

Art After Capitalism

Many came to the conclusion long ago: art after capitalism starts right now. 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 in 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, precodified 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 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, etc. 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 on 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 work 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 on 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 net 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 on to something. It is not so 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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