Antonis Pittas’ *Retroactive: Towards an Installation of Epic Politics*
By Patrick Bobilin

Antonis Pittas’ *Retroactive* is an exhibition that includes sculptural installation, graphite on walls and texts in graphite on the museum floor that are disrupted and erased by public interaction, through the most passive act of walking through each of the galleries. Depending on the path traversed by a viewer, one is either assaulted with bright lights that would otherwise be fitting for an interrogation or met with wooden box structures protruding from the walls and casting light against the wall, like streetlights downed by catastrophe. The large sculptural work, “Land Art”, is a long wooden stair step covered with graphite dust which gallery visitors are to interact with by sitting or stepping on or touching it. The “viewer” is marked with a trace of the graphite and will likewise mark the stair in exchange. On the wall and floor are texts extracted from newspaper quotes from observers commenting on recent protests around the international financial crisis and the Occupy Wall Street movement.

One text on the wall of the south gallery reads, “let him go let him go” as heard in a video taken at a brutal police action in Oakland on October 25th, 2011 where protesters who had peacefully assembled in Frank Ogawa Plaza were gassed by local law enforcement. Despite the absence of any single speaker, this text implies three: a victim (him), the force that seizes “him”, and the speaking/writing objector. The viewer is left to stare in silence at this puzzling text that climbs across the wall as evidence of a distant foreign event—a trace containing all of the history and secrets of a mark at the scene of a crime.

Another text, taken from LA Times columnist James Rainey at the start of Occupy Wall Street, reads “I haven’t seen this before I’m not sure what it means I don’t have a clue where it is going”. Torn from the context of the paper and the protest, the quote could describe a viewer’s internal dialogue regarding the abstract nature of the work in total. Conversely, it also functions to describe a commonality between the abstract character of a protest that began with no discernable aim other than the occupation of public space and the obscure inclusion of quoted non-sequiturs in Pittas’ work.

Antonis Pittas lives as both an expatriate and self-imposed exile, having taken up residence in Amsterdam after moving from his home country of Greece 15 years ago. His installations are democratic, minimalist, participatory and open; he often creates drawings during gallery hours to allow the work to address, in public forum, the specific history of the space and recent local socio-political events. In each of his projects, Pittas becomes a steward for a different political public by appropriating quotes and sound bites from newspapers and newscasts. Pittas’ reaction to the deluge of violence and politicking is to abstract, erase and exhaust the specifics of protest, to abstract the gestures within the context of a museum gallery and through this translation unveil the material gestures and common redundancies between contemporary political movements and the art historical avant-gardes of the 20th century. Through this reveal, Pittas bridges a gap between previously opposing movements of German political theater and the abstract minimalism of the Russian Suprematists - specifically, Bertolt Brecht and Kasimir Malevich.

Pittas has watched the Occupy protests happening in his home country of Greece,
and anticipated the way public space would be used by Americans in the Occupy movement to resemble the way that public monuments were destroyed and creatively appropriated by the Greek public. But after seeing the way that carnival, theater and something resembling performance became the characteristic form of the protest, Pittas’ tactics began to resonate ever more harmoniously.

In *Retroactive* Antonis enacts and embodies the spirit of protestors and occupiers, whose actions his works are fixated on and no less confounded by. His work is critical of the power of the dialogues around protest and self-conscious of the artist’s inevitable reduction of multiple voices to that of a single author. In creating texts which are erased by walking over them and a stair which accumulates traces and marks the body of the viewer, Pittas asserts that even the supposedly dismissive, uninterested and passive viewer is always active, always marked by the environment of political space and political gestures, generating, manipulating and disseminating them materially and conceptually. The viewer is reminded that the gallery and the museum are not inert spaces but generated by, and generative of, hegemonic political frameworks.

