



IT'S THE

Edited by:  
Gregory Sholette  
& Oliver Ressler

POLITICAL

ECONOMY,

*The Global Financial Crisis in Art and Theory*

STUPID

# IT'S THE POLITICAL ECONOMY, STUPID

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in Art and Theory*

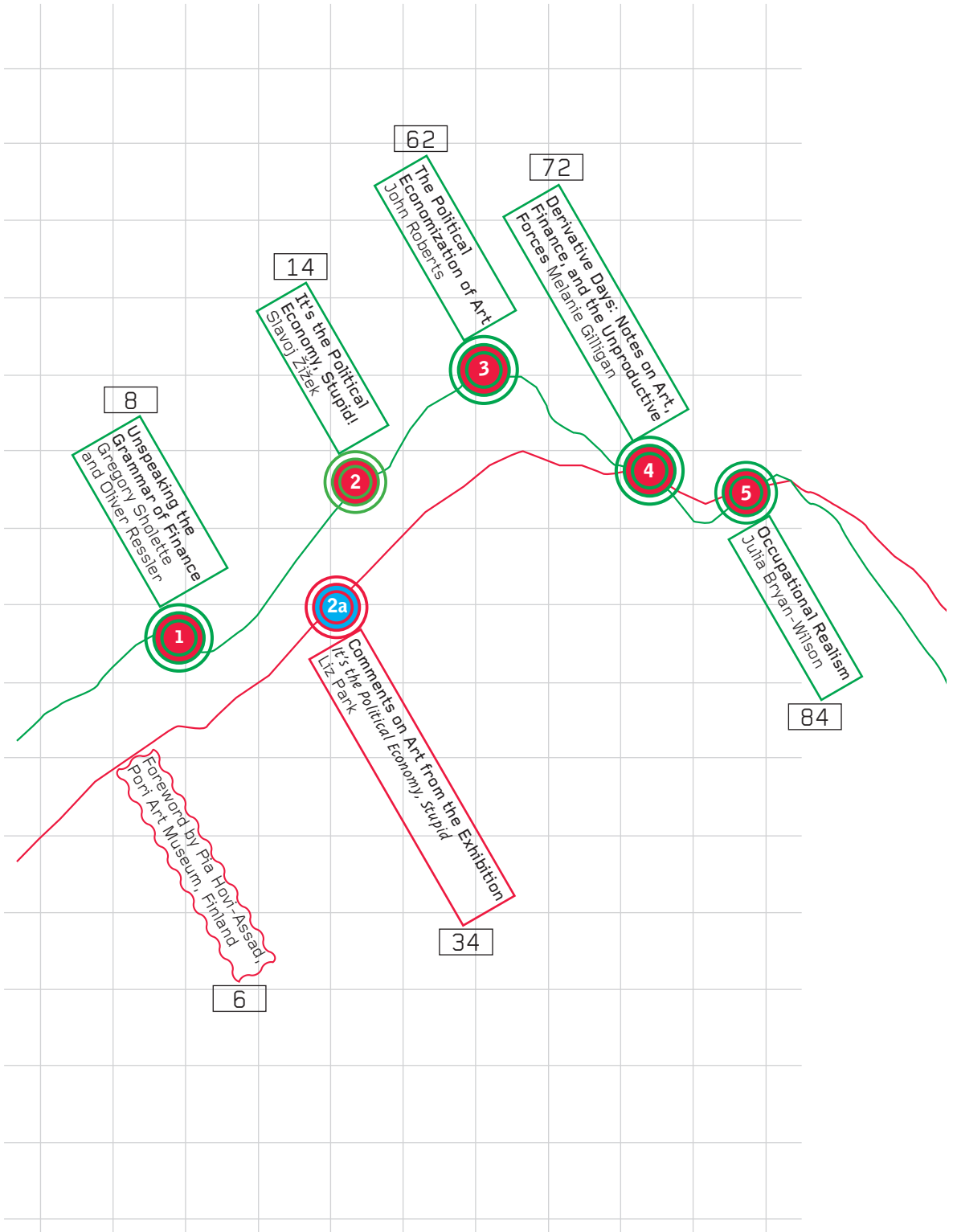
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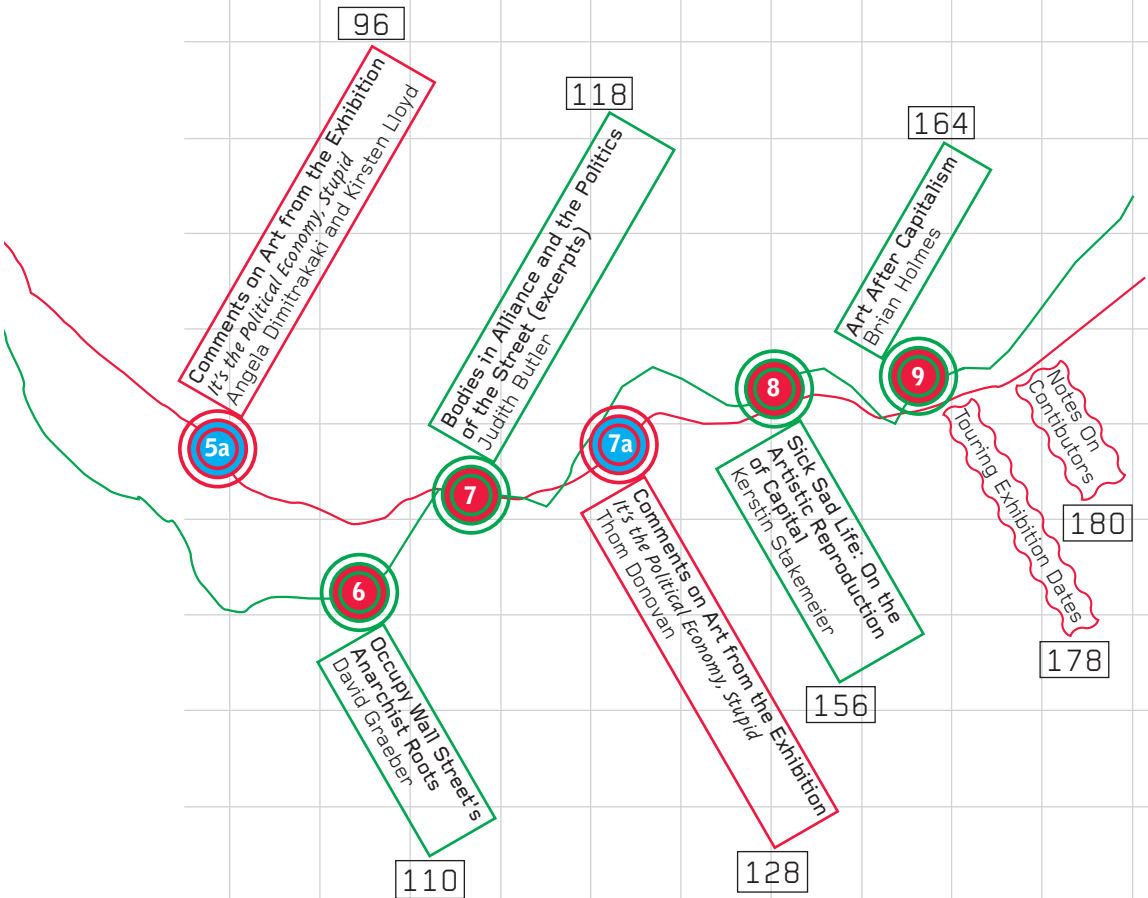
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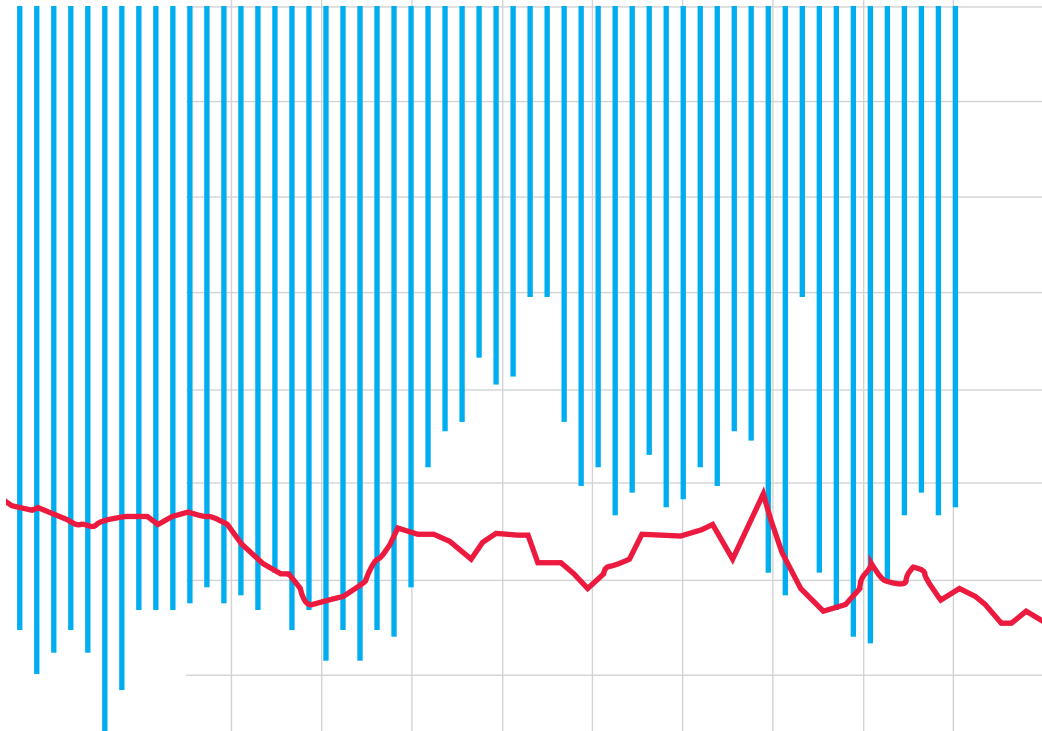
It's the Political Economy, Stupid



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Slavoj Žižek



*Two events mark the beginning and end of the first decade of the twenty-first century: the 9/11 attacks in 2001 and the financial meltdown in 2008.*

## It's the Political Economy, Stupid

The language President Bush used, in both instances, to address the American people sounds like two versions of the same speech. Evoking the threat to the very American way of life, and the necessity for fast and decisive action to cope with the danger, he called for the partial suspension of core US values — guarantees to individual freedom and market capitalism — to save these very values. Where does this similarity come from? The Francis Fukuyama utopia of the “end of history” — the belief that liberal democracy had, in principle, won and the advent of a global, liberal world community lies just around the corner — seems to have had to die twice: the collapse of the liberal democratic political utopia on 9/11 did not affect the economic utopia of global market capitalism. If the 2008 financial meltdown has a historical meaning, it is as a sign of the end of the economic aspect of the Fukuyama utopia.

The first thing that strikes the eye in the reactions to the financial meltdown is that, as one of the participants put it: “No one really knows what to do.” The reason is that expectations are part of the game: how the market will react depends not only on how much the people trust the interventions, but even more on how much they think others will trust them — one cannot take into account the effects of one’s own interventions. Long ago, John Maynard Keynes nicely rendered this self-referentiality when he compared the stock market to a silly competition in which participants must pick only a few pretty girls from a hundred photographs; the winner is the one who chose girls closest to the general opinion: “It is not a case of choosing those which, to the best of one’s judgment, are really the prettiest, nor even those which average opinion genuinely thinks the prettiest. We have reached the third degree where we devote our intelligence to anticipating what average opinion expects the average opinion to be.” So we are forced to choose without having at our disposal the knowledge that would enable a qualified choice, or, as John Gray put it: “We are forced to live as if we were free.”

