

## Elite Art in an Age of Populism

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Banksy, *Keep Out*, shown at the Royal Academy of Arts, London 2019

When I first wrote this essay on postmodernism and contemporary populist art, it was in the wake of the financial crash, which had radically reduced the prices of the branded art-stars who had dominated the top of the market, when the shape that the recession would take was still unclear, and when political populism—at least in Europe, the US, India and Turkey—was no more than a dark cloud on the horizon.<sup>1</sup> Since then, the storm has broken, in the form of the Brexit vote, Trump, Salvini, Erdogan and Modi. The prices of the fashionable stars, temporarily threatened, have revived along with the fortunes of the billionaires who buy them, as governments, in thrall to the global financial institutions and in fear of the markets, responded to the crisis with colossal hand-outs to the already rich. The crisis and what followed has also produced populist reactions to the left—albeit of a more muted nature than those on the right—and a theoretical literature to match. So in this revision I have tried to update the essay and push

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<sup>1</sup> The essay first appeared in Korean: *Visual* (Korea National University of Arts, Seoul), vol. 9, 2012, pp. 39-69; and then in Alexander Dumbadze/ Suzanne Hudson, eds., *Contemporary Art: 1989 to the Present*, John Wiley & Sons, Oxford 2013, pp. 39-49.

forward its conclusions, while not losing sight of the orienting comparison with the postmodern era.

The years leading up to the crisis of 2008 saw a classic speculative bubble which sharply inflated the prices of stocks and shares and contemporary art works alike. When the bubble burst, the most fashionable artists—among them, Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst and Banksy—were the worst hit; Hirst's auction income fell fourteen times from its (admittedly stellar) 2008 height.<sup>2</sup> Yet recovery was swift, and the art world once again exhibits its profound divide between the work that dominates the art fairs and the auction rooms—which is conservative, populist, and almost entirely made by white male artists—and the worlds of biennials, performance and socially engaged works, which tend towards a radical questioning of the hierarchies of gender, sexuality, race, class and the national order. Their meetings are often hostile, and their points of symbiosis bizarre, fraught and contradictory. As with the economy generally, in the art world the recession exacerbated the already top-heavy nature of the system, paring down the middle in favour of the tiny number of elite artists, galleries, auction houses and art fairs.

The bubble years happened to broadly coincide with the rise in social networking which allowed for the online publication of many kinds of cultural creation: amateurs had, of course, long made art but until the price of server space and rapid data transmission dropped to the level at which it no longer made sense to meter, they had little access to global audiences.<sup>3</sup> As uploading material became almost free, and billions of people aired their creations online, there emerged a strange technological answer to Walter Benjamin's demand that art should be judged by the extent to which it promoted the 'socialization of the intellectual means of production'.<sup>4</sup> Equally, the commercialised spaces of the most successful social media sites may be seen as mass-marketed, tightly controlled and surveilled versions of the thoroughgoing user-empowerment promised by the pioneers of Tactical Media in the 1990s.<sup>5</sup>

For all of this, the term 'postmodern' no longer seems adequate. Yet the abiding difficulty of even imagining profound cultural, social or political transformation, despite the striking novelties of the present, is certainly a postmodern matter. Indeed Jameson had opened his foundational essay on the subject with remarks about the 'inverted millenarianism' of the era, in which there were plenty of endings but no beginnings.<sup>6</sup> The difficulty can be glimpsed in the troubled attempts to positively characterise the new: to give just a few examples, Hal Foster's *Return of the Real*, while identifying elements of contemporary art that sat in tension with postmodern theory, remained pessimistic about the horizons of possibility for its firmly neoliberal times; Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's overarching analysis, *Empire*, ran into events of September 11 and the reassertion of imperial power of the old kind; Nicolas Bourriaud's attempt to synthesise elements of modernism and postmodernism to build the 'altermodern' generally failed to convince; and

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<sup>2</sup> *Contemporary Art Market 2009/10: ArtPrice Annual Report*, Lyon 2010, p. 85.

<sup>3</sup> On the remarkable social and economic consequences of this development, see Chris Anderson, *Free: The Future of a Radical Price: The Economics of Abundance and Why Zero Pricing Is Changing the Face of Business*, Random House, London 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer', in *Selected Writings, Volume 2. 1927-1934*, Michael W. Jennings/ Howard Eiland/ Gary Smith, eds., The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1999, p. 780.

<sup>5</sup> I am indebted to David Garcia for this point. See also David Garcia/ Geert Lovink, 'The ABC of Tactical Media', Nettime, 1997: <http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-9705/msg00096.html> Accessed 3 June 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Verso, London 1991, p. 1.

Pamela Lee's sophisticated reflections on the fate of postmodernism in the light of the present, offered only the faint hope, tinged with Benjaminian melancholy, that something positive might be salvaged from the entropic wreckage.<sup>7</sup>



It is worth briefly returning to Jameson's essay on postmodernism as a way to analyse the present in terms of his successful characterisation of the past, and vice versa. As is well known, Jameson's concern was to try to periodize postmodernism, aligning it with post-industrial capitalism, and to describe its main elements in sharp contrast to modernism. He alighted upon the depthlessness of the new, contrasting Andy Warhol's silkscreen, *Diamond Dust Shoes*, with boots painted by Van Gogh. The worn surfaces of the latter are products of manual toil and a hard engagement with the land, while the former stand for a deathly but affectless superficiality.<sup>8</sup> Shallowness is accompanied by a waning of history's power, and a schizophrenic relation to signification, which leaves a 'rubble' of unrelated elements, and with it the ruin of any coherent sense of self.<sup>9</sup> The vast flood of culture engorges and overloads viewers, who respond by rapidly switching from one source to another, and Jameson evokes this condition by referring to the

