

# **Another Art World**

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September 2019

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## Part 1: Art Communism and Artificial Scarcity

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 realized 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.

In May 2019, just married a week before, we arrived at the Venice Biennale. It wasn't exactly a honeymoon; or if it was, it was more a working honeymoon: we had the idea to make the Biennale the basis of our first joint writing project, though we weren't sure precisely what that project was going to be.

We spent much of our first day in the Arsenale—a nearly thousand-year-old structure reputed to have once held one of the world's first arms factories—trying to get past the guards. Apparently there were levels and degrees of press access, and it was necessary to negotiate our way through a complex system of authorization numbers, bar codes, and color-coded passes, encountering a variety of security personnel with different badges and uniforms and means of communication manning physical and conceptual barriers. Scores of well-dressed participants stood dutifully in line, argued in a dozen languages, shuffled from room to room, recuperated in specially provided cafe bookshops while strategizing over dinner invitations or borrowed ID cards, or assessing the relative importance of the parties they'd be attending later in the day. There was an extraordinary lack of humor about the whole business. People were flustered, stoic, self-righteous, intent; almost no one, in this cathedral of irony, seemed bemused.

The seriousness! It seemed important to establish that something of great consequence was happening here. It was not clear why. Just as there was no obvious reason to proliferate multiple degrees of advanced access in the first place, there was no reason for everyone else to feel so invested in the consequences. It only really made sense if exclusion was itself one of the main objects being produced: it was not just that everyone was playing a game whose rules were shifting and opaque, it seemed important that all players, even the haughtiest oligarch or most consummate broker, stood at least occasionally in danger of being foiled and humiliated. Or at the very least flustered and annoyed.

The art world, for all the importance of its museums, institutes, foundations, university departments, and the like, is still organized 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 neighborhoods 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?

There are two traditional ways to answer to this question and they pull in opposite directions.

1. Contemporary art defines the very pinnacle of a much larger structure of aesthetic value, which ultimately encompasses all forms of meaning-making and cultural expression, and therefore plays a key role in reproducing the larger structure of social relations which ensure drivers, maids, miners, and telemarketers will continue to be told their lives and concerns are uninteresting and unimportant, and relegate the aesthetic forms and cultural expressions that speak to their hearts to second- or third-tier status.
2. While co-opted by the rich, as well as public and private managers and bureaucrats, contemporary art still embodies, or is even the primary embodiment, of alternative conceptions of value that have the potential to explode that larger structure of social relations, and that are either unavailable, or not nearly so readily available, anywhere else.

Obviously both of these things probably can be and are true at the same time. It might even be said that the revolutionary potential of art is a large part of what makes it so effective as a principle of control. Even children of ragpickers, sweatshop labourers, and refugees, after all, are mostly sent to school, where they are exposed to the works of Da Vinci and Picasso, play with paints, learn that art and culture are the highest achievements of humanity and perhaps the most obvious justification for humanity’s continued existence on the planet (despite all the damage we inflict); they are taught to aspire to lead lives where their children can live in comfort so that their children’s children can pursue forms of creative expression. And for the most part, since that is the game everyone is playing, they do aspire to such things. 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 recognize that as things are currently organized, 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 marginalized 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 ’80s, 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 theaters 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 realizing 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 eighties was a prelude to a backlash that left music far more corporatized, individualized, 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.

### **Art Communism**

In a Commune everyone is a creator. Every Man should be an artist, everything can become fine art.

—Osip Brik

Consider the case of Kazimir Malevich, who arrived in Moscow in 1904 from the hinterland of Ukraine to become one of the most influential theorists of twentieth-century art. In his 1920 essay “The Question of Imitative Art” he asserts: “We are moving towards a world where everyone will create ... We must set creativity's path in such a way that all the masses will take part in

the development of every creative thought that appears, without turning it into mechanized production or cliché.”

The new, revolutionary art, he insists, was to be based on creativity as “the human essence ...” “as the aim of life, and as the perfection of oneself.”<sup>1</sup>

For Malevich—and he was hardly alone—artists were not only the prophets of this new world, but they were to become the foundation of it, its model. As we all know, such ideas were largely stifled with the suppression of the avant-garde under Stalin. Though as Tzvetan Todorov and Boris Groys have both recently pointed out, what happened is a little more complicated. The main reason avant-garde painters, designers, and sculptors had to be killed or brought under heel was because the political avant-garde, ultimately adopted a version of the most radically exclusionary form of that exact same tradition, where Stalin himself—much like Mussolini and Hitler—became the individual heroic genius reshaping life itself according to a single aesthetic vision.

Todorov argues that in the twentieth century at least, this is what always happens in revolutionary moments. Artists start to demand not just new rights to create and distribute their artworks; above all they demand to preside over a transformation of social reality and the ways culture reproduces itself. But in the end they invariably fail. To achieve their dreams they are obliged to rely on politicians, who have no intention of sharing power with them; therefore, after a short creative surge, almost always coinciding with an opening of political horizons (Malevich himself published his first essays in a journal called, simply, *Anarchy*), a deep and harsh reaction ensues, and the politicians, inspired to carve out their own aesthetic visions on the flesh and sinews of humanity, end up doing absolutely terrible things.

Conservatives have always insisted that this will inevitably happen—in fact, this is the essential definition of what conservatism is, the assertion that applying anyone’s aesthetic vision to the public sphere must always end in disaster—and in this sense, at least, conservative impulses reign. We are taught to consider figures like Malevich terrifying in their naïveté. But what did his vision of true communism actually consist of? It’s not just one of a future society in which everyone would be free from the struggle for survival (this, just about everyone was anticipating at the time). It was also a vision in which the “pursuit of happiness” would mean that everyone was able to pursue some sort of artistic or scientific project. This of course was founded on the assumption that people had both the capacity and the inclination, even if it just meant puttering about trying to create a perpetual motion device or perfecting a stand-up comedy routine. Malevich’s vision implied that curiosity and a desire for self-expression are essential components of whatever it is we are defining as “humanity”—or perhaps all life (some Russian avant-gardists were also interested in the liberation of cows)—and that therefore freedom is more a matter of removing impediments than fundamentally reshaping human nature. This is why Malevich could argue that the basis of a new artistic world would have to be economic—though like so many other revolutionaries, he was also interested in the creation of a new universal aesthetic language. Malevich himself came from the national outskirts; he was a Pole who grew up in a Ukrainian village, and who never mastered literary Russian or received a “proper” art education. His squares and triangles were a way of transcending all that. In a similar way, the Russian avant-garde project was also educational, designed not to create the “new man” (as the Stalinists later put it) but to include those previously most excluded—the poor and provincials, the inhabitants of

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<sup>1</sup> Kazimir Malevich, “The Question of Imitative Art” (1920). Available here.

the national suburbs—to give them the minimal tools they would need to join in the collective project of creating a new society, in which they would, in turn, create absolutely anything they liked.

