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the prophetic-political-magical sense of offering descriptions that aim to bring new realities into being. I find the idea of a revolutionary future that is already with us, the notion that in a sense we already live in communism, in its own way quite compelling. The problem is, being prophets, they always have to frame their arguments in apocalyptic terms. Would it not be better to, as I suggested earlier, reexamine the past in the light of the present? Perhaps communism has always been with us. We are just trained not to see it. Perhaps everyday forms of communism are really—as Kropotkin in his own way suggested in *Mutual Aid*, even though even he was never willing to realize the full implications of what he was saying—the basis for most significant forms of human achievement, even those ordinarily attributed to capitalism. If we can extricate ourselves from the shackles of fashion, the need to constantly say that whatever is happening now is necessarily unique and unprecedented (and thus, in a sense, unchanging, since everything apparently must always be this way) we might be able to grasp history as a field of permanent possibility, in which there is no particular reason we can't at least try to begin building a redemptive future at any time. There have been artists trying to contribute to doing so, in small ways, since time immemorial—some, as part of bona fide social movements. It's not clear that social theorists—good ones anyway—or doing anything all so entirely different.

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a distant past that worked utterly differently (in which, for instance animals could become humans and back again), a past which was at once irretrievable, but always somehow there, and into which humans could transport ourselves in dreams and trances so as to attain true knowledge. As with their Past, so now with our Future.

It is a myth, but a myth constantly elaborated, as in our endless habit of watching science fiction fantasies on TV and in the movies, even though we no longer believe, as we once did, that the future is really likely to be like that. In this sense, the speakers at our conference found themselves cast in the role not even of prophets, perhaps, but of shamans, technicians of the sacred, capable of moving back and forth between cosmic dimensions—and of course, like any magician, both a sort of artist in their own right and at the same time a sort of trickster and a fraud.

Not surprising, then, that as the sincere revolutionaries that they were, most seemed to find themselves slightly puzzled by how they had arrived here.

a final note

Perhaps this seems unduly harsh. I have, after all, trashed the very notion of immaterial labor, accused post-Workerists (or at least the strain represented at this conference) of using flashy, superficial postmodern arguments to disguise a clunky antiquated version of Marxism, and suggested they are engaged in an essentially theological exercise which while it might be helpful for those interested in playing games of artistic fashion or imagining broad historical vistas provides almost nothing in the way of useful tools for concrete social analysis of the art world or anything else. I think that everything I said was true. But I don't want to leave the reader with the impression that there is nothing of value here.

First of all, I actually do agree that thinkers like these are useful in helping us conceptualize the historical moment. And not only in

But we have left that now, and moved on to a century with no future, only precarity. We have come to a point where it is impossible to even imagine projecting ourselves forwards in time in any meaningful way, where the only radical gesture left to us is therefore self-mutilation or suicide. Certainly, this reflected a certain prevailing mood in radical circles.

We really do lack a sense of where we stand in history. And it runs well beyond radical circles: the North Atlantic world has fallen into a somewhat apocalyptic mood of late. Everyone is brooding on great catastrophes, peak oil, economic collapse, ecological devastation. But I would argue that even outside revolutionary circles, the Future in its old-fashioned, revolutionary sense, can never really go away. Our world would make no sense without it.

So we are faced with a dilemma. The revolutionary Future appears increasingly implausible to most of us, but neither can we simply get rid of it. As a result, it begins to collapse into the present. Hence, for instance, the insistence that communism is already here, if only we knew how to see it. The Future has become a kind of hidden dimension of reality, an immanent presence lying behind the mundane surface of the world, with a constant potential to break out but only in tiny, imperfect flashes. In this sense we are forced to live with two very different futures: that which we suspect will actually come to pass—perhaps humdrum, perhaps catastrophic, certainly not in any sense redemptive—and The Future in the old revolutionary, apocalyptic sense of the term: the fulfillment of time, the unraveling of contradictions. Genuine knowledge of this Future is impossible, but it is only from the perspective of this unknowable Outside that any real knowledge of the present is possible. The Future has become our Dreamtime.

One could see it as something like St. Augustine's conception of Eternity, the ground that unifies Past, Present, and Future because it precedes the creation of Time. But I think the notion of the Dreamtime is, if anything, even more appropriate. Aboriginal Australian societies could only make sense of themselves in relation to

On the 19th of January, several of the heavyweights of Italian post-Workerist theory — Toni Negri, Bifo Berardi, Maurizio Lazzarato, and Judith Revel — appeared at the Tate Modern to talk about art. This is a review.

Or, it is a review in a certain sense. I want to give an account of what happened. But I also want to talk about why I think what happened was interesting and important. For me at least, this means addressing not only what was said but just as much, perhaps, what wasn't; and asking questions like "why immaterial labor ?", and "why did it make sense to all concerned to bring a group of revolutionary theorists over from Italy to talk about art history in the first place?"

Asking these questions will allow me to make some much broader points about the nature of art, politics, history, and social theory, which I like to think are at least as interesting and potentially revealing than what happened in the actual debate.

what happened

Here's a very brief summary:

The session was organized by Peter Osborne, along with a number of other scholars at Middlesex College involved in the journal *Radical Philosophy*, and Eric Alliez, editor of *Multitudes*. None of the organizers could really be considered part of the art world. Neither were any of the speakers were known primarily for what they had to say about things artistic.

Everyone seems to have felt they were there to explore slightly new territory. This included, I think, much of the audience. The place was packed, but especially, it seemed, with students and scholars involved in some way with post-graduate education—especially where it interfaced with the culture industry. Among many scholars, of course, these were very big names, celebrities, even something close to rock stars. Many of the graduate students

in particular were no doubt there in part just for the opportunity to finally see figures whose ideas they'd been debating for most of their intellectual careers revealed in to them in the flesh: to see what they looked like, what kind of clothes they wore, how they held themselves and spoke and moved. Perhaps even to mill about in the pub afterwards and rub shoulders.