The very title of *Retroactive* addresses the fact that this work is part of a chain, a retroactive reaction to a reaction. But does it enact a simulacrum through representing an event in which nothing specific is signified? Are the protests symbolically instrumentalized for a symbolic purpose? This question necessitates a discussion that extrapolates the actual material conditions of the Occupy movements, the aims of abstract minimalism (specifically Suprematism), and Pittas’ methodology as an artist.

Rahul Rao asks in *Third World Protest* “What sort of protest sensibility is appropriate to a world in which there is no singular locus of threat?” Sensibility is an important term for addressing creative acts, an ephemeral intuition that might lead to action. In this case, one may understand OWS as a reaction to a multivalent oppression. Pittas’ work can be likewise understood as diffracting the actions occurring in public space in a moment when it seems impossible to reflect, impossible to trace a geometrical, or in this case theoretical, equivalency. As the protestors voiced and represented a multitude of concerns, Pittas enacted a diffractive methodology toward the chaos through his abstract minimalism. When the force against which one means to rebel is obtuse, the response is without a doubt destined to be opaque or even alienating. Diffraction, to use a metaphor from physics, can reveal the geometry of the diffracting object, that monolithic political object to be traced through a multifarious chain of significant oppressions. Pittas’ minimalistic shapes refer to Malevich, who in his text, “The Non-Objective World” writes, “basic forms influence human language, human understanding of the world.” So instead of using a prism, which is commonly used to illustrate diffraction in physics, Pittas uses dark graphite triangles, grand circles that encompass large spaces of the floor and wall and a set of rectangles varying in size that resemble Malevich’s Suprematist compositions but are further intended to conjure the images of signs laid out around Zuccotti Park.

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In his essay *Art and Money*, Boris Groys discusses the project of minimalism by recapitulating an argument made in Clement Greenberg’s *Avant-Garde and Kitsch*. For Groys, Greenberg’s ideal observer of the avant-garde was less aesthetically invested in the work and more interested in it as a source of knowledge that described the means of production, media and technique. Much early minimalism aimed to communicate through basic forms as the image of the utopian political project to come. Greenberg urged minimalists to further consider the breadth of social connectivity found in these works by attending to ‘the entire situation’ and the broad influences that find their way into discourse around an art object. He writes, in *Avant Garde and Kitsch*, “Everything counts—not as part of the [minimalist] object, but as part of the situation in which its objecthood is established and on which that objecthood at least partly depends.”

For Malevich, the artist’s project in Suprematism was similarly focused on the aesthetic interests of a mass culture but markedly different in how that mass was embodied. The aim of the Suprematist artist was to depict reality outside of the familiarity of the normative expectations of a public regardless of its legibility to an audience. The value of a work would be no less potent or profound should the public not accept it, as for Malevich, the public was too often accustomed to having a familiar view of reality reflected to it through artists’ work.

The conditions are inherently different when the public desires change from an illegible political field and, in enacting that desire, produce something minimal, obscure and monolithic as occupation. This foundation necessitates translation and through the work in *Retroactive*, one can see attempts to translate human microphones, occupation, and a multitude of grievances into an ultimately legible but no less creatively insightful form. Through Pittas’ concentration on the form of the museum walls and the form of the work previously displayed in the space, the shape of the museum and the work it displays echo and fade, occupying the space with the same transience of the occupiers at Zuccotti. Unlike the objects of minimalism, these attempts at democratic or socialist functions of the artist aren’t formatted to be bought and traded as any other luxury product.

As Malevich continues, “Every work of art—every picture—is the reproduction, so to speak, of a subjective state of mind—the representation of a phenomenon seen through a subjective prism (the prism of the brain).” In *Retroactive*, the prism is found again in the minimalist object—at Zucotti Park it was the “human microphone” technique used when amplified speakers were prohibited—diffracting the forms of discourse in a way that can describe the contours of the abstract minimalism of the occupation of space.

