

POLITICS OF ART

It was a bit after December 2010. Two years after the murder of Alexandros Grigoropoulos. Two years followed of riots & explosions, sabotage, bullets and a still-growing multitude of social projects, mixed with all different types of crisis-provoked peoples' movements, strikes and protests in Athens and all around Greece.

It was one of those days—the scent of tear gas and burnt rubbish in the morning air. I can't recall if it was after a general strike or just a demo that kicked-off, when I went down to the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Athens to check out an exhibition titled 'Politics of Art'.

I have to admit I didn't have high expectations. However, after descending down to a quiet art-smelling exhibition space (processing chemicals, paint, glue & heated resistors of electronic devices burning dust), sneaking amongst deliberately illuminated art objects and endlessly flickering video screens, I felt convinced enough to

come to the conclusion that there is actually no such thing as politics in art.

This need not be an accusation against this specific exhibition or any of the exhibitors. There was nothing especially unconventional about this show. It was the time and the city, molotovs and batons, resistance and repression, strikes and withdrawals and all the other social and existential conflicts on all levels of society that were being lived daily everywhere, but art simply couldn't reflect all of that anymore.

My days in Athens had crystal-clearly showed me that 'le belle arti' has nothing to do with anything that is political, neither in creation nor in destruction. It is the political climate that distinguishes Athens from e.g. Berlin, where art—as we know it now—seems to bear some kind of meaning (whatever it is, don't ask me). It is impossible to imagine a variety of different pop-up art spaces and alternative galleries here in Athens as in Berlin and other North European capitals.

Not because people in Athens don't like art but because art can't communicate anything important within the current political reality.

However, on that same night I got wasted with a French friend I haven't seen since, wandered back to the museum with a couple of spray cans on me and painted out a question in dog sized letters on the white marble of the building: "Is this art or politics?"—addressing the dilemma mainly to myself.

On the way back home I passed that part of the city, right next to the National Garden, where many foreign embassies are and where, regardless of the time of day or night, some young lads in blue uniforms stand on guard on every corner with submachine guns upon their lumpy shoulders. — What a meaningless piece of crap I just did!, I thought, it was just some spray paint on a wall.

WHAT IS ART ALL ABOUT?

As 20th century avant-garde movements have taught us, art doesn't have any qualitative attributes. It can

be practically anything. However, despite its substantial liberty, art is not—and never has been—‘anything’. There are mechanisms other than creativity, freedom of expression or the cheerful insanity of artists that constitute aesthetics and define what is art and what is not.

Art is to creativity what religion is to spirituality. It is an institution—cruel and sombre—meant to rule out certain phenomena from all-diverse and multi-practical creativity and title them as ‘art’. Art is suppressed expression, dominated by the high priests of the art world: museums, academies, galleries, curators, art-markets and markets of artistic ideas where speculation is based on profitable taste and ethics replaced with aesthet(h)ics.

However, what makes art ‘art as we know it now’, and what is common to art from ancient times until today, is how it mainly manifests itself in representations, abstractions and symbolic expression. Art is an image—a representation or a performance of some sort, strictly divided from the hard reality of everyday life practices. Art is an allegory of human life communicating its own existence as an allegory but very rarely as life itself. It is a story or description of its object rather than an actual event, and its relation to its object is aesthetic rather than practical.

From now on I will call this kind of re-presentative art ‘art-as-we-know-it’ to separate it from all the other possibilities and potentialities art could have and especially from another kind of art that I’m going to present later in this text.

WHAT IS POLITICS?

I’m not interested in how politics is defined by the state or political science. The definition I find useful concerns

everyday reality and sees politics as an interplay of differently motivated people who are practically producing or re-producing a reality that they share together on some level.

It is important to underline that politics is always about practical actions and so is distinguished from so-called ‘political imagination’ or ideology. Ideology is an ensemble of ideals and evaluations that, for example, defines the targets that politics aims at. Ideology is, of course, connected to politics, but as long as there is no act there is no politics either.

What separates politics from other social activities is that politics appears only when there are two or more different and contradicting interests. By dealing with these contradictions politics produces material and social conditions where different experiences of unity or inclusion and alienation or exclusion are taking place. Without such a division no politics exists.

