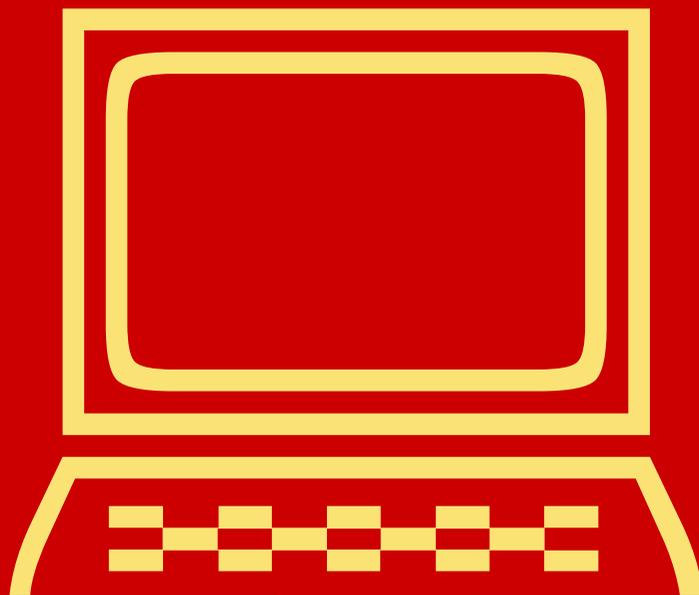


LEA  
BOOKS

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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#### LEA PUBLISHING & SUBSCRIPTION INFORMATION

##### Editor in Chief

Lanfranco Aceti [lanfranco.aceti@leoalmanac.org](mailto:lanfranco.aceti@leoalmanac.org)

##### Co-Editor

Özden Şahin [ozden.sahin@leoalmanac.org](mailto:ozden.sahin@leoalmanac.org)

##### Managing Editor

John Francescutti [john.francescutti@leoalmanac.org](mailto:john.francescutti@leoalmanac.org)

##### Editorial Manager

Çağlar Çetin [caglar.cetin@leoalmanac.org](mailto:caglar.cetin@leoalmanac.org)

##### Art Director

Deniz Cem Öndüğü [deniz.onduygu@leoalmanac.org](mailto:deniz.onduygu@leoalmanac.org)

##### Editorial Board

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##### Editorial Address

Leonardo Electronic Almanac

Sabancı University, Orhanlı – Tuzla, 34956

Istanbul, Turkey

##### Email

[info@leoalmanac.org](mailto:info@leoalmanac.org)

##### Web

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LEONARDO ELECTRONIC ALMANAC BOOK, VOLUME 20 ISSUE 1

# Red Art: New Utopias in Data Capitalism

BOOK SENIOR EDITORS

**LANFRANCO ACETI, SUSANNE JASCHKO, JULIAN STALLABRASS**

BOOK EDITOR

**BILL BALASKAS**

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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.
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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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# ART WORK / DREAM WORK IN NEW MEDIA DOCUMENTARY

by

Karen O'Rourke

ACTE Institute (UMR 8218)

CNRS-University of Paris 1 (Panthéon-Sorbonne)

korourke@univ-paris1.fr

## INTRODUCTION

*In any case, one thing is certain: the human body is the principal actor of all utopias. After all, isn't one of the oldest utopias about which men have told themselves stories the dream of an immense and inordinate body that could devour space and master the world?*

– Michel Foucault <sup>1</sup>

**Creativity, autonomy, community. Today new media artists and blue-jean clad entrepreneurs alike lay claim to these ideals of 1960s counter-culture.** Silicon Valley start-ups have spawned a corporate culture

**Figure 1a.** *Laid Off*, Natalie Bookchin, 2009. This choral work edited from a compilation of video blogger's stories of losing their jobs was exhibited at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 2009 as part of the four channel video installation *Testament*. Whole chorus. © Natalie Bookchin, 2009. Used with permission.

## A B S T R A C T

*Today new media artists and entrepreneurs alike lay claim to the ideals of 1960s counter-culture. Silicon Valley start-ups have spawned a corporate culture that aims for maximum creativity, greater employee initiative and workplace autonomy. Has this "new spirit of capitalism" (Boltanski and Chiapello) let capitalism recuperate the Left's "artistic critique" of the division of labor while undermining its traditional "social critique?"*

*In the highly competitive "winner-take-all" system of contemporary art, has "artistic critique" become obsolete? This article examines contemporary new media artworks that critically activate the ideals of creativity, autonomy and community.*

that aims for maximum workplace creativity. Rumor has it that Google allows its employees to devote one day each week to personal projects with the idea that this could lead to successful products.

