

Critical Acts

(Gob Squad's) Revolution Now! Or Never?

Brandon Woolf

The massive and uniformly gray façade of the *Volksbühne*, or People's Theatre, dwarfs any passerby strolling through former East Berlin. Built in 1913–14 and significantly (and necessarily) renovated after the Second World War, its huge columns and tall, thin windows remain a beacon of that Soviet Realist style, which has all but faded away in the reunified German capitol. The letters "OST"—German for "EAST"—remain prominently perched, however, at the building's highest point, and they loom large over the aptly named *Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz*. *Volksbühne*. People's Theatre. Somehow different than the "national theatres" peppering other major European cities. These halls feel hallowed, sacred even. The dull, well-worn carpet. The overly shellacked wooden panels. The floor-to-ceiling mirrors. The memory of an ever-fading past. The search, or hope for a *Volk*, a People (with a capital "P"), that extends beyond the boundaries of nation, looking beyond the present, toward a different future. There are even fluorescent pink signs covering every surface, advertising an upcoming conference in large, black,

block letters: "Idea of Communism: Philosophy and Art." The catch? Admission costs 55 euros for three days. Tonight's tickets weren't cheap either—by Berlin standards. Without the student discount, tickets to Gob Squad's *Revolution Now!* cost 20 euros. My (student) ticket was 10 euros, but my two guests had to pay full price. Apparently, if you want to make an omelet, you had better be willing to purchase a whole lot of eggs. But hey, my credit card receipt has a beautiful black and white photo of philosopher Theodor W. Adorno on the back. How cool is that? Or, is he turning over in his grave?¹

Willkommen to Gob Squad's revolution! Gob Squad: a German-English artists' collective, based both in Nottingham and Berlin. Gob Squad: conceiving, directing, and staging "live-events" since 1994.² Gob Squad: ever determined to toe the mixed-media line, working always on the borders between theatre, visual art, film, and new media. Gob Squad: a love child of the contemporary European (and dare we say) "postdramatic" performance scene. As Hans-Thies Lehmann characterizes the group,

1. In the year between the time this piece was written and published, we have seen (dare I say) unprecedented revolutionary activity in the mid-East and North Africa. Without a doubt these events do—and must—alter the ways in which we understand Gob Squad's performance, which was crafted before these uprisings and persists (relatively) unchanged in their midst. I am not so presumptuous to think that I could illuminate the current events by means of Gob Squad's performance or vice versa—that is the subject of a different essay entirely. I do think it essential to note, however, that the context of the performance has undoubtedly changed, and any performance that dares to confront "revolution" must continue to be reread with these historical shifts at the fore of our thinking.

2. For more on the history of Gob Squad's work, see Quiñones (2005) and Gob Squad (2010a).

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“[t]hey articulate dreams in ‘speeding standstill’ [...] that operate without a dramatic context in a rather associative or pop-lyrical manner” (2006:119). Gob Squad has steadily garnered international prominence and was most recently invited to participate in the 2011/12 season at New York’s Public Theater. Tonight, Gob Squad has “occupied” the Volksbühne for their newest action. As I head up to the balcony with my two compatriots—since 20 euros only gets you a revolution on the balcony—an attendant approaches us. She explains that the theatre is running low on staff—read: “we didn’t sell enough tickets to the revolution”—and asks if we would mind please taking a seat downstairs in the main house. Sure.

All of the chairs have been removed from the historic theatre space. In their place are hundreds of oversized, white beanbags upon which the audience-of-activists is meant to sit during the event-action-show. In the first few rows, between the beanbag chairs, stand 16 shiny electric guitars, plugged into mini amplifiers. I am not quite sure whether to be excited or horrified or both. As is Gob Squad’s signature, the stage is equipped with a load of multimedia equipment. A long white table holds a number of props, microphones, and two HD video cameras. There are a few revolving office chairs that match the minimalist style of the long table. The stage is covered with wires running between amps and projectors. There are (more) instruments all over the stage. And a very large white projection screen. As their press materials make clear: “Gob Squad wants to electrify the masses and make use of all the possibilities provided by mass media: cameras, live circuits, large screens, meters of cable, and wireless transmitters” (Gob Squad 2010c).³

