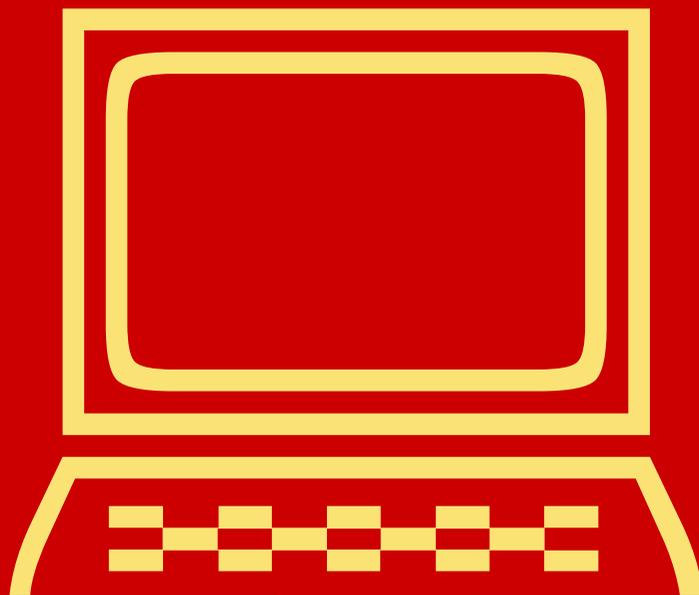


LEA  
BOOKS

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.”
7. The Internet of Things represents a vision in which physical items become ‘smart’ objects by being equipped with sensors that can be remotely controlled and connected through the Internet. The Internet of Places focuses on the spatial dimension of the capacities that Web 2.0 offers. For an account of the Internet of Things, see Mattern, Friedemann and Christian Floerkemeier, “From the Internet of Computers to the Internet of Things,” in *Informatik-Spektrum*, 33 (2010): 107–121, <http://www.vs.inf.ethz.ch/publ/papers/Internet-of-things.pdf> (accessed February 20, 2014). For an account of the Internet of Places, see Giuseppe Conti, Paul Watson, Nic Shape, Raffaele de Amicis and Federico Prandi, “Enabling the ‘Internet of Places’: a virtual structure of space-time-tasks to find and use Internet resources,” in *Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Computing for Geospatial Research & Applications* (New York: ACM, 2011), 9.
8. For more on the concept of ‘concrete utopias’ see Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, tr. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight, 3 vols (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986). Bloch differentiates between ‘abstract utopias’ and ‘concrete utopias,’ associating the latter with the possibility of producing real change in the present. ‘Concrete utopias’ should not be confused with seemingly similar theorizations such as Nicolas Bourriaud’s ‘microtopias,’ which structurally aim at preserving the existing status quo. Bourriaud asserts in *Relational Aesthetics* (2002) that “it seems more pressing to invent possible relations with our neighbours in the present than to bet on happier tomorrows.” Quite evidently, this approach stands far from the universalism that he advocates in his *Altermodern Manifesto* (2009) as a direct result of new technologies and globalization. At a time when neoliberal capitalism was entering its worst ever crisis, Bourriaud chose to largely ignore this context and build on a concept that – in the end – is apolitical and counter-utopian. ‘Post-internet art’ appears to follow a comparably dangerous trajectory.

# 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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# COMMUNISM OF CAPITAL AND CANNIBALISM OF THE COMMON

## Notes on the Art of Over-Identification

by

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*Communism is a hateful thing and a menace to peace and organized government; but the communism of combined wealth and capital, the outgrowth of overweening cupidity and selfishness, which insidiously undermines the justice and integrity of free institutions, is not less dangerous than the communism of oppressed poverty and toil, which, exasperated by injustice and discontent, attacks with wild disorder the citadel of rule.*

— United States President Grover Cleveland, State of the Union 1888 address. <sup>1</sup>

*Socialism and capitalism, however, even though they have at times been mingled together and at others occasioned bitter conflicts, are both regimes of property that exclude the common.*

— Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth*. <sup>2</sup>

*A paradox that conceals its paradoxical nature becomes a commodity.*

— Boris Groys, *The Communist Postscript* <sup>3</sup>

### A B S T R A C T

*Over-identification is a politico-aesthetic strategy famously developed by the music band Laibach and the art collective Neue Slowenische Kunst since the 1980s and conceptualised, among others, also by Slavoj Žižek. This essay argues that the strategy of over-identification understands capitalism mainly as an ideological construct and so it fails to understand its real obscene core, that is living labour. In particular this essay argues that capitalism employs itself a strategy of over-identification with social struggles and it has absorbed many of the features that we historically attribute to social movements. Following Italian Operaism and the work of Paolo Virno and Christian Marazzi, such a capitalist tendency is defined as the “communism of capital.”*

