

Reclaiming Realism

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Reclaiming Realism
Open Systems Journal 06
Editors: Rena Rädle & Vladan Jeremić
Wien, 2014

Supported by:

BKA
ERSTE Foundation
MA 7 - Interkulturelle und Internationale Aktivitäten
Stadt Wien - Kulturabteilung MA 7

Collaboration with:

Istanbul Bilgi University

Editors Note

In his recent book *The Antinomies of Realism*, Frederic Jameson emphasizes that the history of realism is often observed as a history of its opposition: realism vs. romance, realism vs. naturalism, realism vs. socialist realism, etc... Jameson writes: “*Most of those binary pairs will therefore arouse a passionate taking of sides, in which realism is either denounced or elevated to the status of an ideal (aesthetic or otherwise). The definition of realism by way of such opposition can also take on a historical, or periodizing, character. Indeed, the opposition between realism and modernism already implies a historical narrative which it is fairly difficult to reduce to a structural or structuralist one...*” The contradictions of realism intrigued generations of writers, artists and theorists in nineteenth and twentieth century. Debates on realism were formative, as the famous dispute between Georg Lukács and Bertolt Brecht in the end of the nineteen-thirties. Lukács criticized Brecht’s ‘modernist’ methods and favored the formally realist representation with the characters’ lives embedded into and shaped by the contradictions of the historical ‘totality’. Brecht’s notion of realism was different. He insisted in the same line with Marx that “art is not a mirror held up to reality but a hammer with which to shape it” and saw the audience as potential actors of change. Anyhow, this is a historical debate, and it is not our aim to deepen this – in our eyes – false opposition between ‘modernism’ and ‘realism’. There is the necessity of a debate on the notion and potentialities of realism today and this discussion is organically linked to the production conditions of art and to ‘real’ political involvement of art and cultural workers. To put it in the words of David Riff, “*Realism is no longer a choice, but an increasing inevitability.*”

For **Reclaiming Realism** we bring together five positions that reflect on links and contradictions of realism and Avant-garde, on partisanship, representation and participation, but also on organization and political interventions of art workers on a practical level. The opener is Goran Pavlić’s text *Krleža’s (Re)turn to Realism*. It portrays one of the most prominent figures of the “Dispute on the Literary Left” in Yugoslavia, Croatian writer Miroslav Krleža. Pavlić studies the moment in Krleža’s development as a literary and political writer, when he turns towards a new concreteness, dedicating himself to “qualitative” dramaturgy. Pavlić shows how Krleža in his essay ‘Europe Today’ detects knowledge production in capitalism as a crucial example of the originary contradiction and concludes that Krleža here anticipated not only the problem of structural nontransparency of capitalism as a system, but also the particular status of knowledge in capitalist social relations.

Notes on the Avant-garde is a text by David Riff that was published seven years ago - far back in 2007 – as an online supplement of the Chto Delat Newspaper’s issue Debates on the

Avant-garde. Nonetheless, many thoughts are still very relevant for our discussion, even if, as Riff commented, he today has a different view on some issues (and the text would be more “pro-Lifshitz”). Interesting for us here are his reflections on the avant-garde character of nineteenth century realism and on a transhistorical framing of realism. The reason for publishing this text is first and foremost its quality of bridging theoretical historical discussions and practice-related considerations about today’s inevitability of realism.

Taking a critical stance on Rancière’s ideas of anti-authoritarianism and equal participation Danilo Prnjat discusses problems of representation and participation in *Politics of Representation: Performing the People and Avant-garde Practices*. With Hall Foster he argues against the delegitimization of the critical (avant-garde) position in postmodernism and calls for a redefinition of the relationship towards representation that subverts the deadlock of formalism and reflects the material conditions of production.

The conversation with Vesna Vuković about *partisanship in art* is inspired by an article on realism, modernism and photography, John Roberts proposed as his contribution to this volume. However, the unresolved copyright issue induced us not reproduce it within this issue. Vesna Vuković starts from considerations about the historical position of socially engaged art as field for propaganda work by the Communist Party of Yugoslavia and then critically discusses the contemporary condition, when art takes on political agendas without any framework of real political forces that could implement them.

With the text *Realism Revisited: ArtLeaking in the Age of Art Incorporated* by Corina L. Apostol we arrive at questions of artistic production and practical political work. She takes Courbet’s political involvement in the Commune as example for the transgression from realism in art into concrete political practice. Understanding the artist with Gramsci as ‘organic intellectual’, she stresses the urgency of political organization of art workers and demonstrates strategies of various artists’ groups and organizations, such as ArtLeaks or W.A.G.E.

Krleža's (Re)turn to Realism

Goran Pavlič

Miroslav Krleža, the most prominent figure in the Croatian literary canon, substantially transfigured the literary field right from his emergence in the literary scene in the late 1910s. Stirring up controversies from the beginning, his charisma of a radical leftist public intellectual was continuously growing, culminating in his polemical work *Dialectical Antibarbarus* in 1939. In this work Krleža petrifies already existing disputes in the Croatian Communist Party and departs from the party's official strategic aims.[1] Although intrinsically political, this battle revolves around literary issues, consistently ending what was later to be called "The Dispute on the Literary Left" – a series of arguments during the 1930s on the social and political role of literature. [2] Beyond being 'merely' an interesting episode in the history of Croatian literary and political field, this event marks the preliminary resolution of long lasting contradictions within the Croatian cultural spheres. Located between the reactionary literary establishment on the one side and vulgar socialist realist tendencies on the other, Krleža's stance on literature was never uncontroversial. Saturated with aestheticist relics, alongside firm and sincere commitment to Marxism, he tried to articulate a coherent political position, one that is capable of dealing with literature as a part of social ontology and not as an absolutely autonomous realm of human praxis. Berman's words on modern experience probably describe this position most aptly:

To be modern is to live a life of paradox and contradiction. It is to be overpowered by the immense bureaucratic organizations that have the power to control and often to destroy all communities, values, lives; and yet to be undeterred in our determination to face these forces (1988,13).