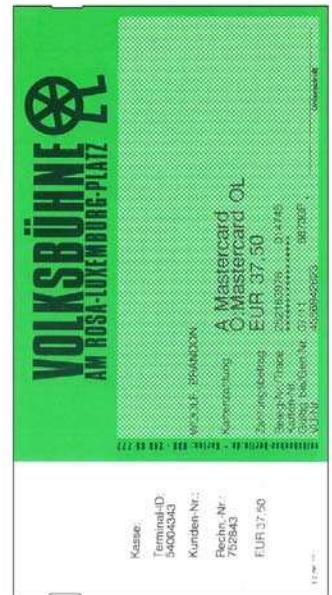
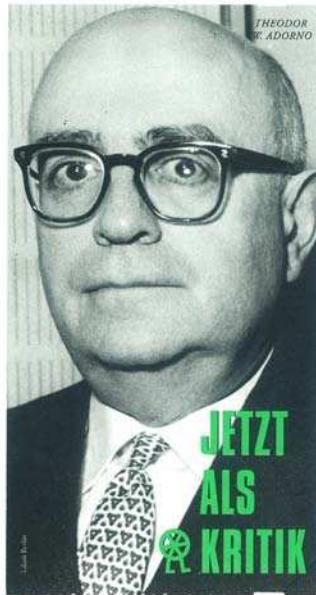


Figure 1. My credit card receipt, with a photo of Theodor W. Adorno on the reverse side, for Revolution Now! by Gob Squad, June 2010, Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz, Berlin, Germany. (Photo: SZ Photo/hr Historisches Archiv/Kurt Bethke; Design: Kakoi Berlin)

Eventually, a cohort of Gob Squad revolutionaries enter the space through the doors leading from the lobby, strumming Bob Dylan’s “The Times They Are a-Changin’.” Live, acoustic versions of John Lennon, Neil Young, the Velvet Underground, and so many others make their appearance throughout the show. As do film clips from Harun Farocki, R.W. Fassbinder, and the Weather Underground. The *Anarchist Cookbook* and texts by Rosa Luxemburg, Chomsky, Baader and Meinhof, René Pollesch, and Eisenstein make their way across the stage at other points as well. Could the irony be any thicker? Or are we meant to take Gob Squad seriously? Are they really attempting to “retrieve the spirit of revolution from the archives of history, and set it to work in the center of our capitalist reality” (Gob Squad 2010c)?⁴ Or are they hoping to demonstrate the very futility—absurdity even—of

3. “Gob Squad wollen die Massen elektrifizieren und nutzen alle Möglichkeiten einer medialen Großproduktion: Kameras, Live-Schaltungen, Großbildleinwände, meterlange Kabel und kabellose Sender” (Gob Squad 2010c). All translations from the German are my own.

4. “Gob Squad holen die Revolution aus den Archiven der Geschichte zurück in die Gegenwart und platzieren sie mitten in unsere kapitalistische Wirklichkeit” (Gob Squad 2010c).



Figure 2. *This revolution is broadcast live! Revolution Now!* by Gob Squad, February 2010, Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz, Berlin, Germany. Performers (from left): Sean Patten, Laura Tonke, Christopher Uhe (hidden under the flag). (Photo by Thomas Aurin)

revolutionary fervor and the amazing ability of a global market society to absorb all opposition? “Is the spirit of revolution still with us? Or are we too far from Russia 1917 or the spring of ’68” (Gob Squad 2010c)?⁵ Are we meant to mourn the very co-optation of our utopian consciousness? Or are we here to *rehearse the uprising*?

One thing is clear: Gob Squad wants to “broadcast the message of revolution to the world. And this revolution is broadcast live!” (Gob Squad 2010c).⁶ Live? Right now? Yes. In between a medley of songs, in between passing out “revolutionary” Russian vodka to everyone in the theatre, in between coercing the audience-of-activists into a giant “group-hug,” the Gob Squad clan explains that our revolution-in-the-theatre is being broadcast to greater Berlin. On the large screen overhead appears a two-way TV-apparatus standing on the sidewalk directly in front of

the Volksbühne. We are instructed to holler at passersby, many of whom ignore our cheers. Those who do stop to examine the TV-apparatus have no idea what to make of the images they see of the action happening inside the theatre. The frustration in the room grows quickly. What is the point of this apparatus if we cannot manage to communicate with anyone? “[W]here are the masses? Where is the People? [...] For without the People, there is no revolution” (Gob Squad 2010c).⁷ Soon, we are informed of a special envoy that will venture into the outside world. Gob Squad explains that we must travel out into the street to find “das Volk,” the People.