In their 1999 book *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello argue that in the 1970s, corporations began to abandon the hierarchical Ford-

ist work structure in favor of a networked organization predicated on greater employee initiative and workplace autonomy. They define the spirit of capitalism as "the ideology that justifies people's commitment to capitalism and renders this commitment attractive."<sup>2</sup>

Studying French management theory from the period 1965-1995, the authors show how this new spirit allowed capitalism to recuperate the Left's "artistic



**Figure 1b.** *Laid Off*, Natalie Bookchin, 2009. This choral work edited from a compilation of video blogger's stories of losing their jobs was exhibited at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 2009 as part of the four channel video installation *Testament*. Three individual faces. © Natalie Bookchin, 2009. Used with permission.

critique" of the division of labor which alienated workers from their own work (the product of their labor), while undermining its traditional "social critique".

Employees in post-industrial societies are increasingly offered a lifestyle modeled on that of artists, which affords them greater responsibility for their work and the opportunity to exercise their creativity. But this relative autonomy comes at the expense of their material and psychological security. In today's project-based systems of production, which require flexibility and rapidity, short-term and freelance assignments have become the norm. Workers earning low wages often hold more than one job to support their families.

Although artists tend to advocate egalitarianism in society, they are at the same time part of a highly competitive "winner-take-all" system. Has "artistic critique" become obsolete? In a world where workers, like artists, compete with each other for scarce resources, is it possible to build a common culture – a culture of the commons?

This article examines three contemporary new media artworks that mobilize the ideals of creativity, autonomy, and community in critical ways: Natalie Bookchin's *Laid Off* (2009); Esther Polak's *Nomadic Milk* (2010); and Tommaso Facchin's and Ivan Franceschini's *Dreamwork China* (2011). All three use digital video and deal with some aspect of work, how particular people make a living in a globalized neoliberal economic system, how work as an activity and as part of a

person's identity can structure ambitions, movements and relations with others. This article will focus on the way these media objects function as experimental forms of documentary and pose the question of their possible use-value for artistic critique.

Webster's dictionary defines *creativity* as the "ability to produce something new through imaginative skill, whether a new solution to a problem, a new method or device, or a new artistic object or form,"<sup>3</sup> while Mihály Csíkszentmihályi emphasizes "the process of producing something that is both original and worthwhile."<sup>4</sup> Focusing on particular art works and the way they were made, we will consider it from the viewpoint of process.

#### DOWN(SIZED) AND OUT(SOURCED)

In the past few years, Natalie Bookchin has been making increasingly complex multi-screen video installations with footage found on YouTube. *Laid Off* is a four-minute long choral projection edited from multiple video bloggers' (vloggers) accounts of losing their jobs.

On a darkened wall, small frames light up – one by one or several at once along a horizontal line. In each frame, a single person addresses the camera. When he or she stops speaking, the frame darkens. Several speakers begin in unison, "So today," followed by a few short individual melodic lines capped off with a ringing

soprano "sucked." The voices chant in unison: "I went to work," a tenor takes the melody: "like any other day and." Other solos fill in the details, one at a time: "my clock-in card was missing," "one of the directors called me into the office." "Aaannndddd..." intones the chorus. "I wasn't sure what was going on," replies a woman's voice. "I went down and, basically, some of the larger people in the company... someone from human resources was there."<sup>5</sup>

Little by little, the story unfolds from one person to the next: who, how, why, how long. "Next thing you know the hiring manager walks in," "And he started off with: 'this is the part of the job I really don't like.'" "And I'm like, what the fuck. What's going on?" "I'm really sorry; you're a really great worker." A short silence precedes a resounding choral "...laid off." "Due to financial reasons," sings a tenor. The vocabulary is familiar: "going out of business," "redundant," "downsized", "removed from my duties." The speakers highlight the injustice: "They're outsourcing my job." "I had been working at that place for nine years," "nineteen years," "since I was sixteen." "It came as a kind of shock," "I feel betrayed."

Bookchin's editing reveals archetypal patterns in the speakers' expression of loss. As she puts it, "It's almost like the stages of mourning – you start with anger, then disbelief, and then acceptance."<sup>6</sup> They are a kind of spoken responsory of the kind used in religious liturgy, when a cantor, hazzan or prayer leader chants sacred verses and the choir or congregation responds with a refrain.<sup>6</sup> Here the melodic line uses the periodic refrains to advance while gathering (or provoking) individual riffs and variations, as if members of the congregation were improvising on a theme.

*Laid off* was first shown in 2009 as part of *Testament*,<sup>7</sup> a four channel installation for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA).

*Testament* [...] explores contemporary expressions of self and the stories we currently tell online about our lives and our circumstances. Clips are edited and sequenced like streams and patterns of self-revelation and narrative that flow and dissipate over space and time. [...] The project reflects on the peculiar blend of intimacy and anonymity, of simultaneous connectivity and isolation that characterizes social relations today.<sup>8</sup>

*Laid off* was itself deployed over two channels, while the other two channels showed *My Meds* and *I Am Not*. "They were each self-contained chapters, or vignettes," notes the artist.<sup>9</sup> In the online documentation that she provides<sup>10</sup> only the bloggers' general traits can be distinguished: male, female, black, white, with a predominance of younger people; the experience is more audio than visual.

