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Another Art World, Part 2: Utopia of Freedom as a Market Value

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The Endless Cycle of Production

The Romantic legacy has by no means disappeared from the contemporary art world – it’s just retained only its most elitist elements. We still worship the individual genius, mad, tortured, or otherwise; what has been purged is any explicit belief that we all begin as artists, and could, in a future society in which forms of institutional violence are rooted out, become artists once again. As a result, that very conception of freedom that once drove the various avant-gardes has come to regulate a logic of commoditization – or even more, it has encouraged us to see that logic of commoditization as the definition of freedom itself.

In the previous installment of this essay, we recalled that the Russian revolutionary avant-garde imagined “people of the future” (*Budetylyans*) would not only to be liberated from those unfair and malicious social conditions that stifled their creativity, they would also enjoy a kind of almost childlike freedom. This was a direct invocation of the original Romantic conception, born together with the concept of “culture” itself, one explicitly formulated in reaction to the logic of commoditization.

It would take a great deal of work to unravel how all this turned around, but the key, it seems to us, is to return to Comte and Saint-Simon’s focus on industrialism. The Romantic conception of the artist as isolated genius emerged, of course, at roughly the same time as the Industrial Revolution. This was almost certainly no coincidence. As French sociologist Alain Caillé has suggested, the artistic genius might best be conceived as a kind of structural complement to the factory system.

In effect, the older figure of the craftsman or artisan split in two. Consumers were confronted with two different sorts of commodity: on the one hand, an endless outpouring of consumer goods, produced by a faceless mass of industrial workers, about whose individual biographies consumers knew absolutely nothing (often, not even what countries they lived in, languages they spoke, whether they were men, women, or children ...); on the other, unique works of art, about whose producers, the consumer knew absolutely everything, and whose biographies were an intrinsic part of the value of the objects themselves.

But if the heroic figure of the artist is simply the mirror of industrialism, this would certainly help explain why that figure was so appealing to

socialists like Saint-Simon, or Marx (who in his student years tried his hand at German Romantic poetry). It does not explain why this figure is still with us. After all, we live in an age when capitalism is more and more organized around the management not of industrial labor but care work, less about the creation than about the sustaining, maintaining, nurturance, education, and repair of people, things, and the natural environment. Even the main loci of class struggle centers on nurses, cleaners, teachers, and care workers of various sorts.

True, artists too less and less resemble industrial workers, and more and more resemble managers. But they are still heroic, highly individualized managers nonetheless – that is, the successful ones (the lesser figures are now relegated largely to the artistic equivalent of care work). And it's telling that, whatever else may change, and however much the Romantic conception of the artist now seems to us trite, silly, and long-since-abandoned; however much discussion for that matter there is about artistic collectives; at a show like the Venice Biennale, or a museum of contemporary art, almost everything is still treated as if it springs from the brain of a specific named individual. Perhaps one piece in a hundred is an exception. And this is true no matter what the circumstances of a work's actual creation. We may be too delicate nowadays to call these individuals "geniuses." But the entire apparatus of the art world makes no sense unless it's ultimately something very like what used to be called genius – something ineffable, spiritual, creative, and rooted in the individual soul – which creates the value that it celebrates. Even the fascination of the contemporary art scene with promoting works by artists identified with specific disadvantaged groups, Iraqi migrants, queer Latinas, and so forth, is perfectly apiece with this; it might seem to mark a return to something at least a little more like the older idea of collective, cultural creativity, since the artists are being valued as representatives of the creative context from which they emerged, but ultimately, it simply dissolves that horizontal Romanticism back into vertical, heroic Romanticism again, since the value of any given artwork is still seen to derive from the artists entirely individual biography, which quickly takes on a logic and trajectory entirely its own.

(It's easy to see why this would have to be the case. To do otherwise would be to suggest that queer artists, or artists of colour, are somehow less individually responsible for their works than straight white ones. That would be obviously bigoted or racist. The only alternative would be to treat the latter primarily as products of their cultural environment, which is precisely

what the art world refuses to do.)

The fact that everyone knows this, and many claim to object, does not make it any less true. Really, it just reveals how difficult this habit is to overcome. Because the overwhelming majority of artworks remain as they have always been, since the Industrial Revolution, seen as making sense only in relation to some unique individual soul. An art world that was *not* organized around the creative vision of named individuals simply would not be an "art world" at all.

Why then the lingering power of industrial categories and industrial-age modes of thought? The ultimate reason, it seems to us, lies in our inability to detach ourselves from the notion of "production."

We still seem obsessed with the notion that work is necessarily a matter of making things; preferably, through a process that is simultaneously mysterious, and at least a little bit unpleasant. Why, for example, do otherwise intelligent human beings so often insist that the "working class" no longer exists in wealthy countries, simply because not many people are employed in factories – as if it were somehow cyborgs or trained monkeys who were driving their taxis, installing their cable, or changing their bedpans when they're sick? Why do we identify work with "production" in the first place, rather than tending to things, maintaining them, or moving them around?