This is always part of the pleasure of the event. Certainly this was part of the pleasure for me. Great theorists are almost always, in a certain sense, performers. Even if you've seen photographs, it never conveys a full sense of who they are; and when you do get a sense of who they are, returning to read their work with one's new, personal sense of the author tends to be an entirely different experience. It was interesting to observe Lazzarato's smooth head and excellent moustache; Revel's poise and energy; Bifo's hair—sort of Warhol meets Jacques Derrida—not to mention the way he seemed to walk as if floating a half inch above the pavement; Negri's almost sheepishness at his inability to pronounce long English words, which made him seem shy and almost boyish. I had never really had a sense of what any of these people were like and I walked away, oddly, with much more respect for them as people. This is partly no doubt because anyone who you know largely through obscurely written texts that some treat with an almost mystical adulation tends to become, in one's imagination, rather an arrogant person, self-important, someone who thinks oneself a kind of minor rock star, perhaps, since they are treated as such—even if within a very narrow circle. Events like this remind one just how narrow the circle of such celebrity can often be. These were people who certainly were comfortable in the spotlight. But otherwise, their conditions of existence obviously in no way resembled that of rock stars. In fact they were rather modest. Most had paid a significant price for their radical commitments and some continued to do so: Negri is now out of jail of course and settled in a fairly comfortable life on academic and government pensions, but Bifo is a high school teacher (if at a very classy high school) and Lazzarato

tions about the nature of society, we simply cannot conceive what a future society would be like. (Though no Marxist, oddly, seems to think we should have similar problems trying to understand past societies.) In this case, though, it is just as much the legacy of Michel Foucault,[5] who radicalized this idea of a series of all-encompassing historical stages even further with his notion of epistemes: that the very conception of truth changes completely from one historical period to the next. Here, too, each historical period forms such a total system that it is impossible to imagine one gradually transforming into another; instead, we have a series of conceptual revolutions, of total breaks or ruptures.

All of the speakers at the conference were drawing, in one way another, on both the Marxian and Foucauldian traditions—and some of the terms used for historical stages ("real subsumption", "societies of discipline"…) drew explicitly on one or the other. Thus all of them were faced with the same conceptual problem. How could it be possible to come up with such a typology? How is it possible for someone trapped inside one historical period to be able to grasp the overall structure of history through which one stage replaces the other?

The prophet of course has an answer to this question. Just as we can only grasp an individual's life as a story once he is dead, it is only from the perspective of the end of time that we can grasp the story of history. It doesn't matter that we do not really know what the messianic Future will be like: it can serve as the Archimedean point, the time outside time about which we can know nothing that nonetheless makes knowledge possible.

Of course, Bifo was explicitly arguing that the Future itself is dead. The twentieth century, he insisted, had been the "century of the future" (that's why he began his analysis with the Futurists).

[5] Really, I would say, it is the legacy of Structuralism. Foucault is remembered mainly as a post-structuralist, but he began as an arch-structuralist, and this aspect of his philosophy in no sense changed over the course of his career but if anything grew stronger.

had moved from an age of connection to one of conjunction; for Negri, the new stage of Contemporaneity that had replaced post-modernism. Each dutifully explained how we had entered into a new age, and described some of its qualities and implications, along with an assessment of its potential for some sort of radical political transformation,

It's easy to see why the art world would provide a particularly eager market for this sort of thing. Art has become a world where—as Walter Benjamin once said of fashion—everything is always new, but nothing ever changes. In the world of fashion, of course, it's possible to generate a sense of novelty simply by playing around with color, patterns, styles, and hemlines.

The visual arts though do not have such a luxury. They have always seen themselves as entangled in a larger world of culture and politics, that they are not simply playing around with form. Hence the a permanent need to conjure up a sense that we are in a profoundly new historical moment, even if art theorists attempting such an act of conjuration often seem to find themselves with less and less to work with.

There is another reason, I think, why revolutionary thinkers are particularly well-suited to such a task. One can come to understand it, I think, by examining what would otherwise seem to be a profound contradiction in the all of the speakers' approaches to history. In each case, we are presented with a series of historical stages: from societies of discipline *to* societies of security, from conjunction *to* connection, etc. We are not dealing with a series of complete conceptual breaks; at least, no one seems to imagine that is impossible to understand any one stage from the perspective of any of the others. But oddly, all of the speakers in question subscribed to the theory that history *should* be conceived as a series of complete conceptual breaks, so total, in fact, that it's hard to see how this would be possible. In part this is the legacy of Marxism, which always tends to insist that since capitalism forms an all-encompassing totality that shapes our most basic assump-

appears under the dreaded rubric of "independent scholar". It's a little shocking to discover scholars of such recognized importance in the domain of ideas could really have received such little institutional recognition, but of course, there is very little connection between the two—especially, when politics is involved.

(Neither were they likely to be walking home with vast troves of money from taking part in this particular event: 500 tickets at £20 each might seem like a bit of money, but once you figure in the cost of the venue, hotels and transportation, the remainder, split four ways, would make for a decidedly modest lecture fee.)

All in all, they seemed to exude an almost wistful feeling, of modest, likable people scratching their heads over the knowledge that, twenty years before, struggling side to side with insurrectionary squatters and running pirate radio stations, they would never have imagined ending up quite where they were now, filling the lecture hall of a stodgy British museum with philosophy students eager to hear their opinions about art. The wistfulness was only intensified by the general tenor of the afternoon's discussion, which started off guardedly hopeful about social possibilities in the first half, and then, in the second half, collapsed.