The project of abstract minimalism was to communicate process to an audience in

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5 Malevich, 34
6 Pittas *Untitled (Mirror Object)* was drawn chronologically after the exhibition of Blinky Palermo: Retrospective 1964-1977 on the same wall that exhibited Palermo’s *Mirror Object*.
7 Malevich, 40
an effort to deflate the aura encircling creative production. However, as the means of production have become increasingly accessible, contemporary art has become a mass cultural practice. As Groys writes, contemporary artists deal less with analysis of art production and more with contextualizing mass cultural image production.\(^8\)

Contemporary art can demonstrate the impossibility of aesthetic experience in an oppressive society that undermines the possibility of utopia through the predetermined boundaries of commodification and commercial interests.

In a world where mass taste and elite taste have collided under the same interests, Groys searches for the markers that delineate the mass from the elite in contemporary art.\(^9\) To counter claims of elitism projected upon contemporary installation practice and the question “is this art?” that tends to arise around obscure projects that don’t rely in any way on the traditional frameworks of canvas, stone, or film, Groys asserts that installation is an anti-elitist form in that it erases (in an ultimately problematic fashion) the elite from the equation.\(^10\) Installation is not primarily for art buyers. The elite are implied in traditional art practices in their ability to finance and even own the luxury objects on display, objects that have little to no relationship to the exhibiting institution and can be removed from context without any change to the concept or aesthetic of the object. This is what makes installation of socio-political importance for Groys: an installation that is dependent upon space and the people who occupy it, cannot be purchased.

In “The Politics of Installation,” Groys continues to discuss the role of the artist in relation to the administration, control, and privatization of space in installation work. Art fairs for Groys have become democratic public events, creating a different discursive environment than was traditionally expected from these once unapologetically commercial venues.\(^11\) Groys notes that the market is dominated by private taste, with everything functioning outside of it subject to administrative control, compromising the sovereignty of a work of art. An installation that is dependent upon a public discourse must be preliminarily privatized then legislated as democratic by the authority of the artist.\(^12\) It takes little further explanation to describe how poignantly this administration of space relates to the politics of occupy. The private administration of public space is what provided the foundation for the occupation of Zuccotti Park.\(^13\)

Groys describes an ideal audience for installation as not an individual but a collective. He continues: “The art space as such can only be perceived by a mass of visitors—a multitude if you like—with this multitude becoming part of the exhibition for


\(^9\) ibid.

\(^10\) As support for the exhibiting institutions ultimately, especially with the disappearance of municipal support for the arts, is increasingly dependent upon a socio-economic elite.

\(^11\) Groys, “Art and Money.”

\(^12\) Groys, “Politics of Installation.”

\(^13\) Zuccotti is what the city of NY terms as POPS, or privately-owned-public-space, created as an incentive program for the expansion of zoning—in exchange for pushing building height limits, United States Steel created the park as a negotiation tool in 1968
each individual visitor, and vice versa.” Seeing the work of art as perceived socially, by a group of visitors, the individual is encountered with the description of space that becomes the foundational material and framework for the installation artist. The space of installation necessitates a public form in order broadcast any interpretation of cultural history relative to a socio-political continuum that is not autonomous or sovereign—but municipal.

Groys’ discussion of an artists’ relationship to installation work accurately describes Pittas’ role in Retroactive as both artist and citizen. He writes:

“The artist who designs a certain installation space is an outsider to this space. He or she is heterotopic to this space. But the outsider is not necessarily somebody who has to be included in order to be empowered. There is also empowerment by exclusion and especially by self-exclusion. The outsider can be powerful precisely because he or she is not controlled by society and is not limited in his or her sovereign actions by any public discussion or by any need for public self-justification.”

Herein lies an elucidation of the authority that Pittas embraces in Retroactive through his dual roles as artist as opposed to political figure and as a European living in America. In these concurrent positions, Pittas is an apt translator of the work of OWS. In true Benjaminian form, the task of his translation is to shape the language of visual art, of abstract minimalism, to appear something more like the abstraction of the protests, yet rather than shaping the world, Pittas conforms the contours of the protest into something resembling art.