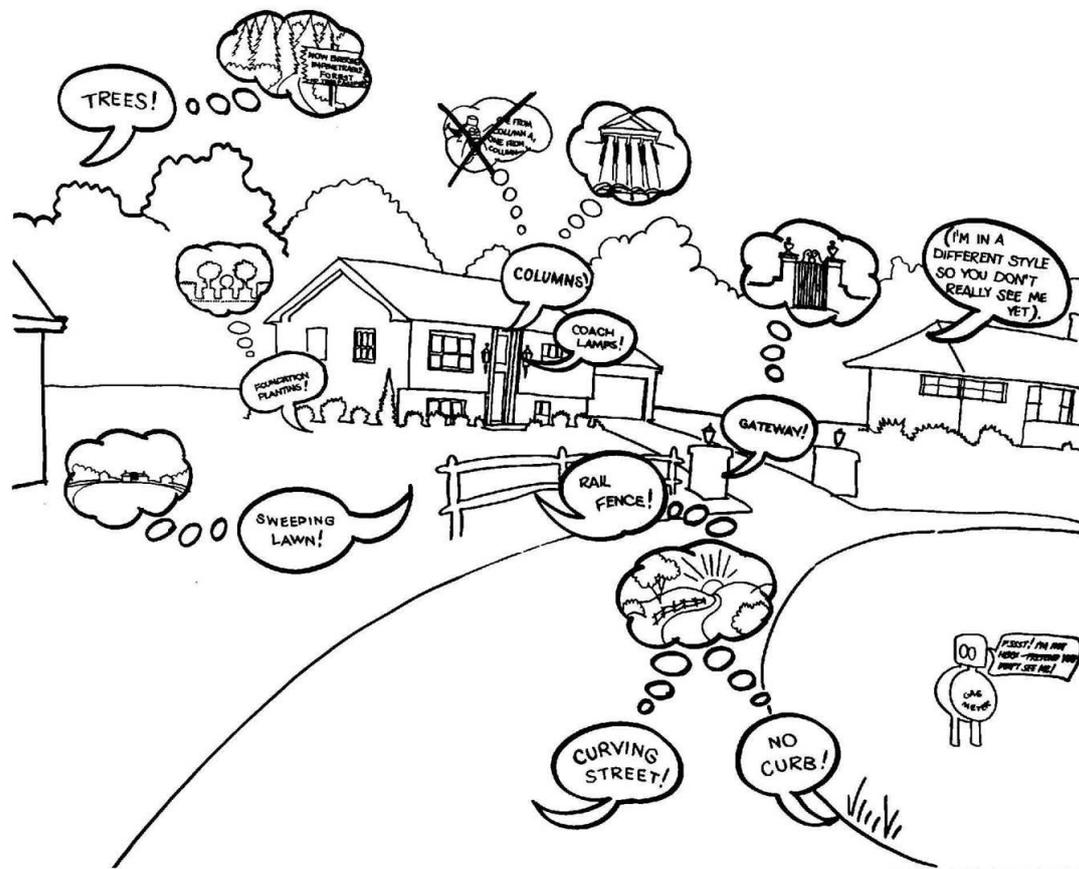
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<sup>7</sup> Hal Foster, 'Whatever Happened to Postmodernism?', in *The Return of the Real*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1996; Michael Hardt / Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 2000; Nicholas Bourriaud, *Altermodern*, Tate Publishing, London 2009; Pamela M. Lee, 'Postmodernism After the "Contemporary"', in *New Games: Postmodernism After Contemporary Art*, Routledge, New York 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, pp. 6-10.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 26-7.

alien in Nicholas Roeg's *The Man Who Fell to Earth* who watches 57 TV screens at once.<sup>10</sup> Spectacle is passively consumed, and the eternal present admits of no sustained action or agency.



The virtues of the suburbs, from Robert Venturi / Denise Scott Brown / Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1977.

Jameson also argues that postmodernism was an ‘aesthetic populism’, invoking that manifesto to popular taste, *Learning from Las Vegas*.<sup>11</sup> In the autumn of 1968, shortly after the summer of revolutionary dissent in many countries, teachers at the Yale School of Art and Architecture took a group of students on a field trip, not to see the wonders of Rome or the modernist towers of Chicago, but to Las Vegas to examine the architecture of the Strip. The students dubbed the course ‘The Great Proletarian Cultural Locomotive’, and this gives a clue to one of its most important aspects: a defence of popular culture against the taste of the cultural elite. The casino architecture of the Strip was designed to entertain ordinary tastes: in this way, argued the authors, it was more democratic than modernist buildings whose makers insisted that an absence of decoration and a concentration on pure form imbued them with moral rectitude. An extraordinary jumble of styles and pastiche histories were to be found on the Strip:

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 31; his artistic model here is Nam June Paik. *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976).

<sup>11</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 2; Robert Venturi / Denise Scott Brown / Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1977.

