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Running Along the Disaster: A Conversation with Franco “Bifo” Berardi

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Önder Özengi & Pelin Tan (LaborinArt): You wanted to speak about the European crisis, especially its effect on the Mediterranean, the Near East, and the Middle East. What does the collapse of social welfare mean for these territories and countries?

Franco “Bifo” Berardi (FBB): After May 25, we must be able to say that the “European experiment” is over. The impressive result that the National Front will have in the French elections is going to add the word “end” to this expression. The European Union was based on the alliance between France and Germany, after two centuries of war. Now the alliance is over. After incredible suffering and bloodshed, the French won WWI and WWII against the Germans. Why should they accept German domination now? This horrible result has been imposed by financial capitalism, and its politics is the prevailing sentiment of the French people. The majority of the French do not feel Europe to be their home. This is a geopolitical catastrophe and, more importantly, a social catastrophe.

The financial system has pushed the EU into the abyss, provoking the resurgence of French nationalism: the EU is now a dead man walking. The majority of British people have declared that they want to leave the corpse of the EU, and in different ways the Danish, the Greeks, and the Austrians have declared the same thing. Only the Pravy Sektor (Right Sector) Party in Ukraine seems to be enthusiastic about the future of Europe, and this means that the future of Europe is Yugoslavia circa 1992. Did the global financial system consciously plan this unspeakable catastrophe, whose consequences might be misery, fascism, and civil war? Or is this only a by-product, a sort of side effect, of the war against social welfare and workers’ rights? My answer is the following: in the history of the war between workers and capital, the EU was the last bastion of welfare and workers’ power. This was thanks to the legacy of its colonial privilege, but also to the peculiar history of the European workers’ movement. The EU was the last example of democracy for the workers of the world. Destroying the EU was the last act of the worldwide neoliberal aggression against democracy. Now this aggression has fulfilled its goal. The EU is dead.

LiA: Europe is heterogeneously filled with migrant workers and refugee labor economies. Parallel to this phenomenon, local movements and networks focused on commoning in urban areas are increasingly active, especially in the southern Mediterranean. Networks such as Encounter Athens and Mataora, among others in Madrid, Lisbon, and Rome, embody a fundamental criticism of Europe’s ideology and unity.

FBB: In general, European politics is now polarized between financial capitalism and the resurgence of nationalism. These are the two actors of the history of the next decade: financial *Übermensch*-ism on one side, and identitarian aggressiveness on the other side – that is, financial abstraction and the aggressive comeback of the identitarian body.

Society has been crushed, precarized, impoverished. The only shelter that the social body can find against financial aggression is nationalist identification – just look at the proliferation of micronationalisms everywhere. The Occupy movement was an attempt to reassert democracy, but Occupy has been unable to go beyond the social uprising of precarious cognitive workers. It has been unable to start a process of self-organizing the general intellect.

LiA: Are there new forms of resistance coming out of these new movements?

FBB: Resistance is futile, as the mutation is transforming everything in the deep fabric of subjectivity. Obviously, people will struggle for survival, and you can call it resistance. Small islands of temporary social autonomy will resist, but the conditions for social solidarity have been cancelled by the pervading precarity. We should

stop deceiving ourselves: the only resistance to global financial capitalism for the time being is the identitarian force of localism, identity, and fascism.

LiA: Recently, we talked about larger movements and their impact on a global scale, rather than local organizations that try create alternative modes of production and new forms of coexistence. Does it matter if those movements are big or not? It is important to consider the kinds of noncapitalist production and labor conditions they offer.

FBB: No, it is not a question of size. Financial capitalism has destroyed the legacy of modern social civilization and is cancelling the conditions for any process of collective autonomous subjectivation. At the same time, it is submitting cognitive activity to techno-linguistic automatisms.

LiA: How would you describe Occupy in light of these recent conditions?

FBB: Occupy has been an exceptional process of reactivation of the social body, fragmented by financial abstraction and the deterritorialization of networked labor. However, Occupy has proved unable to turn this process into one of long-lasting social recomposition. Look at the Egyptian catastrophe. Look at the

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Istubalz, *Untitled*, 2014.

Syrian tragedy. Look at the wave of cynicism and depression in London after the sudden explosion of Occupy in 2010. The Occupy wave is over. In Ukraine, the dynamics of Occupy have resulted in an outburst of nationalism and have opened the way to civil war.

LiA: How can we read the Occupy experience in Kyiv?