Joseph Stiglitz recently wrote that, although there is a growing consensus among economists that any bailout based on Paulson’s plan [editors’ note: the bailout plan for the US devised by Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson in 2008] won’t work, “it is impossible for politicians to do nothing in such a crisis. So we may have to pray that an agreement crafted with the toxic mix of special interests, misguided economics, and right-wing ideologies that produced the crisis can somehow produce a rescue plan that works — or whose failure doesn’t do too much damage.”<sup>2</sup> He is right, since markets are effectively based on beliefs (even beliefs about other people’s beliefs), so when the media worry about “how the markets will react” at the bailout, it is a question not only about the real consequences of the bailout, but about the belief of the markets into the plan’s efficiency. This is why the bailout may work even if it is economically wrong.

The pressure “to do something” is here like the superstitious compulsion to do some gesture when we are observing a process on which we have no real influence. Are our acts not often such gestures? The old saying “Don’t just talk, do something!” is one of the most stupid things one can say, even measured by the low standards of common wisdoms. Perhaps, we were lately doing too much, intervening, destroying environment...and it’s time to step back, think and say the right thing. True, we often talk about something instead of doing it – but sometimes we also do things in order to avoid talking and thinking about them. Like quickly throwing \$700 billion at a problem instead of reflecting on how it arose.

### *It's Ideology, Stupid!*

Immanuel Kant countered the conservative motto “Don’t think, obey!” not with “Don’t obey, think!”, but with “Obey, BUT THINK!” When we are blackmailed by things like the bailout plan, we should bear in mind that we are effectively blackmailed, so we should resist the populist temptation to act out our anger and thus hit ourselves. Instead of such impotent acting out, we should control our anger and transform it into a cold determination to think, to think in a really radical way, to ask what kind of a society are we living in, in which such blackmail is possible.

Will the financial meltdown be a sobering moment, the awakening from a dream? It all depends on how it will be symbolized, on what ideological interpretation or story will impose itself and determine the general perception of the crisis. When the normal run of things is traumatically interrupted, the field is open for a “discursive” ideological competition – for example, in Germany in the late 1920s, Hitler won in the competition for the narrative which would explain to Germans the reasons for the crisis of the Weimar republic and the way out of it (his plot was the Jewish plot); in France in 1940 it was Maréchal Pétain’s narrative which won in explaining the reasons for the French defeat.

Consequently, to put it in old-fashioned Marxist terms, the main task of the ruling ideology in the present crisis is to impose a narrative which will not put the blame for the meltdown onto the global capitalist system AS SUCH, but on its secondary accidental deviation (too lax legal regulations, the corruption of big financial institutions, etc.).

Against this tendency, one should insist on the key question: which “flaw” of the system AS SUCH opens up the possibility for such crises and collapses? The first thing to bear in mind here is that the origin of the crisis is a “benevolent” one: after the digital bubble exploded in the first years of the

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new millennium, the decision across the party lines was to facilitate real estate investments in order to keep economy going and prevent repression — today's meltdown is the price paid for the fact that the US avoided a recession five years ago. The danger is thus that the predominant narrative of the meltdown will be the one which, instead of awakening us from a dream, will enable us to continue to dream. And it is here that we should start to worry — not only about the economic consequences of the meltdown, but about the obvious temptation to reinvigorate the “war on terror” and US interventionism in order to keep the economy running. Or, at least, to use the meltdown to impose further tough measures of “structural readjustment.”

An exemplary case of the way the meltdown already is used in ideologicopolitical struggle is the ongoing struggle for what to do with General Motors (GM) — should the state allow its bankruptcy or not? Since GM is one of the institutions which embody the American dream, its bankruptcy was long considered unthinkable — but more and more voices now refer to the meltdown as that additional push which should make us accept the unthinkable. The NYT column “Imagining a G.M. bankruptcy” ominously begins with:

*As General Motors struggles to avoid running out of cash next year, the once unthinkable prospect of a G.M. bankruptcy filing is looking a lot more, well, thinkable<sup>e-3</sup>*

After a series of expected arguments (the bankruptcy would not mean automatic loss of jobs, just a restructuring which would make the company leaner and meaner, more adapted to the harsh conditions of today's economy, etc.), the column dots the i towards the end, when it focuses on the standoff “between G.M. and its unionized workers and retirees”: “Bankruptcy would allow G.M. to unilaterally reject its collective bargaining agreements, as long as a judge approved.” In other words, bankruptcy should be used to break the backbone of one of the last strong unions in the US, leaving thousands with lower wages and other thousands with lower retirement sums. Note again the contrast with the urgency to save the big banks: here, where the survival of thousands of active and retired workers is at stake, there is, of course, no emergency, but, on the contrary, an opportunity to allow free market to show its brutal force. As if the trade unions, not the wrong strategy of the managers, are to be blamed for the GM troubled waters! This is how the impossible becomes possible: what was hitherto considered unthinkable within the horizon of the established standards of work decency and solidarity should become acceptable.

Marx wrote that bourgeois ideology loves to historicize — every social,



religious, cultural form is historical, contingent, relative – every form with the exception of its own.

There WAS history, but now there IS no history. With capitalist liberalism, history is at an end, the natural form is found.<sup>4</sup> This old paradox of liberal ideology exploded with new power in today's apologies of the End of History. No wonder the debate about the limits of liberal ideology is so thriving in France: the reason is not the long French statist tradition which distrusts liberalism; it is rather that the French distance towards the mainstream Anglo-Saxon liberalism provides an external position which enables not only a critical stance, but also a clearer perception of the basic ideological structural of liberalism. No wonder, then, that, if one wants to find a clinically-pure, lab-distilled, version of today's capitalist ideology, one should turn to Guy Sorman. The very title of the interview he recently gave in Argentina, "This crisis will be short enough,"<sup>5</sup> signals that Sorman fulfills the basic demand that ideology has to meet with regard of the financial meltdown: to renormalize the situation – "things may appear harsh, but the crisis will be short, it is just part of the normal cycle of creative destruction through which capitalism progresses." Or, as Sorman put it in another of his texts, "creative destruction is the engine of economic growth": "This ceaseless replacement of the old with the new – driven by technical innovation and entrepreneurialism, itself encouraged by good economic policies – brings prosperity, though those displaced by the process, who find their jobs made redundant, can understandably object to it." (This renormalization, of course, coexists with its opposite: the panic raised by the authorities in order to create a shock among the wide public – "the very fundamentals of our way of life are threatened!" – and thereby to make them ready to accept the proposed – obviously unjust – solution as inevitable.) Sorman's starting premise is that, in the last decades (more precisely, after the fall of Socialism in 1990), economy finally became a fully tested science: in an almost laboratory situation, the same country was split into two (West and East Germany, South and North Korea), each part submitted to the opposite economic system, and the result is unambiguous.

But is economy really a science? Does the present crisis not demonstrate that, as one of the participants put it: "No one really knows what to do"? The reason is that expectations are part of the game: how the market will react depends not only on how much the people trust the interventions, but even more on how much they think others will trust them – one cannot take into account the effects of one's own interventions. While Sorman admits that market is full of irrational behavior and reactions, his medicament is – not even psychology, but – "neuroeconomics": "economic actors tend to behave both rationally and irrationally. Laboratory work has demonstrated that one

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part of our brain bears blame for many of our economically mistaken short-term decisions, while another is responsible for decisions that make economic sense, usually taking a longer view. Just as the state protects us from Akerlof's asymmetry by forbidding insider trading, should it also protect us from our own irrational impulses?" Of course, Sorman is quick to add that "it would be preposterous to use behavioral economics to justify restoring excessive state regulations. After all, the state is no more rational than the individual, and its actions can have enormously destructive consequences. Neuroeconomics should encourage us to make markets more transparent, not more regulated."

With this happy twin-rule of economic science supplemented by neuroeconomics, gone are then the times of ideological dreams masked as science, as it was the case of Marx whose work "can be described as a materialist rewriting of the Bible. With all persons present there, with proletariat in the role of Messiah. The ideological thought of the nineteenth century is without debate a materialized theology." But even if Marxism is dead, the naked emperor continues to haunt us with new clothes, the chief among them ecologism:

*No ordinary rioters, the Greens are the priests of a new religion that puts nature above humankind. The ecology movement is not a nice peace-and-love lobby but a revolutionary force. Like many a modern day religion, its designated evils are ostensibly decried on the basis of scientific knowledge: global warming, species extinction, loss of biodiversity, superweeds. In fact, all these threats are figments of the Green imagination.*

*Greens borrow their vocabulary for science without availing themselves of its rationality.*

*Their method is not new; Marx and Engels also pretended to root their world vision in the science of their time, Darwinism.<sup>6</sup>*

Sorman therefore accepts the claim of his friend Aznar that the ecological movement is the "Communism of the XXIst century":

*It is certain that ecologism is a recreation of Communism, the actual anti-capitalism...However, its other half is composed of a quarter of pagan utopia, of the cult of nature, which is much earlier than Marxism, which is why ecologism is so strong in Germany with its naturalist and pagan tradition. Ecologism is thus an anti-Christian movement: nature has precedence over man. The last quarter is rational, there are true problems for which there are technical solutions.*

Note the term "technical solutions": rational problems have technical solutions. (Again, a blatantly wrong claim: the confrontation with ecological problems demands choices and decisions – what to produce, what to consume, on what energy to rely – which ultimately concern the very way of life of a people; as such, they are not only not technical, but eminently political in the most radical sense of the fundamental social choices.) So no wonder that capitalism itself is presented in technical terms, not even as a science but simply as something that works: it needs no ideological justification, because its success itself is its sufficient justification – in this regard, capitalism "is the opposite of socialism, which has a manual":

*Capitalism is a system which has no philosophical pretensions, which is not in search of happiness. The only thing it says is: "Well, this functions." And if people want to live better, it is preferable to use this mechanism, because it functions. The only criterion is efficiency.*

This anti-ideological description is, of course, patently false: the very notion of capitalism as a neutral social mechanism is ideology (even utopian ideology) at its purest. The moment of truth in this description is nonetheless that, as Alain Badiou put it, capitalism is effectively not a civilization of its own, with its specific way of rendering life meaningful. Capitalism is the first socioeconomic order which detotalizes meaning: it is not global at the level of meaning (there is no global "capitalist world view," no "capitalist civilization" proper – the fundamental lesson of globalization is precisely that capitalism can accommodate itself to all civilizations, from Christian to Hindu and Buddhist); its global dimension can only be formulated at the level of truth – without meaning, as the "real" of the global market mechanism. The problem here is not, as Sorman claims, that reality is always imperfect, and that people always need to entertain dreams of impossible perfection. The problem is that of meaning, and it is here that religion is now reinventing its role, discovering its mission to guarantee a meaningful life to those who participate in the meaningless run of the capitalist mechanism. This is why Sorman's description of the fundamental difficulty of capitalist ideology is wrong:

*From the intellectual and political standpoint, the great difficulty in administering a capitalist system is that it does not give rise to dreams: no one descends to the street to manifest in its favor. It is an economy which changed completely the human condition, which has saved humanity from misery, but no one is ready to convert himself into a martyr of this system. We should learn to deal with this paradox of a system which*

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*nobody wants, and which nobody wants because it doesn't give rise to love, which is not enchanting, not a seducer.*

This description is, again, patently not true: if there ever was a system, which enchanted its subjects with dreams (of freedom, of how your success depends on yourself, of luck around the corner, of unconstrained pleasures...), it is capitalism. The true problem lies elsewhere: how to keep people's faith in capitalism alive when the inexorable reality of a crisis brutally crushes these dreams? Here enters the need for a "mature" realistic pragmatism: one should heroically resist dreams of perfection and happiness and accept the bitter capitalist reality as the best possible (or the least bad) of all worlds. A compromise is necessary here, a combination of fighting utopian illusory expectations and giving people enough security to accept the system. Sorman is thus no market-liberal fundamentalist extremist – he proudly mentions that some orthodox followers of Milton Friedman accused him of being a Communist because of his (moderate) support of the welfare state:

*There is no contradiction between State and economic liberalism; on the contrary, there is a complex alliance between the two. I think that the liberal society needs a well-fare state, first, with regard to intellectual legitimacy – people will accept the capitalist adventure if there is an indispensable minimum of social security. Above this, on a more mechanic level, if one wants the destructive creativity of capitalism to function, one has to administer it.*

Rarely was the function of ideology described in clearer terms – to defend the existing system against any serious critique, legitimizing it as a direct expression of human nature:

*An essential task of democratic governments and opinion makers when confronting economic cycles and political pressure is to secure and protect the system that has served humanity so well, and not to change it for the worse on the pretext of its imperfection. Still, this lesson is doubtless one of the hardest to translate into language that public opinion will accept. The best of all possible economic systems is indeed imperfect. Whatever the truths uncovered by economic science, the free market is finally only the reflection of human nature, itself hardly perfectible.*

Such ideological legitimization also perfectly exemplifies Badiou's precise formula of the basic paradox of enemy propaganda: it fights something of which it is itself not aware, something for which it is structurally blind – not the actual counterforces (political opponents), but the possibility (the utopian revolutionary-emancipatory potential) which is immanent to

the situation:

*The goal of all enemy propaganda is not to annihilate an existing force (this function is generally left to police forces), but rather to annihilate an unnoticed possibility of the situation. This possibility is also unnoticed by those who conduct this propaganda, since its features are to be simultaneously immanent to the situation and not to appear in it.<sup>7</sup>*

This is why enemy propaganda against radical emancipatory politics is by definition cynical – not in the simple sense of not believing its own words, but at a much more basic level: it is cynical precisely and even more insofar as it does believe its own words, since its message is a resigned conviction that the world we live in, even if not the best of all possible worlds, is the least bad one, so that any radical change can only make it worse.