Miami Moroccan, International Jet Set Style; Arte Moderne Hollywood Orgasmic, Organic Behind; Yamasaki Bernini cum Roman Orgiastic; Niemeyer Moorish; Moorish Tudor (Arabian Knights); Bauhaus Hawaiian.<sup>12</sup>

Instead of a fixed and perfect modernist utopia, here was an emergent and constantly changing architecture and an urban scene that was ‘almost all right’.<sup>13</sup> What was defended here on the grounds of its popularity, in fact, was far from ‘proletarian’, but rather the taste of the white middle class, and just as the Strip was ‘almost all right’, so were the then much-denigrated suburbs.

In looking back on Jameson’s essay, there seem to be features of postmodernism which have been amply borne out, and even to have intensified. The ‘depthlessness’ of culture has been furthered by the sheer extent and speed of digital culture, with its brief wildfires of popularity, endless novelties, and the ease with which it encourages clicking between diverse forms of information and entertainment (news, games, gossip, video novelties, pornography and social networking, to name but a few). The depth and extent of information about many topics provided online may rival all but the greatest libraries (though the realm is also fissured by the agendas that determine what gets digitised and under what legal arrangements) but this undoubted richness is countered by the flux of novelty and distraction, especially by sites and apps that have a fundamental, profit-driven interest in capturing and keeping users’ attention, urging them to move rapidly across data streams so as to show them advertising and mine their personal data. Skimming, distraction and addiction are not side-effects but are baked into the design of these products.<sup>14</sup>

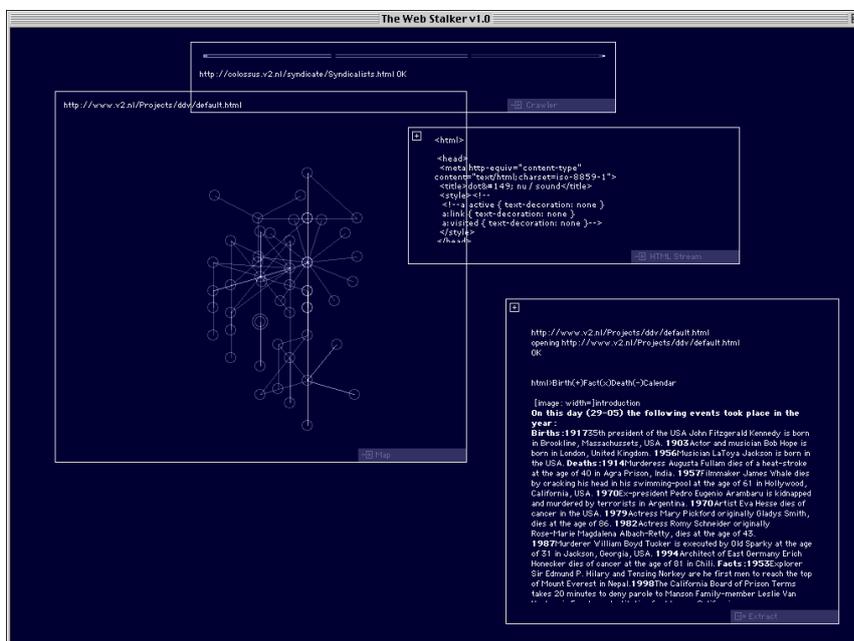


Image from Matthew Fuller, *I/O/D 4*, 1997

<sup>12</sup> Venturi et al., *Learning from Las Vegas*, p. 80

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>14</sup> For a description of the tactics used, see Adam Alter, *Irresistible: Why We Can't Stop Checking, Scrolling, Clicking and Watching*, Bodley Head, London 2017, Part 2.

Confronted with this extraordinary proliferation of information and social dialogue, the effects of the data sublime are felt everywhere, in both the mathematical sublime of the digital expanse and the dynamic sublime of its whirlwind transformation. The cascades of data that confronted Roeg's alien appear to wash over all of those who dwell in mediatised environments, and the art world regularly responds with its own versions: from the most direct, such as Mark Hansen and Ben Rubin's *Listening Post* (2004), which turns the flow of online texts into an immersive digital waterfall; to Candida Höfer's carefully recorded library and archive rooms (technologically advanced renditions of the pre-digital data sublime); or the numerous large-scale museum photographs that overwhelm the viewer with the richness of their detail, while providing few means with which to interpret it; or the many ways of visualising the complexity of Internet structure, of which one of the pioneers was Matthew Fuller's web browser, *I/O/D 4* (1997), which gave the user direct access to a dynamic map of the linking grid.



Ron Galella, *Susan Anton*, *Sylvester Stallone*, and *Andy Warhol* at the opening of *Andy's Whitney Museum exhibit*, New York, November 20, 1979

The populism that Jameson identified in postmodernism also seems to have grown stronger, and has even taken hold in the once-resistant world of fine art. The old (and in some areas, abiding) art-world suspicion of populism is well summed up in the introduction to a 2005 catalogue on the subject, in which it is described as a refusal of complexity which pretends to appeal to the common individual, by offering simplistic solutions to problems caused by globalisation

(whether the growing insecurity of employment or clashes over religion).<sup>15</sup> Yet the speculative contemporary art boom saw the rise of a great deal of what we may call populist art—that is, an art of simple character, wide popular appeal, and an enthusiastic engagement with commercial mass culture delivered through branded artistic persona. The heights of the market were peppered by such work, with the figures of Jeff Koons, Richard Prince, Takahashi Murakami and Damien Hirst standing at the head, with Banksy in close attendance. Warhol, who it should be remembered was for long a despised and isolated figure for his overt commercialism and celebrity-chasing, has arguably replaced Marcel Duchamp as the founding father of contemporary art.<sup>16</sup> In the years since, many of these branded artists have remained remarkably durable, continuing to dominate the heights of the auction market, while other similar characters have joined them: Christopher Wool, Yoshimoto Nara, Zeng Fanzhi, and Rudolf Stingel (the twin martyrs of street art, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring, are also regular features).