It is a very common misconception to see politics just as radical actions that change a political reality radically. Actions—even the most ordinary ones—that reproduce and maintain existing reality and its logics are equally political. The everyday reality does not hold as such without constant reproduction and maintenance.

In this frame we can conclude that because of a lack of practicality art-as-we-know-it, if anything, is eminently ideological, but not political. We have learned that art-as-we-know-it has the exceptional liberty to highlight social and human phenomena, criticize or even disgrace them, but that’s all it can do.

If art-as-we-know-it is somehow political it is such only by reproducing itself and its institutions as representative, non-practical,

ideological and so, paradoxically, ‘non-political’. This is a politics of non-politics that the great majority of artists and art institutions are stubbornly hanging onto.

As George Orwell wrote, “the opinion that art should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political attitude”, and a very reactionary one. Art in general doesn’t have such limitations nor does it imply that only representative or symbolic ways of expression are art. There is no higher law forbidding art from operating on a level of political praxis; from participating directly in the (un)creation of everyday reality, not only through reproduction but transfiguration. By ‘transfiguration’ I do not mean spilling paint or colourful words around public space, doing ideological street theatre, performances or artistic activism – bollocks. I mean large-scale social and material changes and ethical re-evaluations.

WHATEVER YOU PAINT MAY BE USED AGAINST YOU

To get closer to an idea of the politics of art, it is essential to understand that the development of the modern economy has effectively reduced the possibilities of all kinds of representations—including art-as-we-know-it—to participate in politics in any active way. The reason for this is capitalism’s ability to use representations and images on its own behalf, to maintain and strengthen economic power relations in society.

There is a great deal of financial profit to be made today, as the consumption of immaterial products has grown proportionately much more important than the consumption of plain material products. Even toothbrushes are sold by images of a healthy, ecological and happy life where there are no screaming kids or

relationship problems. This kind of imagery is much more important for market success, and therefore profits, than the difference between products themselves. Also, as we see, all kinds of pseudo-political awareness—social and ecological—have already found their way into commercial imagery in the form of organic products, fair trade, 'green technology' or solidarity products. This is, obviously, all bullshit. As long as someone profits, social divisions are maintained, just as in good old capitalism.

If we recognize these developments in the history of capitalism we see to what extent the relation between image and capital has changed during the last century and how visual and literary representations have been very effectively economized.

This notion will put Adorno's famous and over-interpreted phrase "there can be no poetry after Auschwitz" in a new light. Post world-war capitalism which has grown from the same insanity as gas-chambers, has integrated all imagery to itself to such a degree of accumulation that the whole process of accumulation has become 'an image' itself and therefore an object of desire. This means that all art, including previously mentioned poetry, has been banalized with the same confident certainty as capitalism produces Che Guevara T-shirts or radical theory while provoking wars and building new concentration camps to secure material bases for its profits. What I am saying here is that these phenomena—exploitation and ethical or intellectual superiority—are not separated from each other as long as they both occur within the same markets. It is not the substance of products that upholds everyday life but money that is the actual social relation and that makes capitalism and its feeble side-effects real.

What happened to experimental Dada or the revolutionary Situationists or to rebellious street art? As we see now, those radical art movements which were supposed to get rid of bourgeois and reactionary art together with its institutions and uproot a superficial society as a whole, turned out to be part of the reproduction of bourgeois institutionalism and superficiality. As avant-garde theorist Paul Mann saw, those movements were "not the victim[s] of recuperation but its agents, its proper technology". Recuperation is a name for a process where capitalist markets and social normality adapts radical or marginal activity into one of its own commercial products and general ordinariness.

It is not so long ago that a personal collection of notes and letters of the most stubborn situationist, Guy Debord, was sold by his widow to the National Library of France and presented for the first time to the public in a building named after ex-president of France, François Mitterrand: a spectacular recuperation of the author of 'The Society of the Spectacle'.

Street art is another great example of this. Street-art style and actual pieces have found their way into the fashion world, appear in lifestyle publications, advertisements, Hollywood, Music Television, record covers and galleries, and, of course, as reproduced prints on living-room walls of the working class folk and as originals on those of the rich elite. Graffiti is now a big part of gentrification rather than a symbol of autonomy in public space. As far as I know, this was not supposed to happen.