#### 1. THERE IS NO LONGER AN OUTSIDE

“There is no longer an outside” repeats a topological and existential motto since 1989, that is since the Berlin wall fell and a world system appeared to close upon itself (at least for Eurocentric eyes) – there is no longer an outside to capitalism, globalization and the Empire, it is remarked. <sup>4</sup> This – new spatial condition has not affected just politics but more generally the whole collective imaginary – including spy novels, for instance, as the Iron Curtain was providing at least reassuring roles and linear plots.

Indeed, how to be a double agent in the age of one-dimensional thought? This question is addressing directly any activist or artist. The ‘clash of civilization’ with the Islam world cynically designed by Huntington attempted to resolve such a geopolitical disorienta-

tion, before being reabsorbed by China and its new ‘socialist market economy’ around the stable vortex of a gigantic accumulation of capitals. <sup>5</sup> Still, keeping on imploding, this feeling of political claustrophobia is pushing the creation of new *intensive* and *post-utopian* paradigms abreast of the topology of the Empire.

One of the most controversial solutions suggested in order to escape this postmodern impasse is the so-called *over-identification*, that is an aesthetic strategy initiated first by the band Laibach and art collective Neue Slowenische Kunst in the Ljubljana of the late ‘80s within the peculiar ideological curtain of socialist Yugoslavia. <sup>6</sup> Basically, Laibach were imitating totalitarian aesthetics in such a punctual and orthodox way to reverse it into kitsch. To the usual question whether

they were really fascist or not, they were used to reply in a sibylline way: “We are fascists as much as Hitler was a painter.” This strategy was already defended by Slavoj Žižek in 1994 as the ability to show the “obscene fantasmatic kernel of an ideological edifice” against the dominant *cynical reason*.

*What if, on the contrary, the dominant attitude of the contemporary “postideological” universe is precisely the cynical distance toward public values? What if this distance, far from posing any threat to the system, designates the supreme form of conformism, since the normal function of the system requires cynical distance? In this sense the strategy of Laibach appears in a new light: it “frustrates” the system (the ruling ideology) precisely insofar as it is not its ironic imitation, but over-identification with it— by bringing to light the obscene superego underside of the system, over-identification suspends its efficiency.*<sup>7</sup>

Laibach were just pointing to “the obscene *nightly* law that necessarily redoubles and accompanies, as its shadow, the *public Law*,” Žižek wrote in the same essay. As a matter of fact, Laibach’s *retro-avantgarde* was dictated also by the restrictions of the socialist regime to free expression. As the typical punk *transgression* of the Code was not possible, their strategy turned into the identification with the Code itself in a way that was of course too-paranoid-to-be-true. Laibach initiated the genre of *state punk*.

Yet when this over-identification strategy, which was born under a state ideology, is applied to neoliberal market ideology, it performs differently. This text will try to show how the strategies of over-identification too often simply deal with the very surface of ideology and, contrary to the Lacanian credo, never touch its obscene subtext – that is the economic infrastructure and the very *obscenity of labour*. On the contrary, it is

capital itself that has been always playing an elegant art of over-identification with the heart of labour and production. By the ‘communism of capital’ it will be defined the continuous and subterranean cannibalism of the common operated by capitalism – a very material process running *underneath* any ideological spectacle and any Symbolic Code dear to the Lacanian Youth.

“There is no longer an outside” is an ambivalent statement: indeed it points to a claustrophobic *ideological* condition, but it suggests nevertheless very *material* lines of conflict. If there is no more a utopian space outside capitalism, exodus must be established in an intensive and paradoxical way. Resistance must set itself *inside* and *against* the structure of capitalism, as Mario Tronti was suggesting already in the ‘60s (and not just *inside* and *against* its ideological code, as a Lacanian new-wave is back to suggest today).<sup>8</sup> Post-utopianism is to be replaced by *endo-utopianism*. Where to find an intensive yet practical line of flight behind the ideological spectacle of capitalism? Far from psychoanalysis, looking to the mundane chronicles close to us, it is in the very financial crisis of 2009 that we can find an example of an intrinsic breach affecting the system. The political diagram of *endo-utopianism* should be found along that ‘systemic risk’ of capitalism that has been only recently acknowledged by financial institutions.