In the winter of 1915 Krleža was mobilized in the Austro-Hungarian army and took part in the battles on the Eastern front, in Austrian Galicia. That traumatic experience served as a background for his future works where he consistently promulgated pacifist positions, denouncing imperialist policies of European empires. During the early 1920's he regularly published dramas [3], poems, short stories and actively participated in literary as well as in political polemics. A recurring motif in his writings of that period was the corruption of leading politicians and military officials, who continuously engaged large amounts of human flesh in obtaining futile, if not absurd aims, be it through harsh social exploitation or military mobilization. The defining feature of Krleža's literary discourse at that time is a strong moralistic tone. The protagonist of his then works is mainly a solitary figure of petty bourgeois background – a soldier, a craftsman, a journalist – aware of the absurdity of human destiny which is always governed by outer forc-

es. A strong defeatist tone is therefore easily recognized. At the same time, his political writings persisted in an incisive analysis of actual affairs, always offering a coherent political alternative with a strong socialist program. These two trajectories meet in the late 1920s, and his lecture before the Osijek premiere of his drama *In agony* [4] in 1928 serves as a turning point for Krleža's self-evaluation. In the delivered speech, embroidered with strong autopoietic [5] overtones, Krleža emphasized that his latest dramas:

are not, and don't want to be anything but psychological dialogues [because] dramatic suspense of a particular scene can't be derived from the dynamics of outer events, but quite the opposite: the power of dramatic action lies in Ibsenian concreteness, in qualitative aspects; it consists of a psychological objectivation of particular subjects which experience themselves and their destiny directly onstage (1962, 512).

Although of dubious aesthetic value, these insights gain specific relevance when juxtaposed with his earlier writings, permeated with vitalist and expressionist traits. [6] Branko Gavella, famous Croatian theatre director who was the first to direct Krleža's dramas during the 1920s, in a synoptical overview of Krleža's oeuvre in 1931 asserted the following:

Considering his commitments Krleža is a Marxist, but of a particular kind, the one who is not satisfied with schematic acceptance of Marxist formulas; on the contrary, he is the real Marxist who has learnt from his brilliant master the most important thing: the concrete analysis of the given reality. That type of concrete analysis has not yet been finally elaborated in his dramatic works, but lies scattered through numerous essays, and his creative drive guarantees this final analysis soon to be finished in the dramatic works as well (2005, 320).

These two quotes stress the same aspect as the most important in their respective areas: concreteness. For Krleža, it is the cornerstone of the new "qualitative" era of his dramatic writing, whereas for Gavella concreteness denotes a methodological approach firmly based in the experience of (outer) reality.

At the beginning of the 1930s Krleža is already a well established author, with published collected works, so one might wonder what lies behind the motivation to take a step back, to an at that time outdated realist register. Again, Berman gives a succinct diagnosis, which can be applied to Krleža's case as well:

Our century has nourished a spectacular modern art; but we seem to have forgotten how to grasp the modern life from which this art springs. In many ways, modern thought since Marx and Nietzsche has grown and developed; yet our thinking about modernity seems to have stagnated and regressed. If we listen closely to twentieth-century writers and thinkers about modernity and compare them to those of a century ago, we will find a radical flattening of perspective and shrinkage of imaginative range (1988, 24).

For this reason, Berman claims, Marxism remains a continuous source of inspiration for all those aiming at comprehending and substantially restructuring the social relations. Literature, being one of the social fields, can't cope with its environment without understanding of this environment's highly complex dynamics. To do so, one of the appropriate tools is a Marxist critical

stance. As Bennet programmatically notes in his elaboration of Marxist criticism:

It suggests an approach to so-called literary texts which will construe them, not as the manifestations of some abstract and universal literary essence, but as the product of a historically particular conduct of the practice of writing. (2003[1979], 13)

If we can accept such an approach, then to understand Krleža's turn presupposes understanding the nature of social relations at that time. This hypothetical task can't be accomplished outside the historically well informed sociological study of the then literary field – a task which significantly surpasses even the most ludicrous ambitions of one paper. However, what is possible within this realm is to highlight some conceptual traits of the turn, which could demonstrate why exactly the dramatic cycle figures as the most sophisticated instance of Krleža's realism. Georg Lukács, notorious for his permanent renouncing of earlier positions and attitudes, published the article 'The Sociology of Modern Drama' in 1965 for the English-speaking audience, in which he summarized and further elaborated his views on modern drama previously articulated in his seminal work *History of the Modern Drama* (1978[1911]). In the first work he asserted that "what is really social in literature is its form" (1978, 14), and the essence of the dramatic form lies in "paradoxal, intellectually incompatible, sensual unity of mutually opposite claims" (p. 31). In capitalism "every drama is a bourgeois drama because cultural forms of contemporary life are bourgeois, and because these forms determine the form of every manifestation of life" (p. 91). Since individualism stands as the dominant form of bourgeois culture, "the new drama is the drama of individualism" (ibid.). The unseizable differentiation of social relations within the capitalist system makes the naive, direct cognitive apprehension of systemic features utterly impossible. Therefore the crisis of individualism, i.e. the drama of modern individualism stems exactly from the individual's incapability of grasping the dynamics of her social reality. To be able to intrinsically comprehend modern social relations, one needs the knowledge of the 'higher' order, i.e. the scientific or theoretic one. In these circumstances the ideology – as the cognitive superstructure – figures as the new substantial dramatological factor (p. 97).