(As always in effective propaganda, this normalization can be combined without any problem with its opposite, reading the economic crisis in religious terms – Benedict XVI, always sharp, was expeditious in capitalizing on the financial crisis along these lines: “This proves that all is vanity, and only the word of God holds out!”) Sorman’s version is, of course, too brutal and open to be endorsed as hegemonic; it has something of the “over-identification,” stating so openly the underlying premises that it is an embarrassment. Out of present crises, the vesion which is emerging as hegemonic is that of “socially responsible” eco-capitalism: while admitting that, in the past and present, capitalism was often over-exploitative and catastrophic, the claim is that one can already discern signs of the new orientation which is aware that the capitalist mobilization of a society’s productive capacity can also be made to serve ecological goals, the struggle against poverty, etc. As a rule, this version is presented as part of the shift towards a new holistic post-materialist spiritual paradigm: in our era of the growing awareness of the unity of all life on the earth and of the common dangers we are all facing, a new approach is emerging which no longer opposes market and social responsibility – they can be reunited for mutual benefit. As Thomas Friedman put it, nobody has to be vile in order to do business; collaboration with and participation of the employees, dialogue with customers, respect for the environment, transparency of deals, are nowadays the keys to success. Capitalists should not be just machines for generating profits, their lives can have a deeper meaning. Their preferred motto is social responsibility and gratitude: they are the first to admit that society was incredibly good to them by allowing them to deploy their talents and amass wealth, so it is their duty to give something back to society and help people. After all, what is the point of their success, if not to help people? It is only this caring that makes business success worthwhile... The new ethos of global responsibility can thus put capitalism to work as the



most efficient instrument of the common good.

But was the financial meltdown of 2008 not a kind of ironic comment on the ideological nature of this dream of the spiritualized and socially responsible eco-capitalism? As we all know, on December 11, 2008, Bernard Madoff, a great investment manager and philanthropist from Wall Street, was arrested and charged with allegedly running a \$50 billion "Ponzi scheme" (or pyramid scheme). Madoff's funds were supposed to be low-risk investments, reporting steady returns, usually gaining a percentage point or two a month. The funds' stated strategy was to buy large cap stocks and supplement those investments with related stock-option strategies. The combined investments were supposed to generate stable returns and also cap losses — what attracted new investors was the regularity of high returns, independent of the market fluctuations — the very feature that should have made his funds suspicious. Sometime in 2005 Madoff's investment-advisory business morphed into a Ponzi scheme, taking new money from investors to pay off existing clients who wanted to cash out. Madoff told senior employees of his firm that "it's all just one big lie" and that it was "basically, a giant Ponzi scheme," with estimated investor losses of about \$50 billion. What makes this story so surprising are two features: first, how the basically simple and well-known strategy still worked in today's allegedly complex and controlled field of financial speculations; second, Madoff was not a marginal eccentric, but a figure from the very heart of the US financial establishment (NASDAQ), involved in numerous charitable activities. Is it not that the Madoff case presents us with a pure and extreme case of what caused the financial breakdown? One has to ask here a naïve question: but didn't Madoff know that, in the long term, his scheme is bound to collapse? What force counteracted this obvious insight? Not Madoff's personal evil or irrationality, but a pressure, a drive, to go on, to expand the circulation in order to keep the machinery running, which is inscribed into the very system of capitalist relations — the temptation to "morph" legitimate business into a pyramid scheme is part of the very nature of the capitalist circulation. There is no exact point at which the Rubicon was crossed and the legitimate investment business "morphed" into an illegal pyramid scheme: the very dynamic of capitalism blurs the frontier between "legitimate" investment and "wild" speculation, because capitalist investment is in its very core a risked wager that the scheme will turn out to be profitable, an act of borrowing from the future. A sudden shift in uncontrollable circumstances can ruin a very "safe" investment — this is what the capitalist "risk" is about. This is the reality of the "postmodern" capitalism: the ruinous speculation rose to a much higher degree than it was even imaginable before.

The self-propelling circulation of the Capital thus remains more than ever

the ultimate Real of our lives, a beast that by definition cannot be controlled, since it itself controls our activity, making us blind for even the most obvious insights into the dangers we are courting. It is one big fetishist denial: "I know very well the risks I am courting, even the inevitability of the final collapse, but nonetheless...I can protract the collapse a little bit more, take a little bit greater risk, and so on indefinitely."

## What is to be Done?

So where are we today, after the "obscure disaster" of 1989? As in 1922, the voices from below ring with malicious joy all around us: "Serves you right, lunatics who wanted to enforce their totalitarian vision on society!" Others try to conceal their malicious glee, they moan and raise their eyes to heaven in sorrow, as if to say: "It grieves us sorely to see our fears justified! How noble was your vision to create a just society! Our heart was beating with you, but our reason told us that your noble plans can finish only in misery and new unfreedoms!" While rejecting any compromise with these seductive voices, we definitely have to "begin from the beginning," i.e., not to "build further upon the foundations of the revolutionary epoch of the XXth century" (which lasted from 1917 to 1989 or, more precisely, 1968), but to "descend" to the starting point and choose a different path.

In the good old days of Really-Existing Socialism, a joke was popular among dissidents, used to illustrate the futility of their protests. In fifteenth-century Russia occupied by Mongols, a farmer and his wife walk along a dusty country road; a Mongol warrior on a horse stops at their side and tells the farmer that he will now rape his wife; he then adds: "But since there is a lot of dust on the ground, you should hold my testicles while I'm raping your wife, so that they will not get dirty!" After the Mongol finishes his job and rides away, the farmer starts to laugh and jump with joy; the surprised wife asks him: "How can you be jumping with joy when I was just brutally raped in your presence?" The farmer answers: "But I got him! His balls are full of dust!" This sad joke tells of the predicament of dissidents: they thought they were dealing serious blows to the party nomenclature, but all they were doing was getting a little bit of dust on the nomenclature's testicles, while the nomenclature went on raping the people...Is today's critical Left not in a similar position? Our task is to discover how to make a step further — our thesis II [editors' note: Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach*, 1845] should be: in our societies, critical Leftists have hitherto only dirtied with dust the balls of those in power, the point is to cut them off.

But how to do it? The big (defining) problem of Western Marxism was the one of the lacking revolutionary subject: how is it that the working class

does not complete the passage from in-itself to for-itself and constitute itself as a revolutionary agent? This problem provided the main *raison d'être* of its reference to psychoanalysis, which was evoked precisely to explain the unconscious libidinal mechanisms, which prevent the rise of class-consciousness inscribed into the very being (social situation) of the working class. In this way, the truth of the Marxist socioeconomic analysis was saved, there was no reason to give ground to the "revisionist" theories about the rise of the middle classes, etc. For this same reason, Western Marxism was also in a constant search for other social agents who could play the role of the revolutionary agent, as the understudy replacing the indisposed working class: Third World peasants, students and intellectuals, the excluded...

Therein resides the core of truth of Peter Sloterdijk's thesis, according to which the idea of Judgment Day when all the accumulated debts will be fully paid and an out-of-joint world will finally be set straight, is taken over in secularized form by the modern Leftist project, where the agent of judgment is no longer God, but the people. Leftist political movements are like "banks of rage": they collect rage-investments from people and promise them large-scale revenge, the re-establishment of global justice. Since, after the revolutionary explosion of rage, full satisfaction never takes place and an inequality and hierarchy re-emerge, there always arises a push for the second – true, integral – revolution, which will satisfy the disappointed and truly finish the emancipatory work. 1792 after 1789, October after February... The problem is simply that there is never enough rage-capital. This is why it is necessary to borrow from or combine with other rages: national or cultural. In Fascism, the national rage predominates; Mao's Communism mobilizes the rage of exploited poor farmers, not proletarians. In our own time, when this global rage has exhausted its potential, two main forms of rage remain: Islam (the rage of the victims of capitalist globalization) plus "irrational" youth outbursts, to which one should add Latino American populism, ecologists, anti-consumerists, and other forms of anti-globalist resentment: the Porto Alegre Movement failed to establish itself as a global bank for this rage, since it lacked a positive alternate vision.

Today, one should shift this perspective totally, and break the circle of such patient waiting for the unpredictable opportunity of a social disintegration opening up a brief chance of grabbing power. Maybe, just maybe, this desperate awaiting and search for the revolutionary agent is the form of appearance of its very opposite, the fear of finding it, of seeing it where it already buds. There is thus only one correct answer to Leftist intellectuals desperately awaiting the arrival of a new revolutionary agent which will perform the long-expected radical social transformation – the old Hopi saying with a wonderful Hegelian dialectical twist from substance to

subject: “We are the ones we have been waiting for.”<sup>8</sup> Waiting for another to do the job for us is a way of rationalizing our inactivity. It is against this background that one should reassert the Communist idea – a quote from Badiou:

*The communist hypothesis remains the good one, I do not see any other. If we have to abandon this hypothesis, then it is no longer worth doing anything at all in the field of collective action. Without the horizon of communism, without this Idea, there is nothing in the historical and political becoming of any interest to a philosopher. Let everyone bother about his own affairs, and let us stop talking about it. In this case, the rat-man is right, as is, by the way, the case with some ex-communists who are either avid of their rents or who lost courage. However, to hold on to the Idea, to the existence of this hypothesis, does not mean that we should retain its first form of presentation, which was centered on property and State. In fact, what is imposed on us as a task, even as a philosophical obligation, is to help a new mode of existence of the hypothesis to deploy itself.*<sup>9</sup>

One should be careful not to read these lines in a Kantian way, conceiving Communism as a “regulative Idea,” thereby resuscitating the specter of “ethical socialism” with equality as its a priori norm-axiom...One should maintain the precise reference to a set of social antagonism(s), which generate the need for Communism – good old Marx’s notion of Communism not as an ideal, but as a movement, which reacts to actual social antagonisms, is still fully relevant. If we conceive Communism as an “eternal Idea,” this implies that the situation which generates it is no less eternal, that the antagonism to which Communism reacts will always be here – and from here, it is only one step to a “deconstructive” reading of Communism as a dream of presence, of abolishing all alienating re-presentation, a dream which thrives on its own impossibility.

So which are the antagonisms, which continue to generate the Communist Idea?