Here's a brief summary of what happened:

- **MAURIZIO LAZZARATO** presented a paper called **'Art, Work and Politics in Disciplinary Societies and Societies of Security',** in which he talked about Duchamp and Kafka's story Josephine the singing mouse, and explained how the relation of "art, work, and politics" had changed as we pass from Foucault's "disciplinary society" to his "society of security". Duchamp's ready-mades provides a kind of model of a new form of action that lies suspended between what we consider production and management; it is an anti-dialectical model in effect of forms of immaterial labor to follow, which entail just the sort of blurring of boundaries of work and play, art and life that the avant garde had called

for, that is opened up in the spaces of freedom that "societies of security" must necessarily allow, and that any revolutionary challenge to capitalism must embrace.

- **JUDITH REVEL** presented a paper called **'The Material of the Immaterial: Against the Return of Idealisms and New Vitalisms'**, explained that even many of those willing to agree that we are now under a regime of real subsumption to capital do not seem to fully understand the implications: that there is *nothing* outside. This includes those who posit some sort of autonomous life-force, such as Agamben's "bare life". Such ideas need to be jettisoned, as also Deleuze's insistence we see desire as a vital energy prior to the constraints of power. Rather, the current moment can be understood only through Foucault, particularly his notion of ethical self-fashioning; this also allows us to see that art is not a series of objects but a form of critical practice designed to produce ruptures in existing regimes of power o **a lively discussion** ensued in which everyone seemed happy to declare Agamben defunct but the Deleuzians fought back bitterly. No clear victor emerged

- **BIFO** presented a paper called **'Connection/Conjunction.'** He began by talking about Marinetti and Futurism. The twentieth century was the "century of the future."
But that's over. In the current moment, which is no longer one of conjunction but of connection, there is no longer a future. Cyber-space is infinite, but cyber-time is most definitively not. The precarity of labor means life is pathologized; and where once Lenin could teeter back and forth from depressive breakdowns to decisive historical action, no such action is now possible, suicide is the only form of effective political action; art and life have fused and it's a disaster; any new wave of radical subjectification is inconceivable

reality is in turn is first and foremost that which resists attempts to simply call prophet visions into existence, or even (perhaps especially) to impose them through the apparatus of the state. Since all good social theory does also contain an element of prophecy, the result is a constant internal tension; in its own way as profound as the tension I earlier suggested lay at the heart of politics. But the work of Negri and his associates clearly leans very heavily on the prophetic side of the equation.

concerning the fullness of time

At this point I think I can return to my initial question: why does one need a revolutionary philosopher to help us think about art? Why does one call in a prophet?

The answer would appear to be: One calls in a prophet because prophets above all know how to speak compellingly about their audience's place in history.

Certainly this is the role in which Negri, Bifo, and the rest have now been cast. They have become impresarios of the historical moment. When their ideas are invoked by artists or philosophers, this is largely what those artists and philosophers seem to be looking for. When they are brought on stage at public events, this is mainly what is expected of them. Their job is to explain why the time we live in is unique, why the processes we see crystallizing around us are unprecedented; different in quality, different in kind, from anything that has ever come before.

Certainly this is what each one of the four, in their own way, actually did. They might not have had much to say about specific works of art or specific forms of labor, but each provided a detailed assessment of where we stood in history. For Lazzarato the significant thing was that we had moved from a society of discipline to one of security; for Revel, what was really important was the move from formal to real subsumption of labor under capital. For Bifo, we

Spinoza emphasized, it was the prophets who effectively produced the Hebrew people, by creating a framework for their history.

Negri has always been quite up front about his own desire to play a similar role for what he likes to call "the multitude". He is less interested in describing realities than in bringing them into being. A political discourse, he says, should "aspire to fulfill a Spinozist prophetic function, the function of an immanent desire that organizes the multitude."[4] The same could be said of theories of immaterial labor. They're not really descriptive. For its most ardent proponents, immaterial labor is really important because it's seen to represent a new form of communism: ways of creating value by forms of social cooperation so dispersed that just about everyone could be said to take part, much as they do in the collective creation of language, and in a way that makes it impossible to calculate inputs and outputs, where there is no possibility of accounting.

Capitalism, which is reduced increasingly to simply realizing the value created by such communistic practices, is thereby reduced to a purely parasitical force, a kind of feudal overlord extracting rent from forms of creativity entirely alien to it. We are already living under communism, if only we come to realize it. This is of course the real role of the prophet: to organize the desires of the multitude, to help these already-existing forms of communism burst out of their increasingly artificial shackles. Beside this epochal task, the concrete analysis of the organization of real-life TV studios or cell phone dealerships seems petty and irrelevant.

In contrast the main body of social theory as we know it today does not trace back to such performative revolutionary gestures, but precisely, from their failure. Sociology sprang from the ruins of the French revolution; Marx's Capital was written to try to understand the failure of the revolutions of 1848, just as most contemporary French theory emerged from reflections on what went wrong in May '68. Social theory aims to understand social realities; social

[4] Empire, p. 66.

now. If there was hope, it is only for some great catastrophe, after which possibly, maybe, everything might change.

- **a confused and depressing discussion** ensued, in which Bifo defended his despair, in a cheerful and charming manner, admitting that he has abandoned Deleuze for Baudrillard. There's no hope, he says. "I hope that I am wrong."