From the inside of the theatre, we audience-activists watch the overhead screen with anticipation as the envoy ventures out into the streets. We watch with anticipation as the boundaries of the “proscenium,” of the “fourth wall,” are breached in a different way. We watch

5. “Ist mit uns überhaupt noch eine Revolution zu machen? Oder sind wir weit entfernt von Revolutionen wie in Russland 1917 oder der 68er?” (Gob Squad 2010c).

6. “Damit übertragen sie die revolutionäre Botschaft direkt hinaus in die Welt. Denn diese Revolution ist live!” (Gob Squad 2010c).

7. “Aber wo sind die Massen, wo ist das Volk? [...] Denn ohne Volk keine Revolution.” (Gob Squad 2010c).

as the Gob Squad envoy forces us to question that ever-controversial distinction between art and life. Where are the boundaries? Has this move outside the theatre, into the streets, broken this barrier? Has it reinforced a necessary duality? Has it pointed to the very fragility or permeability of the line between thinking and doing, between fictional representation and lived experience? Is Adorno getting angry in my pocket? Or is he giggling to himself?

GOB SQUAD: *Entschuldigung?* Excuse me? *Hallo!* [*The Gob Squad crew approaches a random car that is about to pull away from the curb.*]

GOB SQUAD: *Entschuldigung, bist du das Volk?*⁸

[*A well-groomed gentleman in his mid-30s leans his head out of the driver's side window.*]

DAS VOLK: Um, do you speak English?

GOB SQUAD: Oh, das Volk doesn't speak German. Yes, sure. Excuse me. Are you "das Volk," the People?

DAS VOLK: Um.

GOB SQUAD: Are you ready for the revolution?

DAS VOLK: Um. What revolution?

GOB SQUAD: We would be happy to explain. But would you be willing to take just a little bit of time and join us over here for the revolution?

DAS VOLK: Um.

GOB SQUAD: Please.

DAS VOLK: [*Hesitates*] Sure. I guess. Just let me park my car.

GOB SQUAD: Fantastic. Das Volk has agreed to join the revolution. He is just parking his car.

[*Das Volk parks his car.*]

As we wait for this seemingly random gentleman to park his (very nice) car, we marvel at the contingency and spontaneity of the situation. Why this particular gentleman? What will he have to say? What would the event-action-show be like if the envoy had approached another random person? Is it fair, or cruel, or comic to appoint this passerby as representative of the People? After a few moments, "das Volk" joins the Gob Squad revolutionaries in front of the two-way TV-apparatus.

GOB SQUAD: Hello, das Volk.

EVERYONE IN THE THEATRE: Hello, das Volk.

DAS VOLK: Hi.

GOB SQUAD: How are you doing tonight?



Figure 3. Cameras, live circuits, large screens, meters of cable, and wireless transmitters. *Revolution Now!* by Gob Squad, February 2010, Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz, Berlin, Germany. Performers (from left): Masha Orella, Simon Will, Johanna Freiburg, Berit Stumpf (in the back), Sharon Smith. (Photo by Thomas Aurin)

DAS VOLK: [*A bit confused*] I'm good.

GOB SQUAD: What is your name?

DAS VOLK: [*Hesitates*] I'm Itamar.

GOB SQUAD: Das Volk is called Itamar.

EVERYONE: Hi Itamar.

8. What follows is not a verbatim transcription. Rather, it is my best attempt at a (re)collection of the unscripted dialogue that transpired on this particular evening (20 June 2010).

GOB SQUAD: Are you feeling revolutionary tonight?

DAS VOLK: Um.

GOB SQUAD: Well, you look revolutionary tonight.

DAS VOLK: [*Smiles*] Thank you.

GOB SQUAD: Tell us, Itamar, what is the most revolutionary thing about you?

DAS VOLK: Um.

GOB SQUAD: We are looking for proof that das Volk is ready for revolution. Tell us something revolutionary. Something you did today perhaps.

DAS VOLK: Um.

GOB SQUAD: Anything. Anything revolutionary.

DAS VOLK: Well, I just bought some groceries. I was on my way home to cook dinner.

GOB SQUAD: A revolutionary dinner?