Did Malevich’s vision definitively fail? It might seem that things could not have possibly gone more wrong. Millions died in the civil war and under Stalin, and even afterwards, the dream of communism was indefinitely postponed. Still, there was a side of Soviet society—and state socialist society more generally—that we rarely acknowledge. It was almost impossible to get fired from one’s job. As a result it was quite possible to work three or four hours a day, or even two or three days a week, and thus to concentrate one’s energies on other projects, or, for that matter, on not much of anything at all. There was plenty of time to “think and walk,” and since capitalist-style consumer pleasures were not widely available, and cultural resources like libraries, free lectures and lessons, and so forth, were, the Brezhnev years in particular saw whole generations of “watchmen and street-sweepers,” as they were called—people who intentionally found undemanding jobs, managed to live whole lives on the small bits of money guaranteed by the state, and used their free time to write poetry, make pictures, and argue about the meaning of life.

All this obviously was under the watchful eye of the totalitarian state, but one could well argue that this is precisely why those running the state felt it had to remain totalitarian. The revolution had produced a society where almost everyone was in a position to become a thinker or artist, to plot and scheme, to question everything. So they had to be directly suppressed. In the capitalist West, most people simply didn’t have the time to do any of these things.

We are taught to dismiss the revolutionary avant-gardists as romantics. It’s not clear if all of them would have refused the designation. The revolutionary tradition—Marx included—in many ways traces back directly to Romanticism, and while nowadays this is generally seen to be precisely what was wrong with it, it seems to us that the real history is decidedly more complicated.

Let us then proceed step by step to explain why we believe this to be the case.

### **The Confusing Legacy of Romanticism**

Romanticism in general has come into very bad color nowadays; it is seen as silly and possibly dangerous. “Romanticizing” has become a term for sentimental idealization, whether of nature, peasants, noble savages, the poor, or imagined creative geniuses. The political embrace of Romanticism is seen as leading most naturally to some kind of authoritarian nationalism, or at worst, the Third Reich. But the avant-garde tradition is similarly almost entirely rooted in Romanticism.

Part of the problem is that nowadays, few are aware of what early Romantic thinkers actually said—though to be fair, they often didn’t help things much by writing contradictory things in a deliberately obscure and difficult style. Still, certain consistent strains can be unraveled, and they are not what we commonly imagine them to be.

As an example, consider the endless modernist fascination with comparing art produced by what Hal Foster famously labeled “the privileged triad of the primitive, the child, and the insane.” What did these three really seem to have in common? In the twentieth century, the usual assumption was that the collapse of the cultural authority of the Church had left Europeans without a common visual language, and that by studying the similarities between savages, lunatics, and children, it might be possible to recover some kind of pure, pre-social, and therefore universal visual language on which a new one could be built. As we’ve seen, revolutionary avant-gardes

could sometimes take up a version of these ideas as well. But the original Romantic conception was far more radical. It was in fact closely tied to the concept of culture—itsself originally an invention of German Romanticism. The idea that the language, folklore, manners, myths, sensibilities, and even forms of happiness typical of a nation or social group all form a kind of expressive unity, products of some kind of “popular genius,” was rooted in the assumption that everyone was, in a sense, already engaged in artistic expression. In this view of culture, our very perceptions of the world around us are given meaning and emotional color by generations of ancestral creativity. “We see through hearing,” Herder wrote, because the myths and poetry of our childhood define what we actually see when we look at a mountain, forest, or another human being. But the creation of culture is ongoing. As the German poet and philosopher Novalis famously wrote, “Every person is meant to be an artist.” Artistic genius was simply “an exemplification and intensification of what human beings always do.”

The problem, Romantics insisted, was that bourgeois society had created social pressures and expectations so stifling and atrocious that very few make it to adulthood with their humanity and freedom intact. Bourgeois education had the effect of murdering the imagination. What children and unschooled “primitives” were really thought to have in common, then, was simply that they had not (or not yet) been crushed. In a pathological society such as our own, in contrast, those individuals who do somehow manage to preserve that inborn artistic “genius” with which all children begin their lives, do so at tremendous personal cost; they are typically driven half mad by the experience. German Romantic novels, like those of E. T. A. Hoffmann, typically counterpose some half-mad artistic or spiritual loner and a monotonously monstrous set of provincial types—the doctor, mayor, mayor’s wife, and mistress—united against him, since they perceive his very existence as an attack on their petty and hypocritical reality.

True, the early, democratic phase of German Romanticism gradually descended into conservative nationalism. But those core ideas fundamentally reshaped all subsequent thinking about both politics and art.

This is in particular evident in the legacy of the French Revolution. On the face of it, most of the French revolutionaries, with their cult of Reason, might seem about as far as one could get from the tradition of German Romanticism. True, Rousseau embraced some Romantic ideas, but for the most part, the language and sensibilities could hardly be more different. Still, one of the most radical Romantic ideas was simply that, if everyone is born a free and ingenious child, then the lack of freedom and genius, or the spread of stupidity, malice, and hypocrisy in that society can only be the product of social conditions. This was considered shocking at the time. French revolutionaries were often so determined to prove it that they sometimes placed aristocratic children with the families of drunks—just to prove that they would turn out to be drunks themselves.

The notion of the *avant-garde*, however, emerges from the immediate wake of arguments about how that revolution lost its way. (Incidentally, so did modern conservatism, and social science.) Reactionaries argued that the cult of Reason would lead inevitably to the Terror. But so would the cult of Imagination. Attempting to wipe the slate clean and start over would inevitably mean destroying everything that held society together and made life meaningful: community, solidarity, status, authority ... basically all those things which have become the themes of social theory ever since. Those who believed social change was good and inevitable nonetheless took such objections very seriously. The notions of the artistic *avant-gards* and the political vanguard emerged



directly from the resultant debates. Originally, in fact, they were assumed to be exactly the same thing.

Here we are obliged to provide a somewhat brutal summary of a very complicated history, but suffice it to say that the debate in France, typified by arguments between the followers of Count Henri de Saint-Simon and those of his one-time secretary Auguste Comte, largely came down to an argument about how to manage the transition from an agrarian feudal social order, to a commercial and industrial civilization. Medieval lords—so the argument went—might have been harsh and often arbitrarily violent; they might in many ways have been little more than so many bands of thieves. But they had the Church, and the Church was capable of mobilizing structures of beauty and meaning to give everyone a sense of precisely where they stood in the larger social order. This was precisely what they saw as lacking in industrial society. The Church was now useless. But the captains of industry seemed to feel that the material bounty they provided should simply speak for itself. Clearly it didn't. Political chaos and social anomie was thus the direct result of the lack of any new class to fulfill the priestly function. Comteans imagined these to be scientists: hence Comte's eventual creation of the religion of Positivism, in which sociologists would play the role of clerics. Saint-Simon cast about a bit (for a while he focused on engineers) but ultimately settled on artists as the vanguard who would lead the way towards a culture of freedom and equality, one in which the coercive mechanisms, he believed, would ultimately wither away.