This habit of thought goes far deeper than Romanticism. It is the product of a very particular theological tradition. The Judaeo-Christian-Islamic God created the world out of nothing (He is in fact somewhat unusual in having created the universe out of nothing; most work with existing materials); the human condition, as the story of the Garden of Eden or for that matter Prometheus make clear, is punishment: those who disobeyed the Creator and tried to play God are cursed to continue to do exactly that, to create the means for their own existence, but to do so in a way that is also a form of pain and suffering. Adam is cursed to grow food by the sweat of his brow. Eve is simultaneously told that God will multiply her pains "in labor" – that is, in giving birth.

We might consider this analogy for a moment. The real process of "producing" children (if you really want to use that word) involves not just an act of sex and nine months of pregnancy, but a web of social relations involving years of nurture, support, education ... Yet here that entire process disappears, collapsed into the one moment when a baby seems (especially to male onlookers) to just appear, fully formed, through a mysterious but painful process out of nowhere – much like the universe. This is the

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very paradigm of “production,” a word which literally means “to bring forth” or even “push out.” The factory was always conceived as the ultimate black box, a mysterious place of pain and suffering, where steel, saucers, or microchips somehow pop out fully formed through a process we’ll never really know and would rather prefer not to have to think about. But so, in the classical conception, is the artist’s brain.

In this light, it only makes sense that both the factory worker and the artistic genius must suffer. They simply suffer in opposite (yet complementary) ways. The factory worker suffers because he’s alienated from his work, it means nothing to him, and he has no control over it; the artist, because she’s hopelessly entangled in it and will never be able to break free.

Obviously, with the decline of the importance of factory labor, and the predominance of finance capital, the notion that work is primarily a matter of producing things (instead of cleaning, moving, maintaining, nurturing, fixing, transforming, or caring for them) becomes ever more difficult to maintain. But in this context, the artist actually plays an increasingly strategic role. Art is still conceived as a factory of endless productivity, and art is still seen as somehow popping, through a painful yet mysterious process, directly from the artist’s brain. And with the art world sitting as it does at the peak of the “creative industries,” all this works to subtly suggest that the administrators and bureaucrats who increasingly make it up really are somehow “producing” something after all – or, something other than the various social tissues of the hierarchical structures of the art world itself.

The Art World In and Out

Each exhibition, each new biennial or Documenta, strives (and inevitably claims) to be an historic event. Historical events are – by one definition at least (the one we like) – precisely those events that could not have been predicted before they happened. Every artistic event thus sets out to surprise its audience. Something must be formally new, something must be included that was not previously considered to fit in the category of “contemporary art,” or even better, that was not considered to be an art at all. It’s considered normal, nowadays, for exhibitions to include anything from ethnographic objects and folk art to the description of social practices or items of design. The art world constantly tests and waives its boundaries.

To some degree this is what the art world has actually become: the constant testing and overcoming of its own boundaries. As a result it

always *appears* to be moving in the direction foreseen by past avant-gardes, bursting its own bubble in order to ultimately encompass everything. But can it really succeed in blowing itself up? Is it even really trying? When a few years ago someone asked Boris Groys whether the art world, always in crisis, was really on the verge of self-destruction, Groys answered: “I do not see any signs of collapse. Worldwide, the industrial museum complex is growing. The pace of cultural tourism is increasing, new biennials and exhibitions are opening everywhere on a weekly basis. The recent addition of China alone has drastically increased the size of the art world.”

Much of what is called the art world consists of an endless speculation on the rules, which are always in flux and under negotiation. No one claims to be responsible for them, everyone claims they are just trying to figure them out. It becomes all the more complicated because exposing, challenging, or breaking the rules is now the main substance of art itself.

This game of making a spectacular show of violating the rules, so as to create even more highly paid work for those who recalibrate, redistribute, and reevaluate them, is hardly limited to the art world, incidentally. Increasingly, it is the basic substance of politics itself. Consider Brexit. While presented as an outburst of popular rage, of burn-it-all-down revulsion against administrative elites, the class of people who are going to benefit the most from Brexit will obviously be lawyers, who will now have untold thousands of thousand-pound-an-hour work thrown at them reevaluating pretty much every contractual agreement the UK has entered into for the last forty-odd years. In many ways it stands as a parable for our times.

Still, there are always meta-rules, if we can call them that: rules about what sort of rules can and can’t be broken. Perhaps the best way to determine these is to determine what’s clearly an invalid move. It’s commonplace to hear, for example, that there’s nothing, nowadays, that cannot be turned into a work of art – if only because the very act of arguing about whether or not something is art will itself tend to constitute it as such. But this isn’t really true. Some things can’t be turned into works of art. It is, as we’ve learned from the Venice Biennale, possible to dredge of a ship in which refugees have drowned in the Mediterranean and place it on display, and some will agree that this is an artistic gesture. But the refugees themselves, or the ocean in which they drowned, are quite another matter.