If art has turned out to be just another commodity for capitalist reproduction, something similar has happened to artists too, who

are producers of immaterial goods operating on precisely the same level as labour which is directly embodied in the production of material goods. Even those who are doing their creative work outside of art markets and institutions are constantly contributing to immaterial production by creating public imagery that will be recuperated by commercial purposes in one way or another. As it is also the case with all other labour, the surplus of artistic work will flow to capitalists, since the means of production and transaction are still owned by them.

AESTHETICIZATION OF ECONOMICS

If art-as-we-know-it is fundamentally based on old capitalist values, intentions and infrastructures, it seems to serve such social tendencies and power relations that are maintaining the old or constituting new totalitarianism instead of opening ways to more humane and less authoritarian societies. The reason for this is, precisely, in processes where 1) art-as-we-know-it gets its value as a commodity and therefore benefits the ruling class, and 2) where it pacifies political dynamics by concentrating on (liberal) ideology not politics.

If we focus on the latter, we can notice how art-as-we-know-it appears as a technique for aestheticizing economic power. This is a similar process—though substantially reversed—to what Walter Benjamin called 'the aestheticization of politics' which he saw happening in Europe during the 1930's. The strength and glory of fascist aesthetics aimed to create an ecstatic mass-spectacle that attempted to include the whole nation in its sublimity, where fascist politics could be accepted.

Now, an endless visual flow of images, neo-liberal 'freedom of expression' and especially profitable and ideological art-as-we-know-it—aiming to provide liberty, moralize or raise 'awareness'—is creating a similar blinding aesthetic haze that conceals the deranged realm of capitalism where people are oppressed and enslaved, and actual political opponents imprisoned, tortured, even killed. Art's liberty to make representations freely is maintaining the ideal of an open and just society, capable to reform and advance, although people's possibilities to participate in actual politics—in the actual meaning of politics—are more and more restricted.

So, it is clear that art-as-we-know-it has reached its terminus as a transformative power. However, let's not forget that it played an important part in the fight against cultural conservatism up until the 1970's, and perhaps can still be used for such a purpose somewhere. But what if the enemy is not conservatism but

a bastardized form of liberalism, as capitalism could be portrayed? Art-as-we-know-it has definitely been in the front line pushing further those developments that we now call 'liberal democratic societies', 'capitalism' and 'neo-liberal values'.

Because of this, many radicals dismiss artists and the pointless world of contemporary art, while some of them are even tempted to lean towards reactionary culture in their search for a greater meaning or spirit than that which art often transmits. There is surely plenty of truth in that scorn, but being reactionary is ugly.

From my point of view, both art-hating radicals and contemporary artists are stuck in a conservative concept of art and an equally conservative concept of politics. Sure, art-as-we-know-it smells rancid like off-milk. Sure, it is self-destructive in its logic, making everyone who truly desires freedom and meaning, frustrated, powerless and ultimately crazy.

But let me repeat myself here. Why should art participate in immaterial production and be fully integrated into present capitalism? Why should art reproduce those hollow neo-liberal ideas our time is so keen to manifest? There is no rigid precondition why art should do so. There is no God who commands that art has to be immaterial, representative and apolitical by nature. There is no such thing as the 'nature of art'. It is all in the hands of artists just as are such concepts like 'work', 'economy', 'tolerance', 'fairness' or 'social'. It is all in the hands of the people—even though this work of definition might sometimes mean social war.

If we have any intention to deal with the transition from capitalism to something we could call 'post-capitalism', to direct its course and pursue something worthwhile, artists must have a certain sensitivity to identify the creativity of this process and place themselves within it. If imagery is abducted by the economy, this requires us to rethink art.

TOWARDS POST-CAPITALISM

As some critics had already noted back in the early days of capitalism—and what we clearly see now—is that neo-liberalized capitalism is no more desirable than state-controlled capitalism, since the economic system itself is a badly defective interface for human relations or the environment, and turns out to be exploitation and social cannibalism in one way or another.