Where are we to look for this Idea’s new mode? It is easy to make fun of Fukuyama’s notion of the End of History, but the majority today is Fukuyamaist: liberal-democratic capitalism is accepted as the finally-found formula of the best possible society, all one can do is to render it more just, tolerant, etc. Here is what recently happened to Marco Cicala, an Italian journalist: when, in an article, he once used the word “capitalism,” the editor asked him if the use of this term is really necessary – could he not replace it by a synonymous one, like “economy”? What better proof of the total triumph of capitalism than the virtual disappearance of the very term in the last two or three decades?

The simple but pertinent question arises here: but if alternatives to

liberal-democratic capitalism obviously work better than all known alternatives, if liberal-democratic capitalism is – if not the best, then at least – the least bad form of society, why should we not simply resign to it in a mature way, even accept it wholeheartedly? Why insist on the Communist Idea against all hopes? Is such an insistence not an exemplary case of the narcissism of the lost Cause? Does such a narcissism not underlie the predominant attitude of academic Leftists who expect from a Theoretician to tell them what to do – they desperately want to get engaged, but do not know how to do it efficiently, so they await the Answer from a Theoretician...Such an attitude is, of course, in itself a lie: as if the Theoretician will provide the magic formula, resolving the practical deadlock. The only correct answer here is: if you do not know what to do, then nobody can tell you, then the Cause is irremediably lost.

Again, it is thus not enough to remain faithful to the Communist Idea – one has to locate in historical reality antagonisms, which make this Idea a practical urgency. The only true question today is: do we endorse the predominant naturalization of capitalism, or does today's global capitalism contain strong enough antagonisms, which prevent its indefinite reproduction?

There are four such antagonisms: the looming threat of ecological catastrophe, the inappropriateness of private property for so-called "intellectual property," the socioethical implications of new techno-scientific developments (especially in biogenetics), and, last but not least, new forms of apartheid, new Walls and slums. There is a qualitative difference between the last feature, the gap that separates the Excluded from the Included, and the other three, which designate the domains of what Hardt and Negri call "commons," the shared substance of our social being whose privatization is a violent act which should also be resisted with violent means, if necessary: the commons of culture, the immediately socialized forms of "cognitive" capital, primarily language, our means of communication and education, but also the shared infrastructure of public transport, electricity, post, etc. (if Bill Gates were to be allowed monopoly, we would have reached the absurd situation in which a private individual would have literally owned the software texture of our basic network of communication); the commons of external nature threatened by pollution and exploitation (from oil to forests and natural habitat itself); the commons of internal nature (the biogenetic inheritance of humanity).

What all these struggles share is the awareness of the destructive potentials, up to the self-annihilation of humanity itself, if the capitalist logic of enclosing these commons is allowed a free run. Nicholas Stern was right to characterize the climate crisis as "the greatest market failure in human history." So when Kishan Khoday, a UN team leader, recently wrote:



“There is an increasing spirit of global environmental citizenship, a desire to address climate change as a matter of common concern of all humanity,” one should give all the weight to the terms “global citizenship” and “common concern” – the need to establish a global political organization and engagement which, neutralizing and channeling market mechanisms, stands for a properly Communist perspective.

It is this reference to “commons” which justifies the resuscitation of the notion of Communism: it enables us to see the progressing “enclosure” of the commons as a process of proletarianization of those who are thereby excluded from their own substance, a proletarianization that also points towards exploitation. The task today is to renew the political economy of exploitation – say, of the anonymous “cognitive workers” by their companies.

It is, however, only the fourth antagonism, the reference to the Excluded that justifies the term “Communism.” There is nothing more “private” than a State community, which perceives the Excluded as a threat and worries how to keep them at a proper distance. In other words, in the series of the four antagonisms, the one between the Included and the Excluded is the crucial one: without it, all others lose their subversive edge. Ecology turns into a problem of sustainable development, intellectual property into a complex legal challenge, biogenetics into an ethical issue. One can sincerely fight for ecology, defend a broader notion of intellectual property, oppose the copyrighting of genes, without confronting the antagonism between the Included and the Excluded – even more, one can even formulate some of these struggles in the terms of the Included threatened by the polluting Excluded. In this way, we get no true universality, only “private” concerns in the Kantian sense of the term. Corporations like Whole Foods and Starbucks continue to enjoy favor among liberals even though they both engage in anti-union activities; the trick is that they sell products with a progressive spin: one buys coffee made with beans bought at above fair-market value, one drives a hybrid vehicle, one buys from companies that provide good benefits for their customers (according to the corporation’s own standards), etc. In short, without the antagonism between the Included and the Excluded, we may well find ourselves in a world in which Bill Gates is the greatest humanitarian fighting against poverty and diseases, and Rupert Murdoch the greatest environmentalist mobilizing hundreds of millions through his media empire.

What one should add here, moving beyond Kant, is that there are social groups which, on account of their lacking a determinate place in the “private” order of social hierarchy, directly stand for universality; they are what Jacques Rancière called the “part of no-part” of the social body. All truly emancipatory politics is generated by the short circuit between the universal-

ity of the “public use of reason” and the universality of the “part of no-part” – this was already the Communist dream of the young Marx: to bring together the universality of philosophy with the universality of the proletariat. From Ancient Greece, we have a name for the intrusion of the Excluded into the sociopolitical space: democracy.

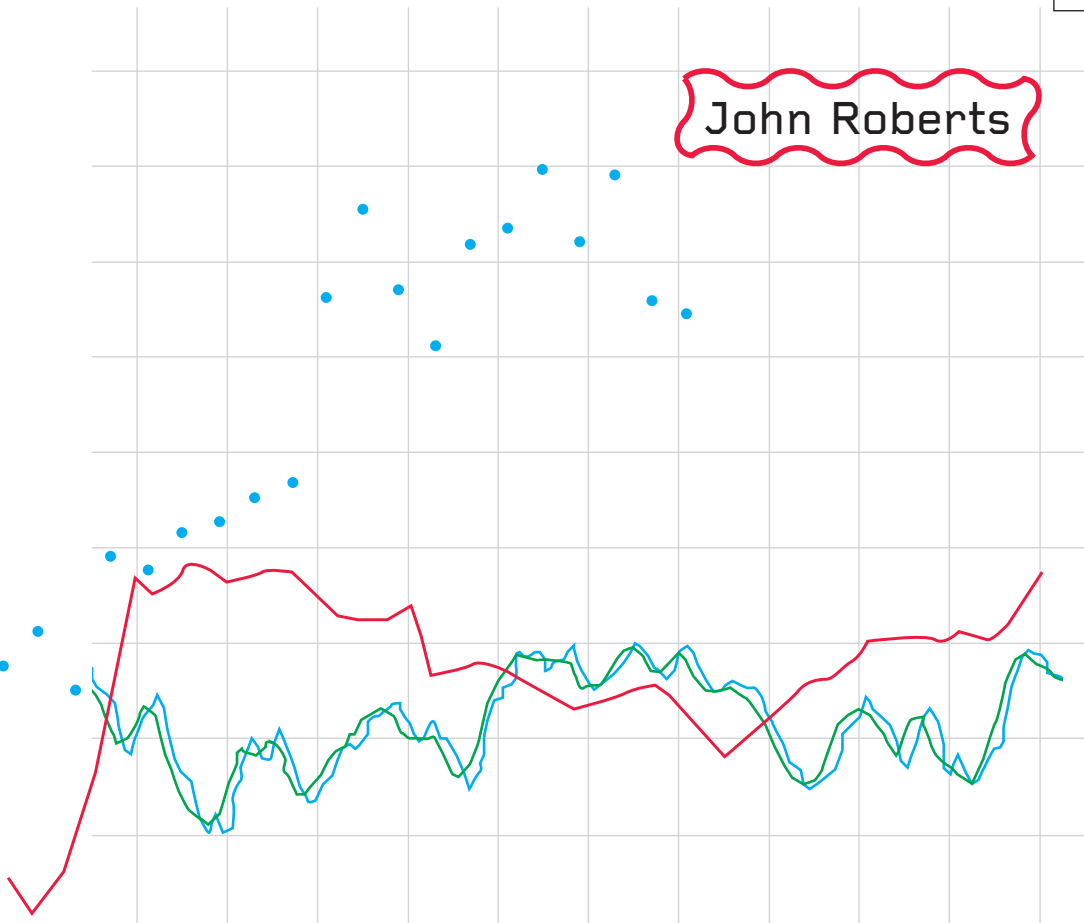
The predominant liberal notion of democracy also deals with those Excluded, but in a radically different mode: it focuses on their inclusion, on the inclusion of all minority voices. All positions should be heard, all interests taken into account, the human rights of everyone guaranteed, all ways of life, cultures and practices respected, etc. – the obsession of this democracy is the protection of all kinds of minorities: cultural, religious, sexual, etc. The formula of democracy is here: patient negotiation and compromise. What gets lost is the proletarian position, the position of universality embodied in the Excluded.

The new emancipatory politics will no longer be the act of a particular social agent, but an explosive combination of different agents. What unites us is that, in contrast to the classic image of proletarians who have “nothing to lose but their chains,” we are in danger of losing ALL: the threat is that we will be reduced to abstract empty Cartesian subject deprived of all substantial content, dispossessed of our symbolic substance, with our genetic base manipulated, vegetating in an unlivable environment. This triple threat to our entire being make us all in a way all proletarians, reduced to “substanceless subjectivity,” as Marx put it in *Grundrisse*. The figure of the “part of no-part” confronts us with the truth of our own position, and the ethicopolitical challenge is to recognize ourselves in this figure – in a way, we are all excluded, from nature as well as from our symbolic substance. Today, we are all potentially a HOMO SACER, and the only way to prevent actually becoming one is to act preventively.

## Notes

1. This chapter first appeared in *Chicago Journals*. It is reprinted here with the kind permission of the author.
2. Joseph Stiglitz, "The Bush administration may rescue Wall Street, but what about the economy?," *Guardian*, September 30, 2008, p. 1.
3. "Imagining a G.M. bankruptcy," *New York Times*, December 2, 2008, *Deal Book* in Business section.
4. And do we not find echoes of the same position in today's discursive "anti-essentialist" historicism (from Ernesto Laclau to Judith Butler) which views every social-ideological entity as the product of a contingent discursive struggle for hegemony? As it was already noted by Fred Jameson, the universalized historicism has a strange ahistorical flavor: once we fully accept and practice the radical contingency of our identities, all authentic historical tension somehow evaporates in the endless performative games of an eternal present. There is a nice self-referential irony at work here: there is history only insofar as there persist remainders of "ahistorical" essentialism. This is why radical anti-essentialists have to deploy all their hermeneutic-deconstructive art to detect hidden traces of "essentialism" in what appears a postmodern "risk society" of contingencies – the moment they were to admit that we already live in an "anti-essentialist" society, they would have to confront the truly difficult question of the historical character of today's predominant radical historicism itself, i.e., the topic of this historicism as the ideological form of the "postmodern" global capitalism.
5. "Esta crisis sera bastante breve," entrevista a Guy Sorman, Perfil, Buenos Aires, 2 November 2008, pp. 38–43.
6. Guy Sorman, "Behold, our familiar cast of characters," *Wall Street Journal Europe*, July 20–21, 2001.
7. Alain Badiou, Seminar on Plato at the ENS, February 13, 2008 (unpublished).
8. A Hopi saying, quoted from Daniel Pinchbeck, 2012: *The Return of Quetzalcoatl*, New York: Tarcher Press, 2007, p. 394.
9. Alain Badiou, *De quoi Sarkozy est-il le nom?*, Paris: Lignes, 2007, p. 153.

