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Editorial – “Alternative Economies”

01/02

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We can now say with some certainty that one advantage of the Cold War was that it placed many of the complexities and contradictions of economic problems within a clear and singular binary between capitalism and communism. On top of that, arguments in favor of one or the other had massive geopolitical blocs backing them, and the sheer scale alone was enough to draw any economic argument into the tide of one side or the other. This made it only natural for dominant narratives following the dismantling of communism to profess the triumph of capitalism. However, it is only now that the logic of global capitalism has begun to collapse from within that we are forced to consider the fact that economic value and actual worth have actually been floating on parallel tracks this entire time.

Of course, in the field of art as we know it, easy solutions for this tension have never been an issue. On the contrary, the field has always been subsidized by public funding, wealthy patrons, and personal assets precisely on the basis that art surpasses clear and straightforward valuation in economic terms. On the one hand this has made for a strange hybrid economy where a humanist tradition also has its own commodity market, while on the other it has managed to remain a sphere in which a lack of faith in any terms for clear economic validation has somehow managed to remain intact. Even officially in many cases, public and private funding alike would flow to art precisely because art was understood to provide an exception to the geopolitical rule.

Now, all the signs say there is a good chance much of this support will dry up, and that before too long we will all be poor. But at the same time, this likelihood is not the result of a single political agenda (though many politicians in places like the US and the Netherlands welcome the cuts), but a much broader series of collapses in a global economic system that by now eludes the possibility of identifying clear ideological friends and enemies. The problem really affects us all.

Still, the sources of art’s livelihood have always been dispersed, somewhat self-serving, and partly non-existent. This means that survival will probably not be a problem, and furthermore that the terms for that survival will be extremely interesting – even transformative. Art has always been made in a ghostly and somewhat treacherous economy built on solidarities and speculations, piracy and ideals: an alternative economy par excellence. As Lawrence Liang writes in his essay in this issue,

Alternative economies are alternative not just because they are quaint, but because

they have figured out a way of being in the world that extends the limits of what they can know by drawing their own boundaries of the knowable. If we are to face up to the challenge of the crisis of the arts, it would be through a recognition that our potential lies beyond the threshold of the possible.

Now that the threat of imminent poverty is shrinking the field of available possibilities, it seems to be the opportune moment to consider how the incredible resourcefulness of artistic work can be deployed towards a more general reformulation of its terms for survival. In issue 27 of *e-flux journal*, essays by Paul Glover, Elizabeth Povinelli, Raqs Media Collective, Franco Berardi, and Lawrence Liang begin to address the question through concrete strategies for gaining economic autonomy, the anthropology of the gift, our time spent on earth as part of a commons, capitalist hyper-acceleration in the absence of any future worth looking forward to, and a “pirate” sense that defiantly demands access.

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