Today a weird process of over-identification is occurring between the archetypes of capitalism and communism at different scales, expanding the feeling of political impasse but at the same time suggesting new spaces of conflict. First, for the irony of fate, a communist state formally ruled by a communist party – China – has become the leading capitalist superpower. Thanks to an enormous accumulation of capitals China managed to buy and control more than 25% of United States public debt (quota in 2010). Second, ex-

actly 20 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, a global credit crunch have forced western governments to nationalize *de facto* many private banks openly infringing one of the basic commandments of neoliberal monotheism. Eventually mainstream economists were forced to acknowledge a ‘systemic risk’ that, as David Harvey noticed, was already defined and named by Marx a long ago as the *internal contradiction of capitalist accumulation*.<sup>9</sup> Third, the new libertarian business models that are born out of digital networks celebrate and locate the common at the center of their mode of production. The new “wealth of networks” is to be based on the “creative commons” and “peer production” of online multitudes, Yoachai Benkler is suggesting to ICT giants like IBM,<sup>10</sup> whereas Wired editor Kevin Kelly confirms that a “new socialism” and a “global collectivist society” [!] is materializing thanks to the internet.<sup>11</sup>

These three examples, however, refers just to the surface of economic chronicles: the ‘communism of capital’ has its roots in a more general process of *financialization of the whole life* that has to be unpacked properly. This text suggests to look at the deep processes of financialization in order to understand the new diagrams of conflict and the art of over-identification itself.

## 2. THE ‘FINANCIAL SOVIETS’ OF THE NEW YORK STOCK EXCHANGE

As Christian Marazzi reminds, it was first Peter Drucker to identify the rise of a peculiar ‘socialism of capital’ in the very financial heart of United States.<sup>12</sup> In his book *The Unseen Revolution* Drucker described the process of financialization of pension funds that started in the state of New York in the ‘70s.<sup>13</sup> The ‘unseen revolution’ was referring to the accumulation of 35% of United States corporate stocks by workers’ pension

funds. Drucker predicted that this ownership interest would increase to 70% by 1985, allowing employees, trough their pension funds, to become hypothetically “the true owners of the country’s means of production.” For the first time in history, workers’ pensions became a crucial variable of stock markets. It was a revolutionary event also because wage and capital established so a very promiscuous relation, blurring then the essential antagonism between workers and capitalists. The troubles of the current credit system are rooted in that process of ‘socialization of capital’ that started to fuel volatile and unstable financial games.

More recently, this financial regime happened to be in need of a strong intervention and protection by the state, reinforcing even more the intuition of a ‘communism of capital.’ In fact, in order to resolve the financial crisis of 2007, the gigantic debt of the private sector has been moved to the public sector. In October 2008 the British government announced a rescue package of £500 billion to stabilize banks affected by the credit crunch. In the same year Northern Rock was nationalized, first of a long series of bailouts and partial nationalization in the western world, most notably the acquisition of Merrill Lynch by Bank of America. In this awkward ‘communism of capital’ the state fulfills the needs of the ‘financial soviets’ of banks, insurance companies and investments funds by using to the money of all the taxpayers – and *de facto* imposing the dictatorship of financial market over society, Marazzi argues.<sup>14</sup> At the end of its parable the supposed ‘socialization of means of production’ *via* the stock exchange has been reversed into a less democratic ‘socialization of private debt’ *via* the state.

In technical terms, the expression ‘communism of capital’ refers to a process of colonization of any aspect of human life that can be transformed into a credit line. The financialization of the *bios* has been cannibalizing everything: from health insurance to house mortgage,

from credit cards to student debt. Also the precarization of the labour market into the figures of temp worker and freelancer and the virtualization of companies into networks of outsourcing point to a deep financialization of economy. According to Marazzi, this wild financialization of the whole human life is specular to the crisis of the traditional forms of political representation, i.e. specular to the resurfacing of the political subject of the *multitude*.

*Financial capital, as social capital listed on the stock exchange, appears as a 'collective representative' of the multitude of subjects that populate civil society. [...] Financialization defines the public sphere of capital. [...] It is specular to the missing attempt to constitute a separated public sphere autonomous from capital. Under this aspect, the financialization of capital is the sign of the political crisis of the form of representation of the multitude.*<sup>15</sup>

Here the political question at stake is how to overturn the hegemony of financialization and how to conceive a new political subject at the very center of the 'communism of capital.'