To use the term ‘populist’ to describe this market-dominant art may seem odd—is it not bought by an elite whose lives are fantastically separate from the common masses, and is it not made by individuals whose main job is to distinguish themselves from their competitors, let alone the rest of us? Yet this would be to underestimate the forces of convention and instrumentalism that now bear down on collectors and artists alike. Elite collectors are no longer those mildly dissident and alienated characters, who helped forge through serious intellectual engagement a culture distinct from the mainstream; rather, herd-like, they employ the same interior decorators, attend the same art events, mingle in the same VIP lounges and buy the same artists. The motivations (beyond mere investment) are put well in a Christie’s catalogue, describing a large Koons’ *Balloon Dog*, the purchase of which will communicate ‘the prominence and stature of its owner’ and transform their collection ‘into an unparalleled level of greatness.’<sup>17</sup>

Artists respond in kind, ramping up production of standardised objects (for which prices can be compared and so somewhat assured), and in many cases exaggerating signature style to such an extent that it approaches the condition of the logo—with Christopher Wool making this move most explicit.<sup>18</sup> And just as the abstract force of political populism is assembled in the concrete figure of the demagogue, so art-world conventions are condensed in a few singular performers. There is much literature about populism as a style, performed by its leaders in ways that are supposed to indicate their closeness of the people, through bad manners, simple or even faulty speech, violation of protocol and the display of emotion, especially aggression.<sup>19</sup> Many of these features are shared by populist artists in their elaborate and equally mediated presentations of the self. The result is a normcore culture that is much swayed by popular taste, and offers its billionaire buyers merely the unoriginal ‘originals’ of the posters and prints that are stuck to many a bedroom wall.

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<sup>15</sup> Lars Bang Larsen, Cristina Ricupero, Nicholas Schafhausen, ‘Introduction’, The Nordic Institute for Contemporary Art, *The Populism Catalogue*, Lukas & Sternberg, New York 2005, p. 15.

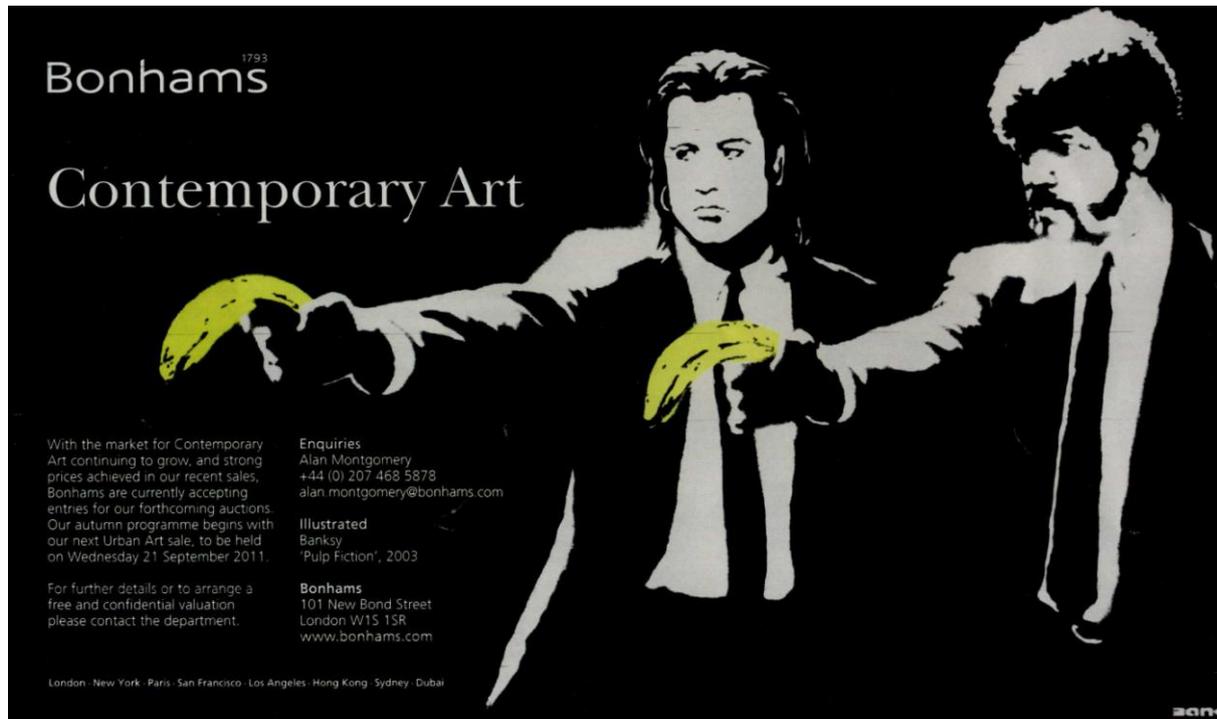
<sup>16</sup> For an analysis of the change in Warhol’s reputation, linked to the character of the current art scene, see Isabelle Graw, *High Price: Art Between the Market and Celebrity Culture*, Sternberg Press, Berlin 2009.

