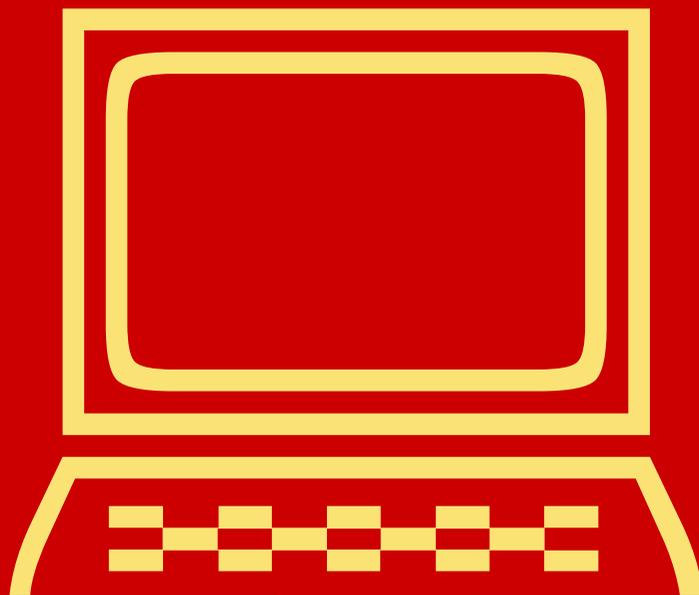


LEA  
BOOKS

VOL 20 NO 1 BOOK SENIOR EDITORS LANFRANCO ACETI, SUSANNE JASCHKO,  
JULIAN STALLABRASS / BOOK EDITOR BILL BALASKAS

The Leonardo Electronic Almanac is proud to announce the publication of its first LEA book, titled "Red Art: New Utopias in Data Capitalism." The publication investigates the relevance of socialist utopianism to the current dispositions of New Media Art, through the contributions of renowned and emerging academic researchers, critical theorists, curators and artists.



# RED ART

New Utopias in Data Capitalism

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LEONARDO ELECTRONIC ALMANAC BOOK, VOLUME 20 ISSUE 1

# Red Art: New Utopias in Data Capitalism

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# Commonist Red Art: Blood, Bones, Utopia and Kittens

**Does Red Art exist? And if so, who creates it and where can we find it?** This special issue of the Leonardo Electronic Almanac addresses these questions and collates a series of perspectives and visual essays that analyze the role, if any, that Red Art plays in the contemporary art world.

Red Art, these are two simple words that can generate complex discussions and verbal feuds since they align the artist to a vision of the world that is 'Red' or 'Communist.'

Nevertheless, even if the two little words when placed together are controversial and filled with *animus*, they are necessary, if not indispensable, to understand contemporary aesthetic issues that are affecting art and how art operates in the context of social versus political power relations within an increasingly technological and socially-mediated world.

Red Art could be translated – within the contemporary hierarchical structures – as the art of the powerless versus the art of the powerful, as the art of the masses versus the art of the few, as the art of the young versus the old, as the art of the technological democrats versus the technological conservatives, as the art of the poor versus the art of the rich... Or it could be described as the art of the revolutionary versus the status quo. In the multitude of the various possible definitions, one appears to stand out for contemporary art and it is the definition of art as bottom-up participation versus art as top-down

prepackaged aesthetic knowledge. And yet, what does Red Art stand for and can it be only restricted to Communist Art?

The contemporary meaning of Red Art is different from what it may have been for example in Italy in the 1970s, since so much has changed in terms of politics, ideology and technology. It is no longer possible to directly identify Red Art with Communist Art (as the art of the ex Union of Soviet Socialist Republics or of its satellite states and globalized Communist political parties which were and continue to be present in the West – albeit inedulcorated forms) nor as the art of the left, but there is a need to analyze the complexity of the diversification and otherization of multiple geopolitical perspectives. <sup>1</sup>

If today's Red Art has to redefine its structures and constructs it becomes necessary to understand who is encompassed within the label of Red Artists and what their common characteristics are. Red Artists – if we wanted to use this category – and their aesthetic production cannot be reduced to the word 'Communist,' borrowing passé ideological constructs. An alternative to the impasse and the ideological collapse of communism is the redefinition of Red Art as the art of the commons: **Commonist Art.** <sup>2</sup> If Red Art were to be defined as the art of the commons, Commonist Art, thereby entrenching it clearly within technoutopias and neoliberalist crowd sourcing approaches for collective participation, this would provide a contradictory but functional framework for the realization of

common practices, socially engaged frameworks, short terms goals and 'loose/open' commitments that could be defined in technological terms as *liquid digital utopias* or as a new form of permanent dystopia. <sup>3</sup>

The XXIst century appears to be presenting us, then, with the entrenched digitized construct of the common versus the idea of the Paris Commune of 1871, thereby offering a new interpretation of the social space and an alternative to traditional leftist/neoliberal constructs. The idea of the common – as an open access revolving door, is opposed to the concept of the commune – as a highly regulated and hierarchical structure.

The 'semantic' distingo between commons and communes becomes important since both terms are reflections of constructions and terminological frameworks for an understanding of both society and art that is based on 'likes,' actions and commitments for a common or a commune. The commitment, even when disparagingly used to define some of the participants as click-activists and armchair revolutionaries, <sup>4</sup> is partial and leaves the subject able to express other likes often in contradiction with one another: e.g. I like the protests against Berlusconi's government and I like the programs on his private TVs.

I find the idea of the commons (knowledge, art, creativity, health and education) liberating, empowering and revolutionary, if only it was not expressed within its own economic corporative structures, creating further layers of contradiction and operational complexities.

The contradictions of contemporary Red Art and contemporary social interactions may be located in the difference between the interpretations of common and commune – the commune upon which the Italian Communist Party, for example, based its foundations in order to build a new 'church.'

The relationships in the commune of the Italian communists (oxymoronically defined Cattocomunisti or Catholic-communist) rests in faith and in compelled actions, in beliefs so rooted that are as blinding as blinding is the light of God in the painting *The Conversion of Saint Paul on the Road to Damascus* by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio.

*[...] and from the leadership an aggressive unwillingness to allow any dissent or deviation. 'That time produced one of the sharpest mental frosts I can remember on the Left,' the historian E. P. Thompson would recall from personal knowledge of the CP... <sup>5</sup>*

It is this blind faith that has generated the martyrs of communism and heretical intellectuals, accusations from which not even Antonio Gramsci was able to escape. The vertical hierarchical structure of the commune and of the Communist Party produced heretics and immolations, but also supported artists, intellectuals, academics and writers that operated consonantly with the party's ideals: people that sang from the same preapproved institutional hymn sheet.