However, it is much more important to see that liberal capitalism is no longer even a realistic option for the future—whether we want it or not. There are multiple examples showing how capitalist faith has been degrading in the 'western world' over the last 20 years and this is still the case. This coincides not only with 'the crisis' but with more general and ideological promises of capitalism: growth, progress, expansion, peace, freedom, tolerance, well-being, happiness, increasing quality of products and life and so on. I'm fully aware that 'the death of capitalism' has been prophesied for at least the last

200 years. However, this is the first time in a modern economy that the signs are so clear. Let me give some examples.

Since the 1980's the size of the global finance economy has been rapidly growing and it is now about four times bigger than the size of the so-called 'real economy'. This means that when we are talking about economic growth we are, first of all, talking about the growth of finance markets, and second, we are talking about an economy that never finds material forms. The world's real economy has actually been decreasing since 2008.

But this is not enough on its own. Drastic changes have been happening on all the levels of capitalist praxis and faith. The individual liberty and political freedom that capitalism was suppose to increase has been reduced since 2001, not only in the USA or by NSA(1), but in most countries, because the authority of the police and other civil forces have been extended at the expense of individual privacy and freedom. In Spain and

many other European countries the right to demonstrate has been recently limited. This kind of regression of political and individual rights and liberties was not supposed to be possible, as economic liberty was promising to grant both individual liberty and political freedom(2).

The war in Ukraine is something that was not supposed to happen either. One of the main arguments, widely used to legitimize capitalist economy, is that the 'free market', as a platform for expressing desires and competition, is a nonviolent way to solve conflicts inside or between capitalist countries(3). Recent riots in Greece, Spain, France, Stockholm, London, Ferguson, Hong-Kong and other capitalist societies are proving the contrary.

And, of course, Fukushima, or any other of the many environmental accidents, was not supposed to happen, because the capitalist market had promised to be an infallible mechanism to find the best and safest solutions, not only for nature, but for mankind(4).

Racism, fascism, poverty, unemployment, global warming, scarcity of resources etc.—all these, and many more, were supposed to be solvable by capitalism. What we have now is quite the opposite.

I chose these examples to point out that the predominant stagnation is not only financial or material but cultural and spiritual as well. It has a lot to do with the whole belief system called 'capitalism' or 'market liberalism'.

I'm not saying, by any means—as many leftists do—that 1980's capitalism was something to go after. No way. I just want to point out that some kind of creepy but coherent causality which post-war capitalism had, doesn't support the horizon anymore. Something has crucially changed that makes me assume that we have entered a post-capitalist period where the new logic and values are about to take over the old ideals and institutions. This notion will bring us back to art.

POST-CAPITALIST ART

So, is political art possible at all? The answer is, yes indeed. It is a simple thing. Stop using narratives or being ideological, stop representing and start doing things.

Different transitions from capitalism to post-capitalism are happening in a political and practical realm. This sounds very materialistic, but it is not, since 'spirit' or substance—however you call it—is not separable from practical actions and the different realities acts create. It is clear that post-capitalism needs 'spiritual' changes as well as practical ones. But as we know, 'spirit' cannot just be invented outside of practical life, nor in the university or the laboratory. Claiming there is a law of causality that demands thought before action is not actually true. As Nietzsche noticed, a thought cannot be declared as a first cause since there is always something that makes us think. But this is not important here.

More important is to realize that if art is sensitive to those on-going social dynamics and therefore exists in

relation with those social changes, an aesthetic question must be practical, and art and artists one of the subjects of that change. Otherwise, art will take the role of an historian—a role already reserved for academics whose job is to interpret—and social change itself will remain culturally conservative.

Literally, this means that art must actively participate in a process of re-evaluating fundamental values—which some might call a 'revolutionary process'. It has to be all about the emancipation of artists and creativity, not only on the level of the substance of art, as 20th century avant-garde movements proposed, but on the level of actual social relations. This objective should outstrip all contemporary and classical conceptions of art and aesthetics.

To be able to do so, art has to abandon all representation-centred common aesthetic matters, such as beauty, harmony, composition, expression, style, genre, form, content and discourse. Instead, post-capitalist aesthetics should

be based on the contemplation of concrete and practical qualities in art: what kind of actual reality does art create? How well is the work or act of art eroding systems of spectacle and distinguishing artists from immaterial production, capitalist value formation and neo-liberal thought?