#### THE JOB REQUIRES MOBILITY

On the left screen, Dutch artist Esther Polak, standing at the edge of a dirt road, holds a professional microphone toward Mr. Idiris, a Fulani herder. Between them is a translator. All three are watching what looks like a toy, a plastic water bottle on wheels as it moves about jerkily, spitting out sand. Idiris gestures toward the robot as he talks animatedly. The right screen shows him guiding his herd along the road.

For the project *NomadicMILK* (2006-2010), Polak worked with a team of researchers including an anthropologist and a robotics engineer, in order to explore milk distribution systems in western Africa.<sup>11</sup> In Nigeria, they used Global Positioning System technology to track the paths of Fulani herders, and truckers transporting the imported Peak brand milk from the harbor in Lagos, where it arrives from Europe, to the capital, Abuja, and from the city to the outlying

**Figure 2.** *Nomadic Milk*, Esther Polak, 2010, video stills. Fig. 2a. The Peak Milk truck sometimes takes the same road as the Fulani herder. Fig. 2b. Esther Polak asks Mr. Idiris, the Fulani herder to comment on his tracks. Fig. 2c. Here, Mr. Usman, the Peak Milk driver, comments on his own itinerary. © Esther Polak, 2010. Used with permission.



suburbs (Figure 2). The data was fed to a custom-built robot, which used sand to draw the recorded routes, allowing the participants to see and comment on their own tracks. Inspired by nomadic practice, this output device, which does not need a projector or even electricity, allows groups of people to gather around the sand map. The nomads, the artist says, “immediately recognized themselves in the sand routes as the robot carried them out. [...] It let people look at the patterns they made based purely on memory, based on their own route.”<sup>12</sup>



The results have been shown in Europe as a multimedia installation (Figure 3). In one configuration, Polak displayed a GPS drawing representing one day of cow herding in Plateau State, Nigeria. The film footage was projected on a wall while the robot moved around the room, spitting out sand as it progressed. Waypoints (such as river crossings) were indicated on the floor by photos planted on sticks. In later shows, individual routes were pictured in a set of twelve 70 by 100 centimeter sand-colored monoprints made by the robot. They were completed by a two-screen video projection to form a self-reflexive *mise-en-abyme*: one video stream documents the participants’ itineraries over the course of a working day; and the other, narrated by the artist, shows the same participants commenting their tracks displayed on the ground.



**SMALL DREAMS**

Multiple pairs of legs advance toward the camera. In the Guanlan district near Shenzhen, on the south coast of China, the street is crowded with young people walking to work (Figure 4). Dressed in navy blue jackets for the boys, gray and pink for the girls, badges clipped to a pocket or worn as a pendant around their necks, they arrive every morning at daybreak. They have migrated from the provinces of Henan, Sichuan, Hubei and Qinghai to take jobs in the Foxconn factory making parts for iPhones.

In the photographer’s studio “Real Woman Photoshop” across the street, they pose in front of artificial scenery (Figure 5). A slight young woman in pants and ballet flats looks over her shoulder at the camera; behind her, a path covered in red and ochre autumn leaves. Two others hold hands in front of a seascape. Slender, adolescent bodies: shy, a little stiff, they wear the same boots, jeans, and layered sweaters as students in London or Paris. They are having their pictures taken to keep or send to friends and family back home.

In late 2010, Italian photographer Tommaso Bonaventura replaced the studio’s owner for two weeks, while Tommaso Facchin and Ivan Franceschini interviewed his subjects. The result was “a multimedia project aimed at giving voice to the new generation of Chinese migrant workers.”<sup>13</sup> The work is comprised of a website, a series of photographic portraits and a documentary video called *Dreamwork China* (2011), in which the workers describe their everyday lives, their projects for the future, their struggles for rights.<sup>14</sup>

“Dreams cannot come true, but everyone has a dream, don’t they?” says a young woman smiling. The camera frames a couple. The young man says: “Go on. Tell them.” She begins: “I love cosmetics; I want to open a beauty salon.”

The dreams - open a cosmetics shop, a skating rink, a photo store - have, for the most part, the same underlying theme. One boy declares: “I want to start my own business before I am 25.” The camera captures the dreamers’ hesitations, their giggles, their pride. Most are in their late teens or early twenties. Two young men stand in front of a bamboo forest, one poses in contrapposto, with his left hand on his hip, a bright yellow keychain attached to his belt; the other puts both hands on his shoulder. The wide shot shows the studio: props stacked on the floor, lamps, reflective umbrellas, part of the lavender field in the next backdrop.

For western viewers, this is no dream job. The migrants live in dormitories near the factory, if not above it: they must be available at any time. To meet short production deadlines, twelve-hour working days are not uncommon. One man declares proudly that he and his colleagues can deliver a finished product in 48 hours. In many factories, cameras are placed above the assembly line to make sure that the work is done in silence.