<sup>17</sup> The sale was at Christie’s, New York, in November 2013; quoted in Georgina Adam, *Big Bucks: The Explosion of the Art Market in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Lund Humphries, London 2014, p. 23

<sup>18</sup> The point about the value of similar objects is made by Adam, *Big Bucks*, p. 74.

<sup>19</sup> The centrality of performance to populism is one of the main arguments of Benjamin Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2016, see especially pp. 31-2, 44, 60; it is also a feature of Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, Verso, London 2005.

Banksy is the most interesting of these figures, since his work was at first made in contention with the art world, and because it was not approbation within the art world that drove his market success but the weight of media hype and popularity.<sup>20</sup> Most extraordinary of all is the extreme populism of Banksy's art: its messages are very simple, clichéd and instantaneously grasped, relying on highly familiar advertising techniques; his signature style is likewise little troubled by complexity; and as with most street art, popularity, speed of production and ubiquity are prized above much else.



### Banksy at auction

While Banksy is the most extreme example of this shift, the general rise of street art is no less remarkable a populist phenomenon. There have been previous art-world dalliances with this art, particularly in the 1980s with the brief if energetic attempt to commercialise the work in the transfer from wall to canvas, and the rise of a few stars who leveraged their street reputations in adapting to the gallery scene (above all, Basquiat and Haring). Yet what has changed profoundly in street art, apparently a creature of old(ish) media such as the spraycan and the photocopier, is the power of the Internet: where once it was short-lived and documented by a few highly dedicated photographers who would spend hours waiting for decorated trains to pass, knowing that the works that they recorded would be destroyed by cleaning crews that very night, now with the ubiquity of digital cameras and of publishing on the Web, vulnerable street works gain long lives, and their artists considerable reputations.<sup>21</sup> Graffiti, an often arcane practice of tagging that spoke to an in-crowd who could read the codes of writing, numbering, over-writing and

<sup>20</sup> For Banksy's views on the art world, see *Wall and Piece*, Century, London 2005, p. 128.

<sup>21</sup> For the work of the graffiti photographers, see Martha Cooper / Henry Chalfant, *Subway Art*, Thames and Hudson, London 1984.

one-up-manship, has been overlaid with an accessible, illustrative street art that courts popular attention, competing with advertisements in a self-conscious struggle for the right to the city.<sup>22</sup>

Here the museum is pulled in two incompatible directions. In its elite and educative role, it is supposed to demonstrate that capitalism can sustain cultural and creative autonomy by displaying work that cannot be found in standard mass culture. At the same time, the demands of branding, marketing and ‘partnerships’ with big business push the museums to open themselves to popular taste. The great global brand that is ‘Tate’ has responded by devoting a large section of its flagship bookshop to street art and graffiti publications, and by publishing its own; selling graffiti style stencils, stickers and badges; and offering a Flash game that allows users to decorate a wall of Tate Modern.<sup>23</sup> It also commissioned well-known street artists, including Blu and JR, to make large works on the Tate Modern façade in 2008, though it has drawn the line at collecting such work for itself. In 2011, the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art held its first major retrospective exhibition of street art—albeit to noisy complaints from the city police. A vast warehouse exhibition of street art was a collateral event of the 2015 Venice Biennale; and in Berlin the Urban Nation Museum for Urban Contemporary Art opened in 2017.<sup>24</sup>



KAWS, *What Party* exhibition, Brooklyn Museum, New York 2020

<sup>22</sup> The point is made in Cedar Lewisohn/ Henry Chalfont, *Street Art: The Graffiti Revolution*, Tate Publishing, London 2009; see also Henri Lefebvre, ‘Right to the City’, in *Writings on Cities*, ed. & trans. Eleonore Kofman / Elizabeth Lebas, Blackwell, Oxford Publishers 1996.

<sup>23</sup> Tate was the most popular brand followed on Twitter in 2010, a position only achieved by responding to users’ views. See <http://www.freshnetworks.com/blog/2010/06/tate-museum-uk-top-brand-twitter/>, accessed 2 June 2011. The Lewisohn/ Chalfont book referred to earlier is published by Tate. For the game, see <http://kids.tate.org.uk/games/street-art/> Accessed 2 June 2011.

<sup>24</sup> Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, *Art in the Streets*, ed. Nikki Columbus, Rizzoli 2011; Adam Nagourney, ‘Admirers Call It Art, but the Police Call It a Problem’, *The New York Times*, 22 April 2011. *The Bridges of Graffiti* was shown at the Terminal San Basilio, Venice, May-November 2015.

If the art of Banksy, Shepard Fairey, JR and Kaws has been drawn into many important contemporary art collections—so that (on the old criteria for judgement) such crass work hangs alongside paintings by Picasso or Richter—indicates a deep shift in the art world. First, it points to the changing profile of collecting itself, as new buyers continue to surge into the peculiar asset class that is contemporary art, driven by convention, bragging rights and the need to hedge investments. There are often darker motives, too: art's portability and the difficulty of accurately assessing its value, along with the light regulation and very rapid growth of its market, make it an effective tool for money laundering and tax evasion.<sup>25</sup> Many of these collectors know little about art history and buy on the power of famous names, readily identifiable trends and fashionable national schools. It also shows that the art world, which has outgrown its once small and enclosed Euro-American domain, is less insulated than it was from the wider culture, having become a global social club for the mega-rich—among whom are numbered, of course, the entrepreneurs of the great media conglomerates. Where there was once a deep divide between popular taste and museum art, now the track between popular approbation and high cultural 'excellence' seems, if not smooth, less impassable. Artists may now achieve substantial success in the market without the sanction of museum showings or positive critical attention: it helps if you are a painter, youngish, male, white, and passably photogenic.<sup>26</sup>

