> "Your secure - no escaping he whispers. He leans forward and plants a brief chaste kiss leaving me reeling – my insides clenching at the thrilling unexpected touch of his lips. "I like this harness," he whispers…" [1]

50 Shades of Red: Enterprise Culture and Social Practice Art, a Love Story?

Gregory Sholette – March 4, 2014

Imagine a communal body defined solely by aesthetic criteria, indifferent to marketing specialists and cool hunters, something resembling a desiring collective – a machine whose solidarity emerges from a constantly materializing sensual interaction with everyday life. The very possibility of such a cooperative being haunts our bedraggled capitalist present, not because it represents what is utterly unthinkable, but because the socialization of labor by capital has made it so palpable.

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What is Social Practice Art? Who gets to define it? And why?

A recent New York Times article sought to answer at least some of these questions. Entitled "Outside the Citadel, Social Practice Art is Intended to Nurture" the reporter puzzled over how institutions can teach contemporary art that blurs the lines between "object making, performance, political activism, community organizing, environmentalism and investigative journalism." In doing so he states this work allegedly pushes contemporary art close to the breaking point. The piece goes on to say that although leading museums have largely ignored so-called social practice art by contrast many smaller art institutions,

> see it as a new frontier for a movement whose roots stretch back to the 1960s but has picked up fervor through Occupy Wall Street and the rise of social activism among young artists.[2]

Of course this is not the first time art with an explicitly socially agenda has engaged flourished on the margins of the art world only to gradually, or rather I should say

[1] Excerpt from the erotic bestseller "Fifty Shades of Grey," Vintage Books, 2012.
[2] Randy Kennedy, "Outside the Citadel, Social Practice Art Is Intended to Nurture." The New York Times, March 20, 2013. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/24/arts/design/outside-the-citadel-social-practice-art-is-intended-to-nurture.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1&

selectively, turn up first in small and then increasingly more established cultural institutions until some few individuals come to represent its all but inevitable passing from the scene. This is not to disparage those whose works are canonized under the heading "political art," "committed art," "socially concerned art," and so forth. Rather it is to raise a red flag regarding the direction the newly minted "social practice" is already beginning to take. Two questions to bear in mind regarding this moment is not only who benefits from the codification of a given activity, and of course also who loses, but under what conditions and on whose terms does this process of classification proceed. It would be remarkable in other words if social practice art were uniquely capable of writing its own contract of usage by institutional power. If one is to wear a harness in other words, it should come at a price.

Let's just say that…

It starts like this. The initially turbulent reemergence of political art, activist art, interventionist art, collectivized art, socially engaged/ relational/participatory/dialogical art. Some see it as a return of concerns dating back to the early years of the avant-garde, others as the resurgence of 1968, which has in many ways grown just as distant as the turn of the last Century I supposed. Still others perceive it as little more than an artistic genre, or a concept useful for organizing the next exhibition, or perhaps freshening-up this or that tired museum collection. But even in my lifetime I recall the late 1980s when "political art" unexpectedly became hip. It was featured in the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition Committed To Print in 1988, the Dia Art Foundation's projects with Martha Rosler and Group Material in Soho at about the same time, and a few year later at the Whitney Biennial of 1993 which was described by some as a pleasureless return to cultural Stalinism, although to many of us on the Left it was seen as an anemic attempt to symbolically represent the politicization of artists starting roughly in the late 1960s but continuing into the early 1980s (and probably it is not a coincidence that some of this work from the 1993 Whitney Biennial was recently on view at the New Museum downtown).

But we know this kind of cultural turbulence "from below" is not aimed at establishing yet another aesthetic category. And we know its resurgence is not simply a case of mere repetition, at least not in any familiar sense of that word. The shift is more fundamental. The dark matter of the art world is rising, for better and for worse.

Still, it's complicated.