DAS VOLK: Um.

GOB SQUAD: What else? Tell us something revolutionary about yourself.

DAS VOLK: Um. Um.

GOB SQUAD: Well, what do you do here in Berlin?

DAS VOLK: I am a clothing designer.

GOB SQUAD: Ooh la la. Das Volk is a clothing designer.

DAS VOLK: Yes, I'm opening a boutique here in Berlin next month.

GOB SQUAD: Are you designing clothes for the revolution?

DAS VOLK: Um. Well. I hope people will buy my clothes and then wear them to the revolution...

[*Silence. Wait for it...wait for it...*]

GOB SQUAD: Good enough. We have found das Volk.

[*Wild applause*]

Mockery? Praise? A bit of both? Thank you, Itamar, for showing us how very ridiculous our efforts tonight have been. Thank you, Itamar, for confirming the absurd proposition that art can bring about the revolution. Thank you, Itamar, for proving that das Volk is in no way ready for revolution, now, exclamation point! And yet, Gob Squad's revolution continues. After all, what would the revolution be without the proper accessories—especially for an aesthete like Itamar? I think it is safe to say that this warm summer night was Itamar's first experience with a Molotov cocktail. Amidst the wild applause, the Gob Squad envoy escorts Itamar to a courtyard adjacent to the Volksbühne, where he is briskly equipped with safety goggles and fireproof gloves. Before he knows quite what is going on, the "safety attendant" places a flaming bottle in his hands, there is a quick count off, and we cheer Itamar on as he heaves the bottle against a brick wall. The glass breaks, and falls to the ground. To my surprise, there is no explosion. There is no pomp or circumstance. All that remains is a pathetic, simmering pool of liquid aflame on the concrete. The camera lingers for quite a while on this highly symbolic image: a sacrificial pyre, a clairvoyant voodoo doll, a blazing reminder or a fiery warning: Beware. All is in vain.

Could this be the takeaway point? Was this Gob Squad's intention? I left the theatre that night feeling a bit sick to my stomach. A bit overburdened with the pessimism, the futility of that fiery image: a pathetic reminder of times gone by. I complained to my two friends who had seen the show with me. Why bother being politicized today? Why bother making art—especially art that confirms the very futility of political action, both past and present? In a conversation that bled into the next evening at a low-key Berlin bar, I explained to one of the friends with whom I saw the show some of my frustrations from the previous year. I told him a story about some of my own students—at the university where I teach—who complained and were even resentful when I brought politics into the classroom. "That was totally inappropriate; a total downer," a few students lamented (in an anonymous mid-semester review). My friend quickly became incensed: "Your generation"—my friend is a bit older than me—"your generation! So



Figure 4. There are 16 rock revolutionaries out there tonight: jumping, screaming, shrieking, strumming, and jamming away at their power chords. *Revolution Now!* by Gob Squad, February 2010, Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz, Berlin, Germany. Performers (from left): Simon Will and members of the audience. (Photo by Thomas Aurin)

quick to dismiss, so quick to ironize, so quick to rationalize the events of the past as ‘failures.’ Expressions of connectedness—spontaneous or planned—that manage to resonate within (or beyond) their moment in time, are important, relevant, successful.” He was adamant: an Orange County punk rock band that can at least inspire 200 people on any given night is more useful than the skeptic who picks apart every attempt to make some kind of statement. Was he feeling nostalgic? Was he critical of Gob Squad’s critique? Or was he likening Gob Squad to that Orange County punk rock band? Was he also being somewhat ironic or hyperbolic or both?

It took me a bit of time—and the writing of this piece—to consider my friend’s outburst and to think past that depressing image of the broken glass, simmering on the side of road, futile. It took me a bit of time to remember that this was only the penultimate moment in *Revolution Now!* Once the camera had lingered long enough, the screens to the outside world went black suddenly. The telecast has

been disrupted. Itamar is nowhere in sight. The remaining Gob Squad comrades implore us to our feet. “There are 16 rock revolutionaries out there tonight,” they scream, “who just happen to have electric guitars sitting directly to your right hand sides. On the neck of the guitars is a sticker. This is your revolutionary chord.” After a few brief instructions, the comrades bedeck themselves with instruments as well: jumping, jamming, screaming, shrieking, strumming. The audience gladly bops along, some arm in arm, mostly amazed that this ad hoc group of amateur “revolutionaries” has managed to produce a highly amplified and not-too-dissonant tune. Suddenly, amidst the power chords, the smiles, and the shouts, the large black curtain on which the white projection screen is mounted begins to ascend slowly. The crowd screams louder. At first, all we can see are feet marching to the beat of the power chords. Slowly, slowly, more is revealed. Finally, we see him in full view. There is Itamar, shiny, sparkly silver flag in hand, waving it overhead, enthusiastic, smiling. There is Itamar: marching out



