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# Occupy the Art World? Notes on a Potential Artistic Subject

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> 'Individual rights are the means of subordinating society to moral law'.
>
> Ayn Rand

> 'It is not the office of art to spotlight alternatives, but to resist by its form alone the course of the world, which permanently puts a pistol to men's heads'.
>
> Theodor W. Adorno

> 'Let us free art from the vagaries of financial speculation and privatization and restore its promise of a better world. By sharing its power to enrich all of our lives, let us make it part of our struggle to reclaim the commons'.
>
> Arts & Labor Working Group of Occupy Wall Street

'Does Occupy Signal the End of Contemporary Art?' entreated an online BBC report at the height of 2012's urban uprisings. Pointing to the abundance of populist, protest art produced by protesters the writer confidently announced that 'it is beginning to feel like a new artistic movement' (Mason 2012). Notwithstanding the wooden stake Occupy Wall Street (OWS) allegedly drove into the white-box heart of high art, more than one year later, Christie's Auction House raised a record 691 million dollars in contemporary art sales. 'It's a new world: it feels like a reinvention of the art market. I'm overwhelmed', one very exuberant Christie's insider exclaimed at the time (Adam 2013). So,

which is it: dead or alive? So just whose ends and whose beginnings are we bearing witness to at the turn of the twenty-first century? Is it the inauguration of an ever-expanding commercial art world, or some still emerging post-OWS radical art subject? Or is it both simultaneously? And, more broadly speaking, as Syria's struggling resistance and Egypt's post-revolutionary uncertainty turn into an Arab winter, and as the once furious kicks emanating from economically garrotted nations such as Cyprus, Greece, Spain and Ireland are now little more than quivers, is the world slipping so soon back into its familiar banalities that theorist Mark Fisher acerbically calls 'capitalist realism' (Fisher 2009) because, don't you know, capitalism is too big to fail? Where now is that rebel imaginary of Occupy stirring, if it is at all, and how has this fledgling experiment prepared us for the next phase of anti-capitalist cultural resistance? For, however fantastic that may seem today, it is surely to come.

## The end of art (again)

For many people 'art' still represents the epitome of non-productive, even non-social, work. It is the kind of thing we do, or imagine we would do, if ever the monotonous routines that fill our day-to-day life were lifted, or if the burden of survival were to be suspended. In this familiar scenario the artist stands on the outer edge of the communal coil at the exact point of friction between autonomous individuality and collective social need. But how then to understand those artists who choose to make work about such worldly concerns as economic inequality, social justice, war or globalisation? Do such individuals simply fail to grasp that if art has social value this must come from its non-instrumental invocation of aesthetic experience, not from its content? And that artistic subjectivity epitomises freedom not by developing a social consciousness but by maintaining a distance from society? Here Ayn Rand's moral individuality that stands stalwart against collective banalities finds common ground with Theodor W. Adorno's cultural negation as social value, their opposite political viewpoints notwithstanding.

By today's cynical standards both Rand and Adorno's romanticisation of the aesthetic is truly utopian, that is to say it exists in a/as a *no place*. The actual day-to-day workings of the art industry produces a subject so ensnared by capital that even art students in the furthest states and provinces now insist on taking classes about how to market their products. Self-branding has overtaken self-discovery. Or perhaps the two

have merged into a single feedback loop? For, as artists promote their unique creative activities via social networks, this process of 'sharing' not only serves to differentiate their wares, it also reinforces a concept of artistic identity in its own right. One side of this Möbius strip is inscribed 'I brand my art', and on the same side it reads 'my brand is art'. This ontological looping is therefore quite unlike the deeply troubled artistic consciousness that either Rand or Adorno once imagined belonged exclusively to the artist. And yet by virtue of being *no place* the integrity of their aesthetic ideal manages to assert itself over and over at every turn. Of course, few would insist that being an artist was ever wholly free of self-promotional careerism. In a society organised (in principle) around utility, being an artist greatly maximises one's individual economic risk. And even if artistic salesmanship has traditionally been handled indirectly when, say, compared to other businesses models, the artist's ability to stand out in a crowd has always been a question of survival, for the person, or for the work. So, whether or not we see art today as a calling or as a profession there is always some level of entrepreneurial skill ready at hand. If the artist does not possess this expertise then a partner, relative or dealer most often does. Risk requires capital. This capital comes in two forms: actual financial investments and symbolic or cultural capital. No artist succeeds without access to both assets. Which may be why few highly successful artists, and even fewer art historians, have come out of working class backgrounds. Or at least that is how things have operated for quite some time. A trio of changes are upending this scenario, providing both possibilities and challenges not only for genuinely critical artistic subjects but also for the customary operations of the art world.