As Benjamin writes: “A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully.” The protests themselves already resembled art by their collective performance, collusion of content and form (with form reflecting content and vice versa) and enacting a temporary utopian structure. To reflect this directly would be to misinterpret one of the aims of occupy which was to confound the standards and present alternatives to traditional forms of resistance that have trickled down from civil rights through the student protests of 1968. Occupy embodied a new format for protest that better reflects the abstract conditions of the political framework the movement opposed. There is no singular demand because there is no singularity to identity — therefore, in Pittas’ work, there is no singular audience addressed. Retroactive as an installation is exemplary of the use of “a pure public taste that surpasses private interests,” a public that is itself a reaction to the proclamation that there might be some kind of public found in private institutions, constituting of 99-percent of citizens to be assembled in private or public spaces. If the Occupy movement consists of 99-percent of citizens as is claimed, the space being occupied by any citizen is potentially mobilized as a political space for municipal discourse. Through the very constitution of this 99-percent, Retroactive is able to communicate and refract the content of a movement that arises in a similar fashion as the mass address that has come to

14 Groys, “Politics of Installation.”
15 ibid.
17 Groys, “Politics of Installation.”
characterize contemporary art.

During the foundation of Suprematism, Malevich asserted that “Solutions of the most complex problems—the result of the invaluable creative activity of superior people become general property and prepare the way for new creative activity. Creative workers are thus always a step ahead of the general public—they show it the road of progress.”

But in an era of socio-political, and possibly art historical, stalemate, when the location of tension is frayed, creative workers may perhaps do better to take a note from modern physicists, many of whom remind their readers “we are part of the phenomena we aim to describe.”

Groys observes that the community of the installation is like that at a concert or on a plane—de facto and completely contemporary, unlike political or religious groups. The difference, in drawing from Occupy, is that a shared value, a 99-percenthood could, if it holds true would mobilize a political and cultural community in the same way, create a socio-political common that subverts the characteristics of communities formed circumstantially and those formed through indoctrination. Herein lies the success of the project of abstract minimalism. The differentiated identities that form political position and art viewership collude in Retroactive in a way that other installation works have merely been able to attempt.

While formally, Pittas takes from Malevich’s early Suprematism, Malevich himself recapitulates a now defunct argument in which the artist is the interpretive filter for the “outside” and is one who reshapes and re-presents the world to a passive general public audience. Where Malevich perceived his audience as passive receptors, it was Brecht who recognized audiences as being rapt, enthralled in the goings-on onstage and in active engagement. Brecht aimed to take advantage of the possibilities of self-awareness using alienating effects to cultivate an audience, skeptical and critical of the play as much as the format of presentation. The volume of space surrounding Pittas’ work creates a balance of tension of meditation that allows a viewer to have an active engagement of moving from one piece to the next, completely opposed to the sequential ordering of more traditional installations of object based work.

In What is Epic Theater, Walter Benjamin describes Brecht’s project as one that demanded that the audience be taught not to identify with the characters but instead to be “astonished at the circumstances under which they function.” As the task of Brecht’s theater was the representation of conditions moreso than the development of action, Benjamin describes Brecht as emphasizing middle class life through an interruption of context that would paralyze its readiness for empathy in order to make room for critical reaction. The audience of Brecht’s work was to depend on their awareness of the structure of “the entire situation,” much as Clement Greenberg urged the minimalists to see the work of art as a source of knowledge with multivalent influences.

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18 Malevich, p. 34
20 Benjamin, p. 150
21 Benjamin, p. 153
In *Retroactive* the context is infinitely remote, and interrupted by contrasting lighting and disruption of the graphite by viewers. It is the conditions of installation within the context of the museum as arrested by *Untitled (circle)* and *Untitled (Corner)* that break with the gesture of the other signs and repeats the shape of *Untitled (Mirror Object)* through the exhausted gesture of its bend, as if it and the rest of the form have slid off the wall. This raised platform, this dais (to borrow from Brecht) is a small-scale stage on which the form of protest (via a sign) could be meant to take shape. Benjamin, discussing the dissolution of the importance of the conventions of theater, writes:

“The abyss which separates the players from the audience as it does the dead from the living...has steadily decreased in significance. Epic theater (is an) attempt to sit down on a dais.”