John Roberts



*Over the last ten years we have become witness to an extraordinary assimilation of art theory and practice into the categories of labor and production.*

### It's the Political Economy, Stupid

I say extraordinary because since 1945, and certainly since the rise of postmodernism in the late 1970s, the discourse on artistic labor and the labor theory of culture had fallen into abeyance. The new art history, the new cultural studies, and the revival of a Kantian-inspired philosophical aesthetics, had little or no interest in how and under what conditions artists labor, and the relations between artistic labor and productive labor generally. It was perhaps only Theodor Adorno, principally in *Aesthetic Theory* (1970) that remained committed to some version of the labor theory of culture, but even for Adorno, this commitment was less about unpacking the historic relations between artistic labor and productive and non-productive labor than fetishizing artistic labor as the ideal horizon of all labor. Art and production were, empirically at least, kept apart. Today, though, the theorization of the making and distribution of art are addressed explicitly in relation to the categories of political economy: value-form, labor-power, productive labor, non-productive labor, immaterial labor, the collective intellect and general intellect. Thus, this discourse is not focused simply on the market exchange of the artwork as commodity, but on what kind of commodities are the labor of the artist and the artwork. Or more precisely: how do artists labor, and what becomes of the value they create? Hitherto, such questions had been hidden behind the standard view that artists' labor is "free labor" brought to the market as a commodity for exchange — artist and artwork existing in an autonomous dyadic relationship. The break with this reified model of artistic labor, then, has become the radical standard bearer for a renewed relationship with the inter-relational functions of artistic and non-artistic labor, derived largely from the historic avant-garde's critique of art's place in the social and technical division of labor. In what ways does artistic labor resist or reinforce the capitalist division of labor? In what ways does artistic labor contribute directly or indirectly to the production of value, to the value form? In what ways, precisely, is the artwork a commodity? But how is this wide change in approach possible? What changes to art and labor have brought about this theoretical expansion of art into the categories of political economy?

The reasons are neither hard to find nor to fathom. Firstly, we are in the midst of a long and ongoing decline in capitalist profit — of which the recent banking crisis is an expression and symptom — that has its origins in the end of the post-war boom 1970s (profit levels have not recovered to these previous levels); and secondly, as a correlative of this long, attenuated crisis in production, we have also been witness to extended crisis in social reproduction, or non-reproduction: stagnation of wage levels; vast and increased global unemployment (the increase of what Marx called superfluous populations); destruction and privatization of the commons; labor precarity (the moving in and out of waged labor); the uncoupling of wage struggles and other labor struggles from even modest reformist challenges to the system.



In short, the system palpably is in decline — or a state of decadence, as Loren Goldner has called it — in a way that has not been visible since the 1930s. It is not surprising, therefore, that artists, have directed their attentions, then, to both the conditions of their own labor — its similarity with or distance from productive labor — but also, to the ways in which they might find a productive and critical place within this systemic crisis and within the ongoing crisis of the labor-capital relation — hence the exponential rise over the last ten years of participatory, relational and other socially-oriented practices, and in socialized art theory; for instance, Nicholas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* (1998) and *Postproduction* (2002), Grant Kester's *Conversation Pieces: Community + Communication in Modern Art* (2004), Gerald Raunig's *Art and Revolution* (2007), Greg Sholette's *Dark Matter* (2010), the writings of Chto Delat, the collection *Are You Working Too Much? Post-Fordism, Precarity and the Labor of Art* (2011), Gail Day's *Dialectical Passions: Negation in Postwar Art Theory* (2011) and Marc James Léger's *Brave New Avant-Garde* (2012). All this writing, of course, works with very different artistic and critical materials, and operates within very different political and philosophical traditions (Bourriaud: post-Situationism; Kester: a Laclau-Mouffe counter-hegemony; Raunig: a Deleuzian transversality; Sholette: tactical media; Chto Delat: Rancière and the politics of artistic autonomy; the authors of *Are You Working Too Much?*: Maurizio Lazzarato and the tradition of immaterial labor theory; Day: Hegelian-Marxism; Léger: Žižek's Lacano-Marxism), but they all share a sense that art and the artist are in a very different place than hitherto (modernism, postmodernism), and that this derives from how artists might distinguish what they do from what other workers do, in a world in which it is increasingly hard to separate artistic skills from non-artistic skills, artistic labor from non-artistic labor.

This dissolution and transfer of skills, of course, is none other than the question of labor's relationship to "general intellect" — derived from Marx's reflections in "The Fragment on Machines" in the *Grundrisse* on the increasing role of science and knowledge in the production process<sup>2</sup> — and which has become central to recent discussion of "cognitive capitalism," immaterial labor, profit-as-rent, and the general debate on artistic labor and immaterial labor. When artists and non-artists share similar tools, and procedures as laborers, then, to what extent are artists — in the collective sense — in possession of skills that are autonomous and non-transferable (the abiding assumption within traditional accounts of artistic creativity)? Artists and non-artists now share a continuum of skills derived from the presentational, archiving, and processing skills of the computer workstation. Now, this is not to reduce all artistic production to the kind of cognitive labor attached to office work but, rather, to recognize that image and text production and processing skills are one of the shared conditions of the expansion of the general intellect. Moreover, if artists and non-artists use similar techniques

### It's the Political Economy, Stupid

and skills it is easy then for artists to be employed as “cognitive creatives/ technicians” on many different kinds of projects, in the way a company might employ a freelance designer. In this sense, with the adaptation of these skills, the artist becomes a wage laborer as an artist, rather than working as a wage laborer in order to support their work as an artist (usually through teaching or, for an older generation, painting and decorating). One of the consequences of these changes is the social equalization of artistic skills and non-artistic skills. And it is on this basis that Negri and the post-workerist tradition (Maurizio Lazzarato, Christian Marazzi, Carlo Vercellone)<sup>3</sup> have talked generally about an immanent communization of labor in and outside of the workplace: the breakdown of the social division between the non-creativity of producers and the creativity of non-producers — a theme that has also been explored extensively in Ève Chiapello and Luc Boltanski’s *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2007). “A spontaneous and elementary form of communism,” as Hardt and Negri put it, in *Empire*.<sup>4</sup>

The problems with this notion of communization are manifold, not least of all the failure of Negri and his post-workerist critics and followers to recognize how the equalization and cooperative content of these skills is merely formal in content. Far from being an indication of communization, it represents, on the one hand, the increasing subsumption of some sectors’ “free artistic labor” to value production (for instance, in environmental regeneration or ecological projects; artists’ material or ideational contribution to prestige architectural schemes or social housing projects) and, on the other, the increasing disciplinary capture of informational labor under a new (cognitive) technical division of labor. (The notion that communicative and informational labor harnesses the autonomy of artistic labor is only the case for a minority of cognitive workers.) Thus in keeping with the affirmation of living labor in workerism, post-workerism inflates the resistance of the worker at the expense of the heteronomous conditions of production as such. Yet, if this process of proto-communization is highly exaggerated, we are nevertheless witness to a series of art and labor couplings that have clearly shifted the cultural and political ground of artistic production. Quite simply, art today is subsumed under general social technique as a condition of art’s increasing absorption into these new cognitive relations of production. The result is that the inexorable conceptualization of art since the 1960s has found a ready home within the new relations of production that even Walter Benjamin would have found remarkable. Thus it is the new conditions of artistic employability, unemployability, underemployment and precarity, which in many ways constitute the “social turn” in art over the last 15 years, rather than the emergence of any broad leftism within the art world per se. Or rather, a better way of putting it is: the present leftism of the current social turn is underwritten, shaped and driven by these new conditions of labor and

employability/unemployability. In this sense the crisis of the capital-labor relation has become a transformative and experimental space of opportunity for the new art, as more and more artists exist in the floating population of superfluous labor and are therefore superfluous not just to the labor market but to the prevailing conditions of artistic production itself. As a result, we see two major responses to this new space of artistic underemployment and unemployment (that is, lack of teaching; no sales; few exhibition possibilities): the transfer of post-conceptual artistic skills directly into the cultural service industries (regeneration schemes and non-artistic social projects generally), and the exponential rise in participatory, relational and other social forms of practice, that are either self-funded, or supported (and underfunded, of course) by public institutions. And this is why the issue of how artists labor, and the conditions under which they labor (and try to signify), has been the motor of the new radicalization. Consequently, when Gail Day argues in *Dialectical Passions* that there is a "new resistive potential,"<sup>5</sup> the emergence of a "new constellation of critical thought"<sup>6</sup> and a new sense of "anticipatory possibility"<sup>7</sup> in this new art, we need to bear this in mind, for there is no radicalization in art and culture without a reflection on the part of artists and their audience on the material conditions of artistic production. Thus, in light of the above, we need to unpack what this "anticipatory possibility" actually means.

What is increasingly evident about the current financial crisis is that it is not just a crisis of neoliberalism (the rise of fictitious capital), but of capitalist production as such. That is, the financial crisis is evidence of the relative stagnation of the system as a whole, which has its origins in the early 1970s, rather than the neoliberalism of the 1980s and 1990s. Before the early 1970s, the growth rate of the world's economies was reasonably stable. But from this date — that is, after the high point of the post-war boom in 1973 — there has been a general slowdown and then an increasing fall in the growth rate globally. For example, in the biggest economy, the US economy — a broad indicator of global tendencies — between 1957 and 1973 the growth rate averaged 57 percent; however, between 1975 and 2008 it had dropped to 30 percent. Similarly, the debt ratio of the US economy was largely stable between 1947 and 1981; in the next decades though, it rose rapidly from 150 percent in the early 1980s, to 274 percent in 2009. Also, the decline in state and infrastructure spending in the US began long before the rise of neoliberalism; the decline in the net stock of public sector structures (roads, public transport systems, the sewage system and water supplies, public utilities) actually started in 1968, 15 years before Reagan's attack on public spending. All these details (taken from Andrew Kliman's *The Failure of Capitalist Production*) then point to a crisis of profitability being in place before the rise of neoliberalism, that neoliberalism's debt-driven policies have in fact been designed to remedy or

ameliorate. Indeed, over the long haul, we see a steady decline in the rate of profit, with certain hikes in the level of general decline (as in the dot.com boom), which have been mistakenly confused with a return to pre-war levels of profitability.

Why has there has been decline in profits over the long haul? In order for capitalists to remain competitive (keep costs down; introduce new lines) they must either seek advantage through initiating technical and technological changes or keep up with these changes introduced by others – the alternative being, quite simply, going out of business. The outcome of this inter-firm competition is the continual rise in the technical and organic composition of capital (producing more with less living labor) – and in the current period, of course, this is exemplified by the introduction of new informational technologies into production. This produces a constant pressure on capitalists to replace machinery with new machinery that will enable them to continue to produce competitively, a process that Marx called “moral depreciation.” In the current period, however, this process has speeded up (one generation of computer rapidly following another), increasing the “moral depreciation” of equipment before it is used up in production. Since the late 1970s, then, capitalists increasingly have had to depose of a larger share of their surplus value on their fixed assets as their equipment becomes obsolete in a shorter space of time. This in turn has created an additional pressure to further cut the labor force and the wage bill – ever present, of course.