For over a century, would-be revolutionary vanguards continued to debate whether they would be more like scientists, or more like artists, while painters and sculptors formed themselves into sects. Revolutionary parties endlessly tried to patch together alliances between the least alienated and most oppressed. The dream of the collapse of the barriers between art and life, which would eventually return us to a society in which Novalis's vision would be realized, was always an inherent part of the revolutionary project. By the twentieth century, many of the best-known avant-garde artists were no longer even producing much in the way of immortal works of art, but instead largely plans on how to share their power and freedom with others. As a result, the supreme twentieth-century avant-garde genre, or at least the most accomplished and original, was not even the collage but the manifesto.

At this point we can return to Russia.

The Russian revolutionary avant-garde was rooted squarely in the tradition we have just described. Its imagined "people of the future" (*Budetlyans*) would not only to be liberated from those unfair and malicious social conditions that stifled their creativity; they would also have the freedom of children. Obviously, no one was so naive as to believe they would live like children in any literal sense, that communism would create a world free from death, betrayal, existential fear, morbid obsession, or unrequited love. Only real children would experience such a paradise. Rather, it would create a world where future people would have the right, duty, and opportunity to reflect on those inevitable, adult, existential problems in startlingly beautiful ways. Communism would be a world no longer divided into mad geniuses and dull, obedient fools—spectators, either uncomprehending or adulatory. Everyone would become both at the same time.

## Part 2: Utopia of Freedom as a Market Value

### The Endless Cycle of Production

The Romantic legacy has by no means disappeared from the contemporary art world—it's just retained only its most elitist elements. We still worship the individual genius, mad, tortured, or otherwise; what has been purged is any explicit belief that we all begin as artists, and could, in a future society in which forms of institutional violence are rooted out, become artists once again. As a result, that very conception of freedom that once drove the various avant-gardes has come to regulate a logic of commoditization—or even more, it has encouraged us to see that logic of commoditization as the definition of freedom itself.

In the previous installment of this essay, we recalled that the Russian revolutionary avant-garde imagined “people of the future” (*Budetlyans*) would not only to be liberated from those unfair and malicious social conditions that stifled their creativity, they would also enjoy a kind of almost childlike freedom. This was a direct invocation of the original Romantic conception, born together with the concept of “culture” itself, one explicitly formulated in reaction to the logic of commoditization.

It would take a great deal of work to unravel how all this turned around, but the key, it seems to us, is to return to Comte and Saint-Simon's focus on industrialism. The Romantic conception of the artist as isolated genius emerged, of course, at roughly the same time as the Industrial Revolution. This was almost certainly no coincidence. As French sociologist Alain Caillé has suggested, the artistic genius might best be conceived as a kind of structural complement to the factory system.

In effect, the older figure of the craftsman or artisan split in two. Consumers were confronted with two different sorts of commodity: on the one hand, an endless outpouring of consumer goods, produced by a faceless mass of industrial workers, about whose individual biographies consumers knew absolutely nothing (often, not even what countries they lived in, languages they spoke, whether they were men, women, or children ...); on the other, unique works of art, about whose producers, the consumer knew absolutely everything, and whose biographies were an intrinsic part of the value of the objects themselves.

But if the heroic figure of the artist is simply the mirror of industrialism, this would certainly help explain why that figure was so appealing to socialists like Saint-Simon, or Marx (who in his student years tried his hand at German Romantic poetry). It does not explain why this figure is still with us. After all, we live in an age when capitalism is more and more organized around the management not of industrial labor but care work, less about the creation than about the sustaining, maintaining, nurturance, education, and repair of people, things, and the natural environment. Even the main loci of class struggle centers on nurses, cleaners, teachers, and care workers of various sorts.

True, artists too less and less resemble industrial workers, and more and more resemble managers. But they are still heroic, highly individualized managers nonetheless—that is, the successful ones (the lesser figures are now relegated largely to the artistic equivalent of care work). And it's telling that, whatever else may change, and however much the Romantic conception of the artist now seems to us trite, silly, and long-since-abandoned; however much discussion for that matter there is about artistic collectives; at a show like the Venice Biennale, or a museum of contemporary art, almost everything is still treated as if it springs from the brain of a specific named

individual. Perhaps one piece in a hundred is an exception. And this is true no matter what the circumstances of a work's actual creation. We may be too delicate nowadays to call these individuals "geniuses." But the entire apparatus of the art world makes no sense unless it's ultimately something very like what used to be called genius—something ineffable, spiritual, creative, and rooted in the individual soul—which creates the value that it celebrates. Even the fascination of the contemporary art scene with promoting works by artists identified with specific disadvantaged groups, Iraqi migrants, queer Latinas, and so forth, is perfectly apiece with this; it might seem to mark a return to something at least a little more like the older idea of collective, cultural creativity, since the artists are being valued as representatives of the creative context from which they emerged, but ultimately, it simply dissolves that horizontal Romanticism back into vertical, heroic Romanticism again, since the value of any given artwork is still seen to derive from the artists entirely individual biography, which quickly takes on a logic and trajectory entirely its own.

(It's easy to see why this would have to be the case. To do otherwise would be to suggest that queer artists, or artists of colour, are somehow less individually responsible for their works than straight white ones. That would be obviously bigoted or racist. The only alternative would be to treat the latter primarily as products of their cultural environment, which is precisely what the art world refuses to do.)

The fact that everyone knows this, and many claim to object, does not make it any less true. Really, it just reveals how difficult this habit is to overcome. Because the overwhelming majority of artworks remain as they have always been, since the Industrial Revolution, seen as making sense only in relation to some unique individual soul. An art world that was *not* organized around the creative vision of named individuals simply would not be an "art world" at all.

Why then the lingering power of industrial categories and industrial-age modes of thought? The ultimate reason, it seems to us, lies in our inability to detach ourselves from the notion of "production."

We still seem obsessed with the notion that work is necessarily a matter of making things; preferably, through a process that is simultaneously mysterious, and at least a little bit unpleasant. Why, for example, do otherwise intelligent human beings so often insist that the "working class" no longer exists in wealthy countries, simply because not many people are employed in factories—as if it were somehow cyborgs or trained monkeys who were driving their taxis, installing their cable, or changing their bedpans when they're sick? Why do we identify work with "production" in the first place, rather than tending to things, maintaining them, or moving them around?