There are always limits.

This is why we believe the image of the individual creative genius is so important. Deny it though we might, it continues to play a role in

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regulating the rules of the game. To put it another way: the continued embrace of one half of the Romantic ideal is premised on the absolute exclusion of the other one. If there's one absolute rule, one red line that cannot be crossed, it is that *everyone* cannot be an artist. The kind of value art creates must, necessarily, be based on exclusion. To actually realize the vision of Novalis (or for that matter Osip Brik, or even Joseph Beuys) would mean to dissolve away the entire structure which makes "the art world" what it is, because it would destroy the entire mechanism through which it creates value.

This is not just because any market must, as we note, operate on a principle of scarcity, and some sort of conception of spiritual genius seems the only way to justify the levels of scarcity that a market pumped quite so full of the profits of financialized derivatives requires. The art world has, since the Industrial Revolution, always been based on the idea that "real art" is priceless and rare; the way the avant-garde challenge to this principle has been absorbed and recuperated has been to add to this that its definition is also constantly shifting and unstable. But this situation is in fact altogether favorable to the current players of the art market in the same way that market volatility is favorable to bond traders: the rapidly changing values of art objects, the discovery of the new names of artists allow for ever-new opportunities for profit, and especially for the insider traders who have some advance knowledge of how the rules are about to change (in many cases, because they are involved in changing them themselves). This is what the work of gallerists and curators is basically about. The price spikes, the conceptual revolutions, the new discoveries, the constant gladiatorial clashes between artists, galleries, curators, critics – all combine to propose a subtle argument: that the characteristic logic of financial markets, the combination of creative destruction, self-marketing, and speculation, *is* freedom, indeed, freedom on the most refined spiritual level. After all, it is nothing if not exhilarating. It feels like a game where anything goes. But so, often, does the financialized peaks of the business world; and just as in the business world, all this is only possible against the unstated background of that which absolutely cannot be challenged, which are ultimately, structures of exclusion.

We Don't Wish to End Here, However (or, Art Communism II)

Our conclusions might seem bleak. Art remains inseparable from a Romantic notion of freedom; but the pursuit of the individual version of Romantic freedom seems to lead inexorably to

validating the logic of finance capital, just as the pursuit of the collective, democratic version of Romantic freedom, in which art is free to all, leads – if Tzvetan Todorov and company are to be believed – inexorably to the gulag.

But we don't think things are really as bad as all that.

In fact, since the logic of finance capital is not, ultimately, particularly inspiring, it only operates because the lure of communism, as the ultimate realization of Novalis's dream of undoing the violence that destroys our sense of play, beauty, and creation, continues to inform it. Here we have to take issue with Todorov's otherwise brilliant essay "Avant-Gardes & Totalitarianism," where he warned that the Romantic element in the avant-garde always turned out to open the way to totalitarianism. Citing numerous quotes from Stalin, Hitler, and Mussolini, Todorov argues that twentieth-century dictators typically enacted the visions of avant-garde artists, that of radically transforming our common reality in accordance with some master plan. If "poetry could no longer be written after Auschwitz," as Theodor Adorno so famously put it, it was only because poetry was complicit in the crime.

Perhaps it's understandable then that the second half of the twentieth century came to be defined by a determination to entirely eliminate poetry from politics, to turn over power first to bland technocrats, then to even blander managers whose vision, insofar as they had one, was precisely not to have one. But the financial crisis of 2008, and particularly the looming crisis of climate change, which threatens to kill far more humans than all the wars of the twentieth century combined, has demonstrated that the rule of managers and technocrats is likely even more dangerous still.

The themes of the last Venice Biennale were devoted precisely to this sense of impending catastrophe. The two most memorable pieces were a sunken refugee ship, and the small Lithuanian Pavilion, a modestly sung ode to the end of the world. All reveled in the impossibility of establishing a redemptive narrative. What, after all, were we, as spectators, being offered as answers? Or even in the way of participation in the debate? Nothing but endless queues and parties, benefits, tournaments, the prospect of ownership of some fragment of our impending doom.

And in this case, the analysis of expert qualifications of artists and curators, or assessments of the level of complexity and subtlety of any specific work, is quite a meaningless exercise.

We would like to imagine the possibility of a completely different model of the art world. It's

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sometimes remarked that even if a modest proportion of the mathematicians and software engineers currently engaged in designing technology for high-speed trading were to shift to working on trying to design alternatives to capital, we'd easily have at least the outlines of a dozen viable economic systems laid out in no time. What if we were to apply the same creativity we do to inventing new works of art, or for that matter theories about the nature of art, to imagining different ways the institutional structure itself could be organized? What would art communism actually be like?

We will dedicate the next chapters of our essay to these thoughts.

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