FBB: The political background of Kyiv is certainly different from the other places where Occupy has developed, but the dynamics it has unleashed are similar. The movement has also initiated a process of the reactivation of the physical body of the city, yet financial capitalism and resurgent nationalism have crushed this social movement. Although Occupy has opened a space, cognitive precarious workers have been unable to transform it into a permanent autonomous zone. The same problem was experienced in Istanbul. The Gezi Park movement has been an exceptional opportunity for the reactivation of the social sphere of communication and organization, but the physical occupation of the city has not enabled the movement to stop the process of exploitation and create a model for autonomous subjectivation. The movement has changed the political horizon and daily life for a social minority, but it has failed to change the *rapport de force* between capital and society.

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LiA: What about examples like WikiLeaks or Snowden and their opposition to financial capitalism?

FBB: Actually, only Assange and Snowden have managed to provoke a crisis in this totalitarian semiosphere. Judging solely from the effects, hacking is proving to be more effective than Occupy. Nevertheless, there is something disquieting in cyberactivism. Anonymous's actions develop in a nonphysical sphere of relation, somehow internalizing the effects of the abstraction and financialization of life and the dephysicalization of the sphere of communication.

LiA: What remains after a park occupation? Friendship, the experience of the other's body, unconditional relations of labor production, bodies in action beyond voluntary labor, clashes of forms of solidarity, and new forms of communal relations. When we speak of production, even alternative forms of production, we always ontologically refer back to capitalism. We often feel conflicted about this. It is a dilemma. Are there local, engaged, alternative forms of production in which resistance is possible? Possibly a transversal practice of sorts?

FBB: Let's look back at five decades of social movements, starting in 1964, when the Free Speech Movement in California launched



Hewsel, Diyarbakir, March 2014. Photo: Pelin Tan.



Encampment at Gezi Park, Istanbul, June, 2013. Photo: Pelin Tan



Encampment at Gezi Park, Istanbul, June, 2013. Photo: Pelin Tan

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Istubalz, *Untitled*, 2014.

the long history of worldwide uprisings that would occur in '68. This student movement was the first uprising of cognitive labor. The ambiguity of technology in the relationship between knowledge and power was already emerging. Fifty years after the Free Speech Movement at Berkeley, we now see that the self-organization of the general intellect is the only prospect for the decades to come. The year 1968 inaugurated an age of conflict, decomposition, and fragmentation in the internal life of the general intellect. But it also inaugurated an age of autonomous cooperation. Aspects of the good life were created in the cultural underground, as well as in some spheres of the larger cultural landscape.

Autonomous cooperation always has to be seen in light of its rich ambiguity. On the one hand, it offers the possibility of exiting the capitalist form. On the other hand, it experiments with new forms of production that capital will exploit tomorrow. Autonomy is not about achieving purity. It is absolute contamination; it is the motor of development and the critique of this development itself. We run on the dynamic of disaster in many ways: from the point of view of the environmental catastrophe, the point of view of the proliferation of wars, of the dramatic impoverishment of daily life, and so on. But autonomy is always running on the dynamic of disaster. And is always trying to create possibilities for escaping.

LiA: Escaping. Modes of escaping.

FBB: In many places around the world, Occupy has opened the way to disastrous scenarios. Think of Egypt, think of Syria. But also in a different sense, think of London. After UK Uncut and the four nights of rage in August 2011, a long wave of depression and cynicism followed. The blockbuster *Hunger Games* portrays the zeitgeist of the post-Occupy generation. Financial abstraction takes over the imagination, but at the borders you can see the profile of the emerging identitarian counter-abstraction, that is, the return of the aggressive identitarian body. The next move is escape. But we are not just escaping from the capitalist trap. We are simultaneously taking part in the evolution of the brain. The new game will be the fight for the autonomy of the brain. The financial reduction of the social body is provoking a wave of depression, and nationalism is a way of transforming depression into aggressiveness. This is the lesson that comes from the European elections: financial abstraction is fuelling the aggressive body of nationalism.

LiA: What is the special meaning of the Occupy movement, particularly as manifested in the Gezi Park resistance? What is the danger of a place? What type of opportunities does it bring?

FBB: Occupy Gezi Park has simultaneously been a movement *against* the devastation of the urban environment, and *for* the reactivation of the erotic body of society – very much like the Egyptian insurrection in January and February of 2011. The reactivation of the erotic body has intersected with the connective wave of self-organization. Commentators have emphasized the role of Facebook and Twitter in the mobilization of both Tahrir Square and Gezi Park. That role is obvious: Facebook and Twitter are normal parts of the daily life and work of the new generation of cognitive precarious workers. What is more interesting in these events is not the use of social media, but this social body coming out from Facebook and Twitter and deciding to meet physically in a place. This has been the high point of the experience. But these precarious cognitive workers have been unable to create a permanent form of existence, of collaboration, and of social power. So many people met in the streets of London, New York, and Madrid, but they did not manage to transfer the energy of the street occupations into a permanent transformation of daily work relations. They did not manage to win the day after.