This habit of thought goes far deeper than Romanticism. It is the product of a very particular theological tradition. The Judaeo-Christian-Islamic God created the world out of nothing (He is in fact somewhat unusual in having created the universe out of nothing; most work with existing materials); the human condition, as the story of the Garden of Eden or for that matter Prometheus make clear, is punishment: those who disobeyed the Creator and tried to play God are cursed to continue to do exactly that, to create the means for their own existence, but to do so in a way that is also a form of pain and suffering. Adam is cursed to grow food by the sweat of his brow. Eve is simultaneously told that God will multiply her pains "in labor"—that is, in giving birth.

We might consider this analogy for a moment. The real process of "producing" children (if you really want to use that word) involves not just an act of sex and nine months of pregnancy, but a web of social relations involving years of nurture, support, education ... Yet here that entire process disappears, collapsed into the one moment when a baby seems (especially to male onlookers)

to just appear, fully formed, through a mysterious but painful process out of nowhere—much like the universe. This is the very paradigm of “production,” a word which literally means “to bring forth” or even “push out.” The factory was always conceived as the ultimate black box, a mysterious place of pain and suffering, where steel, saucers, or microchips somehow pop out fully formed through a process we’ll never really know and would rather prefer not to have to think about. But so, in the classical conception, is the artist’s brain.

In this light, it only makes sense that both the factory worker and the artistic genius must suffer. They simply suffer in opposite (yet complementary) ways. The factory worker suffers because he’s alienated from his work, it means nothing to him, and he has no control over it; the artist, because she’s hopelessly entangled in it and will never be able to break free.

Obviously, with the decline of the importance of factory labor, and the predominance of finance capital, the notion that work is primarily a matter of producing things (instead of cleaning, moving, maintaining, nurturing, fixing, transforming, or caring for them) becomes ever more difficult to maintain. But in this context, the artist actually plays an increasingly strategic role. Art is still conceived as a factory of endless productivity, and art is still seen as somehow popping, through a painful yet mysterious process, directly from the artist’s brain. And with the art world sitting as it does at the peak of the “creative industries,” all this works to subtly suggest that the administrators and bureaucrats who increasingly make it up really are somehow “producing” something after all—or, something other than the various social tissues of the hierarchical structures of the art world itself.

## **The Art World In and Out**

Each exhibition, each new biennial or Documenta, strives (and inevitably claims) to be an historic event. Historical events are—by one definition at least (the one we like)—precisely those events that could not have been predicted before they happened. Every artistic event thus sets out to surprise its audience. Something must be formally new, something must be included that was not previously considered to fit in the category of “contemporary art,” or even better, that was not considered to be an art at all. It’s considered normal, nowadays, for exhibitions to include anything from ethnographic objects and folk art to the description of social practices or items of design. The art world constantly tests and waives its boundaries.

To some degree this is what the art world has actually become: the constant testing and overcoming of its own boundaries. As a result it always *appears* to be moving in the direction foreseen by past avant-gardes, bursting its own bubble in order to ultimately encompass everything. But can it really succeed in blowing itself up? Is it even really trying? When a few years ago someone asked Boris Groys whether the art world, always in crisis, was really on the verge of self-destruction, Groys answered: “I do not see any signs of collapse. Worldwide, the industrial museum complex is growing. The pace of cultural tourism is increasing, new biennials and exhibitions are opening everywhere on a weekly basis. The recent addition of China alone has drastically increased the size of the art world.”

Much of what is called the art world consists of an endless speculation on the rules, which are always in flux and under negotiation. No one claims to be responsible for them, everyone claims they are just trying to figure them out. It becomes all the more complicated because exposing, challenging, or breaking the rules is now the main substance of art itself.

This game of making a spectacular show of violating the rules, so as to create even more highly paid work for those who recalibrate, redistribute, and reevaluate them, is hardly limited to the art world, incidentally. Increasingly, it is the basic substance of politics itself. Consider Brexit. While presented as an outburst of popular rage, of burn-it-all-down revulsion against administrative elites, the class of people who are going to benefit the most from Brexit will obviously be lawyers, who will now have untold thousands of thousand-pound-an-hour work thrown at them reevaluating pretty much every contractual agreement the UK has entered into for the last forty-odd years. In many ways it stands as a parable for our times.

Still, there are always meta-rules, if we can call them that: rules about what sort of rules can and can't be broken. Perhaps the best way to determine these is to determine what's clearly an invalid move. It's commonplace to hear, for example, that there's nothing, nowadays, that cannot be turned into a work of art—if only because the very act of arguing about whether or not something is art will itself tend to constitute it as such. But this isn't really true. Some things can't be turned into works of art. It is, as we've learned from the Venice Biennale, possible to dredge of a ship in which refugees have drowned in the Mediterranean and place it on display, and some will agree that this is an artistic gesture. But the refugees themselves, or the ocean in which they drowned, are quite another matter.

There are always limits.

This is why we believe the image of the individual creative genius is so important. Deny it though we might, it continues to play a role in regulating the rules of the game. To put it another way: the continued embrace of one half of the Romantic ideal is premised on the absolute exclusion of the other one. If there's one absolute rule, one red line that cannot be crossed, it is that *everyone* cannot be an artist. The kind of value art creates must, necessarily, be based on exclusion. To actually realize the vision of Novalis (or for that matter Osip Brik, or even Joseph Beuys) would mean to dissolve away the entire structure which makes “the art world” what it is, because it would destroy the entire mechanism through which it creates value.

This is not just because any market must, as we note, operate on a principle of scarcity, and some sort of conception of spiritual genius seems the only way to justify the levels of scarcity that a market pumped quite so full of the profits of financialized derivatives requires. The art world has, since the Industrial Revolution, always been based on the idea that “real art” is priceless and rare; the way the avant-garde challenge to this principle has been absorbed and recuperated has been to add to this that its definition is also constantly shifting and unstable. But this situation is in fact altogether favorable to the current players of the art market in the same way that market volatility is favorable to bond traders: the rapidly changing values of art objects, the discovery of the new names of artists allow for ever-new opportunities for profit, and especially for the insider traders who have some advance knowledge of how the rules are about to change (in many cases, because they are involved in changing them themselves). This is what the work of gallerists and curators is basically about. The price spikes, the conceptual revolutions, the new discoveries, the constant gladiatorial clashes between artists, galleries, curators, critics—all combine to propose a subtle argument: that the characteristic logic of financial markets, the combination of creative destruction, self-marketing, and speculation, *is* freedom, indeed, freedom on the most refined spiritual level. After all, it is nothing if not exhilarating. It feels like a game where anything goes. But so, often, does the financialized peaks of the business world; and just as in the business world, all this is only possible against the unstated background of that which absolutely cannot be challenged, which are ultimately, structures of exclusion.

## **We Don't Wish to End Here, However (or, Art Communism II)**

Our conclusions might seem bleak. Art remains inseparable from a Romantic notion of freedom; but the pursuit of the individual version of Romantic freedom seems to lead inexorably to validating the logic of finance capital, just as the pursuit of the collective, democratic version of Romantic freedom, in which art is free to all, leads—if Tzvetan Todorov and company are to be believed—inexorably to the gulag.

