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## The Grim Dance

Gregory Sholette and Oliver Ressler (eds.), *It's The Political Economy, Stupid: The Global Financial Crisis in Art and Theory* Pluto Press, 192pp, £19.99, ISBN 9780745333694

reviewed by Pascal Porcheron

*It's the Political Economy, Stupid* is both a book and a series of artist-curated exhibitions intended as a response to the various crises that have engulfed the world's economies, leading to one of the deepest, longest recessions in living memory. It is designed, as the book's editors put it, to be 'an object lesson in backtalk, of impertinence objectified'. Of course 'impertinence objectified' might easily be read as 'stylised protest', a fate made poignant by the book's appearance at the tail-end of the Occupy Movement. Appearing late, the writers have to perform a balancing act, mixing a knowing irony with an underlying sincerity of purpose. Slavoj Žižek, unsurprisingly, is the most adept at this, his eponymous essay providing baffling humour and deep insight from line to line.

In the 19th century, the combined effects of the growth of new media (mechanical reproduction, photography) and philosophies (Marxism, phenomenology) that undermined the notion of an unmediated, accessible experience of 'reality', contributed to the popularisation of the belief in a distinction between appearance and reality, the products of the mind and the world of objects. New media made it easier for artists to appeal to a mass audience, a tendency that both galvanised and was a response to the decline in traditional patronage. It was now possible to view art either as a commodity or, because the artificial nature of the artwork had been brought to the fore, as a method of critique. Thus arose the famous distinction between 'art' and 'life' that, in various guises, has haunted theory and practice since modernism. The idea that 'art' and 'life' were separate realms of experience gave rise to political confusion. How might artists represent universal experience? If art could not represent the 'real', then it was no longer responsible for reality's vagaries. As such, artists found themselves freer - theoretically and financially - to speculate. This freedom came at a cost: that they might no longer be relevant.

A classic example of this dilemma occurred in the 1890s, when the novelist Lucien Descaves was tried by the French state for writing an 'anti-militaristic' novel. Even Emile Zola, an author whose political interests make him an unlikely candidate, was among the signatories of a petition that defended artists' rights to preferential political treatment. The document defines art as a space of free thought, not subject to the same laws as the political sphere, and claims free expression to be the artist's prerogative. In this way the artists both defended their position as critics of the political sphere even as they banished themselves from it.

This separation can be viewed in two ways: it may be that a belief in artifice confers upon art its utopian revolutionary potential – the disenfranchised artist offers, through her work, a glimpse at an alternative reality. It may equally be that art comes to be viewed as irrelevant to 'lived experience', merely a relic cherished by aesthetes or as a commodity. Brian Holmes' excellent essay, 'Art After Capitalism', argues that the most important legacy of the avant-garde is their attempt to patch up this division by 'unfolding formal complexity into lived experience.' However it is life that is complex, and art a model we may or may not use to make sense of it. Therefore, it is not the much-vaunted bridging of the gap between art and life, but rather the pretence of doing so that opens up the space for radical art, by turning questions of aesthetic form over into questions of systemic validity.

Even when artists attack the notion of a special status for art (like pop artists or the Situationists did) they find their ideas defined and legitimated by this division. It is via this ghostly distinction that works that try to disrupt the boundary between an 'artistic sphere' and a political one derive their power. How else do we explain the interest generated by conceptual works like Ben Kinmont's *Sometimes a Nicer Sculpture is Being Able to Provide a Living for Your Family?* Kinmont decided, in 1998, to set up a bookselling business that operates like any other business. The only difference between Kinmont's bookshop and yours is one of definition. Still the distinction, debunked at every turn, persists, like a zombie bank. So Melanie Gilligan and others call art 'a singular type of commodity,' and Julia Bryan-Wilson compares, but does not erase the distinction between, the art-worker and the proletarian. Rather artists, according to the assembled theorists, find themselves in a parallel position to workers, faced with an existence that has become increasingly financially precarious. Precarity is the term that is supposed to bind art-workers and other workers together in common struggle - although the contributors do not consider the difference between chosen and enforced versions of this life.

The design and content of the book dovetail amicably – the title pages are adorned with graph lines going haywire,



while the candy stripe cover recalls Uncle Sam's trousers. The art showcased is varied both in terms of its medium and tone – some of it conventional agitprop, some exercises in deconstruction. Melanie Gilligan's wide-ranging contribution, 'Derivate Days' makes note of the parallel between the growth of financial instruments that recycle or 'repackage' assets and liabilities with the growth of art that is, well, derivative – art that 'mines its own history'. There is nothing new of course about the techniques of parody, mimicry, collage and cannibalisation. What strikes Gilligan as new is the extent to which these practices have proliferated in both fields. They are, mind, only parallel phenomena, not necessarily related. Some derivations, such as Dread Scott's 'Money to Burn' are uninspiring. It would be hard to improve upon the K Foundation's torching of a million pounds. And in any case burning money is what monetarists do. Others challenge authority in sophisticated ways, such as IWT's 'Post-Fordist Variations', a set of lithographic plates that riff on an original newspaper headline.

Isa Rosenberger's *Espiral*, a video installation in which Chilean dancer Amanda Piña performs Kurt Joos' 1932 Dance of Death in front of the Austrian National Bank, is both a critical reflection on capitalism's deja-vu and a melancholy encounter between Gilligan's two spheres, both 'mining their own history' for solutions to the crisis. The melancholy idea of the 'grim dance' between artists and labourers on the one side and economic conditions on the other recurs in numerous pieces, most effectively in Linda Bilda's 'Labor and Capital', in which two flimsy acrylic figurines, one a woman and one a shark, dance awkwardly together. However labour here has the upper hand, leading the more powerful of the two creatures, the shark, who finds itself helpless on dry land. This piece is one of many empowering works in the collection, which largely avoids the trap of defeatism, even when the prognoses (e.g. 'a devastatingly inadequate system is the central fact of our time') are dire. As the book's final contributor puts it, 'art after capitalism' may seem like an impossible notion, but it's worth thinking about anyway.

*'It's the Political Economy, Stupid'* is showing at the Pori Art Museum, Pori, Finland, until 26 May.

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