Following Jameson's remark, we may notice that Lukács' rearticulation of his attitudes on the nature of drama still comprises all essential critical points, albeit with some new accents. After fifty years of capitalist experience Lukács' stressed the uniformity of social relations as the most salient trait of capitalist social ontology (1965, 152). Furthermore, this implies the principal substitutability of every single individual, thus turning them from human subjects into social variables. If the origin of every dramatological structure is the ethical integrity of a character who acts according to her knowledge, the principal lack of knowledge makes the traditional dramatic action impossible. In these conditions the realist discourse can't be founded on the simple principle of highest possible verisimilitude, but a more nuanced articulation is needed. Such an articulation is possible by including theoretical insights on the nature of social reality, and Marxist political economy provides an intricate theoretical apparatus for such a purpose.

In his essay 'Europe Today' in 1933 Krleža presents a grim account of Europe's situation. The essay starts in an eerie tone:

From the darkest cannibal times, about stars and sicknesses, about life mysteries and questions, Europe (most likely) has never known so much as it does know; doubting everything it knows, it is not aware of what it knows and

doesn't have the slightest clue what does it want (1956, 9).

Shortly afterwards the diagnosis descends into more specific details:

The machines of Europe operate twenty-four hours a day, and now when the European material culture thrives like it never did, when Europe knows more than it ever did, now the intellectual Europe is getting bored (p. 15).

In a rather short span the issue of knowledge comes repeatedly to the fore. Although at that time unacquainted with Lukács' insights on the nature of drama (Očak, 1982), Krleža ingeniously anticipated the problem of structural nontransparency of capitalism as a system. In order to be able to comprehend the reality of modern capitalism, i.e. to articulate the concreteness of social relations, one has to acknowledge its originary contradiction. The instance of knowledge, highlighted by Krleža in meticulous detail, serves as the most vivid manifestation of that contradiction. If, as Lukács claimed, the essence of modern drama consists in a »intellectually incompatible, sensual unity of mutually opposite claims«, the material contradictions inherent to the dramatic conflict constitute the basis for a more complex account of social reality. In other words, to demonstrate the intricacy of modern capitalism in literary realistic manner, the dramatic discourse represents a structurally privileged domain.

Considering Krleža's insights on the particular status of knowledge in capitalist social relations expressed in the essay 'Europe today', we may conclude that his decision from 1928 to dedicate himself to 'qualitative' dramaturgy was 'merely' an ingenious artistic intuition on what was soon to become a more elaborate theoretical stance.

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Footnotes:

[1] Unlike many progressive intellectuals, Krleža never joined People's Liberatory Army, led by the Yugoslav Communist Party, which successfully fought against Nazi occupation, eventually founding

the Yugoslav socialist state. Despite this fact, immediately after WWII he rejoined the Communist Party, hence starting a new public career.

[2] Due to stringent anti-communist regulation in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia the literary field was a privileged sphere of radical left political articulation. However, it is extremely important, following Bourdieu's criticism of literary field's autonomy in his *The Rules of Art* (1995), not to mistake proper literary dissents for political ones. Although, rather conveniently, arguments did revolve around issues of art's autonomy, thus founding two opposing camps - realists and surrealists - the stake was much higher. The dynamics of literary disputes was essentially determined by the situation in USSR, where the official party line, as declared in Zhdanovist theses after Soviet Writers' Congress in 1934, was to be followed. Yugoslav surrealists aligned themselves with Breton and were consequentially denounced as leftist outcasts, or even 'worse', as Trotskyists. Interestingly enough, Krleža, although a committed communist supporter, strongly opposed the Zhdanovist line and collaborated with the most distinguished Yugoslav surrealists, such as K. Popović, M. Dedinac, M. Ristić, A. Vučo, O. Davičo.

[3] The first seven dramas, heavily influenced by expressionist poetics, were later published under the title *Legends*.

[4] *In agony*, alongside *The Glembay Gentlemen*, and *Leda* form a dramatic cycle. The *Glembays* is considered by many critics to be the creative acme of Krleža's writings. In this cycle Krleža meticulously pictured the moral and social disintegration of Croatian bourgeoisie, embodied in the *Glembay* dynasty.

[5] Acknowledging the urge to return to already anachronistic poetical models such as realism, in order to invigorate the stale atmosphere of Croatian literary production.

[6] Most notably present in his dramas of the *Legend s* cycle.

[7] Jameson, in a brief overview of the main tenets of Lukács' position, provocatively asks: "What if the earlier works proved to be fully comprehensible only in the light of the later ones? What if, far from being a series of self-betrayals, Lukács' successive positions proved to be a progressive exploration and enlargement of a single complex of problems?" (1974, 163).

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Notes on the Avant-garde

David Riff

Not too long ago that people obsessed with Marxist aesthetic problems were considered little more than ewiggestrig, eternally yesterday, strange pillars of salt on the side of the road to Deleuzian nirvana. That has changed over the last ten years, as a re-politicization of art that has fast-forwarded through all phases of so-called political art, from an analytical vulgar sociologism via activist agit-prop and multitudinal production art to a radical autonomization of the disjunctive folding-into-one-another of the political and the aesthetic. For a long time, there was a lingering post-modernist ban on any hasty identification with this modernist position or that, and it would have been tasteless to claim that central floating signifier, the 'avant-garde.' Any discussion of 'the history of the avant-garde' immediately became a retroactive narrative of catastrophe. Angelus Novus would rustle his wings... That ban has now been lifted; in a moment of interiorization, the old sad tropes are on everyone's lips, just like in the Seventies.