But we don't think things are really as bad as all that.

In fact, since the logic of finance capital is not, ultimately, particularly inspiring, it only operates because the lure of communism, as the ultimate realization of Novalis's dream of undoing the violence that destroys our sense of play, beauty, and creation, continues to inform it. Here we have to take issue with Todorov's otherwise brilliant essay "Avant-Gardes & Totalitarianism," where he warned that the Romantic element in the avant-garde always turned out to open the way to totalitarianism. Citing numerous quotes from Stalin, Hitler, and Mussolini, Todorov argues that twentieth-century dictators typically enacted the visions of avant-garde artists, that of radically transforming our common reality in accordance with some master plan. If "poetry could no longer be written after Auschwitz," as Theodor Adorno so famously put it, it was only because poetry was complicit in the crime.

Perhaps it's understandable then that the second half of the twentieth century came to be defined by a determination to entirely eliminate poetry from politics, to turn over power first to bland technocrats, then to even blander managers whose vision, insofar as they had one, was precisely not to have one. But the financial crisis of 2008, and particularly the looming crisis of climate change, which threatens to kill far more humans than all the wars of the twentieth century combined, has demonstrated that the rule of managers and technocrats is likely even more dangerous still.

The themes of the last Venice Biennale were devoted precisely to this sense of impending catastrophe. The two most memorable pieces were a sunken refugee ship, and the small Lithuanian Pavilion, a modestly sung ode to the end of the world. All reveled in the impossibility of establishing a redemptive narrative. What, after all, were we, as spectators, being offered as answers? Or even in the way of participation in the debate? Nothing but endless queues and parties, benefits, tournaments, the prospect of ownership of some fragment of our impending doom.

And in this case, the analysis of expert qualifications of artists and curators, or assessments of the level of complexity and subtlety of any specific work, is quite a meaningless exercise.

We would like to imagine the possibility of a completely different model of the art world. It's sometimes remarked that even if a modest proportion of the mathematicians and software engineers currently engaged in designing technology for high-speed trading were to shift to working on trying to design alternatives to capital, we'd easily have at least the outlines of a dozen viable economic systems laid out in no time. What if we were to apply the same creativity we do to inventing new works of art, or for that matter theories about the nature of art, to imagining different ways the institutional structure itself could be organized? What would art communism actually be like?

We will dedicate the next chapters of our essay to these thoughts.

## Part 3: Policing and Symbolic Order

The earth is a museum of humanity, traveling through the universe.  
—Nikolai Fyodorov

In the first two parts of this essay, we analyzed the contemporary art world less in terms of how it works than in terms of what it does, in what is at stake in its existence. One of the most powerful and insidious roles the art world (at least as it is currently organized) plays is in the creation and maintenance of a larger symbolic order hierarchizing what are called “the arts,” creating a kind of artificial scarcity that subordinates most forms of cultural creativity. In doing so, the art world has powerful effects on many who are not even aware of its existence.

Other ways of organizing human creativity are possible. In analyzing the artificial production of scarcity, the strategic adoption of only half of the Romantic conception of creativity—or what the Romantics themselves called “genius”—we also wanted to identify exactly what made it possible for the art world to play this role, so as to imagine a different one. What if we spent half the creativity we spend on producing new works of art on reimagining the institutional structure of the art world itself? We set out to examine the matter historically, and cross-culturally, and also take inspiration from our own daydreams and nightmares, to produce a Borges-like catalogue of possible art worlds, based on different principles of value:

- What if there were an art world with the explicit aim of producing gossip?
- What if there were an art world in which art is an extremely sophisticated form of personal insult directed at those the artist hates (such as other artists)?
- What if there were an art world in which humans were not allowed to participate, but only observe the interactions of animals and machines?
- What if there were an art world in which works are meant to express feelings of shame and remorse (art as apology)?
- What if the art world were organized by the government to design previously unimaginable forms of sin, or just beautiful pornography, then sell carnal indulgences provided by the government to absolve consumers?

This was a great deal of fun, and could easily have grown to hundreds, even thousands of possible other art worlds. But after the global pandemic and the veritable mass uprisings that followed, it seemed a trifle flippant. We decided to reconsider our approach.

*Inter anna silent Musae*—the Muses all fall silent when cannons talk. But perhaps this is true of only a certain kind of muse. We came to realize that the ideas we were developing, however imaginative, were ultimately reformist. Perhaps, as Black Lives Matter has argued so cogently of the police and prison-industrial complex, the art world can’t be reformed. What would it mean to take an abolitionist position?

### On Monuments and the Rules of Engagement

Before the global pandemic, much of the world was already in a state of revolt. 2019 had already seen (mostly nonviolent) insurrections everywhere from Haiti to Hong Kong to Lebanon to Réunion, although these were largely isolated, with very little communication between them, or even much mutual awareness of the others’ existence. In the wake of the pandemic, and the killing of George Floyd, the global uprising of spring and summer 2020 found a common inspiration

in Black Lives Matter in the United States, and a common language as a generalized rebellion against the police state in many local manifestations.

By summer 2020, at least two shared themes in this global movement had emerged. The first is a process of mutual communication, starting from a shared desire to dismantle existing structures of state violence in solidarity with the population that bore the brunt of it (Romany in Serbia, migrants in Italy, for instance), but also to simultaneously begin to imagine the kind of institutions that would have to be created in their stead. The second is the destruction of monuments. There have been some incidents of looting, but significantly, they are not celebrated by protestors, and are often assumed to have been intentionally staged by police. The attacks on monuments, even if destructive, are completely unrelated to looting. Monuments, like museums—or more precisely, along with museums—are mechanisms for the production and dissemination of public meaning. It would seem that they are the machinery being at least temporarily suspended and systematically thrown into question with public gatherings in so many towns and cities, not only in the US.

One might put it this way: those who broke out of lockdown directly into mass mobilization moved directly to take over the means of production of the symbolic order, expressed above all in the reorganization of (violent and cruel) public space through the destruction and alteration of monuments. Some people bemoan the destruction of monuments as an attack on history (though almost no one, interestingly, has seen it as an attack on art). Some distinguish between good and bad monuments. *We, however, take the side of Nicholas Mirzoeff, who wrote a few years ago that “all monuments must fall.”*

What is a monument anyway? After actions like N30 in Seattle against the WTO in 1999, the principal images that seemed to remain in public memory were: 1) anarchists dressed in black smashing Starbucks windows; and 2) colorful giant papier-mâché puppets<sup>2</sup>.

But why, between the two, did the police seem to hate the puppets more? The police incessantly tried in subsequent actions to arrest the puppets, destroy the puppets, and organize preemptive strikes against the places where the puppets were being made. It got to the point where puppets had to be made in hiding, and the Black Bloc often had to organize its deployment largely to protect the puppets and their accompanying “carnival bloc” of musicians, clowns, belly dancers, stilt walkers, and so forth.