This attempt has been discussed more deeply by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in their recent book *Commonwealth*, where they put the production of 'the common' – and its expropriation – at the core of contemporary capitalism. Capitalism is not just about exploiting labour time like in the classic Marxist theory, but about a much larger expropriation of the whole life of the metropolis, Hardt and Negri argue. The common of the *bios* is made of material production and material resources, but also of languages and lifestyles, social relations and collective knowledge.

*By "the common" we mean, first of all, the common wealth of the material world—the air, the*

*water, the fruits of the soil, and all nature's bounty—which in classic European political texts is often claimed to be the inheritance of humanity as a whole, to be shared together. We consider the common also and more significantly those results of social production that are necessary for social interaction and further production, such as knowledges, languages, codes, information, affects, and so forth. This notion of the common does not position humanity separate from nature, as either its exploiter or its custodian, but focuses rather on the practices of interaction, care, and cohabitation in a common world, promoting the beneficial and limiting the detrimental forms of the common.*<sup>16</sup>

Within the forms of expropriation of the common we should include also the new forms of business running on digital networks, whose 'strategy of over-identification' is precisely to use the rhetoric of *digital collectivism* (network cooperation, peer production, free culture, creative commons, etc.) to hide the accumulation of value. Here there is no better example of sneaky socialism than Kevin Kelly's article titled *The New Socialism: Global Collectivist Society Is Coming Online* published in *Wired* magazine in 2009.<sup>17</sup>

The 'project of the common' by Hardt and Negri helps to move beyond the 20th century propaganda and the opposition between public and private specific to modernity. Hardt and Negri provide also a good ground to archive definitely the opposition between capitalism and state socialism, as they both represent "regimes of property that exclude the common."

*The seemingly exclusive alternative between the private and the public corresponds to an equally pernicious political alternative between capitalism and socialism. It is often assumed that the only cure for the ills of capitalist society is public regulation and Keynesian and/or socialist economic*

*management; and, conversely, socialist maladies are presumed to be treatable only by private property and capitalist control. Socialism and capitalism, however, even though they have at times been mingled together and at others occasioned bitter conflicts, are both regimes of property that exclude the common.*<sup>18</sup>

### 3. LANGUAGE AS PRODUCTION VS. LANGUAGE AS IDEOLOGY

The promiscuity between the archetypes of capitalism and communism is also connected to a molecular implosion of the categories of art, education, politics and labour. We are familiar with Walter Benjamin's famous essay about the *work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction* and with the 'creativity-for-all' manifestoes of the last century. What was just an intuition of the art avantgardes – mass intellectuality – has become a central pillar of post-Fordism up to the so-called Creative Industries and 'creative cities.' One of the crucial intuitions advanced by Paolo Virno in *A Grammar of the Multitude* is about the over-lapping and indeed 'over-identification' of intellectual and artistic production with labour and politics.

*The boundaries between pure intellectual activity, political action, and labor have dissolved. I will maintain, in particular, that the world of so called post-Fordist labor has absorbed into itself many of the typical characteristics of political action; and that this fusion between Politics and Labor constitutes a decisive physiognomic trait of the contemporary multitude.*<sup>19</sup>

Paraphrasing Virno, we might say that new forms of production based on knowledge and communication (variously termed knowledge economy, cognitive capitalism, media culture, network society, etc.) have

hybridized and integrated Labour, Politics and Art into a single unified gesture of production.

Here labour and politics did not eventually as a 'dictatorship of the proletariat,' but on the contrary into the figure of the manager as opposed to the apparatchik of parliamentary democracy. Managers have become today the models of political leadership. Similarly the society of the spectacle has collapsed onto politics, as exemplified by the institutional roles acquired by Ronald Regan and Arnold Schwarzenegger after their cinema careers. In order to be a leader, you have to be a good performer too. These are basic examples of phenomena of reversed over-identification occurring within the realm of capitalism itself – which make any attempt of counter-over-identification more difficult to accomplish.

This implosion of roles and categories is responsible of the same aforementioned feeling of claustrophobia affecting contemporary passions. Virno notices how the feeling of living in an age of radical depoliticization is related to the absorption of the political skills (that were specific to the generation of '68) into the very production of value.

