

Why Digital Art is Red

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The divide between the art shown in major museums and art fairs and that associated with the new media scene has been deep and durable. Many critics have puzzled over it, particularly because there is much that the two realms share, including the desire to put people into unusual social situations.¹ Yet some of the reasons for the divide are plain enough, and they are about money, power and social distinction. The economic divide is across competing models of capitalist activity: the exclusive ownership of objects set against the release of reproducible symbols into networks with the ambition that they achieve maximum speed and ubiquity of circulation. The social divide is between a conservative club of super-rich collectors and patrons, and their attendant advisors, who buy their way into what they like to think of as a sophisticated cultural scene (Duchamp Land), against a realm which is closer to the mundane and more evidently compromised world of technological tools (Turing Land).² Power relations are where the divide appears starkest: in one world, special individuals known as artists make exceptional objects or events with clear boundaries that distinguish them from run-of-the-mill life; and through elite ownership and expert curation, these works are presented for the enlightenment of the rest of us. In the new media world, some 'artists' but also collectives and other shifting and anonymous producers offer up temporary creations onto a scene in which their works are open to copying, alteration and comment, and in which there is little possible control of context, frame or conversation.

This description of the divide has been put in extreme terms for the sake of clarity, and there are a few instances of the split appearing to erode.³ Yet its persistence remains one of the most striking features of the general fragmentation of the fast-growing and globalising art world. That persistence rests on solid material grounds, laid out by Marx: the clash of economic models is a clear case of the mode and relations of production coming into conflict, and is part of a much wider conflict over the legal, political and social aspects of digital culture, and its synthesis of

¹ On the affinity between new media art and socially engaged art, including relational aesthetics, see Edward Shanken, 'Contemporary Art and New Media: Toward a Hybrid Discourse?':

<http://hybridge.files.wordpress.com/2011/02/hybrid-discourses-overview-4.pdf> [accessed 31 March 2014]

² The reference is to Lev Manovich, 'The Death of Computer Art', 1996:

<http://www.manovich.net/TEXT/death.html> [accessed 31 March 2014] The complicity of both worlds with establishment powers has been criticised since the origin of the divide. For an early example of the engagement of computer art with the military-industrial complex, see Gustav Metzger, 'Automata in History: Part 1', *Studio International*, March 1969, pp. 107-9.

³ See Domenico Quaranta, *Beyond New Media Art*, Link Editions, Brescia 2013, pp. 4-6. Quaranta's book offers a thoughtful and accessible account of many of the aspects of the divide.

production and reproduction.⁴ Copyright is one arena where the clash is very clear. Think of the efforts of museums to control the circulation of images and to levy copyright charges, while at the same time surrendering to the camera-phone as they abandon the attempt to forbid photography in their galleries.



Crowds in front of the Mona Lisa in the Medici Gallery, Louvre 2019. Photo: Owen Franken

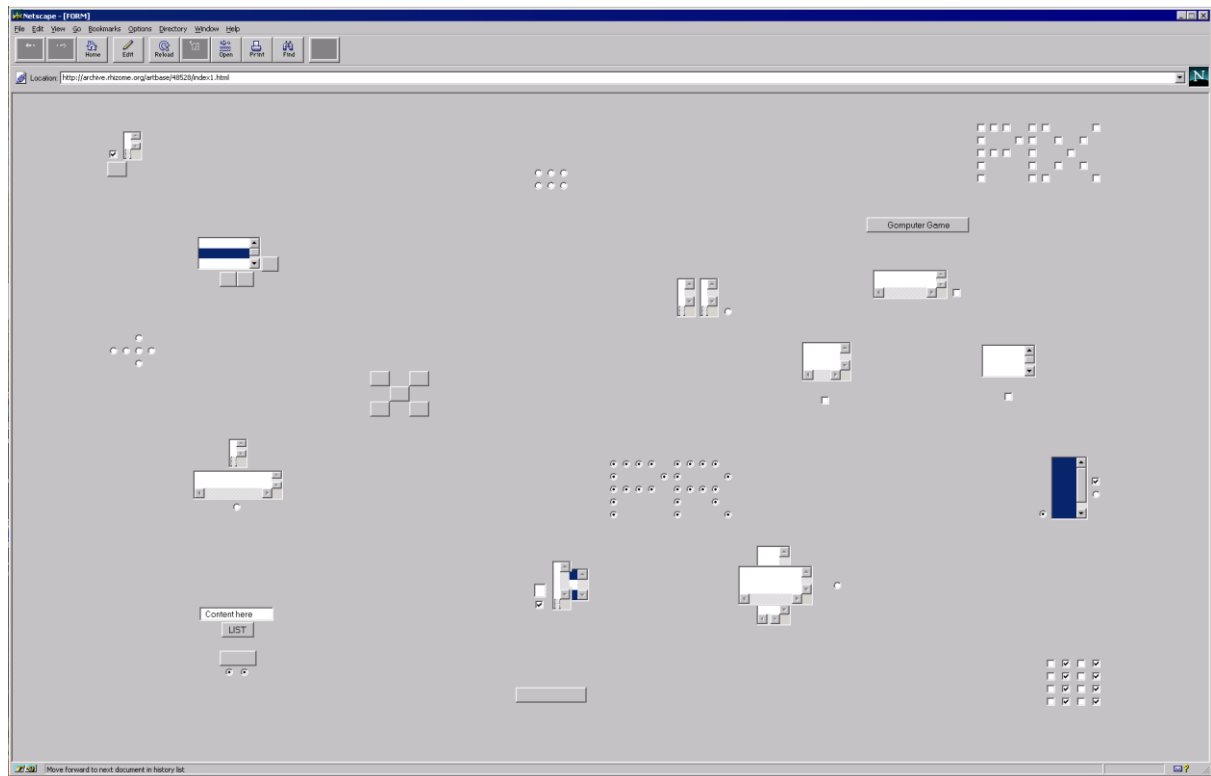
So where is ‘red art’ and the left in this scenario? Amidst the general gloom and lassitude that has beset much of the Left in Europe and the US, the development of the digital realm stands out as an extraordinary gain. It allows for the direct communication, without the intermediary of newspapers and TV, of masses of people globally—who turn out to be more egalitarian, more environmentally concerned and more seditious than the elite had bargained for. Alexander Cockburn, with his long career in activism and journalism, remarks:

Thirty years ago, to find out what was happening in Gaza, you would have to have had a decent short-wave radio, a fax machine, or access to those great newsstands in Times Square and North Hollywood that carried the world’s press. Not anymore. We can get a

⁴ Marx discusses the effects of the transformations of the industrial revolution in the chapter ‘Machinery and Large-Scale Industry’, in *Capital*. See especially, Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I*, trans. Ben Fowkes, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, Middlesex 1976, pp. 617f. On the online synthesis of production and reproduction see my book, *Internet Art: The Online Clash of Culture and Commerce*, Tate Gallery Publishing, London 2003, ch. 1. *Capital* is available online: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/index.htm> [accessed 31 March 2014]

news story from [...] Gaza or Ramallah or Oaxaca or Vidarbha and have it out to a world audience in a matter of hours.⁵

It is hard to ban social media, it has been claimed, because it entwines video fads, kittens and politics (and banning kittens looks bad). So the insight attributed by some to Lenin—that capitalists will sell us the rope with which to hang them—is still relevant.⁶



Alexei Shulgin's *Form Art*, 1997

In an era in which the political and artistic avant-gardes have faded, the affiliation of the art world that is founded upon the sale and display of rare and unique objects made by a few exceptional individuals—in which high prices are driven by monopoly rent effects—tends to be with the conspicuous consumption of the state and the super-rich.⁷ Here, the slightest taint of the common desktop environment is enough to kill aesthetic feeling. The affiliation of at least some of new media art is rather to the kitsch, the populist, and to the egalitarian circulation of images and words, along with discourse and interaction. New media artists who push those attachments work against some of the deepest seated elements of the art world ethos:

⁵ Alexander Cockburn, *A Colossal Wreck: A Road Trip Through Political Scandal, Corruption and American Culture*, Verso, London 2013, p. 441.

⁶ According to Paul F. Boller, Jr. and John George it is a misattribution. See *They Never Said It: A Book of Fake Quotes, Misquotes & Misleading Attributions*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1989, p. 64.

⁷ On monopoly rent and art, see David Harvey, 'The Art of Rent: Globalization, Monopoly and the Commodification of Culture', *Socialist Register*, 2002, pp. 93-110. Harvey uses Marx's example of vineyards as a prime example of monopoly rent: the wine from a particular vineyard is a unique product, like the products of a particular artist. The article is available here: <http://thesocialistregister.com/index.php/srv/article/view/5778/2674> [accessed 31 March 2014]

individualism, distinction, discreteness and preservation for posterity (and long-term investment value). It should be no surprise that they are frequently and without qualification denied the status of ‘artist’.

It is also clear why the death of leftist ideas in elite discourse does not hold in new media circles, where the revival of thinking about the Left, Marxism and Communism is very evident.⁸ The borders of art are blurred by putting works to explicit political use (in violation of the Kantian imperative still policed in the mainstream art world).⁹ Very large numbers of people are continually making cultural interventions online, and value lies not in any particular exceptional work but in the massive flow of interaction and exchange. In that world, as it never could in a gallery, the thought may creep in that there is nothing special about any one of us. And this may lead to the greatest scandal of all: think of the statements that artists who deal with politics in the mainstream art world are obliged to make as their ticket of admission—‘my art has no political effect’. They have to say it, even when it is patently absurd; and they have to say it, even as the art world itself becomes more exposed to social media, and is ever less able to protect its exclusive domain and regulate the effects of its displays. So at base, the divide is economic, but at the level of what causes the repulsion from digital art—that puts collectors and critics to flight—it is deeply and incontrovertibly political.¹⁰ They run headlong from the red.

⁸ See, for example: Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis*, trans. David Macey/ Steve Corcoran, Verso, London 2010; Bruno Bosteels, *The Actuality of Communism*, Verso, London 2011; Costas Douzinas/ Slavoj Žižek, eds., *The Idea of Communism*, Verso, London 2010 and the follow-up volume Slavoj Žižek, ed., *The Idea of Communism 2: The New York Conference*, Verso, London 2013; Boris Groys, *The Communist Postscript*, trans. Thomas Ford, Verso, London 2010. For the most concerted attempt to revise and extend Marxist thinking, see the journal *Historical Materialism*. <http://www.historicalmaterialism.org/journal> [accessed 31 March 2014]

⁹ See Joline Blais / Jon Ippolito, *At the Edge of Art*, Thames & Hudson, London 2006.

¹⁰ Remember Bataille: ‘Communist workers appear to the bourgeois to be as ugly and dirty as hairy sexual organs, or lower parts [...]’ Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1985, p. 8.