LiA: What will the conditions be on the day after?

FBB: The recomposition and reactivation of the social body, of the erotic body of society, is the reason for Occupy's existence. But we have not found a political exit. We did not find the way out. So the precarious cognitive generation is now withdrawing into depression and cynicism, and calling it "coolness." Occupy means the reactivation of the social body. But the energy coming from Occupy must be transferred into the real place of production: not just the urban territory, but the bio-financial global network. We have been unable to link these two levels in our practice.

LiA: You describe the general intellect as a new form of labor. But how do we relate Chinese workers at Foxconn, Italian migrant workers in Rome, or Filippina domestic workers in Hong Kong to cognitive labor and the general intellect? We disagree with the idea that the main actors in Occupy movements have been cognitive workers. How can we imagine a heterogenous kind of labor? Can you clarify what you mean by the "precarity of intellectual labor" and its central position in the general intellect? Does it not reproduce an old hierarchy between manual and intellectual labor?

FBB: The general intellect takes the form of an ocean, an infinite sprawl of depersonalized fragments of bio-time: capital picks up and recombines the digitalized fragments of work-time. This is the continuous scramble of the global labor market. These fragments are

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linguistic fragments, or fractals. Language is formatted in such a way that our linguistic performance is made compatible with the global linguistic machine. But the process of precarization not only concerns intellectual workers. Cognition is everywhere in the cycle of work. Every act of work is submitted to digital abstraction, or to its collateral effects. Abstraction penetrates every fragment of the nervous system of social work. The physical activity of industrial workers is subjected to this same process of precarization. This creates a condition of political weakness for workers: everybody is exposed to the blackmail of precarity. Furthermore, the fragmentation or fractalization of work-time mirrors the fractalization of capital, because capital is also submitted to a process of deterritorialization, abstraction, and recombinant fractalization. A hundred years ago, capital was physically identifiable in the physical assets of the owner. But capital was dephysicalized and deterritorialized when the financial function took over and subjected the industriousness of society to financial blackmail. Now that financial capital isn't based on physical assets anymore, it is all about the virtual possession of abstract fractals, of disembodied money. In the history of money, there is a moment when money is purely a tool of exchange. Then money becomes as an activator of credit. And finally, you have the passage to money as universal mobilizer of human energies.

LiA: ... in the form of, for example, debt. Debt is now deeply connected to these new conditions.

FBB: Yes, debt. Credit and debt are mere activators of social energy, and they force social time to accept any kind of blackmail. Money isn't a semantic tool anymore, an indicator pointing to a referent. Money is a purely pragmatic tool for the mobilization of the nervous energies of society, and debt is the chain that obliges you to accept any kind of blackmail. In this purely pragmatic stage, money is no longer a referential function. It's the function that motivates people to accept slavery.

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This conversation took place on May 24, 2014 during the workshop *Running Along The Disaster*, organized by Otonom Publishing and the LaborinContemporaryArt research collective in Istanbul.

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Franco "Bifo" Berardi, founder of the famous Radio Alice in Bologna and an important figure in the Autonomia movement in Italy, is a writer, media theorist, and media activist. He currently teaches Social History of the Media at the Accademia di Brera, Milan. His most recent book, entitled *The Uprising*, was published by Semiotext(e) in 2012.

Önder Özengi is a critic and writer, trained in Anthropology and Art. He wrote his MA thesis about institutional critique in contemporary art after 1960s. He curated various exhibitions such as "Relative Position and Conclusions," Suriye Arcade, 2009, Istanbul, "Never Again" Depo, Istanbul, 2013. He is a researcher in the project "Like a Rolling Stone: Labor in Contemporary Art" with Pelin Tan. Özengi lives and works in Istanbul.

Pelin Tan is a researcher in the project *Like a Rolling Stone: Labor in Contemporary Art* (2012--2015), which surveys working conditions in art. She is a member of the video collectives Artıkışler and videoccupy, and with Anton Vidokle she codirected 2084, the first in a series of video episodes on the future history of art/artists. Tan is Associate Prof. and vice-dean of Architecture Faculty of Mardin Artuklu University.