**Stefania:** *This young generation horrifies me. Having been kept for years by this state, as soon as they discover to have two neurons they pack and go to study, to work in the US and London, without giving a damn for who supported them. Oh well, they do not have any civic vocation. When I was young at the occupied faculty of literature, I oozed civic vocation. [...] I have written eleven novels on civic duty and the book on the official history of the Party.*

**Jep Gambardella:** *How many certainties you have, Stefania. I do not know if I envy you or feel a sensation of disgust. [...] Nobody remembers your civic vocation during your University years. Many instead*

*remember, personally, another vocation of yours that was expressed at the time; but was consumed in the bathrooms of the University. You have written the official history of the Party because for years you have been the mistress of the head of the Party. Your eleven novels published by a small publishing house kept by the Party and reviewed by small newspapers close to the Party are irrelevant novels [...] the education of the children that you conduct with sacrifice every minute of your life ... Your children are always without you [...] then you have - to be precise - a butler, a waiter, a cook, a driver that accompanies the boys to school, three babysitters. In short, how and when is your sacrifice manifested? [...] These are your lies and your fragilities.* <sup>6</sup>

To the question, then, if Red Art exists I would have to answer: YES! I have seen Red Art in Italy (as well as abroad), as the Communist Art produced in the name of the party, with party money and for party propaganda, not at all different from the same art produced in the name of right-wing parties with state or corporate money – having both adopted and co-opted the same systems and frameworks of malfeasance shared with sycophantic artists and intellectuals.

In order to understand the misery of this kind of Red Art one would have to look at the Italian aesthetization of failure – which successfully celebrates failure in the *Great Beauty* by Paolo Sorrentino when the character of Stefania, and her ‘oozing civic duty,’ is ripped apart. It is a civic responsibility that is deprived and devoid of any ethics and morals. <sup>7</sup>

This is but one of the multiple meanings of the concept of Red Art – the definition of Red Art as Communist Art, is the one that can only lead to sterile definitions and autocelebratory constructs based on the ‘aesthetic obfuscation of the lack of meaning’ as a

tool for the obscurity of the aesthetic to act as a producer of meaning when the artist producing it is inept at creating meaning. <sup>8</sup> Even more tragically, Red Art leads to the molding of the artist as spokesperson of the party and to the reduction of the artwork, whenever successful, to advertising and propaganda.

Commonist Art, founded on the whim of the ‘like’ and ‘trend,’ on the common that springs from the aggregation around an image, a phrase, a meme or a video, is able to construct something different, a convergence of opinions and actions that can be counted and weighed and that cannot be taken for granted. Could this be a Gramscian utopia of re-construction and re-fashioning of aesthetics according to ‘lower commons’ instead of high and rich ‘exclusivity,’ which as such is unattainable and can only be celebrated through diamond skulls and gold toilets?

Commonist Art – the art that emerges from a common – is a celebration of a personal judgment, partially knowledgeable and mostly instinctive, perhaps manipulated – since every ‘other’ opinion is either manipulated by the media or the result of international lobby’s conspiracies or it can be no more than a reinforcement of the society of the simulacra. Conversely, it may also be that the image and its dissemination online is the representation of a personal diffidence towards systems of hierarchical power and endorsement that can only support ‘their own images and meanings’ in opposition to images that are consumed and exhausted through infinite possibilities of interpretation and re-dissemination. <sup>9</sup>

If Commonist Art offers the most populist minimum common denominator in an evolutionary framework determined by whims, it is not at all different from the minimum common denominator of inspirational/aspirational codified aesthetics that are defined by the higher echelons of contemporary oligarchies that

have increasingly blurred the boundaries of financial and aesthetic realms.

Commonist Art – if the current trends of protest will continue to affirm themselves even more strongly – will continue to defy power and will increasingly seek within global trends and its own common base viable operational structures that hierarchies will have to recognize, at one point or the other, by subsuming Commonist Art within pre-approved structures.

Red Art, therefore, if intended as Commonist Art becomes the sign of public revolts, in the physical squares or on the Internet. It is art that emerges without institutional ‘approval’ and in some cases in spite of institutional obstacles. Gramsci would perhaps say that Commonist Art is a redefinition of symbolic culture, folk art and traditional imageries that processed and blended through digital media and disseminated via the Internet enable Red Art to build up its own languages and its own aesthetics without having to be institutionally re-processed and receive hierarchical stamps of approval.

Red Art can also be the expression of people whose blood and tears – literally – mark the post-democracies of the first part of the XXIst century. Non-political, non-party, non-believers, <sup>10</sup> the crowds of the Internet rally around an argument, a sense of justice, a feeling of the future not dominated by carcinogenic politicians, intellectuals and curators, that present themselves every time, according to geographical and cultural spaces, as Sultans, Envoys of God, or even Gods.

Red Art, the Commonist Art that perhaps is worth considering as art, is the one that is self-elevated, built on the blood and bones of people still fighting in the XXIst century for justice, freedom and for a piece of bread. Art that rallies crowds’ likes and dislikes based

on the whims of a liquid Internet structure where people support within their timelines an idea, a utopia, a dream or the image of a kitten. <sup>11</sup>

This piece of writing and this whole volume is dedicated to the victims of the economic and political violence since the beginning of the Great Recession and to my father; and to the hope, hard to die off, that some utopia may still be possible.