*In fact, political action now seems, in a disastrous way, like some superfluous duplication of the experience of labor, since the latter experience, even if in a deformed and despotic manner, has subsumed into itself certain structural characteristics of political action. [...] The inclusion of certain structural features of political praxis in contemporary production helps us to understand why the post-Ford multitude might be seen, today, as a de-politicized multitude. There is already too much politics in the world of wage labor (in as much as it is wage labor) in order for politics as such to continue to enjoy an autonomous dignity.*<sup>20</sup>

There is less passion in politics as political skills have been absorbed by creative industries, marketing campaign and the art system itself. Looking at the implosion of the political categories and their absorption within the realm of economy along the evolution of Fordism into post-Fordism, Virno can say in the final line of the final thesis of *A Grammar of the Multitude* that post-Fordism but incarnates the 'communism of capital.'

*The metamorphosis of social systems in the West, during the 1980's and 1990's, can be synthesized in a more pertinent manner with the expression: communism of capital. [...] If we can say that Fordism incorporated, and rewrote in its own way, some aspects of the socialist experience, then post-Fordism has fundamentally dismissed both Keynesianism and socialism. Post-Fordism, hinging as it does upon the general intellect and the multitude, puts forth, in its own way, typical demands of communism (abolition of work, dissolution of the State, etc.). Post-Fordism is the communism of capital.*<sup>21</sup>

Compared to other authors of Marxist lineage, Virno has always put a big emphasis on the political role of language. Since his work on the Marxian general intellect, Virno has been emphasizing how post-Fordism "has placed language into the workplace."<sup>22</sup> If once the sign "Silence, men at work" was hanging in many factories, today in certain workshops one could put a new one declaring "Men at work, talk!," he suggests.<sup>23</sup> In addition, in more recent works, Virno has underlined the very ambivalent nature of language – at the same time, basis of political institutions and source of social conflicts and wars. Language is an ambivalent and dangerous political force by nature, Virno says.

The ground of language allows comparing the plane of the 'communism of capital' with other schools of thought and the strategy of over-identification itself.

It is interesting, for instance, to notice a similarity between Virno's notion of *language as production* and the understanding of *language as institution* by Boris Groys. Interestingly, in his book *The Communist Postscript*, Groys defines communism as the *linguistification of society*, while post-Fordism is intended as the total commodification of language.

*I will understand communism to be the project of subordinating the economy to politics in order to allow politics to act freely and sovereignly. The economy functions in the medium of money. It operates with numbers. Politics functions in the medium of language. It operates with words – with arguments, programmes and petitions, but also with commands, prohibitions, resolutions and decrees. The communist revolution is the transcription of society from the medium of money to the medium of language.*<sup>24</sup>

Opposite to Virno and Groys' understanding of language as a political institution and productive force, we find Žižek and his static idea of *language as ideology* that is at the basis of many interpretation of the strategy of over-identification. For Lacan and Žižek, language – and not material forces – represents the very nature and structure of ideology. If ideology is structured as an unconscious 'grammar' and it is not a product of material forces, any form of political resistance that does not question that very grammar is caught in a trap – Žižek remarks in a very self-castigating logic. Žižek always repeats that ideology does not teach *what* to desire but *how* to desire. In books such as *The Plague of Phantasy*, imagination is never an expression of desire and production, but it is mostly considered a *perverted phantasma*.<sup>25</sup>

#### 4. THE BELATED STRATEGY OF OVER-IDENTIFICATION

Language as *production*, language as *institution*, language as *ideology*. These three definitions condense the positions of three contemporary authors such as Virno, Groys, and Žižek, and provide a common ground to critique the artistic and political strategy of over-identification. Indeed the notion of 'communism of capital' has been introduced along this essay in order to show (1) that the actual engine of capitalism is running detached from any *ideological spectacle* and (2) that capitalism is playing the over-identification game with the *obscenity of labour and value production* since ever. As the strategy of over-identification is often transplanted from the context of state ideology of socialist Yugoslavia to the liquid spaces of post-Fordism, it is important to follow this migration in detail.

A good example of this cultural translation is given by the book *Cultural Activism Today* by the Dutch research collective BAVO.<sup>26</sup> Questioning "artistic resistance after the end of history," BAVO tries to contextualize and extend the strategy of over-identification outside the peculiar ideological context of the former East Bloc. The problem from which they move is the usual problem of the relation between art and politics and the subversive value of art in a society of spectacle capable to *recuperate* any radical gesture. Essentially, following a typical postmodern logic, they claim that politically engaged art is the victim of a double bind: it is asked to be critical without directly questioning the dominant system, but as soon as *critical art* becomes engaged, it is accused of not being critical at all.

