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Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

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

by [William Powhida](#) on July 8, 2013



It's the Political Economy, Stupid
(Pluto Press, 2013)

It's the Political Economy, Stupid is a well-structured collection of uneven essays and short texts organized around a traveling, international art [exhibition](#) about the global financial crisis. Unless you are initiated into the international circuit of political art (hint, this isn't about Ai WeiWei or Theaster Gates), most of the artists are relatively obscure and the book, edited by Gregory Sholette and Oliver Ressler, devotes too few pages of substantive text about the art, though there is plenty of photographic documentation. I admit, I was unfamiliar with a number of the European artists included in the exhibition and unaware that it already [stopped](#) at New York's Austrian Cultural Forum in the winter of 2012. To this end, the book and exhibition are an excellent introduction to artists working with the global economy, finance, and capitalism.

As expected, the artists in the exhibition — among them [Dread Scott](#), [Reading Lenin with Corporations](#) (Fiks & Kopenkina & Lerman), and [Filippo Berta](#) — take the financial crisis of 2008 and the ensuing protests and political upheavals throughout the United States, Europe, Southwest

Asia, and North Africa, as their departure point. What is curious though is how much of the art, predominantly single and two-channel videos and performance, is designed to operate within the “failed paradigm of the art institution.” Sholette and Ressler acknowledge this condition by arguing that the exhibition is an “occupation by artists as curators” within institutions that now largely function as managerial extensions of the capitalist system. While Sholette and Ressler don’t make any claims to presenting avant-garde work that radically breaks down boundaries of artistic production, distribution, or reception, the emphasis on art institution-friendly forms runs up uncomfortably against what essayist John Roberts calls the “anticipatory possibility” of new art and critical thought. Two essays by Brian Holmes and Julia Bryan-Wilson, “Art after Capitalism” and “Occupational Realism,” specifically explore the possibility and execution of radical new art forms.



(all photographs by the author for Hyperallergic)

The relationship between these radical claims and the art’s production and reception is not very different from either of their relationship to capitalism, which is generally paradoxical. While the art and essays share a common critique of capitalism, it has visibly failed, the theoretical essays by definition are speculative about the future of art praxis in yet-to-be-determined dimensions that sound more like Occupy Wall Street direct actions and protests than the art in the exhibition.

That is to say, theory anticipates new forms of “art after capitalism” to use Brian Holmes’s essay

