

Home for a Season

Habitation or improvement? The question marked a new divide between the lord and the commoner in the late Middle Ages. Woods, streams, pasture lands and arable soil could be used according to season and need by the people living nearby, as they had been since time immemorial. Or they could be enclosed and delivered over to intensive exploitation (running sheep for wool, extracting fuel for a smelter, installing a water-wheel where the stream flowed deep). Land for habitation became a resource for industry. Its improvement for commercial exchange could yield a rich trove of golden coin for the lord. But the commoner, unable to pasture in the spring, plant in the summer or forage in the fall, would be forced from the village to seek a few coppers in town. He or she would become what we now call a “common laborer.”

I get up from the bench where I am writing, turn the key in the door and go to heat some water for tea. How funny to think back on those old stories from the Middle Ages! I rode the cash nexus to get here: a jet plane across the ocean, a high-speed train across the continent, an electric tramway across the city. Then friends (whom I’d never met before) opened the door to this house on the Goethestrasse in Kassel, with no furniture but lots of mattresses and pallets, a sewing machine and a few odd tools. Now a group of us will inhabit this old house for a season, creating events at an international art exhibition, gardening, cooking meals and asking about the life we lead.

First set of questions: How to distribute the beds? How to set up the kitchen? How to build a table? How to get ready for dozens more people who will come to share habitation and art and conversation? This afternoon I will go to another space that so far I have only imagined, the Turnhalle, a vast old gymnasium that is now becoming a center for whatever exactly it is (no one is yet sure) that we are going to do together this summer.

Second set of questions: How to respond to vast and abstract economic crisis? How to react to the collapse of public services, the failure of states, the bankruptcy of finance and the uncertainty of the transnational monetary system? Culture in the German Land of Hesse still seems to be the province of some beneficent lord. Handfuls of treasure are cast out to chosen hands, and art takes shape all over the city. The industrial side of this event will become more obvious when the doors open up, and crowds of visitors flock to buy tickets and books and hotel rooms and ice cream. Meanwhile on June 17 the Greeks are supposed to vote on whether or not they too will take handfuls of money from the European Central Bank and the IMF. It is certain that some of them (the Syriza coalition) don’t want any more EU money. Because the fine print says that even if the house is bare and there’s no tea in the cupboard, still they will have to pay it off for generations, with compound interest.

For millions of people across the world, the collection agency and the repo man are threatening realities. You signed on the dotted line, now face the consequences. If you can’t keep up the payments you may become what is called a “common criminal.” The Next 5000 Years of Debt is an unbearable idea for most people.

As for us here in the house, we probably all grew up more or less inside the cash nexus. Maybe we found a way to hold things in common for a time in youth. Then for a longer while it was all about the complex process of becoming an individual. You were supposed to talk smart, work quick, pay your bills and look good on a Saturday evening. If you were lucky enough you found this thing called a job, which said hello every morning five days a week, and sent a letter once a month with your name on it. If you were luckier you found a mate and then you could have what is called a home, because even if you left the house the heart would travel with you. It was all very fascinating and quite exciting: sometimes you’d ride on jet planes and take the elevator to the

thirty-third floor. But there's just one more thing that we are finding today: Our lives depend on a planetary crisscross of cables and computers and mathematical formulas over which we have absolutely no control. So who will we become as the crisis grows deeper?

Steps Toward Revocation

Globalization was meant to be a tremendous improvement. In the course of just a decade – from 1989 to the Internet boom of the late 1990s – we saw the installation of a worldwide monetary system. Russia, the former Eastern Europe, China, India, Africa and Latin America: all these new territories were integrated to the network of major currencies (Euro-Dollar-Yen), tied together by algorithmic patterns known as derivatives. Everyone expected to ride it to the moon. If you had that thing called a job (or if you snagged that thing called a loan), you could go anywhere on earth with a bank card acquired in your own place of residence. When you stuck it into an ATM machine, differently colored notes would emerge from the global electronic flux.

Today we begin to see the tremendous damage that too much trust in money can bring. National states were always arbitrary and corrupt. Now they have become almost totally unresponsive to the people. Financial corporations steal us blind. Military corporations stoke the wars. Extractive corporations strip the earth. Government is an act of permanent denial. As for commerce, it seems to be based on combinations of seduction and addiction. Those who have good positions look the other way, and take their advantage. Those who don't find themselves facing the cops in the street. The power and privilege of the cash nexus drives everything. Some public services remain, but for how long? Some civil rights remain, but for how long? To pretend all this will solve itself is exactly what the majority has done.

Habitation has a different meaning after the real-estate meltdown of 2008, and then again another after the meltdowns of Fukushima. It is no longer certain you can live inside the circuits of an ATM machine. Communizing resources means opening up the individual to the demands and the generosity of others, with a new awareness of the earth's fragility. There is a displacement of trust, a shift of reference or guarantee. We can try this out experimentally, in a protected space, beneath the umbrella of a giant exhibition. No one is fooling themselves as to the nature of the context here. But the point is to set about altering that context from within. One can imagine a future where it would be normal for individuals operating at high levels of skill and sophistication to pool their resources – but also their hopes and their dreams and their fears and their pleasures – in order to accomplish what they can't do alone and what they can't extract from a dying system. Rather than returning to the Middle Ages (or even 1968) it would be a matter of inventing something necessary and desirable at this exact moment in history.

Revocation is about challenging norms. To revoke is to withdraw institutional authority and legitimacy, to curtail a socially granted power that has turned into an abuse. Around the world people are engaging in this process, whose latest form was inaugurated in the winter of 2010, in Tunisia and in Egypt. But revocation also entails a re-voicing, a different tone and style of speech. In the present time it suggest the form of an assembly, the circulation of words for the creation of trust and collective capacities. Going deeper, it involves a new direction in life, a new vocation. Maybe this is what attracts me and takes me beyond myself. A different rhythm. A time out of mine. Steps toward the revocation of cultural practices.

Brian Holmes
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