**Lanfranco Aceti**

*Editor in Chief, Leonardo Electronic Almanac  
Director, Kasa Gallery*



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1. Larry Ray, "At the End of the Post-Communist Transformation? Normalization or Imagining Utopia?" *European Journal of Social Theory* 12 (August 2009), 321-336.
2. Commonism was used by Andy Warhol. In this essay the word is rooted in Internet 'commons,' although similarities, comparisons and contiguities exist with the earlier usage. "Thus Warhol's initial preference for the term 'Commonism' was as ambivalent, and ambiguous, as the oscillating signs 'Factory' and 'Business.' Although it flirted with connotations of the 'common' with the 'Communist' (from cheap and low to 'dignity of the common man'), the term betrayed no hidden, left-wing agenda on Warhol's part." Caroline A. Jones, *Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 205.
3. "For one thing, utopia has now been appropriated by the entertainment industry and popular culture – what is termed the contemporary liquid utopia – as a kind of dystopia." Anthony Elliott, *The Contemporary Bauman* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 17.
4. The blurred lines between real and virtual do not exempt click-activists or armchair revolutionaries from the persecutions and abuses of the state police. The sitting room within one's home becomes the public space for conflict and revolts. One example of many around the globe: Alexander Abad-Santos, "Turkey Is Now Arresting Dozens for Using Twitter," *The Wire*, June 5, 2013, <http://www.thewire.com/global/2013/06/turkey-twitter-arrests/65908/> (accessed January 10, 2014).
5. David Kynaston, *Austerity Britain, 1945-1951* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 342.
6. The English translation from the Italian is from the author. *La Grande Bellezza*, DVD, directed by Paolo Sorrentino (Artificial Eye, 2014).
7. "Anti-communism was never accepted as the moral equivalent of anti-fascism, not only by my parents but also by the overwhelming majority of liberal-minded people. The Left was still morally superior." Nick Cohen, *What's Left?: How the Left Lost its Way* (London: Harper Perennial, 2007), 3. La questione morale or the 'moral issue' in English is the problem identified by Enrico Berlinguer and that questioned the role of the Communist party and the Left in general in Italy. The moral issue has not been resolved to this day and is at the core of the current impossibility to distinguish between the ideological frameworks of Left and Right – since both political areas are perceived as equally and intrinsically corrupt as well as tools for an oligarchic occupation of democracy. For the original interview in Italian of Enrico Berlinguer see: Eugenio Scalfari, "Intervista a Enrico Berlinguer," *La Repubblica*, July 28, 1981 available in "La questione morale di Enrico Berlinguer," *Rifondazione Comunista's website*, <http://web.rifondazione.it/home/index.php/12-home-page/8766-la-questione-morale-di-enrico-berlinguer> (accessed March 20, 2014).
8. "Under the surface of images, one invests bodies in depth; behind the great abstraction of exchange, there continues the meticulous, concrete training of useful forces; the circuits of communication are the supports of an accumulation and a centralization of knowledge; the play of signs defines the anchorages of power; it is not that the beautiful totality of the individual is amputated, repressed, altered by our social order, it is rather that the individual is carefully fabricated in it..." Michel Foucault, "Panopticism," in *The Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Vanessa R. Schwartz and Jeannene M. Przyblyski (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004), 78.
9. There are those who think that the image is an extremely rudimentary system in comparison with language and those who think that signification cannot exhaust the image's ineffable richness. Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," in *Visual Culture: The Reader*, ed. Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall (London: Sage Publications, 1999), 33.
10. Non-believers stands for skeptics and does not have a religious connotation in this context.
11. Lanfranco Aceti, *Our Little Angel*, Lanfranco Aceti Inc., personal website, January 10, 2014, <http://www.lanfrancoaceti.com/portfolio-items/our-little-angel/> (accessed January 10, 2014).

## Changing the Game: Towards an 'Internet of Praxis'

**There is a new spectre haunting the art world. Not surprisingly, it has been put forward in recent articles, panel discussions and books as the 'ism' that could, possibly, best describe the current dispositions of contemporary art.** The name of the spectre is "post-internet art."<sup>1</sup> Unlike, however, its counterpart that was released in the world by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in 1848,<sup>2</sup> this contemporary spectre has not arrived in order to axiomatically change the established order of things; conceivably, it has arrived in order to support it.

Post-internet art refers to the aesthetic qualities defining today's artistic production, which is often influenced by, mimics, or fully adopts elements of the Internet. At the same time, the term incorporates the communication tools and platforms through which contemporary artworks reach their intended (or non-intended) audiences. Notably, in his book *Post Internet* (2011), art writer Gene McHugh suggests that regardless of an artist's intentions, all artworks now find a space on the World Wide Web and, as a result, "[...] contemporary art, as a category, was/is forced, against its will, to deal with this new distribution context or at least acknowledge it."<sup>3</sup> Quite naturally, this would seem like a strong oppositional force directed against the modus operandi of the mainstream art world. Yet, further down in the same page, McHugh characterizes this acknowledgement as a constituent part of the much larger "game" that is played by commercial galleries, biennials, museums and auction houses.

Thus, there are inevitable contradictions and challenges in the role that post-internet art is called to fulfil as a movement and/or as a status of cultural production. Firstly, there is an easily identifiable 'anxiety' to historicize a phenomenon that is very much in progress: the Internet is changing so rapidly, that if we think of the online landscape ten years ago, this would be radically different from our present experience of it. Furthermore, the post-internet theorization of contemporary art runs the danger of aestheticizing (or over-aestheticizing) a context that goes well beyond the borders of art: in the same way that we could talk about post-internet art, we could also talk about post-internet commerce, post-internet dating, post-internet travel, post-internet journalism, etc. Therefore, the role and the identity of the post-internet artist are not independent of a much wider set of conditions. This false notion of autonomy is quite easy to recognize if we think, for instance, of 'post-radio art' or 'post-television art' or, even, 'post-videogames art,' and the inherent structural and conceptual limitations of such approaches.<sup>4</sup>

Most importantly, however, any kind of aestheticization may readily become a very effective tool of depoliticization. The idea of distributing images, sounds and words that merely form part of a pre-existing system of power, inescapably eradicates the political significance of distribution. The subversive potentiality inherent in the characterisation of a network as 'distributed' was systematically undermined over the 1990s and the 2000s, due to the ideological perva-

siveness of neoliberalism during the same period. Distribution – not to mention, *equal* distribution – could have enjoyed a much more prominent role as a natural fundament of the Web and, accordingly, as a contributing factor in any investigation of digital art. Last but definitely not least, one cannot ignore the crucial fact that apolitical art is much easier to enter the art market and play the ‘game’ of institutionalization (and vice versa).

To the question: could the Internet and new media at large become true ‘game changers’ in the current historical conjuncture? What does ‘red art’ have to propose, and how does it relate to the previously described ‘post-internet condition’?

Interestingly, the term “post-internet art” was born and grew parallel to the global economic crisis and the Great Recession of 2009. One of the most important objectives of the social movements that were engendered by the crisis has been the effort to “reclaim” and “re-appropriate.” This aspiration referred not only to economic resources, but also to social roles, democratic functions, human rights, and – of course – urban spaces. Syntagma Square in Greece, Puerta del Sol in Madrid, Zuccotti Park in New York, as well as some of the most iconic public locations around the world saw diverse, or even ‘irreconcilable’ in some cases crowds demand change. Within the reality of Data Capitalism and its multiple self-generated crises, people increasingly felt that they have now been totally deprived of a place (“topos” in Greek).