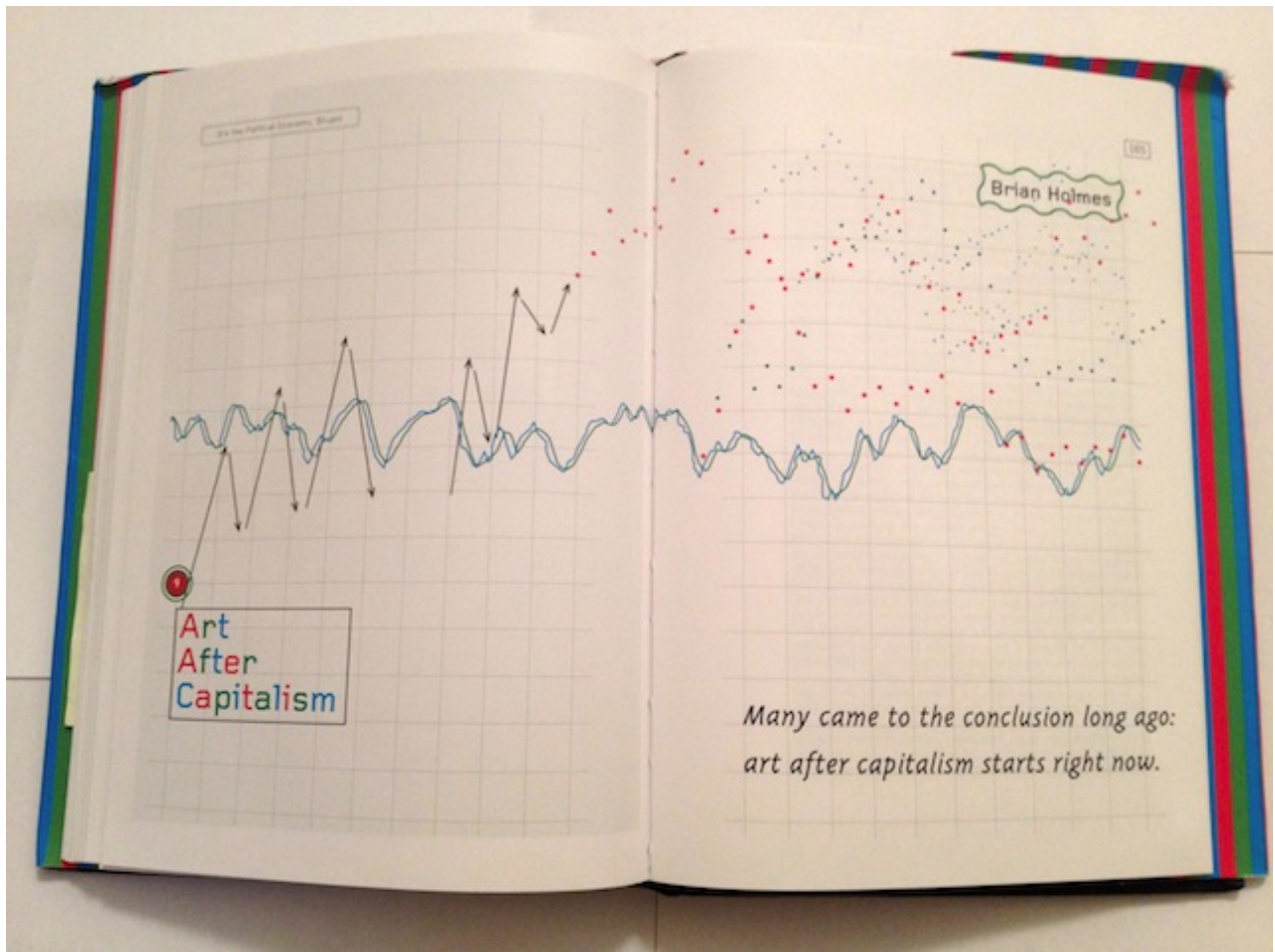
title, which aptly turns out to be the final essay. Near the end, Holmes acknowledges that the idea of art after capitalism may be a laughable concept, but it anticipates the radical potential of communal work where “the group itself in its affective and collaborative pulse – is the primary thing we produce together.” While many works in the exhibition are collaborative, more often than not the art is a product of two-three individuals, not large, authorless, ad hoc communities. [Occupy Museums](#) is one of the few large collaborative groups referenced in the book and their participation in the 2012 Berlin Biennial is as good of an example as any of Holmes’s definition of “art after capitalism.” What that looks like is people talking and doing things intended to produce some outcome, which itself is also often determined by the group in process. There is little presentation or creation of art products for sale and would be defined as a social or relational practice by arts institutions.



Thus, having an exhibition composed of traditional formats — video and performance art — ultimately serves to illuminate the gap between theory and the reality of global capitalism. It becomes apparent that the art holds a rather pragmatic position, even when its content may be radically political, in order to “occupy” cultural institutions. Roberts identifies this as a process of negotiation, or socialization, within capitalist structures. It could be also be argued that the format of the book is also a very pragmatic response to issues of production and distribution. It costs \$25.68 for the hardcover book [on Amazon.com](#) and it is published by [Pluto Press](#).