The heights of elite culture are infected by the popular. Koons, Prince, Murakami and Hirst all deal with mass culture but filter it through individual sensibilities, and re-present it safely under the assured forms of neo-conceptualism, most obviously through appropriation. Banksy does not appear to put anything in inverted commas, and his style, whilst distinct, is also anodyne, and his concerns—political, social and satirical—are commonly shared. What social media provide is rapid and constant feedback; street art is continually tested against it, and contemporary art as a whole becomes more and more open to it, especially as its increasingly digital products find their way onto media-sharing and social networking sites, and as artists strive to make work that will stand out both in the art fair booth and on Instagram. In its manifest conventionality, its attention-seeking, its simplicity and its gilded sheen, the old distinction of art is lost. Art draws near the condition in which its new distinction is simply that of being unaccountably valuable, so that 'Art offers the opportunity to reflect in concentrated form on money, to experience it in its very essence.'<sup>27</sup>

Looking back from the present to postmodernism, its populism may now appear to be its most radical feature, since it laid the ground for the erosion of elite culture. Yet the 'populism' of *Learning from Las Vegas*, as with so much in postmodernism, conflated the operations of big business with popular taste, in a familiar move to which populist sentiment is often subject.<sup>28</sup> What was 'almost all right' was not popular taste, but popular taste as imagined by casino owners. It was tested against the democracy of the dollar, which yields only the crude contrast of on/ off, of buy/ not buy. This is also the 'democracy' of Warhol, in which the President and the

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<sup>25</sup> See Georgina Adam, *Dark Side of the Boom: The Excesses of the Art Market in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Lund Humphries, London 2017; this is a useful account of the subject, despite being tightly constrained by the threat of litigation.

<sup>26</sup> For a list of such artists, see Adam, *Big Bucks*, p. 72.

<sup>27</sup> This is the position of Wolfgang Ulrich, 'Icons of Capitalism: How Prices Make Art', in Centro di Cultura Contemporanea Strozzi, *Arte, Prezzo e Valore: Arte Contemporanea e Mercato*, Silvana Editoriale, Florence 2008, p. 50.

<sup>28</sup> This point is made by Ernesto Laclau, 'Populism: What's in a Name', in Lars Bang Larsen, Cristina Ricupero, Nicholas Schafhausen, eds., *The Populism Reader*, Lukas & Sternberg, New York 2005, p. 107.

'bum' drink the same Coca-Cola, and which is understood to be not about power and dialogue but about buying stuff.<sup>29</sup> Such a view has little purchase on the experience of the entire Strip—the polluted, environmentally catastrophic, surveilled and policed urban fabric—which is not subject to consumer choice.



Las Vegas from the air

Social media open up the possibility for detailed quantitative and qualitative analysis and manipulation of popular feedback—and what commercial organisation (museums, for example) can resist that? So populism intensified in the art world, produced by the exposure of its flagship institutions to market forces, and by the gradual modernisation of the art market to the regular calculations that underlie investment. In its intensification, it also changed its nature. The threat to elite art comes from the lack of pretence in populist art (seen most clearly in street art): it does not pretend to be anything other than a commodity, or to be uninterested in publicity; it does not refuse to bear the marks of its reception; it is relatively open about its methods, and encourages participation; it is generally uninterested in expert opinion. It is a product, in short, of participatory, rather than broadcast culture.

There are other features which this cultural and technological scene opens up which are unrecognisable in Jameson's account of postmodernism. First, there is the ability of a much larger and wider section of the populace to make and publish their own work. In offering a more

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<sup>29</sup> Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B & Back Again)*, Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, New York 1975, pp. 100-101.

positive description of the current phase of capitalism than the reactive term ‘post-industrial’, Hardt and Negri point to the development of informationalised capitalism, in which cooperation is more important than capital.<sup>30</sup> Here Perry Anderson’s discussion of the contrast between modernism and postmodernism is useful: the former was immersed in the romance of technological innovation in production (the cars, planes and ocean liners that Le Corbusier lauded, for example); while in the latter, it was the technologies of reproduction that took the lead (so that video art may be seen as an archetypal postmodern form).<sup>31</sup> In data capitalism, we see a classic dialectical synthesis of the two, as the new technologies bind production and reproduction together. If the archetypal location of modernism was the business towers of New York and Chicago, and of postmodernism the playground of the Vegas Strip, the locale of the new age (only a decade old) must be in the exchange of digital products along with melded business and private persona on Facebook and Instagram, and in city streets transformed by the augmentation of data overlays.