First comes demographics. Who gets to be an artist is changing as more and more individuals from modest economic backgrounds are graduating with professional degrees from art schools and university art programmes. Yes, most of these institutions still have professors who eschew commercial knowledge, preferring instead to recount tales of earnest, studio-bound students rocketed to stardom by a Mary Boon or Larry Gagosian. But most of these students know they must balance such anecdotes against the pressing fact that a Master of Fine Arts (MFA) degree in the USA will add between $30,000 and $80,000 to one's individual debt, depending of course on the school one attends. When confronting this level of sheer existential risk, it comes as no surprise that young artists hope to succeed by commercialising their practice, even if that means nothing more than adding regular postings

to a Facebook page, although it typically involves a much greater level of self-marketing. In the ever more monetised society we have all inherited from the Regan/Thatcher revolution, each generation becomes less queasy regarding that endlessly looping Möbius strip.

The second change-factor altering the art world landscape involves participatory forms of art that are growing in popularity right alongside conventional forms of material production. Perhaps these immaterial projects are even eclipsing artistic objecthood. This of course may be a temporary phenomenon, but at this moment its effects are dramatic. Conferences, exhibitions, academic programmes and an expanding bevy of books celebrate, often with little self-criticism, the 'social turn' in art (Bishop 2006). Institutions that would never consider offering a solo exhibition to troublemakers such as Hans Haacke or Martha Rosler, or groups like Yomango or Critical Art Ensemble, now feel compelled to programme participatory and socially engaging art projects into their schedules. Though fully valorising this work may remain forever elusive, few today would assert that art has no heteronomous social worth and should instead be appreciated solely as art for art's sake.

The third force reshaping artists and artistic institutions is the rise of cognitive capital. As John Roberts points out, 'art today is subsumed under general social technique as a condition of art's increasing absorption into these new cognitive relations of production' (Roberts 2013a, 66). Both indebtedness and the socialisation of artistic practices described above are fully exploited by these new cognitive relations of production. And yet they nevertheless require that the contemporary art subject behave in a rebellious, even anti-social fashion, as if the ghost of Bohemia past demanded satisfaction. Though of course no matter how outlandish the artist becomes, she is never permitted entirely to disconnect from networked culture. After all, the entire project of what has been called 'capitalism 2.0' (see Haque 2011) depends upon a dispersed form of collectivisation that can rapidly be focused on problem solving or consumption or generating new ideas and then just as quickly be dispersed again without commitments or promises offered in return. Nevertheless, this field of digital dispersal, including its dark matter, bright stars and everything in between, remains fully within the logic of creative capital's paradigm. At this stage of capitalist subsumption, writes Fredric Jameson, 'the extra-economic or social no longer lies outside capital and economics but has been absorbed into it: so that being unemployed or without economic function is no longer to be expelled from capital but to remain within it' (Jameson 2014, 71).

In other words, chronically under-employed workers, such as artists, are neither peripheral to nor are they outside the system; instead they remain somehow *necessary for capital's reproduction*.

Contemporary capital's oft-noted lack of an 'outside' may also explain why even as art is subsumed within it – either by the global marketplace or these new cognitive relations of production, or both – it still manages to retain an irrepressible aura of freedom, even rebellion. To put this differently, it seems that by moving art's 'outlaw' status 'indoors' a trace of resistance continues to mark or gesture towards the very absence of a breach or loophole in capital's smooth hegemonic surface. This mark or smudge is crucial, for it allows art to claim a special ontological status that allegedly sets it apart from the market. It also makes it possible for artists, among other 'creatives', to use art to expose the system's empty promises in a process that has only accelerated during the economic restructuring following the financial meltdown. So conspicuous is this convergence of artistic aura and political activism that a BBC reporter made a checklist of Occupy's aesthetic tendencies including a preference for graphic design, typography and comic book imagery; a renewed emphasis on figuration (presumably shunning abstraction as a 1 per cent kind of thing); and, most of all, the movement's subversion of advertising aesthetics carried out in populist modes, as opposed to the way Pop Art once subverted commercial imagery within the elite white cube of the museum (Mason 2012). Thus, even in its most instrumentalised guise, art remains *ontologically bound* up with notions of freedom. And that is a good thing. At least it is good some of the time.