Basically, the 'avant-garde' is a floating signifier in the debates between a broad scope of formalist and realist modernisms, and it would be historically inaccurate to give it over to one of the artistic movements of the modernist period (not only Dada or Constructivism, but counter-modernisms like neo-classicism, Neue Sachlichkeit, or the contradictory surrealist and critical realist attempts to assimilate a contradictory modern reality.) Originally a military metaphor for the forefront of a political movement (its origin in 19th century France), it became a way of talking about artistic trends, as if an army of artists were out to conquer the world. But most importantly it was a way of talking about politics. One does politics in times of revolution. Reactionary times allow us to talk about politics. To sort out who was actually ahead.

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For many people, and rightly so, the most valuable moment in the historical dialectic of the avant-garde is where it negates a superficial, formalist-naturalist approach to the reification of human 'progress' consciousness rendered objective in the framed, historicized thing rather than the processual object (Gegenstand) of human sensuous activity. The avant-garde's main purpose, the thrust of its style: to negate the jadedness (Borniertheit) of its bourgeois audience, to break down its bad objectivity. It is only through this negation of 'thingness' and a full criticism/grasp/depiction of the object that thinkers and practitioners could dream of solving the riddle of history, or to put it politically, contributing to the realization of communism. One could think of a continuity between Hegel's thing for us, Marx's human sensuous activity that is its own Gegenstand, and the avant-garde's attempts to render dialectical the things themselves. But thingness or objectivity came out as a dominant of vulgar materialist thinking. Alfred Barr visited Moscow in 1927

and asked Sergei Tretyakov when it would be possible to write about the revolution objectively. Here, one has the contradiction that would later split the avant-garde. A contradiction between abstract pragmatic-materialist thingness essentially resting upon neo-Kantian assumptions and concrete *Sachlichkeit*, which is synonymous to realism. Post-war formalism collapsed into negative-indexical naturalism because of materialist aesthetes like Alfred Barr. Even their pseudo-Trotskyite colleagues like Clement Greenberg were incapable of discerning the key difference between thingness and *Sachlichkeit*. In "Avant-garde and Kitsch" Greenberg exhorts his readers to 'read Marx to the letter.' Had he subjected Marx to a literal reading, he would have quickly found that it is precisely this difference that frustrated Marx the most, a difference that had come a long way since its formulaic articulation through the 'new science' of Hegelian philosophy.

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For more orthodox Marxists, it is realism that hangs in the balance whenever one speaks of the avant-garde. And not only because Marx's project as a writer was so deeply interwoven with the form of *Darstellung* in 19th century realism. Since Lukács' key interventions, it has been clear just how much we need realism to make sense of the garbled totality. The old struggle: to wrest away the conception of realism from the bourgeoisie, taking what is best about its narratives of decay and/or its critiques of mass culture, for example: its anthropologies, its formulations of social reality. At the same time, realism can be understood as the first modernism, the one that precedes and already contains all developments to come, the real hotbed of aesthetico-political invention before reductionist formalism really made it big. This is why books like *Ulysses* still contain so much potential. Lukács devoted many pages to the critique of such modern realisms, and tried to systematize a literary canon for its inherently political use as an artistic narrative. For Lukács, it really was about 'realism,' a term that needed a broad definition at the beginning of the polemic to define a good addressee, then to be narrowed down. In comparison with later experiments (as irrationalist ideology becomes ubiquitous, and the high modernist autonomization of language from reality makes its impact), realism is an extremely inclusive category. Mikhail Lifshitz, the other key member of the neo-Hegelian 'Tendency' (Techenie, lit. 'current') of the Literary Critic group, includes African masks and the icon painting of the Russian renaissance. Realism becomes a codeword. For what exactly? For the high modernist aesthetic of the Stalinist style? As a mechanism of murderous inclusion?

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As inextricable as the aesthetic of the Popular Front may be historically from the rise of Stalinism, it is still a mistake to conflate Lukács' efforts as a part of the 'Tendency' with the final 'totalitarian' sublation of the avant-garde by the *Gesamkunstwerk* Stalin. The 'Tendency' and its outwardly conversative, inwardly radical aesthetic suffered heavily for its collaboration with Platonov (Lukács holds him up as an example for truly dialectical realism that expresses the contradictions of his time), and, on the eve of World War II, was on the brink of being subjected to repression, perhaps precisely of something that was perceived as crypto-modernism by the apparatchiks all along. NKVD materials have Lukács on record at the sessions of self-criticism, as a frightened marginal figure, 'a certain Lukács, a German-speaking refugee.' In this light, the paeans to power read like panicked defensive measures, or as Adorno put it, recantations under duress, with rebellion still seething somewhere at their core. They belie a defensive attitude that knew all too well what could happen, precisely because his aesthetic was completely at odds with the Zhdanovism that established itself with full force. In this sense, Lukács was quite brave,

despite his professions of faith in the 'Great October.' Even at his most Stalinist, he continues to stress that realism should not sink into revolutionary romanticism, vacillating between a naturalism of means and an idealism of content. Socialist romanticism is just as dangerous as expressionism or formalism. Socialist realism needs to stress contradiction in its inheritance of the 19th century's mimetic devices, mediating the contradictory complexity of the transitional period. Characterization takes precedence here, quite obviously, as the organizing force of the narrative's totality. Then again, Adorno makes a good point also at his pro-American, anti-communist worst: Lukács blinded himself to the potentialities of his time, blunted his sensibilities, in favor of a resigned partisanship that often became dangerous, narrowing an aesthetic spectrum that could have otherwise remained quite broad. So one must broaden Lukács' conception of realism, and thus is back in the trap of that same old murderous inclusion.