The general effect of this process, therefore, is an increase in productivity at the expense of living labor. However, paradoxically, the increase in productivity produces a decline in wealth. With the loss of living labor there is loss in surplus value, generating an overproduction of goods chasing too few consumers, which in turn creates a loss of revenue. One of the effects of this, with the increasing expulsion of labor from production and the creation of a general population of precarious and underemployed laborers, is an uncoupling of wage struggles as a point of resistance to the system. In conditions of social non-production (stagnation of wage levels, destruction of the social wage and the commons, underemployment and unemployment) wage struggles have little mediatory effect on broader political questions: this is why lost days in strikes are so low (and anyway don't accumulate any political force in the long term) and why wage struggles are so atomized; wage struggles have no horizons beyond the maintenance of the status quo – and barely that. And this is why the traditional labor movement is in chronic abeyance, because wage struggles currently do not lead to any generalizable confrontation between labor and capital and the sharing out of social wealth – which, for all its limited political vantage point historically, was nonetheless a key part of the labor-capital relation and workers' identity under Fordism. Thus the idea that the best solution to the present crisis is a new Keynesian works program

— promulgated by many on the Left — fails to register the broader dynamic of non-reproduction as the overwhelming expression of the long-term fall in the rate of profit. Capitalism cannot return to full employment and to the expansion of workers' consumption, and therefore has radically diminished options. It can either maintain the current labor-capital arrangement (through various authoritarian programs, as it is trying to do presently) or it can renew the conditions for accumulation and increase in profit levels through the mass devalorization of capital. This is the more realistic solution for capital in the long term. But there are dangerous consequences to this option — this is why the last round of capital devaluation in the 1980s was relatively mild, and why the system is still in a debt-ridden suspensive state. To strip out capital from the system to the level it was in the late 1920s and early 1930s (closure of businesses and factories, withdrawal of credit, further running down of social services) is both to massively increase unemployment, but also to risk mass radicalization. As Andrew Kliman argues:

*The amount of capital value that was destroyed during the Depression was far greater than advocates of laissez-faire policies had expected, and the persistence of severely depressed conditions led to significant radicalization of working people. Policy makers have not wanted this to happen again, so they now intervene with monetary and fiscal policies in order to prevent the full-scale destruction of capital value. This explains why subsequent downturns in the economy have not been as severe as the Depression.<sup>8</sup>*

The other option — which fed the post-war boom — is world war. This more thorough "cleansing" of the system is clearly a last resort, but it is a resort, and an option that capital will take if it can unless labor intercedes against capital. Hence the underconsumptionist approach to the crisis (David Harvey, Dave McNally, Christian Marazzi, and others) — that more workers need to be put back to work in order to create more demand within the system — is misguided, for the assertion that this will restore workers' confidence in order to fight the system seems a strange inverted logic. It is one thing to defend the right of workers to receive a living wage, when and where possible; it is another to assume that the costs of non-reproduction can be miraculously dissolved by getting the system back to work — particularly when hundreds of millions are out of work globally. The present crisis is a crisis of labor, or the labor-capital relation itself.

One can see, therefore, why artistic labor has taken a radical social turn. It is actually doing some of the transformative, and political and creative work beyond the capital-labor relation, that the workers' movement, trade unions, and other official institutions of opposition are unwilling or incapable of doing. This is not to say the new social practices — whether community-



based, quasi-NGO initiatives, interdisciplinary schemes, radical art communes – seek a classic substitutionalist political role for themselves, but rather that this moment of social participatory activity is being driven by a counter-political logic in which artistic thought-experiments, models of dissensus, microtopian and utopian imaginings in artistic form, offer moments of what I would call anti-capitalist socialization. This is why there is a current blurring between artistic modes of action and activism and political action, as evident in the revival of enclave thinking in the global Occupy movement. On this basis, therefore, I think it is important to make a distinction in this current period – as *Théorie Communiste* and *Endnotes* do – between socialization and communization.<sup>9</sup> Socialization represents a space of negotiation within the heteronomous conditions of capitalist relations. Communization represents the disconnection or uncoupling of actions from the logic of capital itself. We are presently not in the space of the latter, irrespective of what might be made, in John Holloway's language, of building out from the "cracks" in capitalism, or from Negri's model of proto-communization immanent to living labor.<sup>10</sup>

On the contrary, without the communization of labor – that is, the withdrawal of labor from its self-identity as labor-power – communization is simply another name for anti-capitalist socialization. What is emergent in this current period of socialization, therefore, is an expanded prefigurative role of art in the absence of any generalized actions by workers over and above the terms of the labor-capital relation. That is, art's defense and articulation of modes of autonomy and self-management become the productive language of non-relation. But it is only when workers realize that there is no further stake in the system for them (no more New Deals) that this initial and highly limited process of the socialization of non-relation will then pass into a radical mode of negation with capital itself. (This is why the struggle is not for the socialization of the means of production: autonomy and self-management are perfectly compatible with capitalism, and capital under New Deal conditions will do its best to appropriate this language.) Indeed, this is visible already in the kind of socialized capitalist thinking being pushed in *Wired* magazine and other mouthpieces of the digital economy. As one recent commentator has put it, what is required now post the "financial crisis" is a new form of capitalism, "co-op capitalism."<sup>11</sup> Socialization, then, is the present horizon of the labor-capital relation and of art/labor relations, not its revolutionary horizon.

It is not often that it can be said that the political stakes on writing on art and politics are so high. But this is hard to avoid these days. Art-praxis has now passed into a stage of primary convergence with political praxis, as a matter of self-definition. That is, art-praxis has become crucial to a language of exit from, and negation of, capital. Now, this is not to get ahead of ourselves; I do not subscribe to the Capitalist Realist school of capitalist apocalypse; nor do I believe, pace Slavoj Žižek, that we are living in "end times"; non-

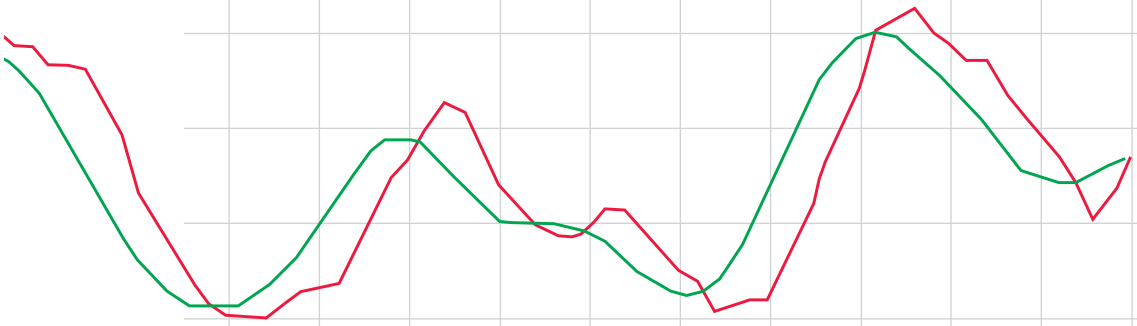
reproduction, as a low-level authoritarianism, binding labor to capital in a grim dance, can roll on for a long time yet. But, nonetheless, in the long term the situation can only get worse, in which relative decadence will turn assuredly into absolute decadence. Hence non-reproduction is the prevailing context in which questions of art and politics – and non-relationality – will be fought over in the coming period. And therefore, for the first time – for a very long time – the terms of discussion will necessarily be shaped by the working out of how art might define itself in relation to labor, beyond socialization, as not-of-capital.

## Notes

1. A version of this chapter was presented as a paper at Leeds University, February 29, 2012, as part of a discussion with Gail Day and Stewart Martin.
2. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970.
3. Maurizio Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labor," trans. by Paul Colilli and Ed Emery, <http://www.generation-online.org/c/fcimmateriallabor3.htm>; Carlo Vercellone, "From Formal Subsumption to General Intellect: Elements for a Marxist Reading of the Thesis of Cognitive Capitalism," *Historical Materialism*, no. 15, 2007, pp. 13–36; Christian Marazzi, *The Violence of Financial Capitalism*, trans. Kristina Lebedeva and Jason Francis McGimsey, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011; Christian Marazzi, *Capital and Affects: The Politics of the Language Economy*, trans. with an Introduction by Giuseppina Mecchia, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011.
4. Michael Hardt and Toni Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000, p. 294.
5. Gail Day, *Dialectical Passions: Negation in Postwar Art Theory*, New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2011, p. 22.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 232.
8. Andrew Kliman, *The Failure of Capitalist Production: Underlying Causes of the Great Recession*, London and New York: Pluto Press, 2012, p. 3.
9. See *SIC: International Journal of Communitisation*, no. 1, 2011.
10. John Holloway, *Crack Capitalism*, London and New York: Pluto Press, 2010.
11. Noreena Hertz, "A Post-luxe Era Needs Co-op Capitalism," *Wired*, April 2012, p. 68.



Kerstin Stakemeier



*“On a photograph, as it were, capital always just looks like money.”<sup>2</sup>*



## It's the Political Economy, Stupid

The disappointment which resonates in Alfred Sohn-Rethel's formulation is all too understandable. Artistic attempts to represent capital figuratively, and in Sohn-Rethel's example from the early 1970s in the seemingly most trustworthy visual medium, photography, are doomed to failure.<sup>3</sup> Being the social relation on which all of our reproduction is based, guiding the ubiquitous law of form, including even that of the camera which records the image, capital itself is still, or rather therefore, aniconic. It signifies an order of production, which imprints itself in everything, and therefore has itself no singular image. Because "within circulation M-C-M [money—commodity—money]...both, commodity and money, only subsist as different forms of existence of value itself, money as its general, the commodity as its specific disguised forms of appearance."<sup>4</sup> Both are reified forms of capital, but are bound to the sphere of distribution — in contrast to that of production. Picturing money thus remains, even though it is the general exchange equivalent, no more than a helpless gesture, a reference to that capitalist form of value, which concerns everything within the picture in any case. The disappointment ultimately lies in the fact that one faces just another reified form of value. But capital would need to be criticized by its objectives, not by its equivalents, which in the end are no more than things amongst things. What turns those things into problems is that it expedites a process at the end of which there is no end, but only the reproduction of that very relation which needs the exchange of equivalents for its continued existence: capital.

*The true limit of capitalist production is capital itself, it is this: the fact that capital and its **reproduction** appear as starting as well as endpoint, as motives and as means of production; that production itself is **for** capital and that its means of production are not just the means of the ever expanding exploration of the life of the society and its producers.<sup>5</sup>*

Commodities, just as the queen of commodity itself, money, are just those points in the process at which production materializes for a brief moment, emerging to be exchanged, only to return to the value form as a result of that exchange shortly thereafter. What Sohn-Rethel wants photographed is thus first and foremost a relation of reproduction, and money is not a specifically productive starting point for the dissemination of that relation. It is the level of reproduction, the moment in which money, for good and for bad, is conspicuous by its absence, in which that power which capital still is remains imprinted. In the reproduction of capital that of human kind is concealed, and in the relentless returns of the "so-called primitive accumulation"<sup>6</sup> it is not only the means of reproduction of capital itself, which are intensified and expanded, but simultaneously the function of human kind within it is defined as that of a means to an end:

*The process, therefore, that clears the way for the capitalist system, can be none other than the process which takes away from the laborer the possession of his means of production; a process that transforms, on the one hand, the social means of subsistence and of production into capital, on the other, the immediate producers into wage laborers. The so-called primitive accumulation, therefore, is nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production.<sup>7</sup>*

As Rosa Luxemburg and others have argued in Marx's succession, this process is not simply the historical myths of capital's origin, in which the world was created after its model, but this process, the violent clearing of different spheres of production, is proceeding continuously. Within art the advancement of such primitive accumulation could be explicated in the creation of modern art and that of contemporary art by capital.

With the "formal subsumption"<sup>8</sup> of art under capital in the nineteenth century, art was established as a sphere of production differentiated from artisanal crafts in which, however, the conditions of production initially remained the same (a factor that became known as "autonomy"). The "real subsumption" of art under capital after the Second World War, the institutionalization of contemporary art as a segment of industrial mass culture, was based on those factors. Within this field of contemporary art, education, production, distribution, and representation are arranged after the model of the cultural service sector and thus have performed an ongoing "primitive accumulation" of autonomous art, establishing a standard, which implies the de facto de-autonomization of artistic production but thereby coincides with its factual politicization. As an industry, art lost its unwanted unaccountability that had been the price of its autonomy.

Consequently, capital is as over-represented and alternativeless in art as it is in all other spheres of production and reproduction. All creative attempts to gain as much distance to capital as to fit it into a frame are ineffectual, as they would need to represent that person taking the image herself as a figure of capital. Artists are above all producers within the sector of mass culture, and their exceptional position within it today almost seems like a scornful repetition of pathetic formulas of autonomy in which that force which characterizes the working conditions within the sector, underpayment, institutional and personal dependencies, a lack of social communication and means to organize are hitting back unfiltered. Autonomy has turned into the scheme of a classicized utopian past tense, it represents an institutionalized icon and not the heteronomous praxis of contemporary artists. Some art-based organizations including the group WAGE (Working Artists and the Greater Economy) have been confronting these very

### It's the Political Economy, Stupid

conditions by directing critical questions of organization to cultural *institutions* (as opposed to artist producers). This approach, for better or worse, maintains the model of autonomy as the well-known social formula for being an artist in the first place but refuses the projection of the genius artist as heroic agitator. In WAGE the capacity for organization thus does not lie primarily in the direct address of individualized artists-against-institutions, but derives power if anything from this very sense of an anonymized unit that discloses its own conditions of production and reproduction. Founded in 2008, WAGE have been concentrating their efforts on enforcing "the regulated payment of artist fees by non-profit organizations and museums"<sup>9</sup> since 2010. For this purpose they have been working on a certificate which institutions can sign as a voluntary commitment to this "best practices model."