As Occupy unfolded, another version of the rebel imaginary was gestating in the USA on the far political Right. Members of the Tea Party Patriots began to dress up as eighteenth-century soldiers from the American Revolution in order to stage public protests against federal taxation and what they see as President Obama's creeping move towards 'socialism'. Notably, these 'rebels' remain active today, whereas the Occupy Movement does not. Even more darkly, we see the display of pseudo-Swastikas brandished by members of Golden Dawn in Greece and the intentionally archaic DIY medieval shields, weapons and barricades made of plywood, car tyres and ice constructed by both populist dissenters as well as members of the ultra-nationalist Right Sector in Kyiv Ukrain's Maidan movement during the 2014 winter. The unleashing of Maidan's repressed populism with its cacophony of sentimental, folkloric and progressive imaginary is just one of many recent examples in which a previously unseen or repressed cultural productivity is materialising as

public self-representation. Along with networked anti-capitalists, we also find once-scattered pockets of misogynist, Islamophobic and anti-Semitic subcultures gaining coherency and therefore improved social agency. For better and for worse, a once-obscured cultural 'dark matter' (Sholette 2010) has leapt onto the world stage. It demands our attention as well as our anxiety, respect, affection and hatred. It also raises the possibility of renewed forms of suppression. Undoubtedly, this was the fate of OWS.

## The 99 per cent aesthetic: suppression and after

It is easy to forget in the aftermath of OWS's apparent failure that it was not the demonstrators near Wall Street, nor those encamped at Fond du Lac in Wisconsin, or those at Frank H. Ogawa Plaza in Oakland, or Dilworth Plaza in Philadelphia, or the other cities who voluntarily retreated from occupied spaces. Neither did protestors in the city of Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia, or Tahrir Square in Cairo, or Pearl Square in Bahrain, or the Puerta del Sol in Madrid simply agree to withdraw from the 'commons' that they had dared to 'repossess'. Whatever 'lack' of long-term strategy these movements must now address, one fact is certain: the immediate disintegration of a global oppositional moment was brought about first and foremost by the orange control nets and stinging pepper-spray of the NYPD's White Shirts, the rubber bullets and tear gas of Egypt's State Police, and the US-supplied armoured cars and helicopters of Bahrain's security forces among the other militarised forces mobilised to protect the global corporate system. These are not metaphors, any more than the bulldozing of Zuccottii Park on 15 November 1911 was a performance piece.

What survives of Occupy continues to digest the consequences of this suppression. And while this level of state violence appears to have driven back overt acts of cultural disobedience, they reappear again as indirect modes of everyday resistance not unlike those championed by Michel de Certeau following the failure of May 1968 (de Certeau 1984, 82). Still, the memory of Wall Street, Cairo, Madrid and other occupied city centres is still raw, just as the economic crisis that fuelled these uprisings is ongoing. In the process, something else has also been inaugurated that was already in play before these events, thanks to an ever more accessible technology for manufacturing, documenting, distributing, as well as pilfering, revamping and fictionalising information. With digital technology, a previously obscured realm of cultural productivity has found a way to brighten and gain agency as dark networks

thicken, cohere and bristle with a desire for independence, not only from prevailing market forces, but also from mainstream cultural institutions including the art world.

We might describe this shift as the sudden unblocking of what Alexander Kluge and Oscar Negt (1993) called, back in the 1970s, 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 to which I referred earlier in this chapter as 'dark matter'. This visualisation not only exposes pent-up desires, it also releases less savoury forms of anger and resentment, all the while throwing a light on the actual socialised conditions of labour, which is a condition now essential for *all forms of production today* including art. And this inescapable visualisation of social production comes at a moment when the usual precariousness of artists has reached a new level of intensity.

## Where did all these artists come from and what are they aware of?

As is widely known, even professional artists – that is to say those with credentials such as the BFA or MFA (in some countries now joined by the practice-based PhD) – typically work two or three non-art related jobs in the USA in order to maintain a modest level of income. On top of this is a shortage of paid work following the 2008–09 economic breakdown and cities where reasonable studio space rentals have been pushed to the far-off urban margins by gentrification. Before the financial crisis French sociologist Pierre-Michel Menger reported that poverty rates among artists in the USA were 'higher than those for all other professional and technical workers' (Menger 1999). Since 2008, this extreme precariousness among artists is less and less confined to the USA. 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' (Duncan 1993). Shortly before the global financial catastrophe, a 2005 *Rand Corporation* study found that:

> 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. (Rand Corporation Summary 2005)

A more recent report by the privately run consulting business Arts Economics found that the art market reached €47.4 billion in total sales (fine art and antiques) in 2013 with Post War and Contemporary art forming the largest sector of these sales (Arts Economics 2014). Meanwhile, the artist's collective W.A.G.E. (Working Artists for the Greater Economy) has generated a survey in which some 577 respondents suggest that the not-for-profit sector of the art world is not exactly a fair or safe haven from the commercial art world: 'On average, the majority (58.4%) of respondents did not receive any form of payment, compensation or reimbursement for their participation, including the coverage of any expenses' (W.A.G.E. 2010).

