

might challenge both the aristocratic monopoly of taste and aristocratic class-interest in government. Tracking the foundation of the art school back to Bentham, rather than identifying its purpose with the spadework of Henry Cole, gives Quinn's account a more radical political promise than comparable histories of the period.

Education, including art education, was a key battleground for the establishment of middle-class hegemony, but victory has dimmed its value. When the current coalition government's October 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review awarded the arts and humanities 0% teaching subsidy, a new phase in the politics of the art school was announced. The art school might once again be regarded as a radical institution, not because it is a conduit of bourgeois hegemony but because it finds itself in direct conflict with neoliberalism. ■

Malcolm Quinn, *Utilitarianism and the Art School in Nineteenth Century Britain*, Pickering and Chatto, 2013, 204pp, hb, £60, 978 1 8489329 8 2.

DAVE BEECH is an artist in the collective Freee.

## It's the Political Economy, Stupid: The Global Financial Crisis in Art and Theory

While it was inevitable that the global economic downturn, subsequent crises and related artistic responses would spawn a number of anthologies, Gregory Sholette and Oliver Ressler's is one of the most recent and, in parts, among the best. A brightly oversized book that accompanies an exhibition curated by the editors, it features many colour illustrations and texts by some formidable theorists. All the same, it is hard to figure out exactly what this volume seeks to achieve, as it offers an awkward amalgam of art discourse, pamphleteer-style texts and a quasi-documentary dance around diverse notions of political intervention.

The title is drawn from an essay republished here by theorist Slavoj Žižek, which paraphrases a Bill Clinton motto from the 1992 US presidential campaign: 'the economy, stupid.' Žižek analyses the strategic ways economic (mis-)information is disseminated by the engines of the status quo and returns to Francis Fukuyama's specious

notion of the post-Cold War 'end of history' circulated widely via the economist's 1992 book of the same name. Using his characteristically abundant verbiage and highly theatrical rhetoric, Žižek concludes: 'The new emancipatory politics will no longer be the act of a particular social agent, but an explosive combination of different agents. What unites us is that, in contrast to the classic image of proletarians who have "nothing to lose but their chains", we are in danger of losing ALL: the threat is that we will be reduced to abstract empty Cartesian subjects deprived of all substantial content, dispossessed of our symbolic substance, with our genetic base manipulated, vegetating in an unlivable environment.'

Leave it to old hand Žižek to morph some fairly dry economic discussions into an apocalyptic JG Ballard-style landscape. But herein lies some of the difficulty presented by this ambitious volume: the attempt to synchronise truly depressing, cold hard data with various occasionally overheated artistic and textual responses. Sometimes the neo-Marxist artworks come over as being as stilted as the script of a Maoist-period Godard film. It is perhaps notable, however, that the works discussed often reflect a knowing surrender to satirical and whimsical acts that certainly cannot be expected actually to effect social change, but instead to create representations responding to the pressures of current circumstances and convey this in various provisional forms, whether discursive in tone ('Reading Lenin with Corporations' 2008-, by the collective comprising Yevgeniy Fiks, Olga Kopenkina and Alexandra Lerman; Melanie Gilligan's creepy 'Crisis in the Credit System' series of videos), highly vivid (Isa Rosenberger's *Espiral – A Dance of Death in 8 Scenes*, 2010-12), or at times both (Ressler's own 2012 video *The Bull Laid Bear*).

John Roberts's essay 'The Political Economisation of Art' succeeds well in capturing the historical background of the current economic period, noting that it dates back to the general stagnation of economic growth of the early 1970s. He also outlines effectively the context of the recent 'social turn' in art practice and how increasingly 'relational' approaches paralleled a decline in opportunities for artists in terms of exhibitions and teaching, and their corresponding enlistment into the workforce as 'cognitive creative/technicians' – noting that, paradoxically, 'the artist becomes a wage labourer as an artist, rather than working as a wage labourer in order to support their

work as an artist'. If this is an unsettling, although familiar, phenomenon, art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson, in a rather more affirmative tone, cites Ben Kimmont's long-term project (since 1998) of being a bookseller, a work entitled *Sometimes a Nicer Sculpture is Being Able to Provide a Living for Your Family*. Bryan-Wilson calls this 'occupational realism', stating that: 'these are performances in which artists enact the normal, obligatory tasks of work under the highly elastic rubric of "art". Here, the job becomes the art and the art becomes the job.'

Brian Holmes offers an almost poetic manifesto of 'Art after Capitalism' (a bit hard to contain one's scepticism even if altogether sympathetic to his stated claims). He openly acknowledges that his call for 'art into life' is indebted to earlier avant-gardism but it becomes difficult to split the divide between his advocacy of practices such as 'building a community centre, planting a garden, preparing a meal, writing a text together, or just talking around a table', and his simultaneous disdain for so-called 'relational' works – is it because that term is so closely associated with artists who have become major economic properties in the art market? 'Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street', a reprinted lecture by theorist Judith Butler, offers an eloquent and succinct examination of the significance of the embodied subject in public/private space in the light of recent protests, while David Graeber elucidates connections between historic anarchist principles and the Occupy movement.

Ultimately the book does make a concerted effort to link together multiple ways of making reference to and working amid the precarious conditions of today's social climate, yet it remains slightly unclear if there really is a post-crash period that is somehow wholly different in creative terms from any number of other traumatic 'post' eras that have often ushered in – at least for a time – some provocative examples of determinedly engaged yet reflective art theory and practice. ■

*It's the Political Economy Stupid: The Global Financial Crisis in Art and Theory*, eds Gregory Sholette & Oliver Ressler, Pluto Press, 2013, 192pp, £19.99, 978 0 7453336 9 4.

MARTIN PATRICK is an art critic and a senior lecturer in the School of Art at Massey University in Wellington, New Zealand.



ANNE HARDY 12 April – 26 May 2013

MAUREEN PALEY. 21 Herald Street, London E2 6JT +44 (0)20 7729 4112 info@maureenpaley.com www.maureenpaley.com