Our own reproduction within capital weaves us tightly into a curtain which we cannot simply tear away, because behind it there is nothing but another view onto M-C-M. This is not to say that I am arguing that we are caught up in a situation void of alternatives, but rather that the visual repetition of capital in its "naturalized environment" promises nothing more than a moralistic naturalism, or simply opens a view onto a general exchange value. And the latter has never been more adequately staged than in Scrooge McDuck's money bin. Artistic attempts to reverse this relation, to demonstrate money as capital in comparison are trapped in the sphere of exchange: Lee Lozano's *Real Money Piece* (1969), in which she offered her guest "diet Pepsi, bourbon, glass of half and half, ice water, grass, and money. Open jar of real money and offer it to guests like candy,"<sup>10</sup> demonstrates nothing more than the social dealings with a medium of general exchange which itself carries no use-value. One year later, in 1970, Cildo Meireles printed messages onto money bills and Coca-Cola bottles, exposing how they both circulated within the same field, within the national borders of Brazil, and thus marked this movement of circulation in its expansion and limitation. In his *Insertions into Ideological Circuits*, Meireles attempted to reify money itself, which necessarily failed, but could only personalize the visage of the ever-recurring forms of M-C-M. And it is precisely this which makes Scrooge McDuck's money bin so "priceless": he projects that commodity fetishism which effortlessly identifies Pepsi, Grass, tagged Cola bottles or the camera mentioned above, onto the very sole commodity which socially operates as a medium only, and thus allows no personalization. Countless Hollywood movies have repeated this motif, and in 1987 Allan Kaprow laid out a *Red Carpet for the Public* at *Documenta 8*, putting up for grabs the money he was given to realize his work. But all of these momentous rededications of money, its partial redistribution as much as its pointed fetishization, are collapsing outside of Duckburg, because they inevitably end up in the circulation, as money remains the sole general means of exchange. Artistic assaults on money



are countless but their necessary limitation lies in its symbolic negation, replacement, or qualification, which all remain views onto an abstraction, which has no chance of turning into one of concretion.

For WAGE, money does not appear as the center of artistic or political debate but as that general exchange value which is needed to secure one's reproduction. And it is thus this reproduction which takes the center stage of artistic and political debate – the social and material cornerstones of one's own survival in the industrial branch called contemporary art. The economic differentiation of this branch filtered just as much into the organization structures of artists such as Lee Lozano and others who founded groups like AWC (Art Workers' Coalition) in the late 1960s, as they were claiming more power over their institutional representation and denounced the substantial exclusion of women, African American, and Puerto Rican artists in the large institutional collections in New York. It is the real subsumption of artists under capital which transforms them into producers of contemporary art. And it is this process that in turn gave rise to the independent artist organizations of the 1960s and 1970s, while implicating artists in the dramatic social struggles of their time, including most notably the anti-Vietnam War movement. They participated in these political confrontations as one kind of "producer" amongst many. Consequently, the capitalization of art also meant its factual socialization. And it is not entirely coincidental that with the worldwide uprisings of 1968 a new understanding of one's own integration within capital evolved, an "inside view," which Gilles Deleuze reformulated in 1969 in an actualization of the most classical model of Marxist ideology critique:

*If there is nothing to see behind the curtain, it is because everything is visible, or rather all possible science is along the length of the curtain. It suffices to follow it far enough, precisely enough, and superficially enough, in order to reverse sides and to make the right side become the left or vice versa.<sup>11</sup>*

And it is precisely in this model that we find that the Marxist disappointment about the seeming lack of formal strength in the artistic practices of the 1970s is in itself reactionary with respect to the reality of those artistic practices: the modernist framing of the artwork, which is implied in Sohn-Rethel's search on the surface of the photograph, sees art in exactly that constrained "autonomous" isolation as characterized by pre-war art in its only formal subsumption under capital. Sohn-Rethel hopes that art will tear away the curtain, whilst it had long been woven into its structure, though gaining a new politicality in the process. The artistic social utopianism of the 1920s could still depict money as an external factor, as an ideogram of capital without falling prey to sheer naturalism. John Heartfield's hilarious collages

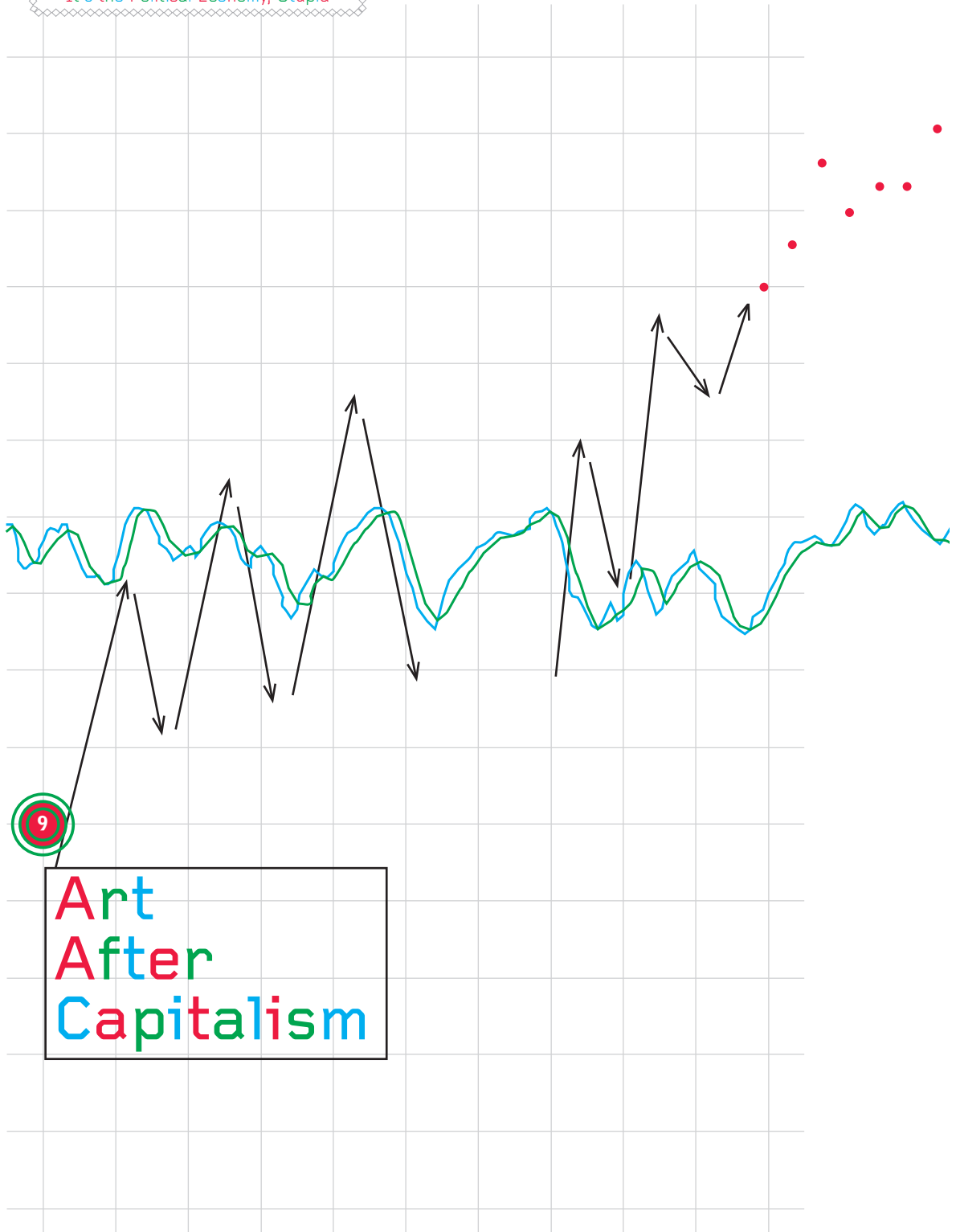
demonstrate this point trenchantly. But as Sohn-Rethel brushes aside the material reorganization of contemporary art as a form of capital, its existence as a branch of the cultural industry, he expects art to create an unreal view, to conform to the bourgeois pretention of its lost autonomy.

## Notes

1. This chapter was originally written for *Bildpunkt's* (autumn 2012) issue on money. *Bildpunkt* is the magazine of the IG Bildende Kunst Austria. The text is translated by the author and reprinted here with kind permission of the author.
2. Alfred Sohn-Rethel, "Der Formcharakter der Zweiten Natur," in Alfred Sohn-Rethel, Peter Brückner, Gisela Dischner Peter Gorsen, et al., *Das Unvermögen der Realität: Beiträge zu einer anderen materialistischen Ästhetik*, Berlin: Klaus Wagenbach Klaus, 1974, p. 198.
3. Alfred Sohn-Rethel was a Marxist political theorist and economist (1899–1990), who was a friend of Ernst Bloch and Walter Benjamin and ongoingly discussed his lifelong working project *Geistige und körperliche Arbeit* (Intellectual and Manual Labor; first published by Suhrkamp in 1972) with Theodor W. Adorno. In it he delineates the genesis of knowledge and abstract thought in relation to that of the capitalist value form, the commodity and money. The book I quote from was published by him and others in 1974 and can be seen as a directly opposite standpoint to Peter Bürger's *Die Theorie der Avantgarde* (The Theory of Avant-Garde) published the same year. The above-quoted take on a productivist and feminist perspective against the grain of the Marxist aesthetics of Bürger and Adorno, but, only in Sohn-Rethel's case, still adhere to a classical ideal of art.
4. Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, Bd. 1, MEW Bd. 23, Berlin, 1982, p. 168f.
5. Ibid., Bd. 3, MEW Bd. 25, Berlin, 1990, p. 278.
6. Ibid., Bd. 1, p. 742.
7. Ibid.
8. Karl Marx, "Resultate des unmittelbaren Produktionsprozesses," *Archiv sozialistischer Literatur* 17, Neue Kritik, Frankfurt am Main, 1968, pp. 46ff.
9. <http://www.wageforwork.com/about/3/history>.
10. [http://www.e-flux.com/projects/do\\_it/manuals/artists/l/L002/L002C\\_text.html](http://www.e-flux.com/projects/do_it/manuals/artists/l/L002/L002C_text.html).
11. Gilles Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*, London and New York: Continuum, 2005, p. 12.