Why did the police object so violently to the “carnival bloc?” Part of the reason was that using art was seen as cheating. The Black Blocs were effectively combatants in a war. Mass actions involved classic military-style maneuvers aimed at ambushing, outflanking, surrounding, or breaking through the lines of adversaries. As in any war, there were limits on what weapons and tactics could be deployed, and though these limits varied from country to country, in general the police weren’t allowed to use deadly force, and the other side couldn’t use anything likely to cause serious physical harm. It is important to emphasize that these rules always exist—even in what seems like total war, such as the Russian front in World War II, where neither side used poison gas or tried to assassinate the other’s leader.

But how are those rules negotiated? This takes place at the level of symbolic warfare, and the police, at least, feel strongly that the creation of powerful imagery to sway the public—and regulate who can use what sort of force in what circumstances—should be carried out through the

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<sup>2</sup> See David Graeber, “The New Anarchists,” *New Left Review*, no. 13 (January–February 2002): 61–73. Available here.



media. Certainly, police representatives did this assiduously, almost invariably telling outrageous lies about “protestor violence” to justify more extreme repressive measures. From the perspective of the police, however, the Black Bloc appearing to organize a military-style confrontation, and then “defusing” or “deescalating” the situation by sending in puppets and clowns, was obviously cheating. The anarchists were demanding the right to change the rules of engagement on the field of battle. Puppets became the symbol for this demand.

But why specifically puppets? Here a further level of analysis is required. Black Bloc communiqués spoke of “breaking the spell”—we are surrounded, they said, by glittering palaces of consumerism, which seem like permanent monuments to a corrupt and fallen human nature. Yet with a simple monkey wrench, the whole facade can dissolve away into shards of glass. At the same time, giant puppets—which could represent anything from gods and dragons to caricatures of politicians and corporate bureaucrats—were simultaneously divine and ridiculous. These were objects that took days, even weeks to assemble, and were put together collectively by very large numbers of people. They were gigantic but fragile, and after a day’s use, almost invariably crumbled away. In other words, they mocked the very idea of a monument. They represented the permanent power to bring the monumental into being as something very large that dominates public space, and by doing so seems to make real an abstraction. Such a constant kaleidoscope of possible monuments evoked the sacred in a form so powerful that it effectively had to be made silly. Otherwise, its power would be too terrifying.

In their self-satire, the giant puppets were also the most honest of monuments, because any monument that proclaims the eternity of what it represents—a sculpture, a mausoleum, a stolen Egyptian obelisk—is by definition a fraud. The things they represent are not really eternal. If they were, there would be no need to raise a monument. No one ever built a monument to the principle of gravity, or winter, or the sea. (Indeed, one could even argue that there is a slight danger involved in creating a monument to something like “Justice” or the nation, because by doing so one is subtly suggesting it may well *not* be eternal.)

Recent images of masked, heavily armed police surrounding the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC are not, perhaps, as ironic as they might seem. Police are, essentially, the guardians of the very principle of monumentality—the ability to turn control over violence into truth. Even the language police use to describe what they do (force, law, power) suggests that the ability to threaten others with sticks and guns, lock them in cages, or to place one’s knee on their neck until they stop breathing, should be considered analogous to the principles that govern the universe.

### **On Politics, Policy, Politeness, and Police**

During the uprisings, art institutions largely played a (sometimes surprisingly) supportive role, providing food and shelter for those fleeing or recovering from encounters with police, for example. So it might seem ungracious to take an abolitionist position in relation to the art world. We should make clear that we do not intend this as a moral critique of individuals or individual complicity. In the same way that shifting the focus from “racism” (which can easily be turned into a moral language of endless self-examination, at the expense of action) to opposing “white supremacy” (as a set of institutional structures producing a concrete outcome that needs to be reversed, through action), we want to shift our own question “is another art world possible?” to focus on the very existence of “the art world” as an institutional power hierarchizing symbolic relations that extend far beyond its own reach. When protestors say, “The police are beyond

reform; they must be defunded and dismantled,” they are obviously not rejecting the idea of public safety. On the contrary, they are insisting that police institutions as they currently exist are detrimental to public safety, and for reasons running too deep for any reform to alleviate; that we have to understand what cops actually do, figure out which elements (if any) are actually desirable, and develop *other* ways, and other institutions, to do it. It’s the same with the art world as an institution that restricts the distribution of sacred or symbolic meaning, the making real of abstractions.

But what do police actually do? In order to understand this, we need to understand the history of how police came into existence, as well as how they came to take the form—and crucially, the symbolic role—they have today. This history is not what we are taught to expect. The idea of something called “the state” only really came into currency in the seventeenth century, and modern European states were always police states in some sense, in that the creation of what were called police functions was a key part of extending sovereign authority to the entire population. But there is also a reason for “politics,” “policy,” and “police” (and for that matter, “politeness”) all sharing the same root. Police at their inception had almost nothing to do with public safety, let alone “fighting crime” (which was still handled by constables and the local watch); police were there to enforce regulations, licensing, guaranteeing the food supply to cities to prevent riots, monitoring rootless populations, and, crucially, too, acting as spies. (Antoine de Sartine, Louis XV’s chief of police, boasted that if there were three men talking on the street, one of them almost certainly worked for him.) Modern policing was born in the early nineteenth century in England, in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. The new, uniformed police, while now advertising themselves as crime fighters, mainly had the dual function of protecting the rich and “prevention”—which largely meant forcing able-bodied vagrants into respectable labor.

Politicians back then were often refreshingly honest about their motives. Many were quite explicit that they had no interest in eliminating poverty: Patrick Colquhoun, the first great theorist of British policing, wrote that poverty was necessary to drive people to industry, and industry was necessary to produce wealth (just not for the poor). They were concerned with that section of the poor who were *not* producing wealth, or threatening to take that wealth away, whether by pickpocketing or insurrection. In this sense, police were always political. In the US, for instance, police in the southern states were largely commissioned to enforce the segregation of former slaves, while in northern cities, one important motive for creating professional police forces was fear that the army would prove unreliable if called out against strikers during industrial disputes.

In this sense, police were, from the very beginning, concerned with social welfare, but of an intentionally limited kind. What we have come to know as the welfare state, in contrast, is quite different in its origins. It is not derived from the apparatus of state at all: from Sweden to Brazil, everything from social insurance to kindergartens to public libraries were originally the product of social movements: labor unions, neighborhood groups, bunds, political parties, and so forth. The state merely coopted them, and insisted they be run by top-down bureaucracies. For a while—mainly when capitalist states were still faced with the threat of the socialist bloc—this compromise did produce widespread prosperity. But what the state seizes the state can also lock away. As a result, since the 1970s and ’80s, as revolutionary threats faded, the power of unions was broken, community groups began to be broken up, and the welfare state began to be dismantled, the police began increasingly to take over the provision of social services once again.