A talkative young woman declares straight away: “I am already 24. I’m old now, but I still look very young.” Her dream? “To earn more money and find a good husband.” She smiles, but her eyes refute that smile. Later, still smiling, she describes her arrival in Shanghai six years earlier, and the homesickness that made her burst into tears at the slightest provocation: “I could not stop myself.” Another comes from Qinghai, a 30-hour train trip from Shenzhen: it is no wonder she can’t afford to go home just now. After a ten-hour day at the factory, she attends night classes in cosmetology from 8:30 to 11:30 pm: “Foxconn won’t maintain me for my whole life.”

She was one of several interviewees who replied that working at Foxconn was “not bad,” although she

qualified this by saying there was a lot of pressure. So much that she added with a giggle: “I’m losing my hair.” “Where does this stress come from?” the interviewer asked. “Life, money, everything.”

Another migrant notes that working conditions are better than in the small factories. At least employees have a guaranteed salary and one or two days off every week. As for the spate of suicides at the Foxconn plant in 2010, a colleague maintains that the media coverage was biased: some of those suicides were caused by romantic disappointments. Besides, if workers are feeling stressed, they can take a break, go to the library, the swimming pool or the gym. His voice continues as the camera pans across large blocks of buildings with bars at the windows and façades covered with netting. Foxconn installed these devices to prevent employees from jumping into the void. Today employment contracts stipulate that the company does not compensate families of suicide victims.

#### WHAT CREATIVITY?

The three works outlined here extend twentieth-century aesthetic traditions through formal invention involving different methods of collaboration. One feature they have in common is the way they highlight the creativity brought to bear by their subjects in their everyday lives both on-screen and off.

#### DÉTOURNEMENT: FRIENDLY FIRE?

“Hijacking” found imagery had long been a disruptive strategy in experimental cinema, even before Guy Debord and Gil Wolman began calling it “détournement” in the 1950s.<sup>15</sup> In *Crossing the Great Sagrada* (1924) Adrian Brunel used stock footage from travel films to which he added facetious inter-titles to satirize

the genre with its imperialist, often racist subtext. In one well-known example, a title identifies a desert scene as taking place in Blackpool beach. In his first film *A MOVIE* (1958), Bruce Conner spliced together pieces of found footage taken from B-movies, newsreels, and soft-core pornography. Conner’s editing created associations between the snippets of found footage by matching movements or juxtaposing similar compositions.

Natalie Bookchin renews and extends this practice in her polyphonic installations. The YouTube remixes create a Busby Berkeley style synchronic dance by juxtaposing videos of people dancing alone in their rooms (*Mass Ornament*, 2009) or a mosaic of speakers reciting lists of medicines they take (*My Meds*, 2009). The resulting videos can be funny without being facetious or ironic. Although they do emphasize similarities in the vloggers’ testimony, they also reveal idiosyncratic reactions, the singular in the midst of the collective. In *I am not* (2009), for example, vloggers attempt to correct their public image, expressed both negatively (“I am *not* gay”) and positively (“I am *so* gay”), moving from “I am no longer gay” to “I can admit I am gay & most people will accept that.” Although *I am not* is often a disclaimer (e.g. “I am not homophobic, but...” followed by a homophobic remark), it is not used that way here.

#### ARTIFICIAL CONSTRUCTIONS

Bertolt Brecht famously questioned whether “the mere ‘reproduction of reality’” in a photograph could say anything about that reality: “A photograph of the Krupp works or the AEG reveals next to nothing about these institutions.”<sup>16</sup> Responding to Brecht’s challenge, artists have imagined artificial means to represent those phenomena that elude photography. Going beyond the mere juxtaposition of media, they have

developed an aesthetic of the hybrid that now encompasses the global positioning system (GPS), digital nonlinear montage and multi-screen installation. GPS tracks are mathematical visualizations of a chronological sequence of track points. In this sense, they are diagrams. Esther Polak’s projects combine GPS tracks with sound sampling and photo or video imagery. Each component is indexical in that it was produced by objects in real space, but it is digital as well, which means that whatever we see or hear is just one of the ways the same information can be apprehended.

Her work combines the graphic and narrative possibilities of GPS to make a kind of documentary that explores human landscapes in a networked world. For the multimedia project *MILK* (2003) she and Ieva Auzina interviewed people involved in the milk commodity chain, from dairy farmers in Latvia to cheese eaters in the Netherlands. Participants were given a GPS device to carry during the course of an ordinary working day. The artists then showed them their own paths and recorded their reactions. The final work is a documentary hybridization of GPS tracks, video and audio that brings Latvian farmers to the attention of Dutch consumers whose lives they impact. In an economy dominated by factory farms and opaque agribusiness dealings, Polak and Auzina show a specific economic circuit: cheese eaters can see where their food comes from and dairy farmers where their milk goes.

Polak thinks the techniques of media hybridization she foregrounds in her practice will allow artists to renew the documentary genre. *MILK* was based “on the equal use of several documenting techniques: visualized GPS-tracking, sound recording and photography. . . . Although recording the subject as realistically as possible, each technique gives a different point of view.” The “special combination of comments, photography and GPS-imaging . . . transforms the people into active ‘pencils,’ drawing in their own landscape, instead

of passive objects whose ways were being documented.” When the artists showed participants their tracks, the result looked realistic, while clearly showing “the limitations of every one of the media we had used.”