Notably, W.A.G.E. – whose mission focuses on 'regulating the payment of artist fees by nonprofit arts organization' – was itself founded by a small group of artists in 2008 as the financial crisis began to unfold. Putting these pieces together underscores something that we already instinctively grasp: that the working conditions of artists are poor and getting more so, but also that precariousness is no longer unique to creative vocations. If anything, the asymmetrical, top-heavy world of art resembles a hyperbolic microcosm of the global economy in general, with winners taking all and the rest of us, well, to quote Benito Mussolini's fascist party: 'Losers beware!' (Fo 2002).

The fact that artists such as W.A.G.E. are turning around to examine their own labour situation is a problem for the mainstream culture industry. For several decades now, but especially since the crisis of 2008–09 we have witnessed the emergence of social labour in the art world as an inescapable presence. Combined with the tendency for self-organisation, the gatekeepers of high art are coming under siege. The emergence of an artistic subjectivity *aware of its own conditions of production* is alarming and I suspect far more threatening than most overtly political art ever was. After all, with few exceptions, artistic content today is infinitively expansive and therefore ultimately subsumable. What is not so easily subsumed is that which directs our attention towards the political economy of art itself. And if we think of culture as having a narrative, then this is like discovering an ellipsis within the story. This gap leads to uncertainty and unresolved questions.

Where did all these artists come from? What role do they play in the reproduction of the art world? How will they be managed? What follows next therefore may not offer perfect answers to these questions, but the practices listed below open up modest possibilities within the dominant cultural narrative that wants us to believe Zuccotti Park was an aberration and that resistance is futile. The time has come (once again) to allow the counter-narrative to write itself.

## Rebel imaginary post-OWS

Arts & Labor started out as a working group of Occupy Wall Street and was organised just a few blocks away from Zuccotti Park in October of 2011. Since then they have built coalitions with other activists such as Occupy Museums as well as worked in conjunction with labor groups to organize direct action protests aimed at 'exposing and rectifying economic inequalities and exploitative working conditions in our fields through direct action and educational initiatives'. To date, their most successful campaign involved working in conjunction with the Teamsters Union to forge a fair labour agreement for construction workers at the Frieze New York art fair. Picket lines and posters reading 'Will Frieze Do the Right Thing?' and 'Frieze Rat Fair' pressured the $8 million operation into accepting new terms of employment. According to the group's press release, 'starting in 2015, Frieze New York has committed to hiring 100% union labor. We applaud Frieze's effort in supporting fair labor practices and its long-term commitment to set an example for the rest of the industry'. Though no way near as large as it was during the heyday of Occupy, Arts & Labor continues to meet on a regular basis and plan actions whose significance lies in the group's ability to sustain a sharp focus on artists' working conditions within the broader context of labour solidarity (Arts & Labor website, unpaginated). Meanwhile, moving along similar lines, but across the pond, a new trade union emerged in England on May Day 2014 that aims to organise 'professional visual and applied artists'. With offices in London and Newcastle, the Artists' Union England seeks to 'challenge the economic inequalities in the art world by working together […] [for] fair and transparent payment' (Hayley Hare. 2014, unpaginated). Though it is too soon to know what kind of success Artists' Union England might achieve, the information on its website and Facebook pages indicates that solidarity with other unions is a key concern, much as it is with Arts & Labor in New York City.

OWS also gave birth to Occupy Museums, a group that continues to carry out direct protest actions against major New York City cultural institutions, including most recently at the Guggenheim Museum, to which I will return in a moment. A different OWS spin-off, however, took an alternative approach towards developing a radical post-Occupy social agency. Rather than focus on common working conditions, as Arts & Labor and Occupy Museums does, members of Strike Debt addressed the broader issue of education loans and health-care insurance costs and how these are dragging the majority of the US population down into a bottomless pit of debt. Calling this financial burden 'illegitimate and unjust', Strike Debt argues that these financial obligations are a 'major source of profit and power for Wall Street that works to keep us isolated, ashamed, and afraid'. Debt, they insist, is 'a tie that binds the 99%'. Furthermore, debt is used to 'discipline us, deepen existing inequalities, and reinforce gendered, racial, and other social hierarchies'. Like other OWS offshoots, Strike Debt deployed a range of imaginative tactics to carry out its mission, including direct action, research, educational publications and artistic interventions that agitated about debt-related issues while simultaneously seeking to imagine broader 'creating alternatives' to neoliberal capitalism (Strike Debt website, unpaginated).