Just like in the 1820s, the transformation was mediated by a symbolic offensive claiming the real role of police was “fighting crime”—it’s hard to remember that, prior to the 1970s, there were almost no movies, in America or perhaps anywhere in the world, where policemen were the heroes. Suddenly heroic, “maverick” cops were on screens everywhere, just as actual cops, “security professionals,” surveillance systems, and the like began appearing in places where they would once have been unheard of: schools, hospitals, beaches, playgrounds. All the while, the actual function of police remained much as it had been in the 1600s: police sociologists have long noted that real cops spend perhaps 6–11 percent of their time on matters that have anything to do with “crime,” much less violent crime; the overwhelming majority of their time and energy is spent enforcing the endless municipal regulations on who can drink, walk, sell, smoke, eat, drive what, where, and under what conditions. Police are still bureaucrats with weapons, bringing the possibility of violence, even death, into situations where it would never otherwise exist (for instance, the sale of unlicensed cigarettes). The main difference is that, as capitalism has financialized itself during this same period, police have added an additional administrative function: revenue collection. Many city governments are entirely dependent on money coming in from police enforcement of fines in order to balance their books and pay their creditors. Just as police in the industrial age were deployed to guarantee the continued existence of (useful) poverty, in a financial age they ensure that not just minority or marginal populations, but increasingly, anyone who is not a creditor, is treated as a criminal.

Clearly none of this has much, if anything, to do with public safety. In fact, at this point, the yearly death rate in America from mass shootings alone is parallel to what one would expect in a country undergoing a minor civil war. As abolitionists point out, Americans would be far safer if they eliminated police entirely, returned to largely self-organized social services, stopped employing trained killers to inform them of a broken tail light, and created a completely different organization to deal with violent crime.

### **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 organized 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 color, and so forth does little to undercut this); to be recognized 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 civilization, 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 sacralize it. It's important to underline the connection between property and the sacred. To sacralize 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 organization or reorganization 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, cataloging, and reorganizing the museum's space, they draw a line between "museum"

quality and “non-museum” quality objects. But there is no ultimate contradiction between commoditized 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 sacralized—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?

### **Ways Out?**

The Russian parallel to the storming of the Bastille was of course the storming of the Winter Palace in Saint Petersburg, and the Winter Palace was itself duly converted into a national museum, the Hermitage. The Hermitage Museum survived the collapse of the Soviet Union and continues to this day to operate almost exactly as it had under Stalin and Brezhnev. This in itself might be worth a moment’s reflection, since it suggests that property relations, and therefore conceptions of the sacred, have changed a lot less than we imagined between Soviet state capitalism, Yeltsin’s wild liberalism, and the current right-wing nationalist regime. (Those running the Hermitage are, in fact, rather proud of this. They see it as proof that they represent a kind of beacon of eternity.)

There is a great deal of discussion today about the possibility of removing public monuments and relegating them to museums, but at the same time, and in a rather contradictory fashion, of turning museums themselves into places of care, love, and social transformation. There is a general sense that the art world needs to get on board with the movement against the police state, perhaps even that art could be one means of restoring the social fabric torn apart by the financialization and security culture that has spread from the United States to almost everywhere. Some seek to explore the connections between art, money, and securitization itself.

Many argue that we should stop the movement of hundreds of thousands of art tourists around the globe, stop building pointless new offices, stop hosting so many exclusive presentations and dinners that serve no purpose other than self-celebration, and imagine how art could be one of many forms of care that contributes to the reproduction of human life (education, medicine, safety, different forms of knowledge, etc.). How else could it be possible for everyone to cultivate local artistic communities as ends in themselves? These are sensible proposals, but they lack the coherence and urgency of the demands being made to defund or abolish the police. What would any of this actually mean in practice? As a thought experiment, if we were to storm the Louvre or Hermitage again, what would we do with it? Anything? It’s also possible that palaces simply don’t lend themselves to democratic purposes.

Perhaps there is more inspiration to be found in another revolutionary artistic institution—or, better said, revolutionary artistic infrastructure—created in Russia in the beginning of the

twentieth century, which could be said to have entirely different implications than the Hermitage. Unlike Soviet museums, it only existed as a state-recognized institution for a few years, from 1917 to 1920, before being formally dismantled. Despite this, the infrastructure was so well-founded that it also, in a certain sense, survives to this day. It was the brainchild of Alexander Bogdanov, an immensely popular revolutionary who, despite being expelled from the Communist Party well before 1917, was briefly given free rein to enact his vision of art communism: Proletkult.

Proletkult aimed quite explicitly to realize Novalis's dream that everyone should be an artist. It aimed to dismantle the infrastructure for the creation of heroic, monumental figures to allow for direct, unmediated relations between producers, and to redirect social investment towards what had previously been dismissed as "amateurs," essentially reversing the values claiming that art should be anything like a job. Part of the aim, too, was to reimagine the very notions of "museum" and "archive" nonhierarchically.

There has been a kind of rediscovery of Proletkult in artistic, activist, and academic circles of late. This is perhaps unsurprising, considering that what Bogdanov and his allies were trying to accomplish, on the artistic level, is remarkably similar to the attempt to create alternative institutions currently being put forward by opponents of the police state. It may be surprising that it took so long. After all, revolutionaries have been arguing for over a century now about the Soviet grassroots popular assemblies and the experiments in worker self-management that flourished around the same time, and their ultimate suppression by the "Soviet" regime. Proletkult was in its origin simply the cultural manifestation of the same democratic movement. It was also more massive in its scale than the organization of popular assemblies and self-managed industries, and more lasting in its effects. To give a sense of its size: in 1920, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union had roughly 150,000 members. Proletkult had 400,000, and was growing when the CPSU was actually shrinking during the period of civil war. During the period of 1917 to 1920—when the movement was self-organized—artistic production concentrated above all on theater (since theater brought together visual art, design, poetry, and music—effectively all branches of art in a single collective product), and participation was so widespread that even a relatively small city might have dozens of different theatrical collectives operating at a given time. There was also, critically, an active educational component to the movement, which attempted to collapse the boundaries between academia, popular education, science, and the arts.

Long before the creation of Wikipedia, Bogdanov and his comrades also imagined and began to build a new infrastructure for the reproduction of knowledge, one that aimed to destroy the traditional hierarchies between students and teachers, and supplant them with horizontal networks in which anyone could find themselves in every role in a different situation: readers become writers, spectators become artists, producers, consumers, and so on. For Bogdanov, at least, the realization of a world where everyone could become an artist *was* communism. This destruction of hierarchies was precisely the end that the Revolution aimed to achieve.