In the presentation system devised for *NomadicMILK*, the proportions are distorted so as to make the result more legible. The robot containing a bottle full of sand with a hole in the lid, moves along the ground, and draws the shape of the GPS tracks by leaving a trail of sand behind it. Sand drawings are made both on site (to present the tracks to the participants) and afterwards, when the project is exhibited, so “the robot functions as a performative tool, making the GPS tracks tangible and physically present.” The artist found it difficult to represent the tracks in a way that was understandable to the audiences. Like the dream work in Freud’s analysis, with its emphasis on condensation and displacement, “[t]he representation of both time and space had to be compressed, scaled, and deformed in order to make the robot draw a sand line that is a representation to which the participants and audiences can relate in a direct manner.”<sup>17</sup>

To combine “the vastly different spatial and temporal scales of the two dairy economies . . . into one intersecting drawing,” she built a basic editing tool for GPS data. The GPS lines are made mathematically, and are visualized by linking a series of positions on a map, unlike tracks that are made by a foot hitting the ground or a tire moving on a soft surface. Relating the lines to a shared knowledge of mapmaking conventions, we can evaluate only whether they are believable. She was surprised to discover that “when GPS tracks become elastic,” the “manipulated tracks became even more ‘real’ in the experience of the participants [...] if being recognizable as belonging to the self is a criterion for realism.” Then, to give this same impression of realism to European audiences with no direct personal relation to the GPS data, she had to add still another layer of editing.<sup>18</sup>



**Figure 3.** *Nomadic Milk*, Esther Polak, 2010, installation.  
Presentation at the Balie. Photo by Ivar van Bekkum. ©  
Esther Polak, 2010. Used with permission.

### WORKING METHODS, CRAFT AND COLLABORATION

Adopting the methods of anthropology and oral history for their interviews, Esther Polak and her team, Tommaso Facchin and Ivan Franceschini all set up and documented artificial situations, while Natalie Bookchin edited footage shot and posted online by others. The web has encouraged transdisciplinarity, developing research methodologies that extend across, beyond and between the arts and the social sciences.

Tommaso Facchin maintains that “*Dreamwork China* is a documentary work. Sometimes it is close to journalism, sometimes to visual anthropology, but it is also something different. We used our own sensibility in relating to those people, let them talk and be themselves, and then, in editing the stories together.” He sees his film as part of a documentary tradition that includes Pierpaolo Pasolini’s *Comizi d’Amore (Love Meetings)*: “His capacity of relating to people, young and older in this long trip along Italy’s seashores in 1964 is for me a great example and a far-to-reach goal.”<sup>19</sup>

Esther Polak says:

*We planned in our project [...] to mainly experience space with people, which gave us a sort of freedom. Working that way sets up a very equal relationship with people from Africa or Latvia or wherever because you’re not there to solve a problem, but to enjoy spending time together. Some of them thought we would bring them medicine for the cows or new technology to increase the amount of milk they produce [...]. There was a family who refused straight away, and were not interested in working with us if we were not going to give them something back, which was fair enough. It was very equal, we were clear about our intentions by telling them that the only thing they would gain from collaborating with us would be to show the way they live to a big audience [...]. When some of them agreed it was already a success for me, a good start.*<sup>20</sup>

She says that she and her team also agreed “to edit out all material they would feel uncomfortable with, so we showed them the clips before they were put in the project.”<sup>21</sup>

Natalie Bookchin collaborates by editing, remixing and projecting footage shot by others. In a time when many high-profile artists admit to (even brag about) having their work made by art fabricators, she writes: “I do my own videos. I can’t do it any other way, because it is how I figure out what I am doing with them. Editing is like writing for me, and I figure out what I am doing by editing, not beforehand.”<sup>22</sup>

Her relation to her subjects came after the fact, when she posted her video on YouTube in response to each of the sampled videos. On YouTube, it has garnered seven comments, but only two from the vloggers whose videos she sampled. One wrote: “This is really beautifully done. It has great depth and sensitivity.”<sup>23</sup>

### WHAT AUTONOMY?

#### Research-oriented Art

These works participate in what could be called the academic or research-oriented branch of contemporary art, as opposed to the market-oriented branch. Academe has its own circuits of legitimization - public galleries, festivals, academic conferences - that only slightly overlap with those of the international art world with its biennials, fairs, galleries and auctions. As Simon Biggs notes in a recent message on the Emypre discussion list, “Art schools have always been an entry point to the art world - although not the only entry point. At this point in time the PhD does not appear to represent such an entry point. To some extent it seems to lead to another door, with the art world rather keen to keep its door firmly closed to those who might knock on it from this direction of entry.

