

The Politics of the Political Catalogue Essay

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'The Politics of the Political Catalogue Essay', in *Villa Lituanica: Nomeda & Gediminas Urbonas*, Lithuanian Pavilion, 52nd International Art Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia, Sternberg Press, Berlin 2008, pp. 68-78.

There is little mystery to the function of the conventional catalogue essay: it bolsters the reputation of artists in a competitive market of discourse, and does so with a mix of rhetorical praise and references to the sources and significance of the works, whether they are found in deep theory or in lighter brushes with popular culture. The content of such essays can be illuminating when read as symptoms, for they reveal the current predilections of the art world, and the grounds on which an artist's work is defended can say much about how that practice is inserted into the art world, about its novelties and adherence to convention; but on the level of sustained intellectual engagement, how seriously should we take the catalogue essay? They are, after all, brief and occasional pieces, which allow of no slow, methodical unfolding of theory or of empirical accounts. How seriously, too, should we take the art-world switch from one quasi-mystical version of the plenitude of the human spirit (Deleuze) to another (Badiou), given that the associations made in these engines of publicity tend to be loose and arbitrary, and that the changes are driven by fashion? At its best, and viewed generously, the catalogue essay may be thought of as a form of Adornian 'immanent critique' in which a close and intense engagement with the material of the work yields an empirical view saturated with theory; more typical is the spectacle of a magpie collation of nods in the direction of weighty theoretical ideas that are supposed to elevate the art. Freud, Lacan, Kristeva; Bataille, Deleuze, Butler—are invoked in this setting as mere incantations.

Of course, the type of incantation has changed lately, switching from the dominance of various forms of post-Nietzschean mysticism that was used to sanction spectacular displays of subjective indulgence to a general urge to the 'political', which supports a broad diversity of documentary, relational aesthetic and engaged work. The art world turn to the political, it should not be forgotten, followed a prolonged shrinking from any taint of politics that did not merely assure the viewer of its own futility, and which, with little reserve, embraced the array of postmodern termini, especially the end of history. Again, there is little mystery to the turn: the spectacular events of September 11, and the war of images that followed was bound to strike the world of visual art, and now one can step into rich, polished commercial galleries to ponder buying photographs of dead Iraqis built into installations. Yet despite this shift, the basic function of the catalogue essay is unchanged, even when it makes no reference to the artists, and dwells on politics alone. Bound within the covers of the monograph, readers are encouraged to stiffen the work with the politics, and be assured of the gravity of the enterprise by the recitation of the names of the darlings of the Biennial circuit. In all this, artists, theorists, the writer, the curator and even the enlightened framework of the Biennial itself are nicely elevated.



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I have been asked to write here about Marxism. Some recent political catalogue texts have worked with the revived intellectual tradition of Marxism, which has drawn strength from the end of ‘actually existing Communism’, the fall of which revealed capitalism as a truly global system of debatable merit, and from the rise of overtly imperial military intervention. Marxism continues to develop as an intellectual tradition, fostered in journals such as *New Left Review* and *Historical Materialism*, while some of the most influential accounts of the current situation, including Hardt and Negri’s *Empire*, much of Žižek’s and Harvey’s writing, draw productively from the tradition.¹ Artists even make work about Communism once again, freed from the mire of its practice to become once again an ideal (though the ghosts of the Gulag are not so easily exorcised).²

But what does the art world want from Marxism? It should be said right away that it is a minority interest even now, and that loftier, more abstract, more philosophical and less materialist forces are more prominent in the theoretical bolstering of art works. That majority interest seems easy to account for: their celebration of the individual act, of unlimited creativity, of the power of such an act to transform the situation, all sit comfortably with the art world’s fetishisation of the individual artist (even when that power

¹ Michael Hardt / Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 2000; Žižek has written prodigiously—to take a single example, Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, Verso, London 1997; David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2005; David Harvey, *The New Imperialism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2005.