Figure 5. The Gob Squad envoy is in search of “das Volk.” *Revolution Now!* by Gob Squad, February 2010, Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz, Berlin, Germany. Performer: Laura Tonke. (Photo by Thomas Aurin)

of the frame of a Eugène Delacroix painting, of a Käthe Kollwitz etching. There is Itamar, kitsch yet beautiful somehow, pathetic yet powerful. Both real in his apathy, and real in his desire to be a part of this moment, with us, here, together.

Is there a way to remain critical of both the past and present, and *still* to take revolution seriously, now? Is this a possible reading of Gob Squad’s piece? We return, finally then, to the figure of Adorno, who is still grimacing on the reverse side of the receipt in my pocket. Of course, I have no doubt he would have his own — destructive? — take on Gob Squad. We return to Adorno, then, by means of the renowned and ever-controversial⁹ philosopher and cultural critic Slavoj Žižek, who would headline the fluorescent pick, 55 euro, “Idea of Communism” conference in this same room just one week after Gob Squad’s performance.

In July 2009, Žižek gave a lecture at a similar conference in London entitled “What Does It Mean to Be a Revolutionary Today?”

I would like to begin with Adorno, who at the beginning of his *Hegel: Three Studies* rejects this traditional patronizing question: What is still alive and what is dead in Hegel? According to Adorno, such a question presupposes an arrogant position of a judge who can graciously concede, “yes, this is maybe still actual for us today.” But, Adorno points out, when we are dealing with a truly great philosopher, the question to be raised is not what can this philosopher tell us, but the opposite one, what are we — our contemporary situation — in his eyes? How would our epoch appear to his or her thought? The same should be done with communism. Instead of asking the obvi-

9. Žižek’s appearance at the Volksbühne’s “Communism” conference sparked some harsh (if not hyperbolic) words in the pages of *Der Spiegel* (Oehmke 2010).

ous stupid question: But is the idea of communism still pertinent today? Can it still be used as a tool for the analysis and political practice? One should ask, I think, the opposite question: How does our predicament today look from the perspective of the communist idea? This is the dialectic of the old and the new. (Žižek 2009)¹⁰

Žižek continues that the only way to grasp what is “new in the new is to analyze what goes on today through the lenses of what was eternal in the old” (2009). That which is eternal, that which is revolutionary, has the potential to be reinvented in each new historical situation. And to keep this eternal idea, desire, drive for radical emancipation alive, we must work to invent it over and over again. We must be “ruthlessly critical” of nostalgia for “revolutionary” times gone by. And we must focus our energy on “lay[ing] the foundations for a new beginning. [...] One should begin from the beginning, again” (Žižek 2009).

Is Itamar our new beginning? Is the Orange County punk rock band? Maybe. Maybe not. Maybe they provide us with *both* a site from which to launch our critique *and* some faint glimmer of hope. As Gob Squad maintains: “We might lose the plot, we might have to rethink and recast, we might hopelessly disagree as to our ultimate goals” (Gob Squad 2010b). But, perhaps it is the very futility of the flaming bottle. Perhaps it is the beauty and the kitsch of the sparkly, silver flag. Perhaps it is the spontaneity of the TV-apparatus, the power chords, and the smiles in the room. Perhaps

it is even my heavy sigh on my way out of the theatre—not sure yet what to make of my experience—and the debate the following evening. Perhaps in the search for meaning, for clarity, we must confront the most fundamental of questions over and over again: “Who are we? What do we want? And what are we prepared to do to get it?” (Gob Squad 2010c).¹¹ Perhaps that is the first step toward revolution, now.

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10. Transcribed from a video of the lecture that can be found at: www.marxismfestival.org.uk/2010/video.htm.

11. “Wer sind wir? Was wollen wir? Und was sind wir bereit dafür zu tun?” (Gob Squad 2010c).