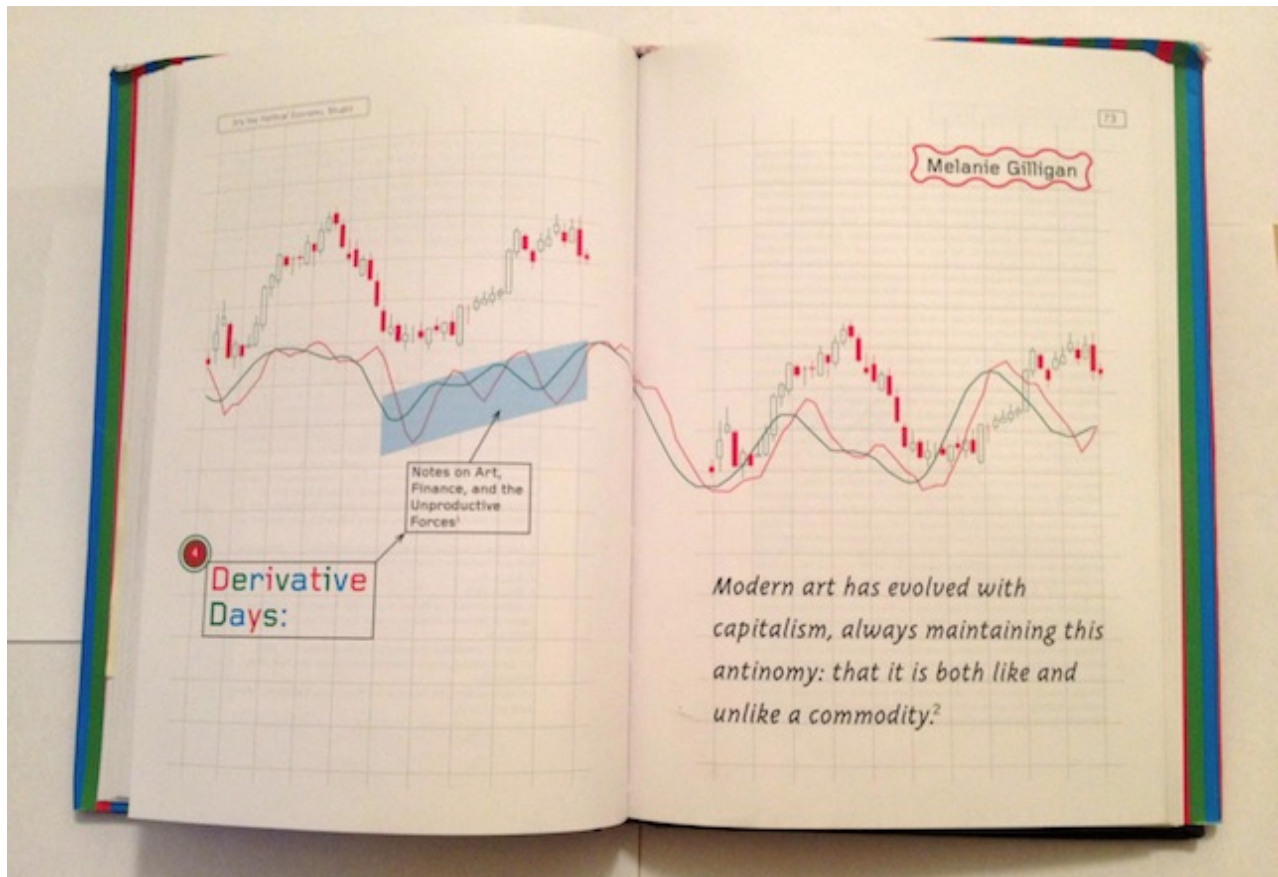
This schism between the art in *It's the Political Economy, Stupid* and anticipatory possibility of art

after capitalism finds another parallel in the pragmatic form the editors chose for the book. Critic-activist Martha Schwendenner recently [called](#) for utopian proposals in the *Brooklyn Rail* following a previous issue of [responses](#) to the “crisis of criticism.” The format of nearly every response (including [my own](#)) was that of an individual author. The only response that anticipated Holmes’ thesis of collective action was from Caroline Woolard, who [wrote about](#) the difference between writing as an individual versus writing as a collective. She spoke of the desire to produce an authentic “we” response, not a coercive “we” used to create the appearance of mutual agreement. While many artists and writers I know lament the difficulty of creating or writing by committee, this is the state Woolard and Holmes anticipate, “Art after capitalism only begins when we find new ways to work together.” In Woolard’s case, a new way would be to think collectively and produce writing that reflects an actual “we.”



Here’s the thing: this book remains a collection of essays written by individual authors — with the exception of the introduction and one section on the exhibition essays. There is a difference between a collection of individual voices and a collective response. This gap between how the majority of the artists and writers in the book actually work and what they think is evident. It feels as if the book says ‘We anticipate working together, but we don’t yet (and we use the term we a lot, but not in the the literal sense).’ As Sholette and Ressler state in the introduction their efforts and the evolving exhibition are “pointing towards the horizon of a very different world, and a very different language,” but admit they aren’t there yet. It is exceedingly difficult, unless you happen to

work in film, theatre, or design where collaborative, even authorless participation is the norm. The traditional forms of art, literature, philosophy, and political theory are still generally produced by individuals whom we identify by last names, like Marx.