² See, for example, Grant Watson/ Gerrie van Noord/ Gavin Everall, eds., *Make Everything New: A Project on Communism*, Bookworks/ Project Arts Centre, London/ Dublin 2006.

is used by certain individuals eloquently to renounce such mastery). Variants of Marxism may even do this; Žižek seeks to rehabilitate Lenin, not on the grounds of his solid arrival at objective theoretical and historical truth, but rather for his solitary defence of revolutionary action at a time when almost everyone else thought it impossible, his genius in grasping the potential of a desperate situation and wrenching it towards revolutionary ends.³

Even so, the very basis of Marxism, the up-ending of Hegelian idealism, above all the realisation that material forces form consciousness, and not vice versa, is still a deep scandal, an indigestible notion for capitalist culture as a whole, and particularly for the art world, founded on the free exercise of individual freedom, and the faith that the act of the artist, no matter how discomfiting, is sacrosanct, must be displayed, conserved, and protected from those who would seek to interfere with it. That central tenet of Marxism is so alien to the fundamental, internalised outlook of capitalist society that even repeated rehearsals of the notion (for instance, in an undergraduate class) often fail to make it stick—that, as with Chomsky’s statement that the US is the greatest terrorist state, this is a notion that it is impossible for people, not to come to believe, but even to *bear*.⁴ For contemporary art, the incompatibility is still deeper. Indeed, what is the art world but the supposed realisation of the autonomy of subjectivity, bent not to the necessities of work or the uniformities of mass culture, but permitted to wander free, mixing and matching, in the forest of signs? Plainly, it continually falls short of that ideal vision—for both artists and viewers (of the former, it is enough to glance at any artists’ professional magazine, such as *AN*, to swiftly dispel that illusion with its depressing mix of articles and notices about sponsorship, state policy, budget management, tax and legal obligations and ‘best practice’).⁵ For viewers, the hyped-up art ‘event’ becomes a bounded and regulated consumption of a cultural fragment, in the space between ticket office and gallery shop. Yet if the core ideal remains, that even in such circumstances, artists may freely exercise their subjectivity in the making of work, and that viewers may use theirs in the appreciation of it, Marxism seems either uninterested in that encounter, or to describe it in the most baleful of terms.⁶

So, structurally, the idea that consciousness is materially formed, and is not a free exercise of the will, is fundamentally incompatible with art world ideology. For the art world is an elite, high cultural realisation of that principle of freedom, the supplement that permits the regulation of the rest.⁷ Of course, Marxism does not deny exceptional individualism (as its very name shows) but the achievements of such individuals must be built into an understanding of the material circumstances that allow them.

Two questions arise from that consideration: first, can we imagine an account of the material circumstances that produce the current range of work in the global contemporary art world?

³ See Žižek’s Introduction to V.I. Lenin, *Revolution at the Gates: A Selection of Writings from February to October 1917*, ed. Slavoj Žižek, Verso, London 2002, p. 11.

⁴ This has long been a major theme of Chomsky’s writing. See, for example, Noam Chomsky interviewed by David Barsamian, ‘The United States is a Leading Terrorist State’, *Monthly Review*, vol. 53, no. 6, November 2001, available at <http://www.chomsky.info/interviews/200111-02.htm> Also Noam Chomsky, *Deterring Democracy*, Vintage, London 1992.

⁵ *AN*, published in London, was formerly entitled *Artists’ Newsletter*.

⁶ For the latter, see Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1997.

⁷ See my book *Art Incorporated*, Oxford University Press, 2004, particularly ch. 1.

To conceive of what would be necessary to produce such an account, of its brutality, reductiveness, universalism, its cruel shoe-horning of delicate individual projects into its objective structures, and the cries of the aesthetes at its Procrustean operations, is to understand the incompatibility of the two worlds. Second, what are the circumstances that allow for this account of the catalogue essay? For Marx, the increasingly visible contradictions of the capitalist system themselves produced the mental forms that allowed the system to be described and the contradictions to be grasped. US comedian Bill Hicks understood the mechanism perfectly:

The first thing I noticed when I came here was the homeless situation. Now I'm not a bleeding heart, okay? But . . . when you're walking down the streets of New York and you step over someone who might be dead, do you ever stop to think, 'wow, maybe our system doesn't work.' Does that push a memory bubble up out of you? If there was only a couple of bums I'd think 'well, they're just fuckin' bums,' but there's THOUSANDS of these guys. I'm running a bum hurdle down the street. It's the hundred yard bum hurdle.

In the art world, the increasing pressure from business and state forces to put art to use (to bring about social cohesion and bolster brands, among other things) erodes art's ideal autonomy, the very thing that makes it so useful to these interests in the first place. The more that gallery-goers find themselves thinking, not about their own free exercise of thought before a free work, but about sponsorship, branding, gentrification or efforts at social engineering, the more the material determination of art becomes evident. The flaunting of flamboyant gallery architecture in areas ready for social improvement, works that set out to act as honey-pots to businesses, the branding of the museum, sponsors' statements displayed in the gallery, tedious magazine articles on the lifestyle of celebrity artists—these are the art-world 'bum hurdle'.