- **TONI NEGRI** presented a paper called **'Concerning Periodisation in Art: Some Approaches to Art and Immaterial Labour'** which began, as the title implies, with a brief history of how, since the 1840s, artistic trends mirrored changes in the composition of labor. (That part was really quite lucid. Then the words began) Then after '68, we had Post-Modernism, but now we're beyond that too, we're all the posts are post now, we're in yet a new phase, Contemporaneity, in which we see the ultimate end of cognitive labor is prosthesis, the simultaneous genesis of person and machine; as biopolitical power it becomes a constant explosion, a vital excess beyond measure, through which the multitude's powers can take ethical form in the creation of a new global commons. Despite the occasionally explosive metaphors, though the talk was received as a gesture of quiet but determined revolutionary optimism opposing itself to Bifo's grandiose gesture of despair—if one diluted, somewhat, by the fact that almost no one in the audience seemed able to completely understand it.
  While the first, analytical part of the paper was admirably concrete, as soon as it began to talk about revolutionary prospects, it also shifted to a level of abstraction so arcane that it was almost impossible for this listener, at least (and I took copious notes!) to figure out what, exactly, any of this

would mean in practice.

- **a final discussion was proposed** in which each speaker was asked to sum up.
  There is a certain reluctance. Lazzarato demurs, he does not want to say anything. "Bifo has made me depressed." Bifo too passes. Negri admits that Bifo has indeed defined the "heaviest, most burdensome" question of our day, but all is not necessarily lost, rather, a new language is required to even begin to think about such matters. Only Judith Revel picks up the slack and all is not necessarily lost, despite the miserable realities, the power of our indignation is real—the only question is, how to transform that into The Common

Revel's intervention, however, had something of the air of a desperate attempt to save the day. Everyone left somewhat confused, and a little unsettled. Bifo's collapse of faith was particularly unsettling because generally he is the very avatar of hope; in fact, even here his manner and argument seemed at almost complete cross-purposes; his every gesture seemed to exude a kind of playful energy, a delight in the fact of existence, that his every word seemed determined to puncture and negate. It was very difficult to know what to make of it.

Instead of trying to take on the arguments point by point—as I said, this is only a sort of review—let me instead throw out some initial thoughts on what the presentations had in common. In other words, I am less interested in entering into the ring and batting around arguments for whether Foucault or Deleuze are better suited for helping us realize the radical potential in the current historical moment, as to ask such questions are being batted about by Italian revolutionaries, in an art museum, in the first place. Here I can make four initial observations, all of which, at the time, I found mildly surprising:

Granted, Continental theory has a notorious tendency to float above the surface of things, only rarely touching down in empirical reality. Lazzarato has a particularly annoying habit of claiming his concepts emerge from a large body of recent "empirical research" which he never, however, actually cites or specifically refers to. Negri tends to throw everything, all the specific gestures, exchanges, and transformations into a kind of giant blender called "real subsumption"—whereby since everything is labor, and all forms of labor operate under the logic of capital, there's rarely much need to parse the differences between one form and another (let alone analyze the actual organization of, say, a collection agency, or the fashion industry, or any particular capitalist supply chain.)

But in another sense this criticism is unfair. It assumes that Negri and Lazzarato are to be judged as social theorists, in the sense that their work is meant primarily to develop concepts that can be useful in understanding the current state of capitalism or the forms of resistance ranged against it—or at any rate that it can be judged primarily on the degree to which it can. Certainly, any number of young scholars have been trying to adopt these concepts to such purposes, with rather mixed results. But I don't think this was ever their primary aim. They are first and foremost prophets.

Prophecy of course existed long before social theory proper and in many ways anticipated it. In the Abrahamic tradition that runs from Judaism through Christianity to Islam, prophets are not simply people who speak of future events. They are people who provide revelation of hidden truths about the world, which may include knowledge of events yet to come to pass, but need not necessarily. One could argue that revolutionary thought, and critical social theory, both have their origins in prophecy. At the same time, prophecy is clearly a form of politics. This is not only because prophets were invariably concerned with social justice. It is because they created social movements, even, new societies: as

What I really want to emphasize though is that none of this means that any of these spaces are any less real. We have a tendency to assume that, since capital and its attendant forms of value are so clearly dominant, then everything that happens in the world somehow partakes of its essence. We assume capitalism forms a total system, and that the only real significance of any apparent alternative is the role it plays in reproducing it. Myself, I feel this logic is deeply flawed—even disastrous. For two hundred years at least, artists and those drawn to them have created enclaves where it has been possible to experiment with forms of work, exchange, and production radically different from those promoted by capital. While they are not always self-consciously revolutionary, artistic circles have had a persistent tendency to overlap with revolutionary circles; presumably, precisely because these have been spaces where people can experiment with radically different, less alienated forms of life. The fact that all this is made possible by money percolating downwards from finance capital does not make such spaces "ultimately" a product of capitalism any more than the fact a privately owned factory uses state-supplied and regulated utilities and postal services, relies on police to protect its property and courts to enforce its contracts, makes the cars they turn out "ultimately" products of socialism.

Total systems don't really exist, they're just stories we tell ourselves, and the fact that capital is dominant now does not mean that it will always be.

on Prophecy and Social Theory

Now, this is hardly a detailed analysis of value formation in the art world. It is only the crudest preliminary sketch. But it's already a thousand times more concrete than anything yet produced by theorists of immaterial labor.

1. There was almost no discussion of contemporary art. Just about every piece of art discussed was within what might be called the classic avant garde tradition (Dada, Futurism, Duchamp, Abstract Expressionism…) Negri did take his history of art forms up through the '60s, and Bifo mentioned Banksy. But that was about it.

