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Another Art World, Part 1: Art Communism and Artificial Scarcity//2019

[...] We would like to offer some initial thoughts on exactly how the art world can operate simultaneously as a dream of liberation, and a structure of exclusion; how its guiding principle is both that everyone should really be an artist, and that this is absolutely and irrevocably not the case. The art world is still founded on Romantic principles; these have never gone away; but the Romantic legacy contains two notions, one, a kind of democratic notion of genius as an essential aspect of any human being, even if it can only be realised in some collective way, and another, that those things that really matter are always the product of some individual heroic genius. The art world, essentially, dangles the ghost of one so as to ultimately, aggressively, insist on the other. [...]

The art world, for all the importance of its museums, institutes, foundations, university departments, and the like, is still organised primarily around the art market. The art market in turn is driven by finance capital. Being the world's least regulated market among shady businesses, tax shelters, scams, money laundering, etc., the art world might be said to represent a kind of experimental ground for the hammering-out of a certain ideal of freedom appropriate to the current rule of finance capital.

A case can certainly be made that contemporary art is in effect an extension of global finance (which is itself, of course, closely tied to empire). Artsy neighbourhoods tend to cluster around the financial districts of major cities. Artistic investment follows the same logic as financial speculation. Still – if contemporary art were simply an extension of finance capital, works designed to look good in banks, or in bankers' homes, why should we even care? It's not as if cultural critics spend a lot of time debating the latest design trends in luxury yachts. Why should changing trends in decorative objects that the owners of such yachts like to place in their sitting rooms be considered relevant, in any way, to the lives or aspirations of bus drivers, maids, bauxite miners, telemarketers, or pretty much anyone outside the charmed circle of the 'art world' itself? [...]

The world's cities are full of young people who do see a life of expression as the ultimate form of freedom, and even those who dream of becoming soap opera stars or hip-hop video producers recognise that as things are currently organised, the 'art world' is the crowning height of that larger domain of 'arts', and as such, its regulatory

principle, that which holds the elaborate ranks and hierarchies of genres and forms of art – so strangely reminiscent of earlier ranks and hierarchies of angels – in their proper place. This remains true even for those who have nothing but bemused contempt for the very idea of contemporary art, or are entirely unaware of it, insofar as they exist within a world where those who produce the forms of artistic expression they do appreciate, or their children, insofar as they aspire to move up in the world, will necessarily have to exist in a world where contemporary art is seen as the purest expression of human creativity – and creativity as the ultimate value.

The easiest way to measure the stubborn centrality of such structures, perhaps, is to consider how difficult it is to get rid of them. Attempts are always being made. There always seems to be someone in the art world trying to create participatory programs, explode the boundaries between high and low genres, include members of marginalised groups as producers or audiences or even patrons. Sometimes, they draw a lot of attention. Always in the end they fade away and die, leaving things more or less exactly as they were before. In the 1970s and 1980s, for example, there was a concerted effort in America to challenge the border between high art and popular music, even to the point where a few of the artists (Brian Eno, Talking Heads, Laurie Anderson, Jeffrey Lohn) actually did create work that hit the charts, and played to sold-out theatres full of young people who had never heard of Hugo Ball or Robert Rauschenberg. Critics declared that the very idea of high and low genres was quickly dissolving away. But it wasn't true. In a few years, it was all just another forgotten musical trend, an odd sidebar in the history of rock 'n' roll.

Hardly surprising perhaps, since the art market and the music industry always operated on entirely different economic principles: the one mainly financed by rich collectors and governments, the other by mass marketing to the general public. Still, if there was a real challenge to the logic of exclusion anywhere in the arts, during the twentieth century, it was precisely in the domain of music, where a defiant tradition from folk to rock and punk and hip-hop actually came closest to realising the old avant-garde dream that everyone could be an artist – though one can, of course, debate precisely how close this really came. At the very least, it established the idea that creativity is a product of small collectives as easily as individual auteurs. All this happened, significantly, at a certain distance from actual self-proclaimed artistic avant-gardes; and it is telling that the brief mutual flirtation with the art world in the 80s

was a prelude to a backlash that left music far more corporatised, individualised, and with far fewer spaces for experimentation than it had since at least the 1950s.

Any market of course must necessarily operate on a principle of scarcity. In a way, the art market and the music industry face similar problems: materials are mostly cheap and talent is widespread; therefore, for profits to be made, scarcity has to be produced. Of course, in the art world, this is what the critical apparatus is largely about: the production of scarcity; which is, in turn, why even the most sincerely radical anti-capitalist critics, curators, and gallerists will tend to draw the line at the possibility that everyone really could be an artist, even in the most diffuse possible sense. The art world remains overwhelmingly a world of heroic individuals, even when it claims to echo the logic of movements and collectives – even when the ostensible aim of those collectives is to annihilate the distinction between art and life. Even the Dadaists and Surrealists are remembered today as a handful of romantic geniuses, whatever they might have claimed to be about.

It is also noteworthy that the only time a significant number of people believed that structures of exclusion really were dissolving, that a society in which everyone could become an artist was actually conceivable, occurred in the midst of social revolutions when it was genuinely believed that capitalism was in its death spirals, and markets themselves were about to become a thing of the past. Many of these trends, unsurprisingly, emerge directly from Russia, where the period from the revolution of 1905 to the avant-garde heyday of the 1920s saw an almost brutal efflorescence of new ideas of what artistic communism might be like.[...]