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The problem with realism as a category, however, is that it enters the picture as the category that mediates between the New of the avant-garde and the Old it supposedly negates, creating a transparent *Jetztzeit* that actualizes all the weak messianism of previous epoch, but only because of shared dialectical structures, new articulation of old human problems, that as we assume as Marxists will somehow be solved and have nothing natural about them. Of course, it is useful to look at history in this way, to think the anthropological universal of class struggle, at least as a weak constant hope, justified because 'the messiah could come through every second.' Very much in the now, this 'archetypal' expression of a time, an epoch, in ideology, makes it possible to find resonances, a secret heliotropism as Benjamin calls it, in all the details and constellations of a reality in constant becoming. But for precisely this reason, a transhistorical framing of realism (as in the theory of Mikhail Lifshitz) is suspect, at least for most people. Translated back into the mute language of commodities, *Jetztzeit* is now called 'contemporary art,' with contemporaneity functioning as all times at once. Again, we recognize the market, which subsumes all production times, finding an expression for every temporality, even the most protracted, and accommodating even something the post-war avant-gardes rejected, namely realist painting. With such pseudo-gnoseologies ('we know that the avant-garde is actually eigentlich even realism'), it is only natural that the aesthetic disputes of the 1920s-30s lose their contours. The debate itself becomes a 'process' (truth procedure) of modernity that included anti-modernists with obvious links to the avant-garde. This new lump sometimes yields new extrusions, inversions, singularities.

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Though we have sketched some primitive version of that old dispute (between formalism and realism), we have yet to discuss its application to contemporary reality. Because to carry out this dispute meant to engage in an appealing mimesis, to wear a toga of 'normal childhood,' knowing full well that we are adults, and that our freedoms are bought with a completely new, post-Fordist form of productive cultural autonomy, relativized by that same-old realm of necessity, where our individual (however heroic) efforts lose their quality, to become certain more or less valuable quantities of abstract labor. All the while, capitalism continues to dig its own grave. But by now, we are so blind to this gravedigger that we wouldn't recognize him if he came and hit us over the head. We dig, dig, dig away at the same old (new) aesthetic problems. It is time to come back to reality.

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Our reality is one of reactionary times, a new Biedermeier: not the re-politicization of art makes the vanguard paradigm relevant again, but the de-politicization that follows. This is when the debate becomes alive again in a truly dialectical sense, rehearsed as a farce pregnant with all the gravitas of resignation. The awaited instrumentalization of contemporary art through a new politics of the left has not led to a new prosumer Proletkult. Instead, the 'creative practices' that accompany new political struggles are simply assimilated into a broader YouTube culture of embedded creativity in an increasingly irrationalized global culture industry. This, at least, is the danger, as well as artistic practices suddenly finding profitable application in other sectors of creative production, such as guerilla marketing and viral, network-based advertising. In addition, it is quite clear to most political art collectives (no matter which form of creativity they contribute to political struggle) that they are instantly reified when they hit the biennial circuit, which paradoxically, is their only venue for spreading their methodologies and ideas beyond a specific, purely relational context of locality. Even the most naïve activist art will quickly wise up to this state of affairs, and start producing more reflexive, self-critical works that focus on the forms political art uses and tries to address. It is hard today to rally any real passion in old arguments against ultra-leftism's infantile disorder, and the symptoms of half-assed, make-believe anarchism that accompany it. So-called 'political art' ages so quickly, and the teenagers immediately go to work at the Starbucks of contemporary art, as smiling barristas. Political radicalism is no longer part of aesthetic infancy, but simply a necessary component of contemporary art's general intellect. It is part of the bourgeois bohemian toolbox, applied in virtuosic bricolage.

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The result is a political formalism in both the positive and the negative sense: both as an emancipatory practice of understanding and countermanding abstraction, exteriorization through intensified estrangement, and as a real danger of fetishizing (implicitly political) language and form over (explicitly political) content that reduces ideas to their skeletons, depleting and conflating antagonisms and dissolving contradictions without gaining a sense for their dialectical possibilities of synthesis and revolution, leaving only a weak trace of what was once a dialectical image, to some historical complex we retrospectively call modernism, using a word whose meaning we have yet to discuss.

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Speaking of dialectical images and their weak traces: it is impossible to repeat the debate on realism and formalism that defined the theoretical vanguard of German and Russian Marxism in the 1930s, just as it is impossible to repeat the discoveries of the historical avant-garde, whose best works anticipate a society far beyond the one we live in today. It is like Marx says about the art of antiquity: the epoch-making artwork is no longer possible when real artistic production begins. In Marx's account, this too leads to realism: the mythology behind the epic is disenchanting by the process of production itself, and the modern artist must rely not on mythopoetic models of-for reality, but upon reality itself, in a world completely disenchanting by capitalism. The quasi-mythology that production engenders may sweep away the old myths, but it stands in direct contradiction with genuine artistic sensibilities. Realism is no longer a choice, but an increasing inevitability.

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We may have somehow internalized modernity's existential fears of death by hunger or violence as something biopolitical much bigger than Angst, of course, but our societies are so very

much softer in their cruelty than the ones Lukács or Benjamin lived in. This, at the very latest, is where we are somehow reconciled with an increasingly reactionary, marginalized everyday and its hyper-material reality. The replayed dispute becomes a source of strength in moments of financial misery, and sometimes, a lesson learned and applied in self-organized, direct (though already-always shortlived) engagement or application to (cultural) politics. Only this lesson is a very painful one.