2. While all of the speakers could be considered Italian autonomists and they were ostensibly there to discuss Immaterial Labor, a concept that emerged from the Italian autonomist tradition, surprisingly few concepts specific to that tradition were deployed. Rather, the theoretical language drew almost exclusively on the familiar heroes of French '68 thought: Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, Deleuze and Guattari… At one point, the editor of Multitude, Eric Alliez, in introducing Negri made a point of saying that one of the great achievements of his work was to give a second life to such thinkers, a kind of renewed street cred, by making them seem once again relevant to revolutionary thought.

3. In each case, the presenters used those French thinkers as a tool to create a theory about historical stages—or some cases, imitated them by coming up with an analogous theory of stages of their own. For each, the key question was: what is the right term with which characterize the present? What makes our time unique? Is it that we have passed from a society of discipline, to one of security, or control? Or is it that regimes of conjunction been replaced by regimes of connection? Have we experienced a passage from formal to real subsumption? Or from modernity to postmodernity? Or have we passed postmodernity too, now, and entered an entirely new phase?

4. All of them were remarkably polite. Dramatically lacking was anything that might provoke discomfort in even the stodgiest Tate Britain curator, or even, really, any of their wealthiest patrons. This is worthy of note no one can seriously deny the speakers' radical credentials. Most had proved themselves willing to take genuine personal risks at moments when there was any reason to believe some realistic prospect of revolution was afoot. There was no doubt that, had some portion of London's proletariat risen up in arms during their stay, most if not all would have immediately reported to the barricades. But since they had not, their attacks or even criticisms were limited to other intellectuals: Badiou, Ranciere, Agamben.

These observations may seem scattershot but I think taken together they are revealing. Why, for example, would one wish to argue that in the year 2008 we live in a unique historical moment, unlike anything that came before, and then act as if this moment can only really be described through concepts French thinkers developed in the 1960s and '70s—then illustrate one's points almost exclusively with art created between 1916 and 1922?

This does seem strangely arbitrary but I suspect there is a reason. We might ask: what does the moment of Futurism, Dada, Constructivism and the rest, and French '68 thought, have in common? Actually quite a lot. Each corresponded to a moment of revolution: to adopt Immanuel Wallerstein's terminology, the world revolution of 1917 in one case, and the world revolution of 1968 in the other. Each witnessed an explosion of creativity in which a longstanding European artistic or intellectual Grand Tradition effectively reached the limits of its radical possibilities. That is to say, they marked the last moment at which it was possible to plausibly claim that breaking all the rules—whether violating artistic conventions, or shattering philosophical assumptions—was itself, necessarily, a subversive political act as well.

The original, romantic conception of the artist—and hence, the very idea of art in the modern sense—arose around the time of industrial revolution. Probably this is no coincidence. As Godbout and Caille have pointed out, there is a certain complementarity. Industrialism was all about the mass production of physical objects, but the producers themselves were invisible, anonymous—about them one knew nothing. Art was about the production of unique physical objects, and their value was seen as emerging directly from the equally unique genius of their individual producers—about whom one knew everything. Even more, the production of commodities was seen as a purely economic activity. One produced fishcakes, or aluminum siding, in order to make money. The production of art was not seen as an essentially economic activity. Like the pursuit of scientific knowledge, or spiritual grace, or the love of family for that matter, the love of art has always been seen as expressing a fundamentally different, higher form of value. Genuine artists do not produce art simply in order to make money. But unlike astronomers, priests, or housewives, they do have to sell their products on the market in order to survive. What's more, the market value of their work is dependent on the perception that it was produced in the pursuit of something other than market value. People argue endlessly about what that "something other" is—beauty, inspiration, virtuosity, aesthetic form—I would myself argue that nowadays, at least, it is impossible to say it is just one thing, rather, art has become a field for play and experiment with the very idea of value—but all pretty much agree that, were an artist to be seen as simply in it for the money, his work would be worth less of it.

I suspect this is a dilemma anyone might face, when trying to maintain some kind of space of autonomy in the face of the market. Those pursuing other forms of value can attempt to insulate themselves from the market. They can come to some sort of accommodation or even symbiosis. Or they can end up in a situation where each side sees itself as ripping the other off.

value of a work of art emerges directly from the unique genius of some individual artist. But none of them really believe that's all, or even most, of what's actually going on. Many artists are deeply cynical about what they do. But even those who are the most idealistic can only feel they are pulling something off when they are able to create enclaves, however small, where they can experiment with forms of life, exchange, and production which are—if not downright communistic (which they often are), then at any rate, about as far from the forms ordinarily promoted by capital anyone can get to experience in a large urban center—and to get capitalists to pay for it, directly or indirectly. Critics and dealers are aware, if often slightly uneasy with the fact that, the value of an artwork is to some degree their own creation; collectors, in turn, seem much less uneasy with the knowledge that in the end, it is their money that makes an object into art. Everyone is willing to play around with the dilemma, to incorporate it into the nature of art itself. I have a friend, a sculptor, who once made a sculpture consisting simply of the words "I NEED MONEY', and then tried to sell it to collectors to pay the rent. It was snapped up instantly. Are the collectors who snap up this sort of thing suckers, or are they reveling in their own ability to play Marcel Duchamp?

Duchamp, after all, justified his famous "fountain", his attempt to buy an ordinary urinal and place it in an art show, by saying that while he might not have made or modified the object, he had "chosen" it, and thus transformed it as a concept. I suspect the full implications of this act only dawned on him later. If so, it would help explain why he eventually abandoned participating in the art world entirely and spent the last forty years of his life claiming he was simply playing chess, one of the few activities that, he occasionally pointed out, could not possibly be commoditized.

Perhaps the problem runs even deeper. Perhaps this is simply the kind of dilemma that necessarily ensues when one two incommensurable systems of value face off against each other.