The door the PhD leads to is also closely guarded by guardians who seem rather nervous about what might happen if they let these new arrivals in. Every group has its gatekeepers (often self-appointed).<sup>24</sup>

### Means of Production

Unlike artists who make their living from their art, and are directly exposed to the whims of the art market, artist-researchers often rely on income from teaching. Those with permanent positions undergo less day-to-day financial pressure, although if they want to have large-scale works produced, their projects must be compatible with the objectives of grant-making bodies. This entails channeling time and effort into writing grant applications and progress reports.

Europeans can apply to state and local structures for funding, as well as private industry. They often receive aid in kind and collaborate with professionals, scientists, and programmers. Realizing *NomadicMILK* entailed travel and production costs. The “about us” page lists ten sponsors, ranging from Friesland Campina, the Dutch dairy producer (they make condensed Peak milk sold in Nigeria) to The Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO), the Dutch embassy in Abuja and the NIMk Netherlands Media Art Institute.<sup>25</sup> Increasingly, the once independent European cultural organizations are embracing a culture of accountability. Frequent audits require grantees to jump through more and more hoops, to perform well in statistical ratings, just as academics need to boost their publication counts. Even in these conditions, the NIMk had to close down at the end of 2012 when the Ministry of Culture denied it further funding.<sup>26</sup>

Artists in the United States often turn to private foundations. Natalie Bookchin has received a number of grants from private organizations, including support from California Institute of the Arts, where she

teaches. Yet she does not let the funding determine how she will work:

*My projects have always tended to shift in scale from very large scale to modest. For a large scale feature-length film Long Story Short (working title!) is still very DIY and I am doing all the editing and much of the story collecting myself. The major difference in this work and work I have done before is that I am going out in the world and working with people to make their own video diaries rather than starting with material on the web.*<sup>27</sup>

The relative autonomy attributed to artists could be contrasted with the lack of freedom felt by other categories of workers. As Theodor Adorno puts it, “absolute freedom in art, always limited to a particular, comes into contradiction with the perennial unfreedom of the whole.”<sup>28</sup> The migrant workers in *Dreamwork China* describe their days as monotonous: eating, working, sleeping. When they aren’t working, they either “kill time” by surfing the Web or shopping, or use it to prepare for a new future (after a ten-hour day, the young woman from Qinghai still finds time to attend night school). It is telling that they all aspire to what they see as the independence of small business owners and shopkeepers: being their own boss.

As if in echo, the laid-off workers in Bookchin’s compilation cite their newly found freedom as an advantage gained from losing their jobs. At one point, the chorus intones: “I’m looking forward to having a little time on my hands.” With this time, one speaker declares “I’m going to work on my skills to pursue what I really want”, while others plan to: “take a vacation”, “laze around the house” and, the chorus picks up, “make some videos”. Has the “unfreedom” remarked by Adorno begun to give way to something resembling the artist’s freedom?

### What Community?

A number of recent studies have focused on the qualities of communities that foster creativity. As Scott Rettberg puts it, “creativity is not best understood as a manifestation of genius or inspiration within any particular individual, but instead as the collective, performative practices of communities.”<sup>29</sup> Noting that “breakthrough ideas” are “cobbled together from whatever parts that happen to be around nearby,” Steven Johnson describes the environments where these parts can be found in abundance: the coffee shop, for example, offers optimal conditions for exchange, as it is a place where people from diverse milieus meet, allowing many wide-ranging ideas to “collide.”<sup>30</sup>

Did these works benefit from environments that support artists and incubate new ideas? To what extent have the artists themselves contributed to building collaborative communities?

Tommaso Facchini and Ivan Franceschini refer to the community of migrant workers, activists, union organizers and members of non-governmental organizations who defend workers’ rights in Shenzhen and the Pearl River Delta. These are the people they have interviewed and whose points of view come across most strongly in the film. Again, their contribution seems straightforward, as they aim to make these people’s lives better known in the West. Tommaso Facchin writes: “There’s no explicit link between Foxconn workers and NGO [non-governmental organization] activists in the second part of the video, even if those NGOs operate exactly in the same area, so we may say that the two - workers and NGOs - may meet one day. While I was there, and during the editing process I was more and more convinced that I should make a documentary only on the young workers of the first part, and probably I will. But this time we wanted to give a broader view of the issue and show different stories divided into separate chapters.”<sup>31</sup>

Natalie Bookchin’s videos gather individual English-speaking vloggers into an entity whose collective voice may be stronger than any individual. Many of them appear to be North American, although the occasional British accent can be heard. She has built her structure on top of YouTube’s social network. The sampled videos communicate each author’s distinctive voice and storytelling flair, and show the inventiveness that people deploy in dealing with unexpected situations.

Has YouTube’s ecosystem fostered a sense of community? After a period of undue idealization of “the wisdom of crowds,” we have settled into the opposite trope: social networking is a fool’s bargain. If user-contributed content undoubtedly lines the pockets of large corporations, it is no less true that people appropriate these platforms to their own ends. For example, one of the vloggers in Bookchin’s sampling uses her YouTube channel to launch a speaking career.<sup>32</sup>

Vloggers tend to talk informally as if conversing with friends and they can often receive many comments. Why did this particular group not respond to Bookchin’s remix? Could they have thought that, because she posted no personal laid off story, she was not a member of the club? Were they at a loss as to how to interpret her meta-narrative? Or was it simply that, by combining their voices, her video said it all? Was there really nothing more to add?