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Further, much of Marxism's materialist and collectivist character is antithetical to all that the art world offers: ever-changing, novelty-driven displays of institutionalised eccentricity, founded on the sovereign individual. Perry Anderson, in an analysis of the relationship between modernism and revolution, concluded:

If we ask ourselves, what would revolution (understood as a punctual and irreparable break with the order of capital) have to do with modernism (understood as this flux of temporal vanities), the answer is: it would surely end it. For a genuine socialist culture would be one which did not insatiably seek the new, defined simply as what comes *later*, itself to be rapidly consigned to the detritus of the old, but rather one which multiplied the different, in a far greater *variety* of concurrent styles and practices than had ever existed before: a diversity founded on the far greater plurality and complexity of possible ways of living that any free community of equals, no longer divided by class, race or gender, would create. The axes of aesthetic life would, in other words, in this respect run horizontally, not vertically. The calendar would cease to tyrannize, or organize, consciousness of art. The vocation of a socialist revolution, in that sense, would be neither to prolong nor to fulfil modernity, but to abolish it.⁸

This vision sounds like an ideal description of postmodernism, and it does have a similarity to those accounts, like Danto's, that were modelled on the end of History, and held that we could have that endless and non-temporal variety right now.⁹ Complete self-realisation of the individual was of course the intended endpoint of the Marxist unfolding of history, but that could only be achieved through the harsh bending of individuals to collective discipline. To in the meantime pretend that it can be realised, or even to build an enclave in which to present necessarily stunted fragments of it to artist and viewer, may at best serve as a doleful reminder of all that is lacking in the instrumental world, and at worst may buttress it against its critics.

There is a deep intellectual incompatibility, too: Marxist texts typically seek to settle issues (think of *Capital* as a model), and in doing so to change them (the model of *What Is To Be Done?*). While naturally Marxist language is very various, there is a strong intellectual tradition that favours wide-ranging, synthetic accounts that set out to capture in a unifying frame apparently disparate phenomena (it can be seen variously in the writing of Harvey, Fredric Jameson, Perry Anderson and many others).¹⁰ The attempt, then, is made to decide issues, rather than have them generate an interminable, eccentric, proliferating discourse that is so characteristic of both art works and their accompanying theory. Texts that set out to be of use may be contrasted with the principled uselessness of art world products that serve only as adornment. The ideal of that deep uselessness, that it is crude to ask questions of viewers' experiences before a work, is reflected in the lack of feedback measures in contemporary art

⁸ Perry Anderson, 'Modernity and Revolution', *New Left Review*, no. 144, March-April 1984, p. 113.

⁹ See Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ 1997.

¹⁰ Harvey, Jameson and Anderson's accounts of postmodernism are good examples of this tradition. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell 1990; Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Verso, London 1991; Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity*, Verso, London 1998.

that could gauge its effect over broader cultural and political discourses—that these are salutary and far-reaching is left as a matter of faith. So we may suppose that the political turn in art is preferable what preceded it—and that works and texts may affect individuals' outlooks and even actions—but we have no way of knowing.

So what does this puzzling coming together of contemporary art and Marxism entail? Is it merely a surrender of the weak to the strong? That Marxism, shrunken to an ideal, must take its airing where it can? Now that Marxism is defeated, without a power base in workers' movements, let alone the apparatus of an armed state, the art world may use it as a provocative adornment, and flirt with its radical Other. In this way, the mild radicalism of artists may be charged with greater apparent significance, as the long and deep Marxist tradition is trawled for telling phrases. In its sharply reduced circumstances, Marxism comes to take on a Utopian air which brings it closer to the visions of freedom offered in the art world. The cost is that the power of Marxism as a route-map, offering a plausible path from current circumstances to revolution and beyond, is lost. So that an artist's attachment to Marxism, or that of a critic, is not warranted by circumstances, and instead comes to be seen as an individual choice, another subjective exercise of will. It is merely another choice amongst choices, the selection of a brand, as easily switched off as on.

Which brings us back to the political catalogue essay, and the conflict between its radical content and its place of publication: that the function of the essay is the support of an individual artistic project, and that in this it must reflect the art work itself; that art work, curation and writing are all performances of free subjectivity, and that against this setting, even the most materialist and collectivist content founders. In that way, this piece of writing, too, while it attempts to struggle against its circumstances, can be seen as the furthering of the author's image and brand—and given the confinement of this text between these covers, that reading has a lot to recommend it.



1st Lithuanian pigeon arrived from Venice to Grliava, Kannas on 29th of June, 2007 at 6.29 am. Pigeon fancier Algirdas Baniulis. Congratulations! © Villa Lituania