This is particularly easy to see in the case of the European avant garde. From Duchamp's first readymade in 1914, Hugo Ball's Dada manifesto and tone poems in 1916, to Malevich's White on White in 1918, culminating in the whole phenomenon of Berlin dada from 1918 to 1922, one could see revolutionary artists perform, in rapid succession, just about every subversive gesture it was possible to make: from white canvases to automatic writing, theatrical performances designed to incite riots, sacrilegious photo montage, gallery shows in which the public was handed hammers and invited to destroy any piece they took a disfancy to, objects plucked off the street and sacralized as art. All that remained for the Surrealists was to connect a few remaining dots, and the heroic moment was over. One could still do political art, of course, and one could still defy convention. But it became effectively impossible to claim that by doing one you were necessarily doing the other, and increasingly difficult to even try to do both at the same time. It was possible, certainly, to continue in the Avant Garde tradition without claiming one's work had political implications (as did anyone from Jackson Pollock to Andy Warhol), it was possible to do straight-out political art (like, say, Diego Rivera); one could even (like the Situationists) continue as a revolutionary in the Avant Garde tradition but stop making art, but that pretty much exhausted the remaining possibilities.

What happened to Continental philosophy after May '68 is quite similar. Assumptions were shattered, grand declarations abounded (the intellectual equivalent of Dada manifestos): the death of Man, of Truth, The Social, reason, dialectics, even Death itself. But the end result was roughly the same. Within a decade, the possible radical positions one could take within the Grand Tradition of post-Cartesian philosophy had been, essentially, exhausted. The heroic moment was over. What's more, it became increasingly difficult to maintain the premise that heroic acts of epistemological subversion were revolutionary or even particularly subversive in any other sense. In fact their effects seemed if anything depoliticizing.

Just as purely formal avant garde experiment proved perfectly well suited to grace the homes of conservative bankers, and Surrealist montage to become the language of the advertising industry, so did poststructural theory quickly prove the perfect philosophy for self-satisfied liberal academics with no political engagement at all.

If nothing else this would explain the obsessive-compulsive quality of the constant return to such heroic moments. It is, ultimately, a subtle form of conservatism—or, perhaps one should say conservative radicalism, if such were possible—a nostalgia for the days when it was possible to put on a tin-foil suit, shout nonsense verse, and watch staid bourgeois audiences turn into outraged lynch mobs; to strike a blow against Cartesian Dualism and feel that by doing so, one has thereby struck a blow for oppressed people everywhere.

about the concept of immaterial labor

The notion of immaterial labor can be disposed of fairly quickly. In many ways it is transparently absurd.

The classic definition, by Maurizio Lazzarato is "the labor that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity"—the "informational content" referring to the increasing importance in production and marketing of new forms of "cybernetics and computer control", while the second, the "cultural content", refers to the labor of "defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and, more strategically, public opinion," which, increasingly, everyone is doing all the time.[1] On the one hand, "immaterial workers" are "those who work in advertising, fashion, marketing, television, cybernetics, and so forth", on the other, we are all immaterial workers, insofar as we are disseminating information about brand

[1] "Immaterial Labor" (http://www.generation-online.org/c/fcimmaterial-labour3.htm).

mally intervene between the proletarian world of material production and the airy heights of fictive capital, are, essentially, yanked away.

Ordinarily, it is the working class world in which people make themselves intimately familiar with the uses of welding gear, glue, dyes and sheets of plastic, power saws, thread, cement, and toxic industrial solvents. It is among the upper class, or at last upper middle class world where even economics turns into politics: where everything is impression management and things really can become true because you say so. Between these two worlds lie endless tiers of mediation. Factories and workshops in China and Southeast Asia produce clothing designed by companies in New York, paid for with capital invested on the basis of calculations of debt, interest, anticipation of future demand and market fluctuations in Bahrain, Tokyo, and Zurich, repackaged in turn into an endless variety of derivatives—futures, options, various traded and arbitraged and repackaged again onto even greater levels of mathematical abstraction to the point where the very idea of trying to establish a relation with any physical product, goods or services, is simply inconceivable. Yet the same bankers and traders who produce these complex financial instruments also like to surround themselves with artists, people who are always busy making things—a kind of imaginary proletariat assembled by finance capital, producing unique products out of for the most part very inexpensive materials, objects said financiers can baptize, consecrate, through money and thus turn into art, thus displaying its ability to transform the basest of materials into objects worth far, far more than gold.

It is never clear, in this context, who exactly is scamming whom.[3] Everyone—artists, dealers, critics, collectors alike—continue to pay lip service on the old 19th century Romantic conception that the

[3] That is, within the art world. The fact that increasing numbers of the these complex financial instruments are themselves being revealed to be little more than scams adds what can only be described as an additional kink.

enough people believe them. The problem is that in order to play the game effectively, one can never acknowledge its essence. No king would openly admit he is king just because people think he is. Political power has to be constantly recreated by persuading others to recognize one's power; to do so, one pretty much invariably has to convince them that one's power has some basis other than their recognition. That basis may be almost anything — divine grace, character, genealogy, national destiny. But "make me your leader because if you do, I will be your leader" is not in itself a particularly compelling argument.

In this sense politics is very similar to magic, which in most times and places—as I discovered in Madagascar—is simultaneously recognized as something that works because people believe that it works; but also, that only works because people do not believe it works only because people believe it works. For this why magic, whether in ancient Thessaly or the contemporary Trobriand Islands, always seems to dwell in an uncertain territory somewhere between poetic expression and outright fraud. And of course the same can usually be said of politics.