“Someone interviewing me recently said my role as a collector and editor of these videos was somewhere between an anthropologist, dramatist and labor organizer because I’m taking individual voices off of a small screen and making 3-D spaces that assume a collective resistance to alienation and isolation.”<sup>33</sup> Anthropologists are usually not members of the communities they study. In her recent project *Long Story Short*, Bookchin initiates and carries out interviews locally. As she puts it, “I think of art making and teaching as

fundamentally creative social practices. I teach from the position that most art making is collaborative, that in the current parlance, artists edit, remix and sample ideas, attitudes, and images, working from within culture rather than outside of it. I think some of the best work comes out of dialogue, critical awareness, and active engagement in the world.”<sup>34</sup>

Esther Polak made different communities intersect during her project. The idea first came to her when a Nigerian friend in the outskirts of Abuja mentioned seeing Fulani herdsmen lead their cattle past his office window. Making a project only with nomadic people would be too nostalgic, so she decided to contrast this milk route with that of the imported power milk that Nigerians use in tea. To this end, she contacted the Dutch headquarters of the dairy firm Friesland Campina. In Nigeria, where she made a number of six-week research trips, she worked with the non-governmental organization Pastoral Resolve.<sup>35</sup>

#### What Critique?

None of the artists claims to be making art that is specifically political. Their agendas may vary, but most seem to see their art as a form of knowledge or a way to increase understanding. *Dreamwork China's* authors describe their film as a documentary. Ivan Franceschini, a PhD candidate at the Ca' Foscari University of Venice, has done research into Chinese labor rights and civil society and has published several books on the subject.<sup>36</sup> Both Franceschini and Tommaso Facchin lived in China for several years before making the film.

Tommaso Facchin notes that the recent “media obsession around Apple and Foxconn in China” has blurred the real issues: “Yes, Foxconn is a hard place to work in. Yes, there have been a lot of suicides there. But do we have any real idea of how hard a Chinese migrant worker's life is in today's China? I'm sorry to delude

many, but Foxconn still is one of those factories millions of Chinese workers would want to work in. Higher wages, better working conditions, better working environment and much more. Foxconn and Apple are so big and important, so we have to talk about them, I'm not denying it. But I think that, if we just point at Foxconn and Apple when we are talking of Chinese workers' rights, we miss the real problem. We seem not to be interested in the real working conditions in the thousands of real sweatshops around the country.”<sup>37</sup>

Esther Polak insists that, while she is interested in being critical in general, as a citizen, as a member of the audience or with regard to other artists' work, she refrains from outspoken criticism in her own work so as to leave it open for “all kinds of interpretations. This is both an esthetic and a political decision.”<sup>38</sup> What sets both *Dreamwork China* and *NomadicMILK* apart is the attention given to details. At first sight it might seem rather repetitive to ask one person after another to tell the story of his or her everyday life or movements. While contemporary art has never shied away from the boring (indeed this is one of the ways it distinguishes itself from popular art forms), it is just this precise observation that gives both works their critical edge - and their interest.

As it turns out, the two milk economies charted in *NomadicMILK* aren't mutually exclusive. Peak Milk has not wiped out local production. Nono is like yoghurt; it can sustain one for a whole day, whereas Peak Milk is better in tea. Does this mean *NomadicMILK* functions as a support to facilitate neoliberal globalization? Such a simplistic approach would be short-sighted. Let us interpret it as a call to refine our analysis.

Natalie Bookchin says that her work “tries to make sense of the flood of information that we're producing about ourselves.”<sup>39</sup> In the past, she has been known



**Figure 4.** *Dreamwork China*, Ivan Franceschini and Tommaso Facchin, 2011. Video 55 mins. In the Guanlan district near Shenzhen, on the south coast of China, the street is crowded with young people walking to work. They have migrated from the provinces of Henan, Sichuan, Hubei and Qinghai to take jobs in the Foxconn factory making parts for iPhones. © Tommaso Facchin, 2011. Used with permission.

for explicitly “political” content, such as the Gatt.org parody website, made with activists who later became known as the Yes Men, and *Metapet* (2002-2003), an online game that satirized corporate culture, made with Jin Lee. Players managed a virtual, genetically engineered employee (brought in to replace uncooperative human workers): the game defied them to motivate the pet to work harder and more efficiently by “the right balance between a firm hand and a gentle coax, without ever losing sight of the bottom line.”<sup>40</sup> The artists lampoon business's managerial ethos, its relentless goal orientation, and the jargon that smooths over questionable practices like the patenting of genes.