The participatory nature of the project clashed directly with both the hierarchy of arts as it existed at the time, and the new Bolshevik project of creating an efficient police state. In fact, Lenin's reaction to Proletkult lays bare the connection between the two. In 1920, Lenin imposed state control over the project, insisting that the proletariat had a right to be "enriched" by the highest forms of what he called "classical culture"—the reimposition of the values of the Hermitage, and of museums in general, corresponded exactly to the transfer of power to the secret police (large statues of Lenin were to begin going up slightly later). Popular theater and

education did continue, but under the control of Lunacharsky's Ministry of Culture it was either censored or reduced to propaganda.

Meanwhile, as avant-garde art was removed from existing museums (and many of the artists were shot), in almost every city of the Soviet Union a world heritage museum (a local version of the Hermitage) sprang up, and alongside it a museum of contemporary Soviet art and a deeply conservative educational system designed to produce a body of technically proficient cultural specialists, whether socialist-realist painters or ballerinas. One might say that the creation of bottom-up social welfare and cultural institutions, and their gradual replacement by police functions, which took almost a century to accomplish elsewhere, took place over the course of about three years in the Soviet Union.

There is still a great deal of debate over the long-term significance of Proletkult. What's really striking today is how Proletkult, despite its focus on art, offers remarkable parallels with some of the proposals for the creation of a new infrastructure to replace our current police state. Remember here that "police" originally refers to the imposition of "policy," of centralized initiatives (think of all those declarations of war—on crime, drugs, terror, and so forth). The emphasis in Proletkult was the direct inverse:

- Artistic priorities were not imposed by any "center," but responded to the specific needs of people—education, health, equality, poverty, and existing networks.
- All artistic institutions were to be local, decentralized, human-controlled, created by and existing for real people as they actually exist (not some utopian ideal of how they should exist) in a specific neighborhood of the city, or even a specific street, and capable of being changed by them.
- Localism was combined with internationalism through immediate horizontal networks of artistic solidarity around the world. There was no talk of creating a national culture, but rather, an art of the oppressed, or a proletarian culture.

Remarkably, much of this is still in place in Russia. While Proletkult as a self-organized movement ceased to exist after Lenin had Bogdanov removed and placed the institutions under the control of the Party's Central Committee, the infrastructure itself was not disbanded. Even now, thirty years after the destruction and privatization following Perestroika in all Eastern Bloc countries in the 1990s, almost every small town in Russia and much of the former Eastern Bloc still has a so-called "House of Culture" where anyone can spend their free time on anything from Go clubs to drawing and singing lessons, from puppet theater to painting classes. The professionalization of the arts and reimposition of hierarchies simply meant that the network of Houses of Culture were reduced to "amateur" status, with participants expected to act as unpaid propagandists for the Party, creating theatrical productions celebrating increased productivity, for example.

The teachers at the Houses of Culture were paid, though not much, and their symbolic capital was minimal enough for them to attract little attention, which allowed the remains of Proletkult to become a primary enclave for Soviet dissidents, or simply those seeking alternatives to official culture. Yoga, for example, was formally forbidden in the USSR, but underground yoga teachers might work there, even if they were being paid to teach something else. A place equidistant from both fame and influence, the Houses of Culture were also about as far as one could get from police control. Meanwhile, "professional" institutions like universities, artist unions, academies, and so on became gateways to privilege, "feeding troughs" for an elite with access to exclusive hospitals and resorts. Unsurprisingly, recruitment soon came to be based less on talent, and certainly creativity, than on conformity and connections. As a result, a huge number of real

Soviet intellectuals actually emerged from the remains of Proletkult, from chess players to poets to Pavel Filonov's artistic pupils to mathematicians like Grigori Perelman (originally a participant in the mathematics circle at the Leningrad Palace of Pioneers). *Like well-written computer code or beautiful urban planning*, Proletkult *turned out to be so tightly sewn into the social body that it is almost impossible to unravel it.*

We write this at a moment when many expect governments to soon begin pouring money into the arts, perhaps as part of a Green New Deal similar to what the Roosevelt administration did as part of the original New Deal in the 1930s. This may or may not happen, but if the money is directed through the existing infrastructure of the art world, it will surely reproduce a similar professionalized elite. What if we were to redirect these funds elsewhere, along with the billion dollars the New York City Council shifted from the NYPD, and the hundreds of millions of dollars circulating in offshore and private investments and art world coffers?

What if we were to create a House of Culture in every district, every street, along with a Palace of Children, a Palace of Pensioners, a Palace of Refugees, but according to the original, self-organized plan? What if we didn't judge what anyone did with the resources, and simply provided the means for anyone wishing to participate in cultural activities to sustain themselves and find others interested in the same projects—to gossip, insult each other, apologize, sell indulgences, or create a waterpark or miniature golf course out of former monuments? What if we didn't organize biennials with tiered admissions, but monthly carnivals with costumes and dances in every district and every city, as we see erupting seemingly spontaneously in any "occupation" from Zuccotti Park to Seattle, from Christiania to Rojava? Except this time, without all the cops.

These are just opening salvos. In this essay, we want to suggest that what is usually presented as a decline in social welfare spending, and consequent greater reliance on the police, is actually a clash between two entirely different concepts of social welfare. On the one hand, there is what might be termed the police model of social welfare, which uses the threat of violence to maintain a regime of artificial scarcity, yet also carefully regulates and ameliorates its worst effects to maintain social order. At one time this threat of violence was largely organized around disciplining labor, but today it has shifted to becoming itself the principle means for the extraction of profits, which are increasingly derived from rents—capitalism sustaining itself not so much by selling us cars as distributing parking tickets and traffic tickets. But the forms of the sacred appropriate to the police order remain the same: public monuments, museums, and the art world.

On the other hand, there are the self-organized forms of social welfare that are effectively extensions of communal care, conviviality, or the expectation of help from a neighbor in an emergency. Essentially, this is the form of communism that always exists in any community worthy of the name, if only in our lack of desire to hurt each other and the fact that most pleasures aren't very pleasurable unless they're shared. This communal notion of social welfare invariably, as Kurdish activists point out, generates its own notion of security and self-defense.

The question that remains unanswered is: What precisely are the forms of the sacred appropriate to the communal notion of social welfare? We have no intention of ending with ringing declarations. Perhaps we are just offering a challenge to respond to this question. We can't help recalling that Alexander Bogdanov himself thought he had a solution. He was not only the founder of Proletkult, but of the Soviet Institute for Hematology, which was convinced that transfusing blood within communities could extend human life indefinitely. In this was the Russian cosmist belief that what is ultimately sacred is human life itself. "The earth," according to



Nikolai Fyodorov, “is a museum of humanity,” with the emphasis on “humanity” more than “museum.” Everyone deserves the same care and attention that we direct towards monuments and masterpieces, and should for all eternity.

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September 2019

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