If so, for the art world to recognize itself as a form of politics is also to recognize itself as something both magical, and a confidence game—a kind of scam.

Such then is the nature of the permanent crisis. In political economy terms, of course, the art world has become largely an appendage to finance capital. This is not to say that it takes on the nature of finance capital (in many ways, in its forms, values, and practices, is almost exactly the opposite)—but it is to say it follows it around, its galleries and studios clustering and proliferating around the fringes of the neighborhoods where financiers live and work in global cities everywhere, from New York and London to Basel and Miami.

Contemporary art holds out a special appeal to financiers, I suspect, because it allows for a kind of short-circuit in the normal process of value-creation. It is a world where the mediations that nor-

names, creating subcultures, frequenting fan magazines or web pages or developing our own personal sense of style. As a result, production—or, at least in the sense of the production of the *value* of a commodity, what makes it something anyone would wish to buy—is no longer limited to the factory but is dispersed across society as a whole, and becomes impossible to measure.

To some degree this is just a much more sophisticated Leftist version of the rise of the service economy, etc, but there is also a very particular history, which goes back to dilemmas in Italian workerism in the '70s and '80s. On the one hand, there was a stubborn Leninist assumption—promoted, for instance, by Toni Negri—that it must always be the most "advanced" sector of the proletariat that makes up the revolutionary class. Computer and other information workers were the obvious candidates here. But the same period saw the rise of feminism and the Wages for Housework movement, which put the whole problem of unwaged, domestic labor on the political table in a way that could no longer simply be ignored. The solution was to argue that computer work, and housework were really the same thing. Or, more precisely, were becoming so: since, it was argued, the increase of labor-saving devices meant that housework was becoming less and less a matter of simple drudgery, and more and more itself a matter of managing fashions, tastes and styles.

The result is a genuinely strange concept, combining a kind of frenzied postmodernism, with the most clunky, old-fashioned Marxist material determinism. I'll take these one at a time.

Postmodern arguments, as I would define them at least, pretty much always take the same form:

1. begin with an extremely narrow version of what things used to be like, usually derived by taking some classic text and treating it as a precise and comprehensive treatment of reality. For instance (this is a particularly common one), assume that all capitalism up until the '60s or '70s worked exactly the

way described in the first two or three chapters of volume I of Marx's Capital

2. compare this to the complexities of how things actually work in the present (or even how just one thing works in the present: like a call center, a web designer, the architecture of a research lab)

3. declare that we can now see that lo!, sometime around 1968 or maybe 1975, the world changed completely. None of the old rules apply. Now everything is different.

The trick only works if you do not, under any circumstances, reinterpret the past in the light of the present. One could after all go back and ask whether it ever really made sense to think of commodities as objects whose value was simply the product of factory labor in the first place.

What ever happened to all those dandies, bohemians, and flaneurs in the 19th century, not to mention newsboys, street musicians, and purveyors of patent medicines? Were they just window-dressing? Actually, what about window dressing (an art famously promoted by L. Frank Baum, the creator of the Wizard of Oz books)? Wasn't the creation of value always in this sense a collective undertaking?

One could, even, start from the belated recognition of the importance of women's labor to reimagine Marxist categories in general, to recognize that what we call "domestic" or even "reproductive" labor, the labor of creating people and social relations, has always been the most important form of human endeavor in *any* society, and that the creation of wheat, socks, and petrochemicals always merely a means to that end, and that—what's more—most human societies have been perfectly well aware of this. One of the more peculiar features of capitalism is that it is not—that as an ideology, it encourages us to see the production of commodities as the pri-

This is not perhaps the place for a prolonged analysis, but a few notes on what's called "the art world" might seem to be in order. It is a common perception, not untrue, that at least since the '20s the art world has been in a kind of permanent institutionalized crisis. One could even say that what we call "the art world" has become the ongoing management of this crisis.

The crisis of course is about the nature of art. The entire apparatus of the art world—critics, journals, curators, gallery owners, dealers, flashy magazines and the people who leaf through them and argue about them in factories-turned-chichi-cafes in gentrifying neighborhoods…—

could be said to exist to come up with an answer to one single question: what is art? Or, to be more precise, to come up with some answer other than the obvious one, which is "whatever we can convince very rich people to buy."

I am really not trying to be cynical. Actually I think the dilemma to some degree flows from the very nature of politics. One thing the explosion of the avant garde did accomplish was to destroy the boundaries between art and politics, to make clear in fact that art was always, really, a form of politics (or at least that this was always one thing that it was.) As a result the art world has been faced with the same fundamental dilemma as any form of politics: the impossibility of establishing its own legitimacy.

Let me explain what I mean by this.

It is the peculiar feature of political life that within it, behavior that could only otherwise be considered insane is perfectly effective. If you managed to convince everyone on earth that you can breathe under water, it won't make any difference: if you try it, you will still drown. On the other hand, if you could convince everyone in the entire world that you were King of France, then you would actually be the King of France. (In fact, it would probably work just to convince a substantial portion of the French civil service and military.) This is the essence of politics. Politics is that dimension of social life in which things really do become true if

the impulse seems to be to declare that, just as commodity production has exploded the factory walls and come to pervade every aspect of our experience, so has biological reproduction exploded the walls of the home and pervade everything as well—this time, through the state. The result is a kind of sledge-hammer approach that once again, makes it almost impossible to reexamine our original theoretical assumptions.)

the art world as a form of politics

This reluctance to question old-fashioned theoretical assumptions has real consequences on the resulting analysis. Consider Negri's contribution to the conference. He begins by arguing that each change in the development of the productive forces since the 1840s corresponds to a change in the dominant style of high art: the realism of the period 1848–1870 corresponds to one of the concentration of industry and the working class, impressionism, from 1871–1914, marks the period of the "professional worker", that sees the world as to be dissolved and reconstructed, after 1917, abstract art reflects the new abstraction of labor-power with the introduction of scientific management, and so on. The changes in the material infrastructure—of industry—are thus reflected in the ideological superstructure. The resulting analysis is revealing no doubt, even fun if one is into that sort of thing, but it sidesteps the obvious fact that the production of art *is* an industry, and one connected to capital, marketing, and design in any number of (historically shifting) ways. One need not ask who is buying these things, who is funding the institutions, where do artists live, how else are their techniques being employed. By defining art as belonging to the immaterial domain, it's materialities, or even its entanglement in other abstractions (like money) need not be addressed.

mary business of human existence, and the mutual fashioning of human beings as somehow secondary.