The YouTube remixes chart a different path: “One of the roles of the chorus in Greek theatre was to act as a bridge between the audience and the actors, mediating the action between the two and interacting with both. In the choruses I create and the commentary I assemble, I variously present different positions, and speak through the assembled voices. In other words,

at varying points in the different works, the chorus's commentary becomes my own.”<sup>41</sup>

Since then, she has been working on a larger scale documentary project. “*Long Story Short* is a three part project - a feature film, a web documentary, and story archive. It uses innovative forms of storytelling and shapes its narrative by interweaving hundreds of first person video diaries made by people in California living below the poverty line.” Its use-value is greater, although it could also be seen as one of those much-criticized cultural bandages, by which participatory art projects serve to soften some of the harshest effects of neoliberal capitalism and the free market.<sup>42</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

Although we are a long way from Guy Debord's injunction to “never work,” these new media documentaries do insert a (brief) pause in the 24/7

always-on, just-in-time cadence that has become the norm in today's globalized economy. While among the European "creative class," artistic critique often takes the neo-luddite form of "unplugging" (rejecting cell phones and/or the Internet), the authors of these documentaries hone closer to the ideal of the "hi-tech gift economy."<sup>43</sup> In each case, technology has facilitated the contact between the documentarists and their subjects and allowed new forms of exchange.

The laid-off workers in America engage in unproductive play and carry on video-mediated conversations with their peers. The young migrants in *Dreamwork China* inflect the course of their lives by formulating "small dreams." The urban truck drivers and pastoral

nomads in Nigeria reflect on their itineraries, as they move more or less fluidly between cutting-edge technology and ancestral tradition. In this, they all assume the critical distance necessary to comment on the worlds they inhabit, and to imagine others possible.

At the same time, it would be overstating the case to say that these works contribute much to (let alone create) communities outside of the art sphere. The non-artists tend to lose interest in a project once its instigator has left: both interviewers and interviewees move on with their lives. Tommaso Facchin notes that it was "hard to keep contact with those workers, their lives change so fast and when later I wanted to get back to them their phone numbers had already

**Figure 5.** *Dreamwork China*, Ivan Franceschini and Tommaso Facchin, 2011. Video, 55 mins. One of the Foxconn factory workers interviewed in the photography studio. © Tommaso Facchin, 2011. Used with permission.



changed, or they were not reachable because they had probably moved to other cities. At present I'm in contact only with one or two of them. From the messages I got, they seemed to like the video, without showing much interest in it, but I hadn't the occasion to talk to them in person about this."<sup>44</sup>

Here, unlike participants in community art projects, the subjects of these documentaries are not their main audience. And the secondary audience deemed necessary for art to be validated by history is to be found in the art world, or more precisely, the academic art world.<sup>45</sup>

It may be significant in the long run that I can write about these works although I have never set eyes on any of them in a gallery, a museum or a movie theater. The Internet's potential for leveling the playing field has been partially realized. Even as Natalie Bookchin reworks material on YouTube to exhibit in a museum (the installation was bought by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art), she undermines this gesture by posting footage of the exhibition on YouTube and on the competing video-sharing site Vimeo, where they can in turn be remixed by others. The *Nomadic-MILK* and *Dreamwork China* projects are also visible online.<sup>46</sup>

Yet how can these works be "visible" when, according to YouTube, the site streams 4 billion online videos every day, and 60 hours of new videos are uploaded every minute?<sup>47</sup> The fact that they find their audience amongst this outpouring of online material is due in part to their (broadcast) media visibility. It is the same media circus decried by Tommaso Facchin that led me to his film in the first place. Natalie Bookchin, a pioneer of Internet art in the 1990s, has gradually built up an oeuvre and an audience online and, on occasion, in museums. Esther Polak came to the attention of the "new media" art community in 2002 with her

large-scale GPS project *Amsterdam Realtime*, and has developed a corpus of work since then.

Of course, these secondary audiences take notice primarily because there is something to notice. The overall shape of each project is striking; all three are crafted as language, sound, and image. In other words, the artists have framed situations and produced outcomes that transform experiments into experiences capable of affecting audiences at several levels. ■

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43. See Richard Barbrook, "The Hi-Tech Gift Economy," the website of the Hypermedia Research Center, 1998, <http://www.hrc.wmin.ac.uk/theory-hightechgifteconomy-print.html> (accessed May 1, 2013).
44. Tommaso Facchin, e-mail to the author September 9, 2013.
45. See Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, 190.
46. Natalie Bookchin, "Testament (2009):" The website of NomadicMILK, <http://nomadicmilk.net/full/>. The website of Dreamwork China, <http://www.dreamworkchina.tv/en/>. Bookchin includes on her press page a link to video commentary by a vlogger whose work she had sampled for her 18 channel immersive installation *Now He's Out in Public and Everyone Can See* (2012): "Bookchin Seeing Me." Natalie Bookchin's official website, n.d., <http://bookchin.net/projects/out-in-public.html> (accessed May 1, 2014).
47. Alexei Oreskovic, "Exclusive: YouTube Hits 4 Billion Daily Video Views," *Reuters*, January 23, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/01/23/us-google-youtube-idUSTRE8oMoTS20120123> (accessed May 1, 2013).



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