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The theories of Soviet productivism from the mid-to-late 1920s, for example, are very useful to the neo-Stakhanovites among the cultural producers, whose passion for the political is fuelled by a utopianism left over from the 1990s project economy. Productivist practices allow a rationalized, aleatory workflow of total immersion in non-artistic praxis to become art, which, in turn, can become a commodity: as militant participant observation of the workflow, the cultural producer becomes an artist. But how do you know that your love for Tretyakov and for the 'biography of the thing' isn't being exploited, that you aren't aestheticizing the politics of your production? Aren't you in on the game? Or would it be clearer if they really came and arrested you? It doesn't matter. All too often, there is no outside, but there is still an inside, and that inside runs risk of growing cold and lonely. So even the heated Marxist disputes of the 1920s-30s around the so-called 'avant-garde' can be useful, if they warm you today. And since you know this, sipping your tea and grasping that beautiful little Verso volume, the study of contradiction becomes a reflexive historical materialism, a history of use and reification, driven on by swallowed rage. Capitalism will never forget our comforts, no more than our carbuncles.

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The strange thing about the 'movement of movements' that came out of Seattle and Genoa is that it drew a revolutionary romanticism in its wake, one linked to the Epicurean joys of life, a fun life style of passion and madness, mediated by pop-cultural self-irony: the 'movement' was always-already aware of its carnivalesque stature. Films like Bernadette Corporation's documentary 'Get Rid of Yourself' show radical chic in the Black Block, prosumer folk-narratives of resistance in reality, on an anti-capitalist rampage. Strangely enough, all of this is fashionable enough for Dietrich Dietrichsen to write about it. Singularity became the new watchword, but not without the necessary dose of spleen, an awareness that singularity is already a universal structure. One can feel this in Bernadette Corporation's movie too, which is still a dialectical image that both expresses the affect, the becoming-animal of thinking bodies in the act of resistance, but one that also foreshadows the onset of an even deeper, unhappier melancholia than the one it has left behind. Thus, Marxists can easily level the charge of subjectivism at the 'politics of multiplicity,' and not because this politics no longer identifies the subject of struggle as an industrial proletariat. (In fact, Marx's conception of the proletariat is not so narrow, especially in the earlier works, where he speaks of humanity as species being, *Gattungswesen*). Instead, today, subjectivism is a collaborationist charge: it accuses its subject of being another singular variation of the same-old-personhood that acts so well and so stylishly.

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Marx was a wonderful critic of stylization. His style was a weapon, and he wielded it well. In a rare consideration of visual art, he wrote against what, in the 19th century, counted as classicism, though strangely, in a Winkelmannian key. 'It is even recognized that certain forms of art, e.g. the epic, can no longer be produced in their world epoch-making, classical stature as soon as

the production of art, as such, begins; that is, that certain significant forms within the realm of the arts are possible only at an undeveloped stage of artistic development.' When you apply this dialectical thought to the avant-garde, it raises an interesting question: can one make avant-garde art in an art system based on avant-garde principles, an art system geared to the production of avant-garde art? The entire art system is geared toward the production of a latter-day 'avant-garde,' but already in a mediated, sublated, neutralized form. The system of art-production really is based on cultural political gains that the second and third wave of 'avant-garde artists' made in their battle with an older art system of salons, private patronage, etc., using the state or corporate entities (collections, foundations) to create laboratory conditions for the creation of both ilk of avant-gardism, both 'autonomous' and 'engaged,' both 'ethical' and 'aesthetic.' Despite all the differences between a white cube gallery and a discourse-concept heavy environment of research-based, institutional art, there is in both cases the claim of 'rationalized' manufacturing of a certain product, whose use value is determined by the entire avant-gardist repertoire. De-auratization is a necessary consequence. Strangely, it is now again the salon and the private collector's Wunderkammer that seems so full of potentiality.

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Then again, some of the more 'utopian' social programs that could be associated with a properly Marxian discourse are more imaginable today than they were in the mid-20th century, certainly: high industrial capitalism's strict division of labor in a mechanized culture industry has been shaken fundamentally, not only by the theories and artistic practices of the avant-garde, but also by a broader technological 'universalization' of artistic labor, so that one could speak of a generic activity of cultural production that eludes conventional categories and divisions. In some sense, many cultural producers today fulfill interdisciplinary functions akin to those Marx and Engels forecast in those famous passages of *The German Ideology*. The problem is that this happens in a hyper-capitalist society. One can speak of abstract creative labor, which is no longer ontologically resistant in the way it was in Marx's time. It only takes on some of its previous qualities when it becomes art (as opposed to 'contemporary art'), which is when it starts to fulfill the demands that the new audiences all over the world actually would place upon it, if they had a chance to stop and think. They want to know as an immanent reality what liberals call 'utopia.'

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What is really important today: art (not all of it from distant and less-distant, i.e. modern pasts) can still provide emancipatory experiences and spark political coming-to-consciousness. Its main use is that it prefigures communism, and the emancipation of the human senses, as Marx put it in the *Paris Manuscripts of 1844*. Some of art's other distinctly modern features, such as its vacillation between production and consumption, are still relevant, though as moments we now see them 'dissolved' into everyday life by capitalism more effectively than by any artistic 'avant-garde.' Though this can serve as an argument against upholding the old idea that art is, strictly speaking, not productive labor, it also justifies an orthodox Marxist return of the fetishism critique, as contemporary art begins to illustrate what is supposedly the most radical claim of contemporary capitalism, namely its invention of a knowledge economy, and what has happened to any excess utopianism in this idea. To speak less hermetically, we could say that it illustrates contemporary capitalism, and almost becomes a set of plates or figures for *Capital Vol. One*: the 'big exhibition' is an encyclopaedia of commodities that presupposes encyclopaedic knowledge of potential uses from its clients, in which every artwork is the mirror for every other artwork.

And, just like capital, it ushers in the political movement of communism, because it gives rise to specific forms of cooperation that outgrow the general social relations at hand. In that sense, art is still ahead of its time: reason always existed though not always (yet) in a reasonable form. It is almost a miracle that art can still do this despite increasingly hostile conditions of production and reproduction. This almost is crucial. It, too, brings us back to Marx...