It is worth remembering that the coiner of “utopia,” Thomas More, chose an island as the location where he placed his ideal society.<sup>5</sup> Any island constitutes a geographic formation that privileges the development of individual traits through a natural process of ‘appropriation.’ This encompasses both the material and the immaterial environment as expressed in the landscape, the biology of the different organisms, and – most relevant to our case – culture. Notably, when it comes to connecting utopianism with the cultural paradigm of new media art, we should not focus merely on the lack of a physical space (as articulated, for instance,

through cyberspace); rather, we should address the juxtaposition of “topos” with a potentially ‘empty’ notion of “space.” The transcendence of space in a ‘digital utopia’ absolutely necessitates the existence of a ‘topos.’ In a similar way to the one that Marx sees capitalism as a stage towards a superior system of production (communism),<sup>6</sup> the construction of a ‘topos’ is a prerequisite for the flourishing of utopianism.

‘Red Art’ can be understood as a tool for the creation of such ‘topoi.’ The lesson that new media artists can learn from the political osmoses catalyzed by the economic crisis is that, in order to be effective, cyberspace should become part of a strategy that combines physical and online spaces, practically and conceptually, whilst taking into account the individual traits of both. The necessity expressed through this combination constitutes (at least partly) a departure from the developing discourses around the ‘Internet of Things’ or the ‘Internet of Places.’<sup>7</sup> Alternatively, or additionally, what is proposed here is the formulation of an ‘Internet of Praxis’ (including, of course, artistic praxis). This approach is vividly reflected in several of the projects examined in this publication, as well as in the theoretical frameworks that are outlined.

Digital art is today in a position to capitalize on the participatory potentialities that have been revealed by the socio-political events that defined the early 2010s. The reconceptualization of cyberspace as a ‘cybertopos’ is a constituent part of this new ground on which people are called to stand and build. Accordingly, the emergence of a culture of ‘post-net participation’ in which digital media transcend physical space by consolidating it (instead of ‘merely’ augmenting it), may allow us to explore “concrete utopias”<sup>8</sup> to a greater extent than ever before in recent times. It is by actively pursuing this objective that we would expect to change the rules of the game. Artists are often the first to try.

**Bill Balaskas**

## REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. The term ‘post-internet art’ is attributed to artist Marisa Olson. See Gene McHugh, *Post Internet* (Brescia: LINK Editions), 5.
2. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels published *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* in London, on February 21, 1848.
3. Gene McHugh, *Post Internet*, 6.
4. The etymological comparison between the terms ‘post-internet art’ and ‘postmodern art’ could also highlight this context. Notably, in the case of this juxtaposition, ‘post-internet art’ puts a tool (the Internet) in the position of a movement (Modernism). If we were to consider the Internet as a movement, then, the natural historical link that would be established through the term ‘post-internet art’ would be with net art. Nevertheless, such a decision would assign net art to a status of ‘legitimization,’ towards which major museums, curators and art fairs have shown a rather consistent hostility. In this instance, historicization becomes a foe, since it would refute a ‘neutral’ relationship of the Web with art. This perspective is closely connected with the formation of an abstract notion of universalism, to which I refer further down (see endnote 8).
5. Thomas More’s *Utopia* was first published in 1516, in Belgium. There are several translations of the book.
6. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, with an introduction by David Harvey (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 51: “What the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable.”
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# Suggestions for Art That Could Be Called Red

**What is Red Art? Or rather: what could Red Art be in today's post-communist, post-utopian world, a world shaken by conflicts engendered by contrary beliefs and ideologies which have little to do with communism?** A world in which countries and societies are disrupted by territorial disputes, and by bloody fights about questions of religious identity, national identity, and ideology? Where communism has been overrun by capitalism with rare exception; where the European left movement is weak. Where the post-industrial era has produced an economic reality that is orders of magnitude more complex, transnational and therefore more difficult to control or change, than history has ever seen. In this situation, can there (still) be art that deals with ideas of communism constructively, or does contemporary art look at communist ideals only with nostalgia?

And let's be clear: is art that simply speaks out against capitalism, globalisation and neo-liberalism from a leftist position – is this kind of art 'red' per se? Do we expect Red Art to be 'red' in content, for instance, in directly addressing topics such as class struggle, the negatives of capitalism and a new neo-liberal world order? And if it does, is it enough to be descriptive or do we want art to be more than that, i.e., provoking, forward-thinking or even militant? In 1970, Jean-Luc Godard drafted a 39-point manifesto *Que faire? What is to be done?* that contrasted the antagonistic practices of making political films and making films 'politically.' It called unequivocally for art that actively takes up the position of the proletarian class and that

aims for nothing less than the transformation of the world. With his legacy, what kind of objectives do we request from Red Art? Do we really still think that art can change the world or is that another idea from the past that has been overwritten by something that we like to call reality? Can art that is for the most part commercialised and produced in a capitalist art market be 'red' at all, or does it have to reject the system established by galleries, fairs and museums in order to be truly 'red'?

Decades ago, when artists started to use new media such as video and the computer, their works were 'new' in the way they were produced and distributed, and changed the relationship between artists and their collaborators as well as between the artworks and their audiences and 'users' respectively. Most of this new-media-based art circulated outside the ordinary market and found other distribution channels. The majority of works were inspired by a quest for the 'new' and consistently broke with old aesthetic principles and functions. Much of it was also driven by a search for the 'better,' by overthrowing old hierarchies and introducing a more liberal and inclusive concept of the world, based on self-determination and active participation. Last but not least the emergence of the Internet brought us a fertile time for new and revisited utopias and artistic experiments dealing with collaboration, distribution of knowledge, shared authorship, and appropriation of technologies. Today we know that neither the Internet nor any other new technology has saved us, but that the hopes for a more demo-

cratic world and alternative economies sparked by it have come true, if only to a minor degree.

So how do artists respond to this post-communist, post-utopian condition? What can be discussed as Red Art in the recent past and present? In this issue of Leonardo we have gathered some answers to these questions in the form of papers, essays and artworks, the latter produced especially for this purpose. Bringing together and editing this issue was challenging because we decided from the start to keep the call for contributions as open as possible and to not pre-define too much. We were interested in what kind of responses our call would produce at a moment when the world is occupied with other, seemingly hotter topics, and it is fascinating to note that the resulting edition quite naturally spans decades of art production and the respective 'new' technologies as they related to ideas of social equality and empowerment – from video art to net art to bio art. This issue shows that the search for alternative ideas and perspectives, and an adherence to leftist ideals is neither futile nor simply nostalgic. But that this search is ever more relevant, particularly at a time when European politics is seemingly consolidating and wars around the world are establishing new regimes of social and economic inequality.