Pittas again implicates the viewing audience and the protest audience’s agency, conflated through the supposition of 99-percenthood, awaiting practical instrumentalization by responding colloquially to both the institution and the public protest reflecting both in a smooth glossy black mirror of thick graphite. This blank piece of signage is a receptacle, intentional and aesthetically compelling enough for the museum and potentially practical for use in protest. One could imagine the power of the tens of thousands of occupy protesters holding up signs of varying sizes and shapes that were nothing but solid black reflective graphite.

Then again, perhaps the sublime power of these works is much like the power that Benjamin finds in Brecht: “They are liberated from the drudgery of usefulness.” The signs and shapes as gestures, are voids of content. But that is not to say that they are devoid of content. They are more like black holes, figuratively and in some way literally, not through the mere fact that most minimal forms are seen as being receptacles for post-modern art theoretical gestures but that they have a powerful magnetic force, a strong gravitation. Instead of art providing the image of the revolution, the opposite happens, leading it to read more with the poignancy of Picasso’s *Guernica* than the utopia of Malevich’s Suprematist exhibition, despite *Retroactive’s* formal similarities. Whereas Groys sees modernists as attempting to “give shape to the ‘new life’ of the future,” through the work’s defunctionalized design, *Retroactive* depicts an unstable cultural landscape projected upon itself and refusing to reflect. Palermo has a gravitation for art historians that Pittas’ takes advantage of in his own *Mirror Object*, scratched in graphite in the same place that Palermo’s *Mirror Object* occupied in a previous exhibition just weeks before. And while Pittas’ black graphite and wooden shapes are of a monolithic type, they are not to be confused with the "pure forms" of Judd and Morris but of the type that drives the neanderthals of Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* mad with distraught confusion. A dead-end of utility and functionless design, are what gives both Occupy and *Retroactive* their existential brilliance, a brilliance that is solar, inescapable, both illuminating and blinding.

Politics are understood as being actively granted authority and agency through the

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22 Benjamin, p. 154
23 Benjamin, p. 42
24 Groys, “Politics of Installation.”
act of their enforcement in the affairs of political bodies. The created formal political apparatus generates and is generative of the politics that measure and disseminate the possibilities of action by that political body, who also measure and determine the limits of politics. Groys notes that to maintain a law “always also means to permanently reinvent that law.”

Both a law and a form reference their own history and the moving continuum of signification as they appears and reappear, are redeployed and reapplied. The application of Untitled (circle) demarcates an inside and outside, across the floor and the wall, pulling together the politics of space and image without the limits of canvas found in Malevich’s similar gesture in Black Circle.

Perhaps the instantiation of a 99-percent has laid the foundation for generating the first mass pop cultural protest. By using minimalist tactics (distilling protest to its basic form, presence) Occupy subverted the previous definition of a community as reliant upon differentiation between members who shared a similar history and an outside of strangers. Instead, the Occupy protests demand that strangers come together with socio-cultural differences. The only differentiating function is an empirically measured level of wealth, generally quantified as being below 6 figures annually—a number that few if any of the 99-percenters can claim. If quantifiable wealth becomes the measure of political persuasion, we would see a fairly homogenous political landscape. The fact that we don’t should account for the abstract fluidity of the Occupy protests. The protests are a marker of political dissatisfaction and dissensus, a unifying dissensus which is ultimately the heart of democracy. And where abstract minimalists attempted to quell dissensus for the sake of a consensus of form and content in an effort to arrest and address the means of production, Pittas works under more contemporarily relevant pretenses. The openness of form, the iconography and simplicity of shape and in his monochrome exhibition allow for that same breadth of application that the 99-percenthood of occupy made room for. The simple act of occupation was a return to form, the form of presence, a patient arrest instead of linear mobilization of earlier marches and protests and without the didactic hegemony of an authoritative educational singularity delivering information to an uninitiated multitude.