Notes on the Avant-garde was published for the first time in 2007 as an online supplement of the Chto Delat Newspaper's issue Debates on the Avant-garde.

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Politics of Representation: Performing the People and Avant-garde Practices

Danilo Prnjat

Historically, the question of the emancipation of the masses through the development of collective power can be seen through two ideas: the communist and the democratic one. Jacques Rancière conducted a critique of both instances in an attempt to bring about the third one, which is based on equality. Yet this kind of equality is a radical one and does not depend on education or wealth. According to him, knowledge is not a set of acknowledges, but a mixture of occupied positions that are exercised through practice.[1] Rancière does not find the example for this in life but in art. He believes that the paradox of the theater audience is in the fact that there is no theatre without spectators, and that the spectator (the viewer), for that very reason, is not separated from the skills and knowledge of the performance capabilities. Through the idea that “the theatre remains the only place for facing the audience with itself as a collective,” [2] Rancière is trying to draw attention to the theatre as a representative of the community that is opposed to the trap of representation and that is formed in a way of self-presence.

“Theatre is an exemplary community form. It involves an idea of community as self-presence, in contrast to the distance of representation. Since German Romanticism, thinking about theatre has been associated with this idea of the living community. Theatre emerged as a form of aesthetic constitution – sensible constitution – of the community. By that I mean the community as a way of occupying a place and a time, as the body in action as opposed to a mere apparatus of laws; a set of perceptions, gestures and attitudes that precede and pre-form laws and political institution.”[3]

Considering Guy Debord’s takes on the society of the spectacle[4] , mainly the idea of spectacle as an empire of seeing, the *exterior* where a man renounces control over himself, theatre as a live collective to Rancière represents a counterpoint to the illusion of mimesis, thus the stolen essence in the world of spectacle. In theatre, the viewer creates, in a way, his own poem “and he only feels and understands while doing so”[5] , and similarly that is also the case with actors, dramatists, directors, dancers and performers. Rancière’s politics of radical equality presumes a detachment from the perception of a schizophrenic world torn apart by keepers of knowledge, specialists and experts on one hand, and a stupefied mass of uneducated and ignorant individuals on the other – a detachment from the law of domination in the name of human autonomy and emancipation, thus in the name of communal participation in the communal

world. This is the idea of wholeness, potentialities and creation, opposed to any form of totalitarianism. In that sense (although he is very close to the French left) Rancière is very critical of communism. Stating “the less workers, the more Communism.”[6] Rancière points out that the true paradox of Communism is that it was conceived as a part of the leader’s principle, originally created by philosophers such as Plato.[7] For Rancière, the Communist elites, since they have a “golden soul”, are the only ones who are capable of living in Communism. On the other hand,

“Ordinary, dirty people can only be capitalists. Workers must live as capitalists, even when they don’t have the capital, and only those who are the elite are able to live as communist equal people.”[8]

According to Rancière, this is a perverse idea that still survives in the idea of the avant-garde, precisely in the idea of communists as avant-garde that will free the working class from the illusions of everyday life etc.

Certainly it is a fact that in historical Communism there were examples of a bureaucratization of the party, a division of minor circles of leaders from common members of the party and the working class in general, the so called “new class”. But, neither the historical nor the theoretical Communism can be reduced to this phenomenon. Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, Mao – all of them pledge for less distance, in theory and practice, between the proletariat and its avant-garde. Lenin’s famous thought on the party is that it should be *one step* ahead of the proletarian masses. It has to be ahead, because the masses are not emancipated enough in their minds; they cannot be it because of their class position in the social division of labour. In the class society (that we live in today, too), so called intellectual work is a privilege of the middle and upper class. For that reason, it was necessary for the party to be created as an avant-garde of the proletariat. But, the party had to remain only *one step* ahead, in order to remain *its* avant-garde and not alienate itself from it. Therefore, the avant-garde is composed of individuals who were recruited, and it seems that it’s the only way, from what could be called in Marxist words petty bourgeoisie. A great majority of party leaders, theorists and artists came precisely from this class. But, they abandoned the interests of the ruling class and embraced the political position of the proletarian class and its interests. This made them into the most progressive and outstanding part of the proletariat, not some other, particular class, as interpreted by Rancière. They too understood the avant-garde nature of the party only as a *transitioning moment* while preparing for the future classless society, which will enable everyone to truly step out with all of their “intelligence capacity”. The oppressed should be emancipated with the help of the party and enabled to lead themselves, as their freedom was determined, but not given for granted.

However, this polemic may serve as a starting point for some more general and I would say more urgent questions concerning the participation as a necessary condition to representational and direct democracy. In fact, starting from the historical determination of the avant-garde as a (military) forefront that informs about the position of the enemy, it would be crucial to understand if the exploited ones really need this viewpoint or *if it is safe to think that they overview the exploitation well and enough on their own?*[9]

First of all, the avant-garde is not an eternal norm as Rancière sees it, something that is defined by its representatives in a way that is historically unsustainable. The avant-garde is rather a historical fact that serves as an induction. There is a need here to accentuate that in every moment in history, a clear distinction between those who are more and those who are less aware of

their own and general subordination can be made. Do oppressed masses produce awareness (and highly theoretically articulated awareness) of their subordination and the ways of overcoming it on their own? Or, does it come to them from outside, from members of different classes and intelligence who, following the logic of their class position, are in the better place for perceiving and conceptually articulating sources of social subordination and forms of its termination, that is – emancipation? Or, more explicitly, why do workers and farmers in Serbia, for example, live in poor and humiliating conditions if they are aware of what is good and what is bad for them? Why don't they rebel against these living conditions? Why are the attempts of resistance to privatization so rare and weak, when it leaves huge working masses without basic security in life? Why does a great deal of workers still believe blindly in the idea that privatization will save them, the one that will be "fair", even though such does not exist? Why are their trade-unions so weak and defensive, and strive to attain a peaceful dialogue with the exploiters (the government and the owners), when it is clear from the beginning who will win that fight due to stronger elements of power?