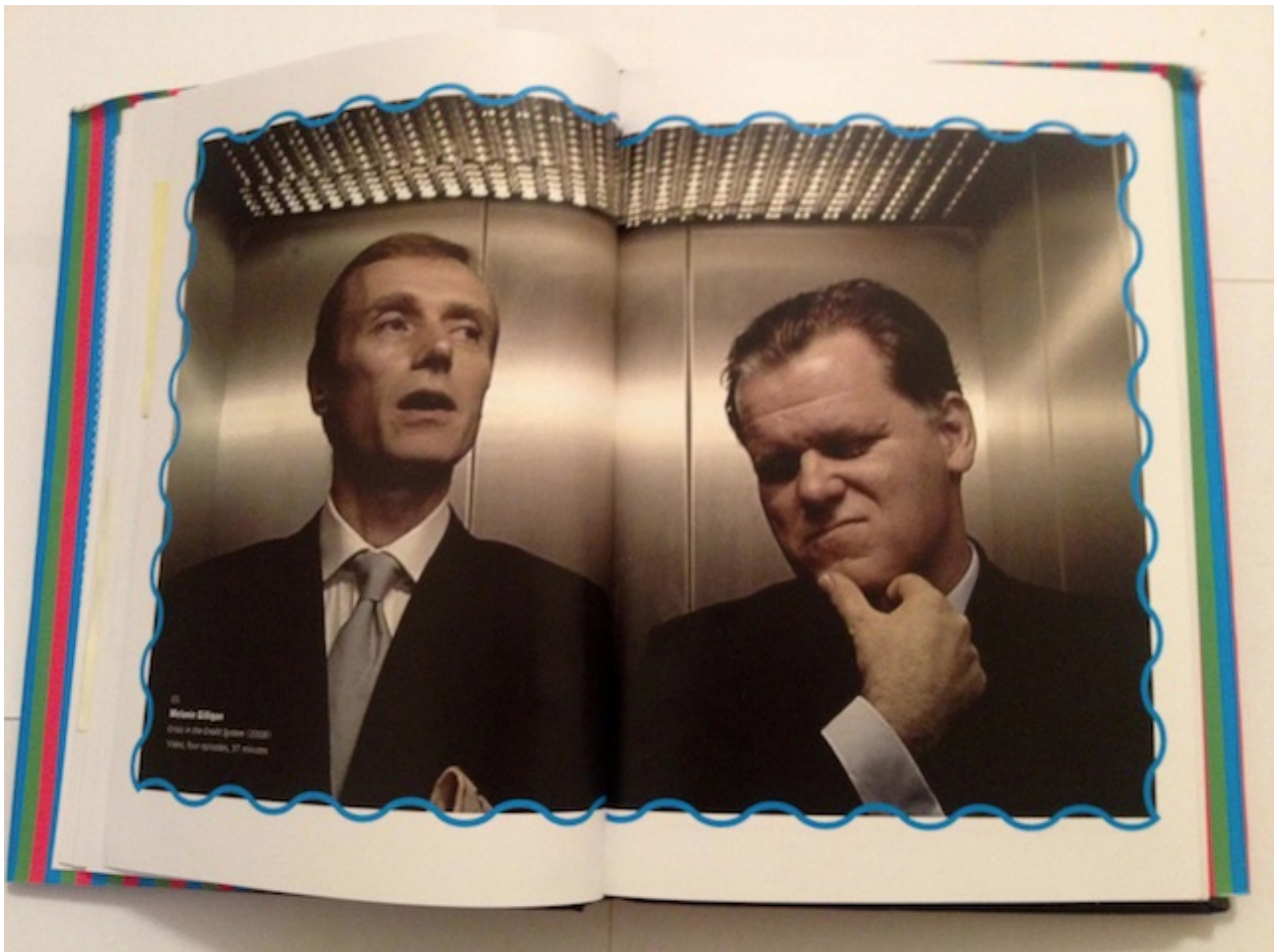


The anticipatory state of possibility in the book gives it a particular character, which is one of anxious optimism (to riff on Klaus Biesenbach's term "dark optimism") among those waiting for transparently logical outcomes that seem imminent, but not immediately so. Roberts argues that socialized capitalism, or co-op capitalism, will likely continue for some time, "binding labor to capital in a grim dance ...". Again, it sounds like, "We all realize neo-liberal capitalism is fucked, so we must do something else. It should probably involve groups doing things." In the meantime, all of the contributors write essays, make political videos, engage in public performances, protest, etc., in overlapping roles as writers, teachers, artists, and activists. In his eponymous essay, Žižek says "The pressure to 'do something' is here like the superstitious compulsion to do some gesture when we are observing a process on which we have no real influence. Are our acts not often such gestures? The old saying 'Don't just talk, do something!' is one of the most stupid things one can say." Instead Žižek suggests stepping back, assessing the situation, and figuring out a course of action that might actually work.