Actual post-capitalist aesthetic questions are: how does art create immediate life? What kind of material conditions and social relations does it require and create? What is its relation to power? What kind of concrete actions does it take? How is it related to the environment? How does it connect with other post-capitalist phenomena? What kind of resources does it consume? What kind of economy does it use or constitute? What happens after art? How will it be disposed or decomposed? And so on. Such re-evaluations do not set any technical limitations for artists, they only connect art to those matters post-capitalism has to face at this particular moment of time when the old conventions are losing their validity.

If we look at classical painting or sculpture from this kind of practical point of view, the only thing we see is artists moving their tools, rubbing poisonous paints on canvas with a brush or removing small pieces of marble from a bigger chunk. Digital art with digital devices, body-art or performance does not do much more. In relation to post-capitalist aesthetic viewpoints, none of these appear aesthetic. Of the modern arts, only architecture carries some practical aesthetic qualities, as it is mainly about reforming concrete reality—though it is almost always done for capitalistic purposes and is therefore unaesthetic.

But, if we replace mallet and chisel with sledgehammer and instead of marble use a bank building as a medium of sculpture, or, if an artwork manages to destroy a large quantity of money, disable cops, paralyze a stock market or a busy shopping street or telecommunication connections, or if it manages to create permanent alternatives for social relations or satisfy some basic needs outside of capitalism, we have surely achieved

some kind of aesthetic value in the post-capitalist sense. I do not mean artists have to take care of all activities in a future world(s), but somehow concretely relate to its practices and subjects. How this can actually happen, I leave artists of the future to answer. But with a little imagination we can see that there are many, many ways to act.

Sculptors, break open and dig holes in asphalt. Painters, change your oil paints into flammable liquids. You who build installations, build them to block the streets and logistic routes. Musicians, hit the beat with flying cobblestones. Poets, stick your hands into soil. Actors, bring people together. Create and break, solve and sabotage.

“Art makes life possible. It is the great enticer of life, the great stimulant. Art as the only form of superior resistance against every form of denial of life.”(5)

WHY ART?

Some friends and colleagues have shown their concerns about my perspective and asked why call it art, why not politics, social struggle or revolutionary politics? How is post-capitalist art differentiated from 'normal' insurrection? There are a few thoughts about that.

First of all, the point here is not to reclaim social struggles or insurrections and aestheticize them by claiming them as art—quite the opposite. The question is rather to politicize art and artists by disposing of the restricting separation between representation and actual political action.

Art and especially avant-garde movements (I don't mean it in a sense of vanguard, but those who experiment with the new) have always set important preconditions for history, present and future. In this sense, art has been, and still is, an essential part of human culture, but is a form of social sensibility as well. It is difficult to imagine any civilization without something we could call 'art', nor any anti-civilization ideology that could draw a meaningful life without art. Desirable post-capitalistic life cannot be conservative in culture and therefore it has to create its own art based on its own demands and evaluations—and also use creativity to create both of those. If it fails to follow the existing social dynamics it will evidently end up with some sort of totalitarian post-modern transmutation of superficial historicism and the constant spiritual degeneration already visible in those traditions that try to actively control and limit creativity. However, in the end it's all about creativity, isn't

it? Whatever life brings, art has to discover and whatever art brings, life around must adapt to. This attitude describes the ethics of art and the artist much more clearly than any other attempt.

Secondly, politics, insurrection or social change is not an empty platform, but it is enacted by real people with real qualities. Saying "radical politics is only for so-called radicals" means that there is no longer subjectivity but a faceless 'radical process' acted by non-persons. This is why artists and those who are devoted to creativity must make their own insurrection. To actually become an active part of revolutionary processes from one's own particular point of view is the only way to keep this particularity throughout social change. I do not mean people should not change, but they should not lose the sources of their desires either.

An artist who is not sensitive enough to understand the current collapse of capitalism and its post-capitalist dynamics cannot continue as an artist when social structures will change. This is already evident, as only very few artists are able to keep up and follow their desire to create in the on-going economic crisis. The same goes with many other fields of interest too.