**Susanne Jaschko**

# Why Digital Art is Red

**The divide between the art shown in major museums and art fairs and that associated with the new media scene has been deep and durable.** Many critics have puzzled over it, particularly because there is much that the two realms share, including the desire to put people into unusual social situations. <sup>1</sup> Yet some of the reasons for the divide are plain enough, and they are about money, power and social distinction. The economic divide is across competing models of capitalist activity: the exclusive ownership of objects set against the release of reproducible symbols into networks with the ambition that they achieve maximum speed and ubiquity of circulation. The social divide is between a conservative club of super-rich collectors and patrons, and their attendant advisors, who buy their way into what they like to think of as a sophisticated cultural scene (Duchamp Land), against a realm which is closer to the mundane and more evidently compromised world of technological tools (Turing Land). <sup>2</sup> Power relations are where the divide appears starkest: in one world, special individuals known as artists make exceptional objects or events with clear boundaries that distinguish them from run-of-the-mill life; and through elite ownership and expert curation, these works are presented for the enlightenment of the rest of us. In the new media world, some 'artists' but also collectives and other shifting and anonymous producers offer up temporary creations onto a scene in which their works are open to copying, alteration and comment, and in which there is little possible control of context, frame or conversation.

This description of the divide has been put in extreme terms for the sake of clarity, and there are a few instances of the split appearing to erode. <sup>3</sup> Yet its persistence remains one of the most striking features of the general fragmentation of the fast-growing and globalising art world. That persistence rests on solid material grounds, laid out by Marx: the clash of economic models is a clear case of the mode and relations of production coming into conflict, and is part of a much wider conflict over the legal, political and social aspects of digital culture, and its synthesis of production and reproduction. <sup>4</sup> Copyright is one arena where the clash is very clear. Think of the efforts of museums to control the circulation of images and to levy copyright charges, while at the same time surrendering to the camera-phone as they abandon the attempt to forbid photography in their galleries.

So where is Red Art and the left in this scenario? Amidst the general gloom and lassitude that has beset much of the Left in Europe and the US, the development of the digital realm stands out as an extraordinary gain. It allows for the direct communication, without the intermediary of newspapers and TV, of masses of people globally – who turn out to be more egalitarian, more environmentally concerned and more seditious than the elite had bargained for. Alexander Cockburn, with his long career in activism and journalism, remarks:

*Thirty years ago, to find out what was happening in Gaza, you would have to have had a decent short-wave radio, a fax machine, or access to those great newsstands in Times Square and North Hollywood that carried the world's press. Not anymore. We can get a news story from [...] Gaza or Ramallah or Oaxaca or Vidarbha and have it out to a world audience in a matter of hours.* <sup>5</sup>

It is hard to ban social media, it has been claimed, because it entwines video fads, kittens and politics (and banning kittens looks bad). So the insight attributed by some to Lenin – that capitalists will sell us the rope with which to hang them – is still relevant. <sup>6</sup>

In an era in which the political and artistic avant-gardes have faded, the affiliation of the art world that is founded upon the sale and display of rare and unique objects made by a few exceptional individuals – in which high prices are driven by monopoly rent effects – tends to be with the conspicuous consumption of the state and the super-rich. <sup>7</sup> Here, the slightest taint of the common desktop environment is enough to kill aesthetic feeling. The affiliation of at least some of new media art is rather to the kitsch, the populist, and to the egalitarian circulation of images and words, along with discourse and interaction. New media artists who push those attachments work against some of the deepest seated elements of the art world ethos: individualism, distinction, discreteness and preservation for posterity (and long-term investment

value). It should be no surprise that they are frequently and without qualification denied the status of 'artist.'

It is also clear why the death of leftist ideas in elite discourse does not hold in new media circles, where the revival of thinking about the Left, Marxism and Communism is very evident. <sup>8</sup> The borders of art are blurred by putting works to explicit political use (in violation of the Kantian imperative still policed in the mainstream art world). <sup>9</sup> Very large numbers of people are continually making cultural interventions online, and value lies not in any particular exceptional work but in the massive flow of interaction and exchange. In that world, as it never could in a gallery, the thought may creep in that there is nothing special about any one of us. And this may lead to the greatest scandal of all: think of the statements that artists who deal with politics in the mainstream art world are obliged to make as their ticket of admission – 'my art has no political effect.' They have to say it, even when it is patently absurd; and they have to say it, even as the art world itself becomes more exposed to social media, and is ever less able to protect its exclusive domain and regulate the effects of its displays. So at base, the divide is economic, but at the level of what causes the repulsion from digital art – that puts collectors and critics to flight – it is deeply and incontrovertibly political. <sup>10</sup> They run headlong from the red.

**Julian Stallabrass**

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# THE DESIRES OF THE CROWD

## Scenario for a Future Social System

by

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

**The capitalist system Marx described when formulating his theories was based on nineteenth-century industrial capitalist society.** New methods of communication have since changed the conditions for capitalism. Parts of today's network-based creative economy are characterized by the humanistic values some writers claim Marx was looking for when he formulated the theory of alienation. <sup>1</sup> For instance, Hardt and Negri argue that the new economy of affective labour and networked relations amounted to "a kind of spontaneous and elementary communism." <sup>2</sup> This stateless network economy operates in a relational space where the consumer is also the producer, and self-fulfillment, as much as financial gain, is the goal.

In this article, I describe how to alter the functionality of the creative sector and develop institutions allowing for a union of the private and public sector. In doing this, we may approach something resembling Marx's vision of an ideal society as he describes in, for example, *Comments on James Mill*. <sup>3</sup> Here, unlike in his other texts where the communist society is described only as the antithesis of capitalism, he describes his vision more directly, as "production as hu-

### A B S T R A C T

*The micro-financing of artists offers new possibilities for people outside the economic and cultural elite to become patrons of the arts. One might term it a more democratic base for the artistic activity and its varied discursive practices. However, it is not just the economy of art that focuses on people with the particular skills to make things that get called 'art.' Promoting a personal brand in the form of taste, education and social relations is also central to every career in an insecure and flexible labor market, and not only in the creative sector. Accordingly, the crowd funding of humanity, rather than of production of commodities, is a possible and reasonable scenario for a future social system, where people are deeply interconnected in collaborative networks.*

*In order to examine what such a system might look like in practice, I have in my project *The Affect Machine* formulated a market place for social relations. Here I show how the principles for a capitalist institution like a corporation can be combined with those of a digital social network, and thus point to a form of merger between the private and public sector. In this scenario for a future social system, we may approach something resembling Marx's vision of a communist society.*

man beings," in which the products of work would reflect human nature, and would be made for reciprocal benefit as a free manifestation and enjoyment of life.