Thanks to an ever more accessible technology for manufacturing, documenting, distributing, as well as pilfering, revamping, and fictionalizing information, a previously obscured realm of cultural productivity has begun to brighten, materialize, and sometimes even cohere into thickening networks of exchange that bristle with a desire for independence not only from prevailing market forces, but also from mainstream art institutions. We might describe this shift as the sudden unblocking of what Alexander Kluge and Oscar Negt called a counter public sphere: the defensive production of fantasy generated in response to the alienating conditions of capitalism. Or we could refer to this process as the illumination of a previously shadowed realm of informal, everyday imagination from "below," a phenomenon I sometimes describe as art's missing mass or "dark matter." Still, this visualization not only exposes pent-up desires, it also releases less savory forms of anger and resentment all the while throwing a light on the actual socialized conditions of labor, conditions that have become essential for *all forms of artistic production today*. And this inescapable visualization of social production comes at a moment when the usual precariousness of artists had reached a new level of intensity.

As is widely known even professional artists –that is to say those with credentials such as BFA or MFA – typically work two or three non-art related jobs in order to maintain a modest level of income. On top of this are increasingly unaffordable health care expenses and reasonable studio space rental has been pushed to the far-off urban margins by gentrification. Add to this is a scarcity not only of full-time teaching positions, but also part time adjunct work. Sociologist Pierre-Michel Menger writing before the recent global economic crisis reported that poverty rates amongst artists in the United States were "higher than those for all other professional and technical workers." [3] Since 2008 this extreme precariousness amongst artists is less and confined to the United States.

Compounding this bleak situation is the ever-greater waves of graduating artists from schools and universities who augment an already over-saturated industry with a glut of artists described by Carol Duncan in 1984 as "the normal condition of the art market." Shortly before the global financial collapse a 2005 *Rand Corporation* study found that,

[3] Pierre-Michel Menger "Artistic Labor Markets and Careers," in *Review of Sociology*, Vol. 25. (1999), pp. 541-574.

> The number of artists in the visual arts has been increasing (as it has in the other arts disciplines), and their backgrounds have become more diverse. At the same time, however, the hierarchy among artists, always evident, appears to have become increasingly stratified, as has their earnings prospects. At the top are the few "superstar" artists whose work is sold internationally for hundreds of thousands and occasionally millions of dollars." [4]

In a nutshell: Risk Rules!

Nevertheless the appearance of social production within the world of high culture has unsettled the gatekeepers of the artistic canon. They eyeball it, cautiously, hoping it is nothing but a short-lived detour from business as usual. Their greatest concern is not how to manage some deeply subversive or radical content, instead it is the very appearance of this social production itself that is disturbing because it directs our attention towards an ellipsis within the dominant cultural narrative: a point of uncertainty in a story where no such doubt is supposed to exist. It raises questions. Where did all these artists come from? Who is producing them? What role do they play in the reproduction of the art world? What are we – museums, art historians, foundations- supposed to do with all this shit?

When patience wears thin and strategic acts of evasion fail the mainstream art world devises ways of filtering out the less manageable elements of this challenging tumult, all the while dropping a trail of breadcrumbs to attract those bits they believe they can safely work with. These crumbs lead into museums and academic programs and guide certain artists towards whatever miniscule pots of public funding have not been completely eliminated by the culture wars. It is a process of seduction and discipline that reads like a scenario ripe for pulp fiction. The harness is tailor made. It's a work of art.

Performing Social Practice

I have to be honest and confess that this process of seduction and discipline is not some abstract thing. There is in fact a social practice curriculum that I am involved with developing at Queens College. This is where I teach and how I pay the bills. Ours is just