Any attempt to open the enclosed space of an individual artwork necessitates a privatization (symbolic private spaces, marked through authorship) that precedes the opening of an exhibition as a public space. Artistic installation, through its delineation of space and subsequent redistribution of it in an effort to democratize, is an attempt to act in the name of a community. Groys believes there is a fundamental alienation to this legislation of space writing: “By entering this space, the visitor leaves the public territory of democratic legitimacy and enters the space of sovereign authoritarian control. The visitor is here, so to speak, on foreign ground, in exile. The visitor becomes an expatriate who must submit to a foreign law—one given to him or her by the artist.”

25 Groys, “Politics of Installation.”
26 Wikipedia suggests that about 5% of Americans make $100,000 annually. I don’t mind here rounding up to 99%
27 Groys, “Politics of Installation.”
28 Groys, “Politics of Installation.”
Groys continues that the public-ness of an installation relies on the legislative power of the artist, especially if the aim is democratic. However, if the artist becomes mired in the bureaucratic delegation of space unwillingly, then perhaps it would be important to note how this happens in Pittas’ work. Pittas’ himself is a stranger in observation, looking at conditions which seem uncannily similar but inherently different. Watching Occupy unfold while receiving word from family about protests in Greece created a split in the authority of the artist and citizen. When dealing, similar to the Zuccotti Occupiers’ use of the limitation of privately-owned-public-space, with the grey area of public/private that a museum can provide at the fringes of a market, an artist can make use of their status as an interloper, communicating from the position of the ideal cosmopolitan. The site-specificity of the CCS Bard museum was one such place where the fringes of the market are still usefully unbound, not yet tethered directly to the vacuum of the New York art market, allowing for Pittas to generate an installation whose echo is audible while the source remains safely contained, mirroring the effect that OWS had on him.

At the end, at the arrest of an event, its history has already begun. On November 17th 2011, Zuccotti Park was seized by Mayor Bloomberg and the NYPD. This instantiation of protest has passed. Should another arise, it would be difficult for it to look like anything other than a shadow, a ghost of the preceding action and occupation. The following day seated protesters were pepper sprayed relentlessly at UC Davis. The video of the spraying looks cartoonishly cinematic, unreal like a caricature of police brutality, like a parody of itself. The retaliation from students was a silent seated protest along the path of UC Davis Chancellor Linda Katehi’s walk from office to car. The students assembled as bodies, as a cinematic gesture, or something closer to a Vanessa Beecroft installation without the uniformity or the specific figurative content. The footage that it produced was epic, self-aware cinema. Protest here resembles the media that gives it its afterlife in a static sense, lacking the forward trajectory that suprematism strived for, as perhaps protests of 50 years ago now appear to have. Protest in its current form has become mimetic of the cultural-socio-political landscape in which it exists. Self-aware protest needs to be offered something greater than re-presentation or documentation in order to understand it. Self-aware protests like Occupy and its related instantiations, like much art installation, predicts and embraces its own status inevitability as documentation, as already in conversation with a collective flow of information and within an existent social net/framework.

If a multitude momentarily unifies under a collective identity, then an artist can in fact make broad mass cultural gestures with an elegant simplicity that can resonate through art and politics without the pitfalls of instrumentalization that so often plague social practice or contemporary politically-motivated art production. By avoiding the conventions of documentary, by using the tactics of the protest itself, becoming a resonant microphone, the gestures in Retroactive reverberate with the same warmth and collectivity shared by the protestors.

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29 Here the “ideal” is drawn from Martha Nussbaum and Okwui Enwezor who both define the cosmopolitan as a figure who is a world citizen, belonging to everywhere and nowhere simultaneously.