By combining an institution from the public sphere with the private, I show how we can create a scenario for a future social system. In the next part, I give a brief description of Marx's theory of alienation. In part 3, I describe how the art world can be seen as an exception to the mainstream market economy. In

part 4, I describe how changing the production conditions for art creates new opportunities to deepen the relationship between producer and consumer. In part 5, I argue for a broad definition of the artist. In part 6, I discuss how to create institutions that unite the private with the public, by combining a system of online trading with an online social network. In part 7, I draw the conclusion that today we can see the embryo of a communist society.

## 2. ALIENATION ACCORDING TO MARX

The theory of alienation is central to Marx's analysis of capitalism. During the financial and political conditions of the Western industrial revolution, a division of labour on an unprecedented scale was made possible, which drastically reduced the individual's ability to monitor and control the results of her own work. Marx argued that this created alienation in society that operates on several levels:<sup>4</sup>

1. Alienation between the producer and the consumer. Instead of producing something for another person, the worker produces for a wage.
2. Alienation between the producer and the product of the work. As the production is split into smaller parts and the worker becomes an instrument that makes a limited part of the whole, the pride and satisfaction of work is lost.
3. Alienation of workers from themselves, since they are denied their identity. By losing control over the product of work and thus pride in labor, the worker is deprived of the right to be a subject with agency.
4. Alienation of the worker from other workers, through the competition for wages, instead of working together for a common purpose.

A capitalist society, divided into classes of bourgeoisie and proletariat, stands in contrast to the ideal of communist society where there is no need for the state and class differentiation; instead everyone owns the means of production, and the principle of distribution is famously: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need!"<sup>5</sup>

This has often been interpreted to mean that everything should be shared equally, but Marx says nothing about equality, rather he emphasizes the relationships between people.<sup>6</sup> A communist society is a society where everyone is linked in a mutual interdependency with others and nature, and self-actualization is the driving force:

*Let us suppose that we had carried out production as human beings. Each of us would have, in two ways, affirmed himself, and the other person. (1) In my production I would have objectified my individuality, its specific character, and, therefore, enjoyed not only an individual manifestation of my life during the activity, but also, when looking at the object, I would have the individual pleasure of knowing my personality to be objective, visible to the senses, and, hence, a power beyond all doubt. (2) In your enjoyment, or use, of my product I would have the direct enjoyment both of being conscious of having satisfied a human need by my work, that is, of having objectified man's essential nature, and of having thus created an object corresponding to the need of another man's essential nature...*<sup>7</sup>

In this perspective, production is a mutual exchange that strengthens individuals. The producers are strengthened by expressing themselves through their work, where the product is an expression of their subject and position in the world, and thus expands their power and range. As this expression of their identity is put into use, and used by other individuals, the producers also get the satisfaction of seeing their products in use, as a response to other people's human needs.

Exactly how this state is achieved is, however, controversial, and the self-proclaimed precursors of Communist society, the socialist states of the twentieth century, fell far short of these high ideals. Yet the problem of alienation has not dissipated, and may indeed have got worse as capitalism lost its socialist other. However, in a description of the alienation in American society, social scientist Fritz Pappenheim points out the strategy that many feminist theorists have focused on:

*If our goal is to overcome alienation by fostering bonds between man and man, then we must build up institutions which enable man to identify his ends with those of others, with the direction in which his society is moving. In other words, we must try to reduce the gulf between the realms of the private and the public.*<sup>8</sup>

Thus, that the differentiation between people should be avoided, and that the gap between what is seen as private and what is seen as public should be reduced.

## 3. AN EXCEPTION TO THE MARKET ECONOMY

Today, Marxist scholars claim that we are living in a hypercapitalist era where more and more relationships with other people are converted into commodities without contact with the specific needs and expressions of the people who produce or consume them.<sup>9</sup> But a small creative class of people has resisted the temptation of capitalism, and refuses to participate in the regular market. This creative class consists of an art avant-garde that plays in another arena, what the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu calls the field of restricted production.<sup>10</sup> Here the game is not to sell as many products as possible to a broad mass, but a few to a limited audience of other cultural producers and colleagues. Your access to this market depends on your social relationships more than your financial capital. The products are an expression of the producer's individuality and the result of a desire to participate in the arts collective. They are a reflection of other individuals' need to understand themselves and their contemporaries, and to be acknowledged as unique human beings.

It may be argued that the global art world can be seen as a market like any other though with the peculiarity that it has a small and affluent clientele who use

art as a way to launder their economic capital with cultural capital.<sup>11</sup> But even though this market exists, economic capital is not usually the main motive of the art world's participants. What is most pursued by the producers in this field is not profit, but self-realization and peer recognition.<sup>12</sup>

Others argue that since modernism and the breakthrough of industrial capitalism, it is peer recognition that is most important for artists, more important than recognition from gallery owners, collectors and a wider audience.<sup>13</sup> To sell their art 'commercially' is seen as a necessary evil, as a way to get money for studio rent and the necessities of the life as an artist. This has similarities with the work ethic of today's so-called open source communities, where the driving force is primarily to achieve fame and acknowledgment from peers.<sup>14</sup>

## 4. NEW PRODUCTION CONDITIONS FOR ART

Yet even artists adapt to new conditions of production, and must somehow finance their fulfillment, which, after all, takes place within the framework of capitalism.

For instance, the British artist Tracy Emin sold options on her future work for £10 in the early 1990s.<sup>15</sup> In recent decades, financial crises, digital technology and a new form of network economy have stimulated a search for alternative forms for financing the visual arts. Crowd funding is one of these forms. Internet sites like Kickstarter and Crowdfunder make it possible to gain small, but potentially numerous, contributions from large groups of people.<sup>16</sup> Some sites provide the sponsors with an opportunity to ask questions and propose a change or development of the project. The investors / consumers can therefore be in direct communication with the artist, which might develop into a more sustained relationship. This crowd

can also function as a loyal audience and PR-support for realized projects; if you have invested in something, you probably also want it to be successful.

Coming up with a good idea for an artwork is not too difficult, and arguably the the art lies in carrying it out. This demands skill, experience, contacts, and legitimacy. For this reason, the artist as a person is often more important for the artwork than the idea. Following the logic of the dominating western modernist concept of art, one cannot alienate the work of art (the commodity) from the artist (the human being).