What Does This Have to Do with the Art World?

Our argument is that just as police ultimately operate to maintain poverty and white supremacy, what we call ‘the art world’ ultimately exists to maintain a structure of hierarchy. What happens inside the bubble makes little difference. The issue is the existence of the bubble itself. Or to put it slightly differently, ‘the arts’ are organised the way they are because ‘art’ sits on top of them. A poor child growing up in a shantytown in Brazil or Pakistan has likely never heard of any of the names featured at the latest Documenta, but whatever she might dream of becoming – a rapper, a movie star, a fashion designer, a comedian (basically anything other than a tycoon, athlete, or politician) – it is already ranked on a scale in which ‘artist’ is the pinnacle. The fact that

most people have little or no idea who contemporary artists are or what they do contributes to the mystery.

This may help to explain otherwise puzzling contradictions. In trying to explain why it would be a bad thing if our troublesome human species became extinct, ‘art and culture’ is often evoked as one of the few self-evident justifications for our existence. On the other hand, most people find artists rather useless. A recent *Sunday Times* poll challenged a thousand people to name the most essential and least essential professions. The five most important turned out to be doctor/nurses, cleaners, garbage collectors, vendors, and deliverymen. But the real headline news was that the least essential turned out to be artists (telemarketers came in second).

There’s no reason to believe this reflects hostility towards artists, or a feeling that they would be better off collecting trash. Rather, it seems to reflect a feeling that ‘artist’ isn’t really a job at all. Or perhaps that it shouldn’t be. It should be a reward. It’s as if artists are seen as people who insist that they, and they alone, already exist under communism. Put this way, it’s not unreasonable to then ask: why should nurses and cleaners have to pay for artists? It’s almost as if the contingencies of race, class, and national origin sort us all out into different historical epochs, wherein some of us toil away under capitalism, some are reduced to feudal retainers, others are even living under de facto slavery, while a chosen few are allowed to inhabit a communist future that might otherwise (perhaps) never come into being. Should we be surprised that nurses and cleaners look slightly annoyed as the artists wave from their communist starcruiser floating past?

Obviously, most artists don’t see it that way. Some feel they are still blazing the trail to a utopian future in good avant-garde fashion. But by now it’s just as obvious a pretext as someone telling himself his cushy job in brand management isn’t really hurting anyone, since he doesn’t actually do much more than spend his time updating his Facebook profile and playing computer games. Maybe this is true of his particular job, but then we also have to admit that the existence of brand management is clearly a disaster. The same goes for the art world, since to enter this communist tomorrow you need resources (and the art world’s attempts to foreground more women, people of colour, and so forth does little to undercut this); to be recognised as an artist, you need to support a certain structure of recognition. To take an obvious example, you need to show in museums, those temples of our civilisation, where reigning symbolic codes are formed, assigned, and archived.

After all, the same is true of cops. ‘All cops are bastards’ is a structural statement; there have always been individual cops who have been well-meaning, even idealistic (Gene Roddenberry, the creator of Star Trek, spent seven years working for the LAPD). The point is that their personal character or even personal politics are mostly irrelevant; they are operating within an institutional structure that does inestimable harm, and whether any particular benevolent act does more harm by validating that structure, or good by mitigating it, is a secondary consideration.

Museums Are to the Art World as Prisons Are to the Police State

If we were to tell the history of the art world in the same way we just told the (very abbreviated) history of police, we would have to begin with the role of the museum. Of course, the French Revolution began with the storming of the Bastille (a prison), but it culminated in the seizure of the Louvre Palace, which became the first national museum, effectively initiating a new secular conception of the sacred to break the remaining power of the Church.

Of course, museums do not produce art; neither do they distribute art. They sacralise it. It’s important to underline the connection between property and the sacred. To sacralise is to exclude; it’s to set something apart from the world, whether because it is sacred to an individual (‘private property’) or sacred to something more abstract (‘art’ ‘God’, ‘humanity’, ‘the nation’). Any revolutionary regime changes existing forms of property, and the organisation or reorganisation of museums plays a crucial role in this process, since the forms of property that exist within museums represent the summit of the pyramid. They are the ultimate wealth that police protect, and that the industrious poor can only see on weekends.

Virtually all museums today operate in a way that produces and maintains hierarchy. By archiving, cataloguing, and reorganising the museum’s space, they draw a line between ‘museum’ quality and ‘non-museum’ quality objects. But there is no ultimate contradiction between commoditised art and art considered inalienable and not to be sold, because they are simply two variations of the sacred as radical exclusion. The fact that these objects are surrounded by armed security and high-tech surveillance simply serves to underline to any visitor how much their own creative acts (songs, jokes, hobbies, diary entries, care for loved ones, and precious mementos) are of no particular significance, and therefore, that visitor will need to return to their

non-museum life and continue to carry on their ‘non-inessential’ job producing and maintaining the structure of relations that makes museums possible. Much like the cathedrals they were meant to replace, museums are there to teach one one’s place.

In the same way, the art world – as the apparatus for the production of objects, performances, or ideas that might someday merit being sacralised – is based on the artificial creation of scarcity. In the way that police guarantee material poverty, the existence of the art world – in its current form – could be said to guarantee spiritual poverty. What, then, would an abolitionist project directed at the art world actually look like? [...]

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