I imagine the material realities (employment, income, precarity) of the book's contributors necessarily involve 'doing things' like teaching, publishing, theorizing, making art, working at various occupations, living in Capitalist economies, while anticipating a major shift away from that material reality. One of the darkest quotes in the books is also by Žižek and captures the double-bind of doing things:

“The self-propelling circulation of the Capital thus remains more than ever the ultimate Real of our lives, a beast that by definition cannot be controlled since it itself controls our activity, making us blind for even the most obvious insights into the dangers we are courting. It is one big fetishist denial: “I know very well the risks I am courting, even the inevitability of the final collapse, but nonetheless ... I can protract the collapse a little bit more, take a little bit greater risk, and so on indefinitely.”

While I hope the outlook is not so dismal for the contributors working within the controls of Capitalism, Žižek’s assertion about the ultimate Real dictates a certain amount of contradictory doing on our part; writing from individual positions with cross-purposes; to think deeply, to attack false class consciousness, to publish, to secure tenure, to be acknowledged, to be credited, to be paid, to achieve respect, anticipate the coming revolution, object to ruling ideology, etc. So goes the life of the academic and the artist in the post-Fordist economic model, which just in case you aren’t up on your economic models is another word for our post-industrial service and information based economies characterized by rising income inequality, decreasing real wages for the 99%, fewer benefits, privatized retirements plans, etc.