Art is also about much more than producing artworks. Art sociologist Nathalie Heinich shows in her study of Van Gogh how art in modernism is a belief in the special, the uniquely human, and in this belief system the artist is an embodiment of this idea of the singular and special person, and indirectly of all people.<sup>17</sup> The artwork can be viewed as a way of mediating this singularity, a proof that we are not interchangeable cogs in a machine without significance, but that our particular experience of the world is important and unique. The art world is therefore more about belief in the singular artist rather than in the artworks. Some sites, for example, SonicAngel and ArtistShare have concentrated on this aspect of the arts.<sup>18</sup> In this context it is no longer only the artwork that is central, but the existence of the artist. The micro-financing of artists rather than works of art also offers new possibilities for people other than the economic elite to become patrons of the arts. One might term it a more liberal democratic base for the artistic priesthood and its varied discursive practices, as it makes the patronage of art more easily accessible to people without large financial means.

For the founder of ArtistShare, Brian Camelio, crowd funding is a way to create deeper and more direct links between those who produce art and those who

consume art.<sup>19</sup> Camelio argues that digital technologies are gradually destroying capitalist production conditions, especially in the music industry, as it becomes increasingly difficult to sell music as a commodity when it is too easy to copy in its commodity form. Therefore, the focus on the crowd-funding site is on the process and the technology to enable consumers to be with the artist and participate in the artistic process, rather than merely buying some end product of the process. By donating money on the site to the artists you like, you get special privileges to be in the vicinity of the artist, for instance, as a participant in pre-concert activities, and to meet others who share the same passion.

Perhaps it is mainly the music industry that fits into the concept of crowd funding, since it is already built on relationships with big fan groups. But even more traditionally oriented artists can use technology to establish a contact with potential customers on a deeper level. Painter Laura Greengold used an online crowd-funding service to ask people to sponsor a project that was about sharing dreams and stories.<sup>20</sup> The contributors not only sent money but descriptions of their dreams, and Greengold used these as the starting point for a series of paintings. For the artist, this was not just a way to finance a project, but also a way to create a relational space for her art that she lacks in the traditional gallery setting. It thus worked as a way to establish a deeper discussion about the content of the artistic process, rather than focusing only on the end product. Art that emphasizes the relation to the audience, and art as a platform for a wider discussion do not necessarily have to be restricted to digitally mediated art. The participatory aspects of art were emphasized by Fluxus and the Situationists, to take just a couple of examples, and so-called relational art has been a marked trend in contemporary art from the 1990s onwards.

Is it possible then to widen this relational functionality of the art world to other parts of society? To answer this question, we first have to examine the concept of the artist.

## 5. THE CONCEPT OF THE ARTIST

In an institutional view of the definition of art, what gets called art and who gets called an artist is defined by the powers within the art world. But even with this approach, important participants in the art world are left out: namely, those who themselves do not think the term 'artist' is interesting, but who the art world still categorizes as an artist.

You can also broaden the concept of the artist to include all members of the creative class, that is, often highly educated people working with creative industries and problem solving. Needless to say, even this is far too limited, and I would propose a different and broader way of looking at who the 'artist' is by looking at how such a person is placed on a map of production conditions. Here the individual can be seen as either placed in a structure that she cannot overview or affect, or as someone who has agency and manipulates, navigates and changes to realize herself. In the first position, social relationships are not important, and the individual is alienated from herself and her work. In the other position, relationships are central, and the individual is the one who creates the production conditions. The artist is someone who is in the more active position, where maintaining relations and communication is central to the work.

According to Chris Mathieu, the editor of an anthology of research on creative industries, particular features of the art field make for distinct conditions for artistic production.<sup>21</sup> First, there are no real permanent jobs, but a life-long competition in which the rules are con-

stantly changed. Moreover, it is not a competition on an open market; instead, participation is determined by the relationships you have, and how close or far there are work opportunities in the production network of relationships. The judges of the competition are colleagues, not some faceless market. The competition is not only individual, but can be seen as a team sport where there is uncertainty about who your partners are. Here, everyone gains if someone in the network is successful, and everyone is pulled down if someone does not succeed. A great deal of time is thus spent not only on making artistic things, but on behaving as an artist and being in places artists are, to be present when there is a new market opportunity.

However, it is not only artists of various types who operate in an uncertain and ever-changing labor market, or who are constantly forced to transform and express their identity to be recognized. Having a lifelong permanent job is increasingly scarce, and social skills are in demand in all areas.<sup>22</sup> Promoting a personal brand in the form of taste, education and social relations is thus central to every career in an insecure and flexible labor market, not just in the creative sector. Here you can see the popularity of networks like LinkedIn and Facebook as a general expression of the need to maintain a personal brand and many social relationships.<sup>23</sup>

These networks are not only central to the individual's ability to act as producer and to navigate an uncertain job market. They are also important channels for the individual as consumer when the abundance of information increasingly makes us rely on recommendations from people we have a personal relationship with.

Social networks in combination with crowd funding create a situation where we are linking our social being to economic investment, thus creating direct personal relationships between producer and consumer, in which the consumer is also co-producer.

6. THE AFFECT MACHINE

When this networked social being is paired with economic investment the division between the private and the public sphere is disrupted. The private sphere usually consists of members of a legal statutory family, which for the family members means mutual rights and obligations enshrined in law but also in norms. The public sphere is typically composed of adults that compete within a market, where the production of goods and services is performed on a commercial basis. This market is maintained and governed by collective institutions that dictate the rules of participation. Here, a collective of individuals can come together in companies in which the market temporarily does not apply, but where everyone instead collaborates for the collective good. There is also a capital market, where companies' profits for surplus production can be used for investments in new businesses.