In the synthesis of production and reproduction, data can be worked upon, not merely viewed; it can be worked upon by others, providing tailored perspectives on datasets, guided by the user’s own input. More radically, computational power is increasingly available for users over the Web, who are able to interrogate data with specific queries, and use it to perform calculations.<sup>32</sup> This hands powerful analytical tools to anyone with an Internet connection. Analyses of data sets may also be applied to culture, as for example Franco Moretti has been showing in a remarkable series of works on global literature.<sup>33</sup>

Yet the power relations between users and the vast global companies that command the Internet remain dire. Far more common than the radical interrogation of public data, is the experience of being handled by the obscure workings of algorithms which are kept secret for commercial gain. Users are threatened with becoming merely the grazing beasts of the data fields, milked for their data; or becoming slaves to the algorithm, producing stereotypical or even nonsensical and corrupting products to serve the app and the search engine. This is the continually stressed life of the relentlessly positive, always-on-duty Instagram or YouTube star; or the labourers in the YouTube galley, producing increasingly bizarre cultural collages to game the algorithms and appeal to popular search terms; or who abuse their own children in the quest for likes and shares.<sup>34</sup> Some of the results may resemble postmodern culture; yet, far from being the free, diverse and playful creativity that Arthur Danto imagined would follow the evaporation of grand narratives, they are the micro-managed products of a process that is continually subject to the numerical audit of popularity.<sup>35</sup>

Perverted though some of these forms may be, vast numbers of people are now making things that look a bit like art, and are finding that it is not hard to do so. At the same time, the number

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<sup>30</sup> Michael Hardt/ Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 2000, ch. 3.4.

<sup>31</sup> Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity*, Verso, London 1998, pp. 87-9.

<sup>32</sup> This is the model offered by Wolfram Alpha which takes Mathematica procedures and applies them to selected datasets. See <http://www.wolframalpha.com/> Accessed 2 June 2011.

<sup>33</sup> See Franco Moretti, ‘Conjectures on World Literature’, *New Left Review*, new series, no. 1 (2000); ‘More Conjectures’, *New Left Review*, no. 20 (2003); ‘Network Theory, Plot Analysis’, *New Left Review*, no. 68 (2011).

<sup>34</sup> Chris Stokel-Walker, ‘Why YouTubers are Feeling the Burn’, *The Observer*, 12 August 2018; James Bridle, *New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future*, Verso, London 2018, ch. 9.

<sup>35</sup> Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ 1997.

of contemporary art museums, public and increasingly private, essential tools in gentrification and regional development, grows rapidly across the globe, making the museum experience a more common part of everyday life. Here Jameson's demand that we dialectically see the positive as negative may be put into place:<sup>36</sup> the over-population of arty products and places to show them serve the salutary demands of demystification. This remarkable set of developments puts pressure on an elite culture that has long served as a mask for neoliberalism, as the economic system itself remains in deep and threatening waters, for which our political masters have no solution, and scant resources put aside for the next crash.<sup>37</sup>

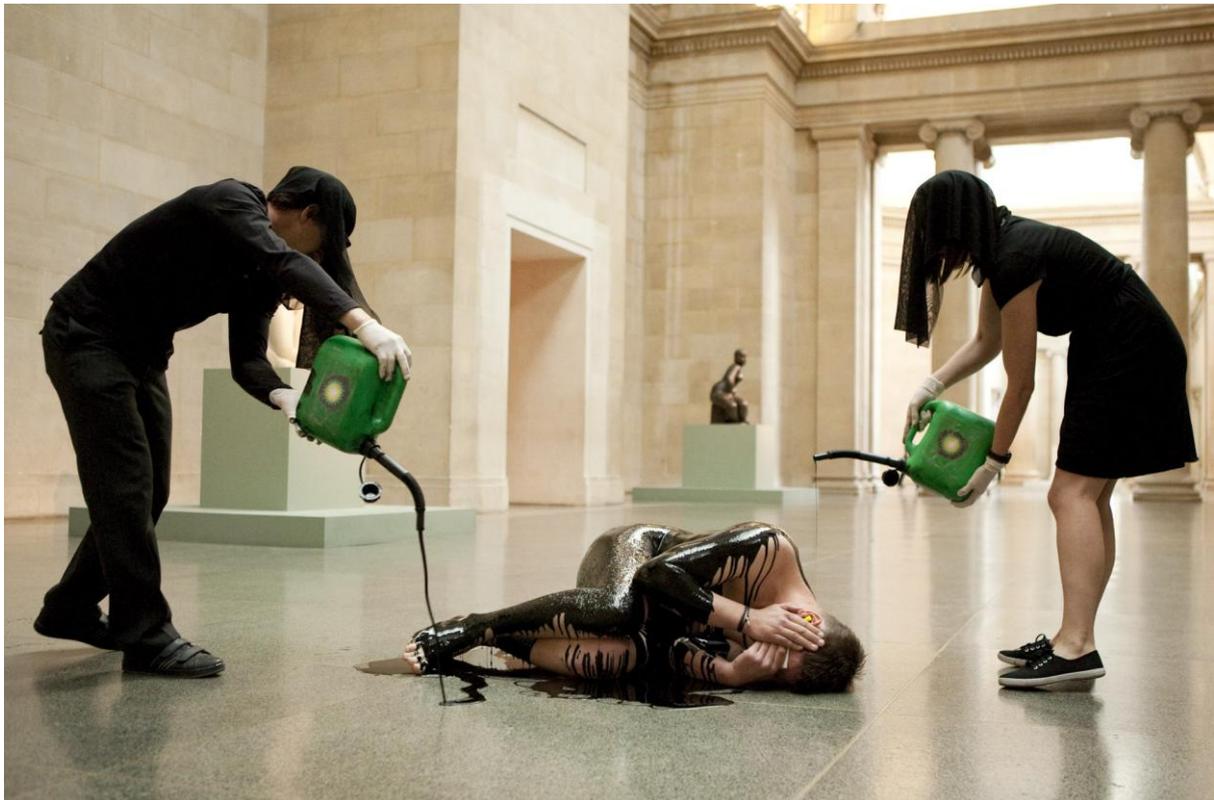


Museum glut in Seoul, South Korea. Photo: JS

<sup>36</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*, Verso, London 2009, pp. 427f.