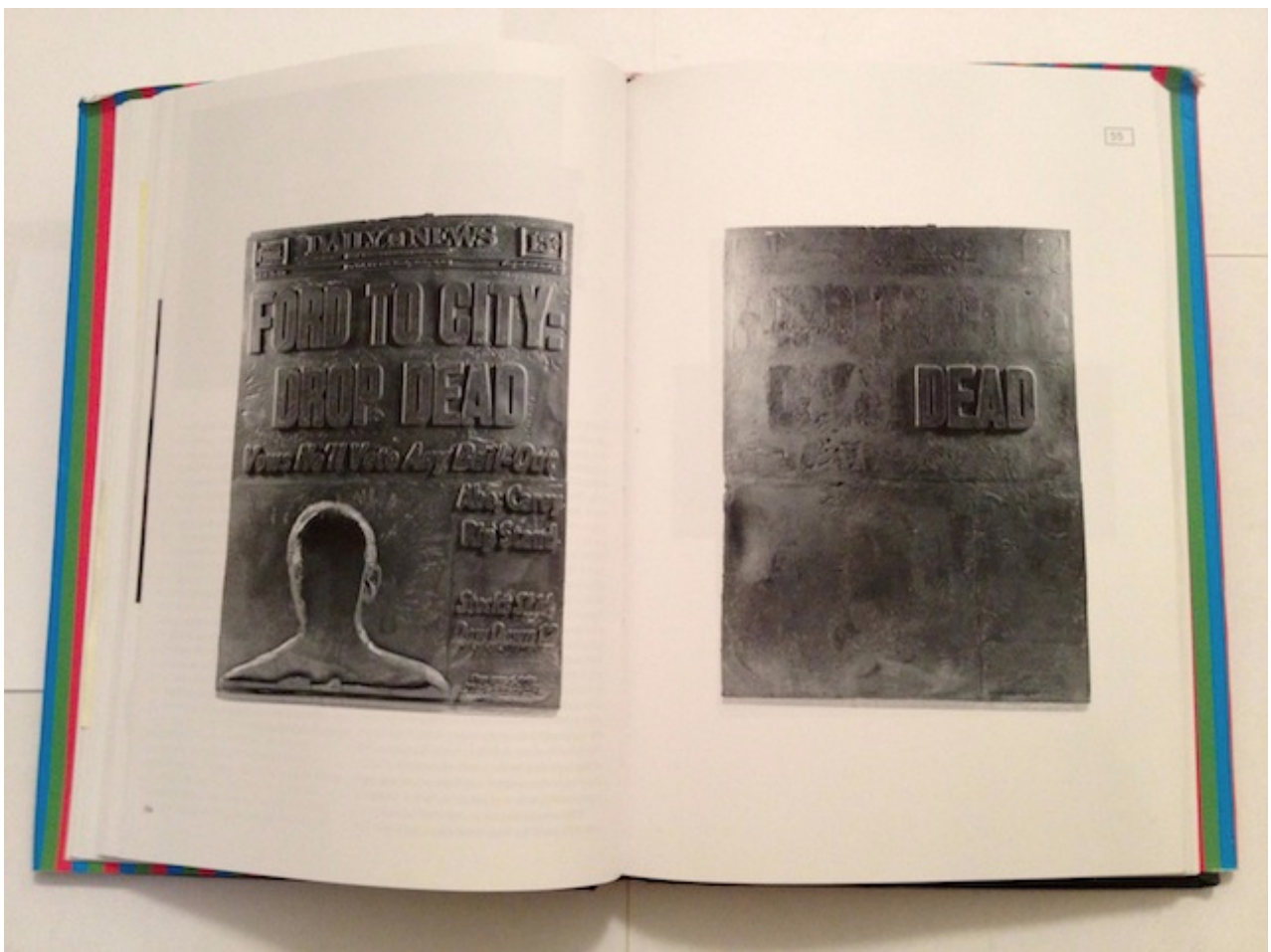


This is the post-Fordist position of precarity for whatever kind of work you engage in (if you are able to engage in work), which requires you to take care of yourself now and in the future. Roberts says that when the majority realizes that there will be “no more New Deals” then the transition

away from tying income to labor may finally begin. Science-Fiction author Kim Stanley Robinson recently used a phrase, "[the precariat](#)," to distinguish this new class condition, and one whose consciousness may finally bring about radical new relationships not-of-capital.

Unfortunately, "co-op capitalism," which according to Roberts allows for autonomy and self-management, may be appealing to entrepreneurs and people who find themselves in a position to accomplish their dreams, or at least not hate the conditions of their labor. I've done quite well at my own cross-purposes as an artist; to critique the market, to sell in the market, to critique art, to make art, to rant, to be insubordinate. I also mention this to implicate my position in the Real, not the abstract state of the capital-A Anticipatory.

When I think of outsider positions, one is the Anticipatory where an individual or group can operate in a 'pure' manner, a hypothetical future moment where things should be different. The best practitioners of the Anticipatory live out as much of their progressive ideals as they can in the Real. Unfortunately, the Anticipatory moment is also a horizon just as are Nostalgic and Sentimental moments that exist in idealized histories. The desire to be anywhere but here and now in the Real is a rather powerful attraction for both the left and the right. It's in this idealized Anticipatory state where the theoretical ideas of *It's the Political Economy, Stupid* exist, while the book and the art were produced in the Real.



I think this is my central criticism of the book, but not one that negates the excellent structure of

the texts, which moves slowly from the broad critiques of Žižek towards the more specific analysis and speculation of Roberts and Gilligan, creating a substantive critique of the global financial crisis. What would have made this book something to recommend enthusiastically would have been a radical form, an actual break from the Real into the conditions of 'art after capitalism', or more appropriately 'theory after capitalism.' If Sholette and Ressler want all of us to make the shift with them into the future horizon, they can't just rely on others to tell us. They might take a risk in the Real with a radical break in the normative format of the book. However much I agree with its philosophy and politics, this is not the radical breakthrough it anticipates. It does make an excellent primer on why that radical breakthrough is both so necessary in the face of the continuing global financial crisis, and so unlikely in the near future. As Žižek and Roberts suggest, the now is a state of negotiation between the Real and the Anticipatory.

It's the Political Economy, Stupid (*Pluto Press, 2013*) is available [online at Amazon](#) and elsewhere.

Tagged as: [Gregory Sholette](#), [It's the Political Economy Stupid](#), [Oliver Ressler](#), [Slavoj Žižek](#)

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**J Redmann** • an hour ago

"Žižek suggests stepping back, assessing the situation, and figuring out a course of action that might actually work."

What is it exactly that is trying to be achieved? Are the artists trying to return to a new deal standard of living by highlighting the differences past vs present through art? Or is it more about highlighting perverse inequalities? I'm a little confused (perhaps reading the book would help).



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