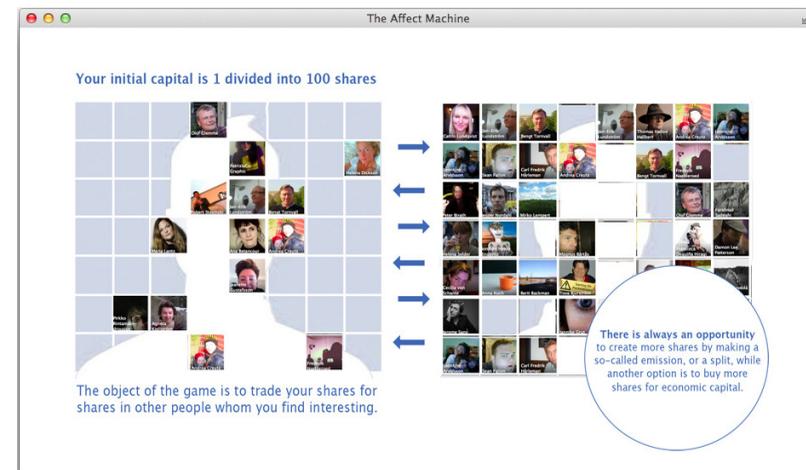
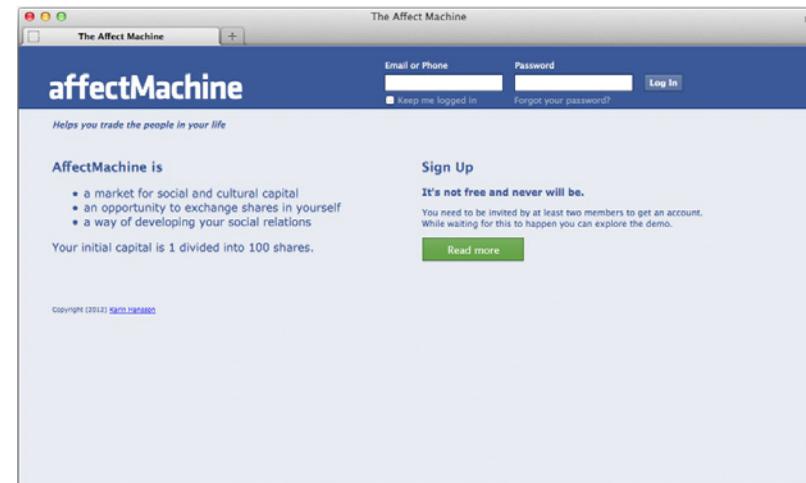
Naturally, there is a fuzzy border between the private and the public sector, which is in constant negotiation. But must activity be either private or public? What if, as Pappenheim proposes above, we unite the private with the public? In order to examine what such a system might look like in practice, I have in the project *The Affect Machine* formulated a marketplace for social relations by combining the principles for trading shares with those of a digital social network (see figure 1-X). Here you can develop your social capital by acquiring shares in interesting subjects. Instead of being dependent on inflexible and unreliable bourgeois constructions like the family, *The Affect Machine* is a dynamic and much safer way of creating a family that is built on micro-desire rather than a sense of duty and routine. With a carefully composed Affect Family, you spread your risks and create surplus value, thanks to synergies between different shares in the network.

If I am a corporation and want new capital, I can divide the company with a share issue, and sell ownership on to those who are interested. If I want to invest in a corporation, I must wait until the shares are for sale on the open stock market. If, as a corporation, I need more capital, I can issue new shares; that is, splitting the company into even smaller parts in the hope that more people will want to invest.

On the other hand, a digital social network is about collecting and developing social relationships in a workable way. At best, this network formalizes contacts with a group of people I like and trust in one way or another. This digital platform can facilitate my communication with this group, and be used as a way to develop and deepen the relationship by exchanging information. In this way, you can, for example, easily get hold of someone who can help out with something, or knows where to find a certain type of information.

There are interesting similarities in the structuring of a corporation with the structuring of a digital social network. But while one is based on legally viable contracts between people that do not need to know each other, the second is built on relationships between people who know each other and which have no legal validity. If we combine the idea of a corporation with a digital social network, this would open up a legal opportunity for people to act as a corporation on a social market.

Suppose that each player initially has 100 shares. They may exchange these shares for shares of other people, provided that both parties are interested. In this way social networks are established that are legally valid and cannot be waived without compensation. Unlike in a social network, the relationship does not need to be exactly reciprocal; you can exchange shares with people who have not exactly reciprocal shares in you, so the value of different people's shares will shift. The sum of your network is your total capital, and this capital increases or decreases depending on how well the individuals in your network perform. If I do not feel good about a relationship with someone in my network, I can either try to exchange my shares if possible, without too much loss of value, or work on improving the relationship, thus strengthening my social capital. Likewise, it is in my interest to promote my social network and help my relationships with their needs. Just like in a family, you simply help each other, without thinking about exactly what you get out of it all, but safe in the knowledge that a long-lived loyalty is being inculcated, in part through a binding legal contract. Unlike a family, which usually is not very large, and in practice can be quite unreliable, here risk is spread across a larger number of people. In practice, this legal institution can replace and merge institutions



Figures 1, 2 & 3. *The Affect Machine*, Karin Hansson, 2012. Web page, <http://affectmachine.org/>. © Karin Hansson, 2012. Used with permission.

that are now divided between a private and a public sphere, and thus create a legal support for the development of a communist society. Here, maintaining and developing relations are central to the work, and the individual navigates and changes the structure to realize herself.

This model shows how, by joining the functions in a capitalist institution with the functions in a digital social network, we can sketch a form of how the private and public sectors can approach each other.

### 7. CONCLUSION: AN EMBRYO OF A COMMUNIST SOCIETY

In practice, a lot of institutions, laws and norms need to be recompiled in order to legally and socially replace the current system of norms and laws with ones that better reflects the dynamic organization of the network society. But it is possible to see phenomena such as digital social networks and crowd funding as an embryo of a communist society in which all are bound together in mutual economic and social relations. Here we cannot, of course, ignore all those without the possibility of operating on digital networks, and those who produce the wealth that makes this sector possible. But the examples in this article show how other people besides artists can set personal fulfillment as their objective before economic profit, and how crowd funding and digital social networks can support people's active role as producers and consumers.

Here technology may be a way to allow for the extension of the social network to more than the biological family and closest friends, and the means that bring the social/private and economic/public sectors closer together. Communications technology brings about the possibility of reducing the alienation between producer and consumer by establishing direct links without any tangible intermediary. The product can be seen as an expression of the talent of the producer and the needs of the consumer, but also as an act of recognition between humans, that is, a social relationship. Information and communication technology here may reduce the need for the mediation of commodities as symbolic capital like fashion or other status

symbols as a way of signaling group affiliation and hierarchy will become less important, thus reducing the need for commodities and the exploitation of natural resources.

To translate this into Marx's terminology, instead of alienation, stronger relationships are created:

- » The relationships between the producer and the consumer. Instead of producing work for a wage, a direct relation is produced to another person.
- » The relationship between the producer and the product of the work. As the product and the producer is one, the artist/artwork is one, and the producer has total control over her own self-image and can feel proud of the image created.
- » The relationship with herself. When production is mainly about realizing oneself and creating one's own market, the worker is no longer a stranger to herself.
- » Relationships between workers. By not competing for the salary, but working together for the common network that everyone depends on, relationships are strengthened.

In this perspective no one can own anyone else's work, or even their own work, as their own subject is dependent on all the others, and cannot therefore exist outside of this relationship:

*Our products would be so many mirrors in which we saw reflected our essential nature. This relationship would moreover be reciprocal; what occurs on my side has also to occur on yours.* <sup>24</sup> ■

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