On one side, BAVO measures the boundaries of contemporary engaged art and frame it in the effective definition of 'NGO art,' that is a form of art that aestheticizes social injustice and sanitizes any real political conflict in a fetish for victimization. "No politics please, victims only" says NGO art: "These art practices share

the idea that, considering the many urgent needs at hand, there is no call for high art statements, big political manifestoes or sublime expressions of moral indignation. Instead what are needed are direct, concrete, artistic interventions that help disadvantaged population and communities to deal with the problems they are facing."

On the other side, celebrated figures such as Santiago Sierra are, according to BAVO, the personification of the cynical artist, whose provocations are just instrumental to the neoliberal consensus. Santiago Sierra is known for his provocative performances, which have included: paying refugees from Chechnya to remain inside cardboard boxes, giving money to young Cubans for the privilege of tattooing their backs, dying the hair of Africans blonde to make them look European, and spraying ten Iraqis immigrant workers with insulating foam. In the art catalogues Sierra is celebrated for highlighting socio-economic inequality through performances and installations, but "like a true capitalist, Sierra simply sat down, did nothing, took some photographs and consumed the surplus value that was generated at the expense of the day labourers," BAVO notes.

Between the twin poles of politically-correct NGO art and the politically-incorrect art of provocation, BAVO advances the strategy of over-identification as the ultimate escape, assuming then that the *neoliberal ideology* functions exactly like the *state ideology* that was providing a stage for NSK and Laibach. The main example of over-identification practices abreast of the age of globalization is the work of The Yes Men, a culture jamming duo that is famous for infiltrating business conferences and re-enacting perfectly the whole anthropology and imaginary of global corporations.<sup>27</sup> For instance, on 3 December 2004, the twentieth anniversary of the Bhopal disaster, BBC news reported an interview with a (fake) Dow Chemical spokesper-

### 5. CANNIBALISM, OR THE INGESTION OF THE ENEMY

son (staged by one member of The Yes Men) who was promising an investment of 12 billion dollars in medical care for the region. In just a few hours Dow Chemical reported stock losses of \$2 billion on the Frankfurt stock exchange.

Despite rare successful examples, the attempt to upgrade the over-identification strategy to the neoliberal ideology appears to re-enter a *cul de sac* and to be stuck in a vicious circle. The diagram offered by BAVO may paradoxically reinforce the dominant language and feature no real exploit at all. The overarching suspicion here is that Lacan and Žižek make the disease worst, trapping frustration in an even more claustrophobic space. If the 'obscene subtext' of ideology is understood according to the matrix of language, any gesture that is expressed according to that language just reinforces its hegemony. The feeling is that over-identification is often missing the target, as it incarnate the ideological *grammar* without ever touching the ground of material *production*.

The strategy of over-identification appears often to be described and to be trapped in categories that still belong to the previous century and specifically to the regime of Fordism. When Virno was observing that Intellect and Labour, Art and Politics are blurring into each other, he was also pointing to the implosion of any ideological discourse in the western world. However, the residual force of Fordist categories is still alive today and re-emerges precisely in those paradigms of art and politics that consider language as *ideology* and not as a material means of production. Whereas over-identification claims to enter the obscene kernel of capitalism, in fact it just remains on its ideological surface, while beneath the 'communism of capital' keeps on cannibalizing the common undisturbed. The central difference between *over-identification* and *endo-utopianism* approaches (both claiming to be 'inside and against') lays precisely in this conception of language that is understood respectively as *ideology* or *production*.

In order to eventually escape the neuroses of western dialectics, other latitudes should be explored. Aside from the arts of *identification* with the enemy, incidentally we could also consider those strategies that contemplate the *ingestion* of the enemy himself. In the *Manifesto Antropófago* (1928) the Brazilian poet Oswald de Andrade, in polemic with Freud and the whole colonial patriarchy, was suggesting the cannibalism of the (European) taboos in order to transfigure them back into totems, i.e. in material and pagan figures.<sup>28</sup> Like Andrade with the Freudian idea of interiorized Super-ego, we should follow this ancestral invitation and finally ingest the neurotic angels of ideology to transform them into the demons of living labour. ■

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