From my perspective, radicalization has to grow from everyone's own understanding, and it has to be based on those desires, skills, life experiences and practices that a person is familiar with as an individual but also in affinity with the social surrounding. It is important to stress that different people with real differences should discover their radical subjectivity based upon their particularity within their daily

activities, thus those activities will form a solid part of their radicalism. This kind of understanding opens many accesses to political reality, not only for artists, but other walks of life as well. For me this is more than convenient, as there is no other way to approach this diverse world than in diversity. Only diversity will lead to diverse struggles and diverse realities. It is far too arrogant and academic to demand that revolution should be neutralized of its subjects.

Where are the political theories of shoemakers, car mechanics, sailors, bakers, doctors, thieves and farmers? How are they planning to liberate themselves from a joyless slavery and the dullness of their own profession or social position? Not to become the same as others, but to rejoice in their desires, skills and experiences more meaningfully; to redefine their 'jobs' as based on their own creativity and relations. I don't want to stress professionalism here, just to say that it is all about people's needs, desires, skills and different life experiences that matter. Where are all those different revolutionary theories? The impersonal and exportable revolutionary theories of impersonal and exportable academics (or "professional" revolutionaries) we all know. But is this anything real? For heaven's sake no.

BUT...

If the artists are fighting cops, burning banks, demolishing highway intersections and sabotaging telecommunication towers, who is going to provide that obligatory strangeness that is essential for all life?

From my point of view the world should never be turned into pure 'revolutionary' utilitarianism.

Not even for a moment. Such a thought is an empty memento of revolutionary theories of the past, a relic of those evaluations which see us as an impersonal oneness—oneness in multitude or in unity. Nothing good can come out of that. The revolution I have been talking about here is not that of abandoning or simplifying meanings or aiming towards transcendent emptiness—this is closer to the reality we are living at the moment: the void of nihilism.

The strangeness is hiding. It is in those fugitive logics that escape the degrading core of capitalism and modernity and can be seen through the ruptures of this malevolent 'economy of crisis'. Behind, there are other life forces and logics, unique and particular: giving, sharing, hiding, abdicating, looting, breaking the law and other and

weirder and more elusive ones than we are used to deal with. Perhaps it is difficult to see another world from within the 'crisis', perceiving it as mere signs of poverty. But it is not. It has nothing to do with it.

When the capitalist economy degrades, something else grows. This is the soil that art has to find and tunnel into, to drag some strangeness to the daylight. If utilitarianism was the foundation of the (neo)classical economy and of capitalism, post-capitalism is no longer utilitarian. Contemplating this is odd enough to start with.

For these reasons I propose that the 'irrational' which we have learned to associate with the arts, with stories and narratives, should be expressed as a conspiracy between a few with an affinity and held amongst them in mutual trust. Strangeness is a process

of finding. Art is secret and beauty, something very personal, not for sharing just like that with anyone.

However, this conspiracy is in each case realized, art—to be something meaningful—has to become a real problem for contemporary society, a problem that cannot be solved by modern or capitalist deeds, material or spiritual. A 'real problem' that is practically and spiritually 'incorrect' in regards to capitalist reproduction and thought. (6)

Footnotes:

- (1) The National Security Agency (NSA). The massive extent of the NSA's spying, both foreign nationals and U.S. citizens, was revealed in June 2013 by Edward Snowden.
- (2) Liberal economist Milton Friedman promoted economic freedom as both a necessary freedom and also as a vital means for political freedom.
- (3) Immanuel Kant wrote in 1795 in his essay 'Perpetual Peace', "the spirit of commerce . . . sooner or later takes hold of every nation, and is incompatible with war". Today, at least four theories of capitalist peace can be identified, with some of these theories claiming that a capitalist peace may subsume the democratic one, given that capitalism may be the cause of both democracy and peace.
- (4) "I believe it is time for a new era in environmental protection, which uses the market to help us get our environment back on track—to recognize that Adam Smith's invisible hand can have a green thumb" – Bill Clinton 1992. This way of thinking is called green liberalism and it is very common all around the 'Rich North'. Most of the Green Parties in Europe are pro-capitalist and politically closer to right-wing liberals than left.
- (5) From a film: "Dias de Nietzsche em Turim" by Júlio Bressane.
- (6) With gratitude to Antti Salminen.