Solidarity across an even wider span of space, culture and economic difference is key to the work of Gulf Labor Coalition, an organisation of which, in full disclosure, I am an active member. In 2006, the Guggenheim Museum Foundation publicly announced its plans to build a new, contemporary art showcase in Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), one of the wealthiest nations in the world. However, for the majority immigrant population in the UAE, labour conditions approach that of slavery. Workers from Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal and other parts of South Asia pay steep recruitment fees in order to be transported to the UAE where they must repay these charges before receiving wages, in a process that can sometimes take years. With their passports held by the authorities, to return home is impossible. Attempts at labour organising are treated harshly and a suitable 'living wage' is almost never provided. Gulf Labor Coalition began as a boycott of the Abu Dhabi Guggenheim and has more recently grown into a weekly campaign of artworks and direct actions aimed at drawing attention to the dreadful labour situation in the UAE (Gulf Labor Coalition website; Kaminer and O'Driscoll 2014). Meanwhile, a spin-off organisation known as G.U.L.F. (Gulf Ultra Luxury Faction) has staged several

occupations of the New York Guggenheim with extensive mainstream media coverage. In response to all of this pressure, the museum assures critics it is struggling to improve working conditions in Abu Dhabi and promises that it now sees this as a priority. Still, with ground breaking for the new project set to begin in 2015, scant time remains for the Guggenheim to back up their words with concrete actions.

In addition, there is a more expansively imaginative, even utopian response to the intensification of working conditions following the recent financial crisis. Catch a public performance by Aaron Burr Society on Wall Street some evening and you will see a crutch-wielding man in a top hat symbolically slaying a blood sucking banker while proposing to a crowd of tourists and night-shift workers a form of Left-libertarianism that involves, among other things, illegally brewing whiskey at home. Like an anti-Tea Party, the Aaron Burr Society channels one of the least known but most extensive post-Revolutionary rebellions in US history in which grain farmers, many of whom were war veterans, refused to pay federal taxes on home-brew to the newly formed government in an early rejection of centralised state power. Ultimately suppressed by President Washington, the Whiskey Rebellion, as relived through Aaron Burr Society today, calls on insurrectionary forces to take back the government 'before these Bastards with Aristocratic Pretensions Destroy the Planet' (Aaron Burr Society website, unpaginated).

Using a different set of tactics, artist Caroline Woolard tries to imagine an alternative to both the art world and student debt with her online data-gathering project she calls bfamfaphd.com/. The project seeks to visualise the massive expenditure on higher education 'creative degrees' in the USA by crunching information on those seeking arts-related BAs, BFAs, MAs, MFAs and PhDs. After graphically demonstrating the growing population who want to become 'professional artists', she asks an almost naive question: 'If we pursue arts degrees out of a drive for community, craft, risk, audience, and knowledge, then how might we meet these needs and desires together, for a lifetime, not only 2–4 years?' Or, to put it another way, can the costs of getting a degree in art, which for most lead to a lifetime of debt, be channelled into producing another kind of society and economy on the ruins of the one we now inhabit? Woolard, who does not herself have a MFA degree, asks instead if it is possible to 'dream differently about ourselves?' That is certainly the question of the moment (Caroline Woolard website, unpaginated).

## In conclusion, and in gestation

Notwithstanding the pistol aimed at our collective heads, artists and other cultural workers are indeed spotlighting alternatives. Much like at the start of the last century, artistic production is once again today at the centre of a struggle over definitions and possibilities about what constitutes a genuine avant-garde practice, including who has the right to be called an artist, and what it means to imagine culture finally freed from capitalism. Questions are also being raised about the nature of labour, democracy, political agency and history. Because in order radically to occupy the present we inevitably wind up taking hold of the past and future, reinterpreting the archive with all its gaps and lacunae as we go. This is a significant moment. First, reclaiming the commons – a goal post-Occupy agents most often describe as their primary mission – requires preparing a space for something that is as yet unknown. Let us call it a new form of political-artistic subjectivity still in gestation. And, second, it seems that proclaiming the end of art yet once again turns out to be art's best chance of assuring its return. So did Occupy actually signal the end of contemporary art? Yes. Did it herald the birth of a new artistic subject? Absolutely. For, despite similarities between present-day circumstances and previous unsuccessful upsurges of socially engaged art in the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, the future of this post-Occupy, post-crisis moment has yet to be written. It still belongs to those forces that dare to produce systemic dissonance while believing that a better art world is possible.