[4] Kevin F. McCarthy, et al., *Rand Report: A portrait of the visual arts: meeting the challenges of a new era*, Rand Corp., 2005; http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2005/RAND_MG290.sum.pdf

one of a handful of such initiatives in the United States along with California College of Art in San Francisco, Portland State, and Otis Institute (although others are rumored to be in the works). These programs differ somewhat in their specific emphasis but taken together they cover every shade of socially engaged art including guerrilla architecture, urban interventions, community-based-public art, interdisciplinary design, post-studio research, green "sustainable" culture, and so forth. And because networked cultural production is not bound to traditional institutional spaces, social practice art appears free to engage with, and in turn be engaged by many potential suitors who range from political activists to representatives of the so-called creative industries - that new economic engine, which neoliberals claim will save post-industrial capitalism. Does the delight of watching high culture placed into serving progressive social transformation curdle when it ultimately benefits neoliberal enterprise culture? The art critic Ben Davis has asserted as much when he insists that,

> what appears at one juncture to be radically opposed to the values of art under capitalism often later appears to have represented a development intrinsic to its future development, for the simple reason that without changing the underlying fact of capitalism, you cannot prevent innovations in art from eventually being given a capitalist articulation.[5]

By contrast theorist John Roberts writes, "art today is subsumed under general social technique as a condition of art's increasing absorption into these new cognitive relations of production. The result is that the inexorable conceptualization of art since the 1960s has found a ready home within the new relations of production." [6]

In other words the very dynamic processes of capital itself are forcing a previously hidden social production into view, all the while attempting to bring it under control. Roberts more nuanced and emphatically Marxist interpretation of historical forces grasps what Davis does not. Yes, under capitalism, everything solid melts into air, but this process of continuous destruction inextricably opens up new possibilities for exposing and challenging the system whose disciplinary mechanisms have become so apparent in the aftermath of the global financial meltdown. [7] The determination of culture by capital is not a straight line of cause and effect, a lesson even capitalists

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[5] Ben Davis, "A critique of social practice art: What does it mean to be a political artist?" International Socialist Review #90 http://isreview.org/issue/90/critique-social-practice-art

[6] John Roberts, from "The Political Economization of Art," in the book *It's The Political Economy, Stupid: The Global Financial Crisis in Art and Theory*, edited by Gregory Sholette and Oliver Ressler, Pluto Press, 2013. p. 66.

[7] If this dialectic were not intrinsic to capital then how would a Marx or Luxemburg or a Trotsky formulate a anti-capitalist theory of resistance from within such a totalizing ideological regime?

embrace today judging by their celebration of thinking "outside the box" in the post-industrial workplace, a mode of "subversive" consciousness attributed rightly or wrongly to artists.

Nevertheless with this increasing visibility of artistic forms of labor emerge new possibilities and risks. On the positive side we are experiencing a moment in which artistic production is once again at the center of a struggle over definitions and possibilities not only about what constitutes a genuine avant-garde practice, but also about the very nature of labor, democracy, and political agency. But before getting carried away consider the fact that artists are seldom willing or able to demand the terms of their own disciplinary enclosure, which is a fancy way of saying their own institutionalization. Still, the very fact that our conditions of social labor have been rubbed so terribly raw it is time we artists, along with all those "creatives" who drank the cool-aid of the "new economy," consider the terms of our contract. Occupy Wall Street was clearly one phase of this reconsideration as a generation asserted "We prefer not to." The performance was interrupted by force. This time. What new barricades are called for next time?

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Once again, imagine a communal body defined solely by aesthetic criteria, indifferent to marketing specialists and cool hunters, something resembling a desiring collective – a machine whose solidarity resists appropriation by way of a constantly materializing sensual interaction with life. The very possibility of such a cooperative being haunts us today not because it is utterly unthinkable, but because the socialization of labor by capital has brought it so close. Meanwhile, the system's recent collapse makes us desperate. It puts everything and everyone at risk. Nurturing solutions are hard to resist and to some degree necessary. Flirtation with power is unavoidable. And yet notwithstanding whatever sort of love affair we once had with capitalism the time has come to break it off.

> "This is a nondisclosure agreement." He shrugs and has the grace to look a little embarrassed. "My lawyer insists on it." He hands it to me. I'm completely bemused. "If you're going for option two, debasement, you'll need to sign this."[8]

[8] "Fifty Shades of Grey" ibid