<sup>37</sup> See Wolfgang Streeck, *Buying Time: The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism*, Verso, London 2014.

The problem of seeing beyond the horizon of the present was always one of agency and powerlessness. In his book, *Hatred of Democracy*, Jacques Rancière argues that the elite want democracy to run in such a way that they can exercise complete technocratic control over decision-making without interference from the public, but equally that they despise the decadence that they themselves make by blocking people off from political life and power.<sup>38</sup> ‘Populism’ is the elite term used to condemn any move to break the sealing off of the majority from decision-making.<sup>39</sup> Such passivity was always a First World view, a product of those nations that had the most successful technocratic governments, and that sat at the top of the pyramid of global economic oppression. Elsewhere, the years since Jameson’s book was published have been an era of revolutions. Following those that deposed the Communist dictatorships in Europe, there followed the crumbling of other authoritarian regimes that had been propped up under the Cold War—in South Africa, in many former Soviet states, in South America, and most recently in the revolts of the Arab Spring. Yet they have generally put in place regimes that have immediately or eventually bowed to the neoliberal order. The powers that ensure orthodoxy, and the ideology that they propagate, seem so inescapable that in response Wolfgang Streeck calls citizens to engage in destructive opposition.<sup>40</sup>



Liberate Tate, *Licence to Spill*, 2010

These calls have their cultural equivalents, beyond the culturally saturated sphere of protest, and echo in the art world. To take a single example: what else but destructive opposition were the actions of Liberate Tate in opposing the museum’s invidious relations with arch-polluter and

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<sup>38</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, trans. Steve Corcoran, Verso, London 2006.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>40</sup> Streeck, *Buying Time*, pp. 158-9.

cynical greenwasher, BP? Under the legal and moral cover of artistic freedom, this network of activists staged a sustained and numerous series of protests which included spilling oil over the gallery floor, bringing a gigantic wind-turbine blade into the grand hall of Tate Modern, and performing a ritual to exorcise the corruption of BP sponsorship.<sup>41</sup> Having successfully embarrassed the museum into severing its ties with Big Oil, they have moved onto other art institutions that still take that tainted cash.

It is often said that one of the defining features of populist politics is its setting of the ‘people’, variously defined or constituted, against an enemy that oppresses them. The enemy is needed, and the great failure of ‘third way’ responses to neoliberalism was to seek consensual improvement, in which all would be borne up in a great fuzzy triumph of positivity, with no blame assigned for the long years of oppression, and no privileged interest punished.<sup>42</sup> In the art world, the enemy is plain enough, and indeed personified—in the swaggering branded male artist, armoured in gold; in the flagrant conspicuous consumption of the art fair (a vulgar means of shouting: ‘look at my money!’), and ecologically ruinous as the aristocracy of business class and the private jet burn up the globe as they incessantly travel from one event to another); in the billionaire collectors themselves, in large part a bunch of ignorant thieves who slavishly follow the bragging-rights conventions that govern the buying of Koons or Stiegel or Hirst. In the face of such contempt, destructive opposition is more than warranted.

The elite condemnation of cultural populism in high art has traditionally been founded on believing that it lacks and even threatens to destroy the qualities that should most be valued in that art—ambiguity, complexity and freedom from overt use. Likewise, the political elite condemn populist movements for their lack of expertise, and their belief that complex problems will yield to simple solutions. Populist art shares with populist politics an underdog rhetoric, in which the taste of the people is defended against the snobbery of the liberal elite—Hirst or Banksy have regularly made such claims.<sup>43</sup> This is to press upon the divide between the culturally active multitude and the professional elite who control the heights of the contemporary art world and the biennial scene. Anderson again makes salient points here: first that in postmodernism there was a divide between what he calls its ‘citra’ and ‘ultra’ wings, the former sunk in the spectacular and the latter seeking to elude it, a divide which corresponds to the class of consumers and those who command the market.<sup>44</sup> Anderson goes on to compare the change from modern to postmodern to that of Renaissance to Reformation. While the intellectual achievements of the Renaissance were superior, it was an elite affair, while the Reformation was in part a popularisation of Renaissance ideas that took in ‘half the common people of Europe’. Anderson continues, writing of postmodernism:

‘Plebianization’ in this sense does mean a vast broadening of the social basis of modern culture; but by the same token a great thinning of its critical substance, to yield the flat postmodern potion. Quality has once again been exchanged for quantity, in a process

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<sup>41</sup> See <http://www.liberatetate.org.uk/>

<sup>42</sup> See Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, Verso, London 2018, p. 36.

<sup>43</sup> On the political aspect of this rhetoric, see Laclau, ‘Populism’, p. 110.

<sup>44</sup> Anderson, *Postmodernity*, pp. 105-6.

that can be looked at alternatively as a welcome emancipation from class confinement or as a dire contraction of inventive energies.<sup>45</sup>

If postmodernism is popularised modernism, then populist art is popularised postmodernism, a result of the technological stripping of command from the manufacturers of culture, whose role is now to frame the popular.

Yet the present, in its blatant contradictions and conflicts, and in its engagement of huge audiences with contemporary art, also opens the possibility of a more self-conscious and self-critical populism, one driven not only by continuous and instantaneous feedback, but also by the wide availability of tools to analyse its own cultural products and the responses to them. In this development, we may glimpse the synthesis of elite critique and common populism, and the basis for an informed, flexible, critical and effective destructive opposition.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 113.