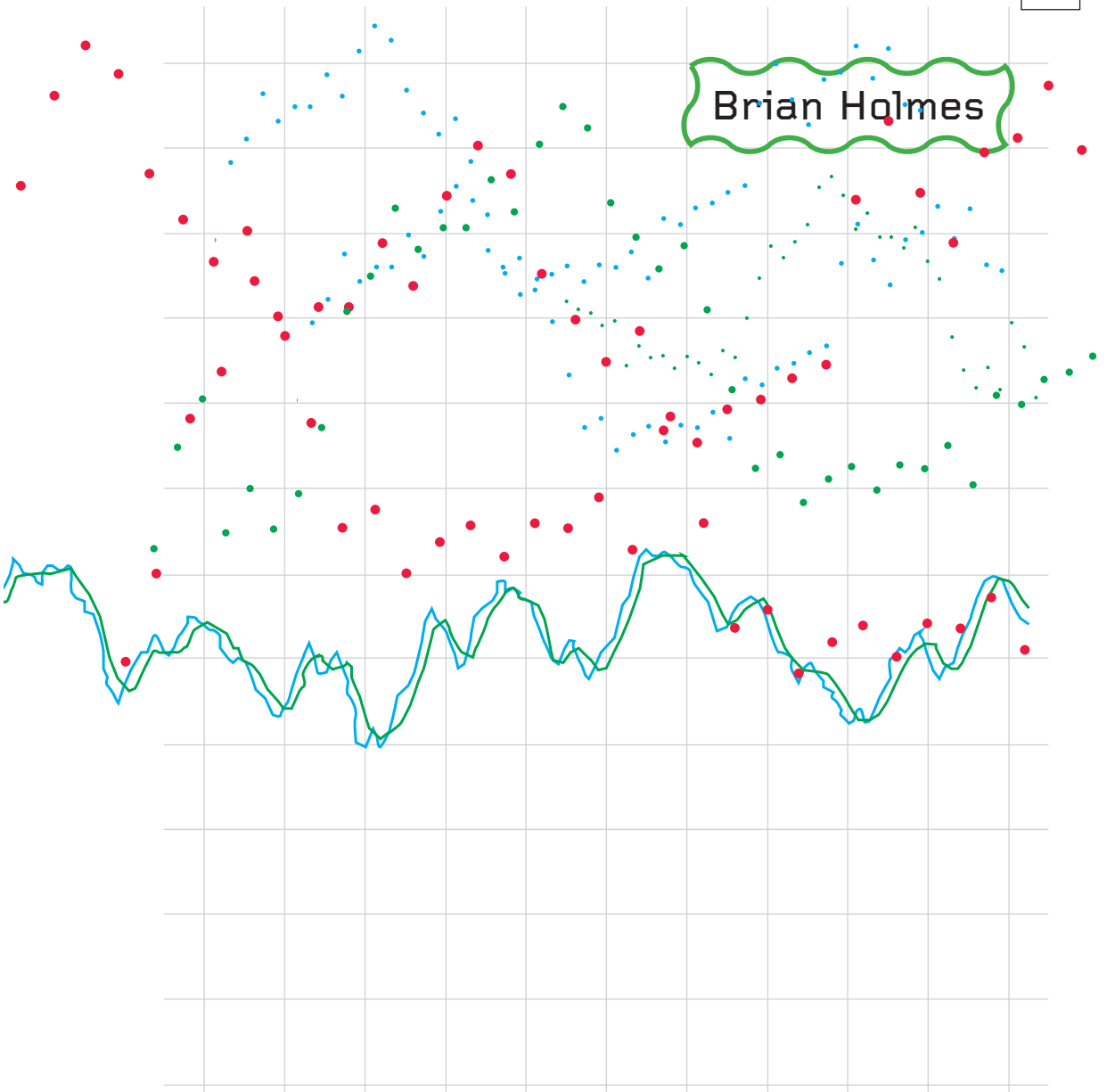
It's the Political Economy, Stupid



Art  
After  
Capitalism

9





*Many came to the conclusion long ago:  
art after capitalism starts right now.*



## It's the Political Economy, Stupid

Passionate conversations about how things will look once socialism is achieved are rare in our day. Instead, transformations are undertaken with the means on board, for results that can be shared, distributed, and adapted by others. Utopia consists of changing something real, whatever the scale. Great things have happened this way and we'll see more in the future. But the massive fact of capitalism's persistence in the present continually returns to complicate, hinder, obstruct, or paradoxically encourage artistic experiments that have flowered on common ground.

The first steps toward a post-capitalist practice involve the redefinition of art itself. Call it anti-art, the overcoming of art, art into life, the aesthetics of existence: all these formulations represent a major inheritance of the twentieth century. The crucial insight of what were formerly called the "avant-gardes" is that an image of emancipation provides only a contemplative respite from exploitation, hierarchy and conflict. The energies devoted to the creation of a privileged object could be better spent on reshaping the everyday environment. Abandonment of the authorial form and exodus from the museum are some consequences of these vanguard insights. A protean world of exploration and intervention opens up for practitioners of art into life. If you take this path you will often hear the complaint that artists these days just can't "handle the brush" as their predecessors did. Yet it's up to us to demonstrate that there are other ways of unfolding formal complexity into lived experience.

Processual art explores the generative roots of any collaborative activity, seeking not only the inventive twist that departs from a normal, pre-codified way of doing, but also the synaptic or affective leap that allows another person to appropriate that invention, to develop it further and pass it along among a crowd. In the best of cases a rhythm emerges, with the sense of a shared horizon. We're all familiar with the feelings of bodily exuberance and sociable pleasure that arise in games; but this kind of play is also constructive. The specific character of "art" might be hard to locate when people are building a community center, planting a garden, preparing a meal, writing a text together, or just talking around a table. Yet all this is fundamentally part of art after capitalism. Of course, images of such activities can be extracted and displayed as the simulacrum of a missing fulfillment ("relational art," they call it). But the point of the post-capitalist process is to develop new means of production, where subjectivity – the group itself in its affective and collaborative pulse – is the primary thing we produce together.

On that basis, much can follow. I'm thinking about the creation and distribution of sophisticated works, like installations, performances, films, and interactive media, which condense broad swathes of experience into intensive little packages. In fact, these kinds of aesthetic objects have much to contribute to life in a complex society. The problem is not so much their form, as their destiny under capitalism. All those involved in contemporary culture

are familiar with highly conventional presentations before a presumptively neutral audience: a museum show, a lecture, a screening, a staged event, a publication, and so on. Under these conditions, the evaluation of the work takes place according to a few restrictive criteria. First comes the "interest" or advantage that a given work may hold for each spectator, as a source of new ideas, encouragement, or sheer personal pleasure. Then there is a more envious speculation on the interest the work may hold for others, so that publicly claiming it as one's own object of desire establishes tacit ties of allegiance with them. A third very common mode of evaluation is strictly negative. Attack, ridicule, and disdain are typical strategies in the cultural marketplace of ideas. The capitalist economy is defined as the "art of allocating scarce resources" – so, naturally enough, the formal public sphere is a space of intense competition. This struggle for primacy is one of the big dead-ends of art in today's society. The production of a cooperative community opens a new door.

Multi-layered works are developed slowly, through complex processes of perception, self-reflection and expression that always involve more than one person. Their use-values can only be discovered over time, through contact, immersion, dialogue, reference, response, and reworking. Traditionally (in what was known as "bourgeois culture"), this inherently social process of discovery was internalized by individuals, who experienced a work in silence and let aspects of it cohere in the intimacy of their memories, as a kind of vibrant inner beacon to which they would return from time to time. Reception by a cultural community brings out the latent dimensions of this traditional schema. The first stage of this process involves direct response and sustained dialogue in informal settings, unencumbered by time constraints or conventional protocols that limit the circulation of speech. Usually the work itself can then be shared, through copies, recordings, archives, or long-term presentations in everyday spaces, without the mediation of money and the obstacles it brings. Electronic networks vastly expand this distribution. Since the late 1990s community meshworks have stretched to the far corners of the globe, bringing a multitude of artistic expressions with them.

Access and immediate dialogue, however, are only the beginning. What's surprising is the way the sensations and ideas of the artwork resurface in later conversations, in other works, texts, projects or programs. Without disappearing, the figure of the author tends to disperse into appropriation and remix. Direct references to the content of a piece are less important than a lingering affective presence, a kind of memory echo that creates an aesthetic atmosphere. In capitalist society such atmospheres also exist: but they are engineered at a distance, according to instrumental calculations. In a cultural community the modulation of the environment by all the participants is the tacit act of creation that binds the group together and, in the best of cases,



extends an invitation for others to join. Sustaining a generous atmosphere is crucial for these communities of reception. We may be accustomed to thinking that prefigurative politics takes place in exceptional moments on the streets. But when a cultural scene stays under the radar, eluding the rules of money and defending itself against institutional manipulation while continually opening itself up to new people and new explorations, what it is developing is nothing other than the prefigurative politics of art after capitalism.

So how does this post-capitalist art relate to its more militant anti-capitalist cousins? What about subvertising, Indymedia, Luther Blissett, Critical Mass, corporate identity correction, border-hacking, communication guerrilla, and all the other activist inventions that have flourished since the 1990s? Do complex images, impassioned discussions, exquisite atmospheres, and the efflorescence of memory really have anything to do with speaking truth to power? How to cross the thin red line separating community art from art in the streets?

Every carefully executed work of perception-expression will reveal — perhaps unwittingly — an aspect of what Theodor Adorno called “damaged life.” It’s a basic condition of existence in our pathological societies. Art that emerges from centuries of capitalism can only be a symptom of this damage, until it opens itself up to an analytic process that helps us understand where it has come from. Analysis is often opposed to expression: it is considered a form of blockage or censorship of the affects. Yet this opposition serves the logic of entertainment, where aesthetic experience is conceived as nothing more than a hedonistic stimulant, bypassing the intellect for a direct connection to the senses. Among cultural communities whose participants have overcome the instrumentalization of art and its separation from daily life, analysis acts to heighten perception, to extend the horizons of language and to intensify our awareness of the tragic dimension from which solidarity draws its strength. Often, an artwork contains a demand for analysis: it sketches out a problematic field that can be explored by others. But this demand can only be embodied and expressed through an act of resistance. The red line is crossed when what we have seen and understood can no longer coexist with what we envision and ardently desire. As one reads on a series of works by Muntadas: “Warning: Perception Requires Involvement.” There’s no mystery why so many artists end up on the front lines of demonstrations and occupations.

The recent “movement of the squares” — in Greece, Tunisia, Egypt, Spain, the US, and many other countries — saw untold numbers of artists venturing out onto the streets, with their works, their performances, their subtle understanding of ambiances and crowd dynamics. Art on the streets is an expression of resistance, but it is also an invitation to change the ways we look, feel, think, act, and relate. This much is familiar from the occasional victories of the past, back when the notion of civil society still seemed to have

some meaning. But today, as new generations take up the struggles across the globe, the violence of the confrontations is matched only by the deafness of power to any voice but its own. The massive extension of protest and dissent carries new risks, and the stakes are rising with each fresh outburst of rebellion. Under such conditions one sees an upsurge of the healing arts among post-capitalist communities. I am thinking of massage and bodywork, but also of group experiments with expression and imagination, often involving precise aesthetic practices. No doubt some will scoff at this preoccupation, which could be mistaken for a narcissistic trap, redolent of a former counter-culture. Yet the current polarization of society and its violent consequences are not to be taken lightly. The idea that there can be a therapeutic dimension of art — a vital relation between expression and healing — is something that artists and thinkers should consider more seriously in a period of economic and ecological catastrophe.

Where will all this lead? The fact is, no one knows. The appearance of politicized art in institutional settings is merely a correlate of far wider upheavals. The artist graciously installing her drawing, film, or sculpture in the cool white spaces of a museum or gallery may be found the next day among the chanting crowd, making a banner, staging a protest choreography or shooting an agitational video to go out on the internet that evening. The presence of dissident artworks within the institution is not necessarily cynical. Artists working the official circuit often draw their material from the constructive play of cultural communities and the risky freedom of political insurgency, in order to transform the usual functions of a society in which they still necessarily participate. The hope is to vastly extend the avenues leading to an exit from a failed paradigm. Yet the rules of competition and money remain alive in the background; and it is important to learn how to struggle absolutely for changes that are still only partial. The persistence of a devastatingly inadequate system is the central fact of our time.

In conclusion: art after capitalism might sound like a joke, and maybe not a good one. In fact, I laughed out loud when I saw that the editors of this volume had proposed such a title for my contribution. On reflection, however, it seemed like they were onto something. It is not very often that one is asked to explain the meaning of an underlying idea that has become a path toward a whole way of living. We should always seize the occasions that are offered to cast our existence in a different mold — since the point is not to be the author of one's own private universe. Art after capitalism only begins when we find new ways to work together.

Besides, laughing out loud can be good for you.

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