Obviously all this is not to say that nothing has changed in recent years. It's not even to say that many of the connections being drawn in the immaterial labor argument are not real and important. Most of these however have been identified, and debated, in feminist literature for some time, and often to much better effect. Donna Haraway for example was already discussing the way that new communication technologies were allowing forms of "home work" to disseminate throughout society in the '80s. To take an obvious example: for most of the twentieth century, capitalist offices have been organized according to a gendered division of labor that mirrors the organization of upper-class households: male executives engage in strategic planning while female secretaries were expected to do much of the day-to-day organizational work, along with almost all of the impression-management, communicative and interpretive labor, mostly over the phone. Gradually these traditionally female functions have become digitized and replaced by computers; this creates a dilemma, though, because the interpretive elements of female labor (figuring out how to ensure no one's ego is bruised, that sort of thing) are precisely those that computers are *least* capable of performing. Hence the renewed importance of what the post-workerists like to refer to as "affective labor." This in turn effects how phone work is reorganized, now, as globalized, but also as largely complementary to software, with interpretive work aimed more at the egos of customers than (now invisible) male bosses. The connections are all there. But it's only by starting from long-term perspectives that one can get any clear idea what's really new here, and this is precisely what the postmodern approach makes impossible.

This last example brings us to my second point, which is that very notion that there is something that can be referred to as "immaterial labor" relies on a remarkably crude, old-fashioned kind of Marxism. Immaterial labor, we are told, is labor that produces

information and culture. In other words it is "immaterial" not because the labor itself is immaterial (how could it be?) but because it *produces* immaterial things. This idea that different sorts of labor can be sorted into more material, and less material categories according to the nature of their product is the basis for the whole conception that societies consist of a "material base" (the production, again, of wheat, socks and petrochemicals) and "ideological superstructure" (the production of music, culture, laws, religion, essays such as this). This is what's allowed generations of Marxists to declare that most of what we call "culture" is really just so much fluff, at best a reflex of the really important stuff going on in fields and foundries.

What all such conceptions ignore what is to my mind probably the single most powerful, and enduring insight of Marxist theory: that the world does not really consist (as capitalists would encourage us to believe) of a collection of discrete objects, that can then be bought and sold, but of actions and processes. This is what makes it possible for rich and powerful people insist that what they do is somehow more abstract, more ethereal, higher and more spiritual, than everybody else. They do so by pointing at the products—poems, prayers, statutes, essays, or pure abstractions like style and taste—rather than the process of making such things, which is always much messier and dirtier than the products themselves. So do such people claim to float above the muck and mire of ordinary profane existence. One would think that the first aim of a materialist approach would be to explode such pretensions—to point out, for instance, that just as the *production* of socks and silverware involves a great deal of thinking and imagining, so is the production of laws, poems and prayers an eminently material process. And indeed most contemporary materialists do, in fact, make this point. By bringing in terms like "immaterial labor", authors like Lazzarato

and Negri, bizarrely, seem to want to turn back the theory clock to somewhere around 1935.[2]

(As a final parenthetical note here, I suspect something very similar is happening with the notion of "the biopolitical", the premise that it is the peculiar quality of modern states that they concern themselves with health, fertility, the regulation of life itself. The premise is extremely dubious: states have been concerned with promulgating health and fertility since the time of Frazerian sacred kings, but the same thing seems to be happening here. The insistence that we are dealing with something entirely, dramatically new becomes a way of preserving extremely old-fashioned habits of thought that might otherwise be thrown into question. After all, one of the typical ways of dismissing the importance of women's work has always been to relegate it to the domain of nature. The process of caring for, educating, nurturing, and generally crafting human beings is reduced to the implicitly biological domain of "reproduction", which is then considered secondary for that very reason. Instead of using new developments to problematize this split,

[2] Lazzarato for example argues that "the old dichotomy between 'mental and manual labor,' or between 'material labor and immaterial labor,' risks failing to grasp the new nature of productive activity, which takes the separation on board and transforms it. The split between conception and execution, between labor and creativity, between author and audience, is simultaneously transcended within the 'labor process' and reimposed as political command within the 'process of valorization'" (Maurizio Lazzarato, "General Intellect: Towards an Inquiry into Immaterial Labour", http://www.geocities.com/immateriallabour/lazzarato-immaterial-labor.html. Note here that (a) Lazzarato implies that the old manual/mental distinction *was* appropriate in earlier periods, and (b) what he describes appears to be for all intents and purposes exactly the kind of dialectical motion of encompassment he elsewhere condemns and rejects as way of understanding history (or anything else): an opposition is "transcended", yet maintained. No doubt Lazzarato would come up with reasons about why what he is arguing is in fact profoundly different and un-dialectical, but for me, this is precisely the aspect of dialectics we might do well to question; a more helpful approach would be to ask how the opposition between manual and mental (etc) is *produced.*