Karl Marx and Marxism favoured the idea of the workers' revolution, which Rancière for some reason dismisses. Secondly, even if the will for domination was the only motive for the avant-garde, that only explains why it stands by the working masses, but it does not explain why the masses stand by it. It is hard to believe that these masses only changed their ruler after the revolution. They also changed considerably the character of the authority, because the new authority was more "close to them", to their interests, certainly more than the previous one. Thirdly, the matter of social division remains unresolved. Although Rancière denies a division between bourgeoisie and proletariat today we can still make a distinction, in liberal democracy, between, for example, democratic oligarchy and those who, as Rancière, disapprove of it at least on an intellectual level. However, this way of pointing out things would only benefit the avant-garde. Furthermore, very severe criticism of Jacques Rancière's work and the postmodern inheritance as such, that I want to relate to, came from the American art theoretician Hal Foster.[10] Foster determined that the possibilities of a critique historically gradually disappear and vanish. First of all the judgment [11] is dismissed, as a moral position that provides a standpoint for critical observation, then the authority [12] is dismissed, as a sort of critical privilege that enables a critic to speak in the name of others, and in the end the distance, which is so distinctive for the critical position and provides an independent point of observation for practice or events, is well shaken.

As Foster points out, these accusations against critique (avant-garde) are led by two ideas. The first one is that the critic is an ideological patron who dislocates a certain group of people or a class that he represents from his critical position [13], and the second one is that a critical discourse is predominantly perceived as a scientific one, which provides it with a particular legitimacy in the matters of truth, so we cannot see the thing that potentially remains hidden (ideology).[14] According to Foster, there are two more ideas that helped the process of extracting legitimacy out of the critical position in a historically-philosophical sense. The first one is the critique of representation that suppressed the value of truth as such, encouraging moral indifference and political nihilism. The second one is the critique of the subject based on the critique of identity as social construction, encouraging consumerism of positions of subject -- identities. [15] As we can see, this rough division illustrates how postmodernism is seen today. Postmodernism is closely associated with neoliberal capitalism, thus, postmodernism can be interpreted as a culture of liberal capitalism referring to the deregulation of culture that finds its match in the

deregulation of economy.[16] Refusing critique and the critical seems to have led to a position that has nothing to offer, with no possibility to criticize. In the field of theory the “distribution of sensible” [17] is offered instead, “general intellect” [18] , “art in gaseous condition”[19] , glorifying the aesthetic... The art world of today is being cluttered by works of engaged art, most of which is based on participation, joint work that tries to avoid any kind of hierarchy (the same strategy is applied on curators’ projects, following the principle “Let’s do something together”).

In short, the concept of the redistribution of the sensible (that Foster criticizes) and the politics of dismissing authority and promotion of equal participation (Rancière), according to Foster, worked in favor of the fetishization of the object in a way that it becomes interpreted as quasi-subject:

“Recent art history shows a marked tendency to do much the same thing: images are said to have “power” or agency, pictures to have “wants” or desires, and so on. This corresponds to a similar tendency in recent art and architecture to present work in terms of subject hood.[20] Although many practitioners aim, in good Minimalist fashion, to promote phenomenological experience, often what they offer is the near-reverse: “experience” returned as “atmosphere” and/or “affect”, in spaces that confuse the actual with the virtual and/or with sensations that are produced as effects yet seem intimate, indeed internal, nonetheless (...). In this way the phenomenological reflexivity of building seems to do the perceiving for us. This, too, is a version of fetishization, for it takes thoughts and feelings, processes them as images and effects, and delivers them back to us for our appreciative amazement. As such it calls for antifetishistic critique.”[21]

But, as I see it, a matter of a great relevance that should be mentioned here, besides the fetishization of the object, being interpreted as a fake subject (by what the concept of reification has been re-actualized), is the much bigger *phenomenon of fetishization of events, acts of participation, presence of the individual in society, in a way that all of these become interpreted as quasi-presence*. In other words, contemporary cultural practice (art), expanding the field of representation into the wide field of social activism, has become the perfect tool for the transfer of the mechanism of deception that traditionally belonged only to the art (fetishization of objects – a quasi-subject) to the whole society (fetishization of events – a quasi-presence). Or, as Rancière, affirmatively, points out:

“We need to identify knowledge in action in uneducated and activity in viewers. Every viewer is an actor in his own story, every actor and every person of action is a simultaneous viewer of the same story.”[22]

Specifically, substituting virtual for real is becoming a predominant practice in the production of the social today. In the field of culture, we witness the expansion of our presence in public, the expansion of jointment and action, in forms of different quasi-subjectivizations, conquering the public field and providing visibility for everyone (participation in art [23] , workshop projects of NGOs, media phenomena like *Big Brother* and *Facebook*, a wide range of activism struggling for availability of information on the Internet as the struggle for *piracy* and *open source* systems, etc). In other words, it looks like if the presence of an individual in communal and public space has become a matter of course. The public space is being permanently redefined, conquered and ever more available. However, what is actually happening is the *privatization of public material space, rapid decrease of citizens’ involvement in activities of general mat-*

ter, and the growth of urban and industrial zones (districts that are most commonly rich with resources) and large portions of land, that due to privatization become absolutely unavailable to citizens.

So, we can say that the neo-liberal ideological concept undoubtedly makes a foundation for most of these, so called “emancipatory” practices of today in a way that they increasingly move the presence of participants into the virtual realm. These theories and practices are actually a great way of covering up the fact that public space is becoming less and less ours. Perceived in this manner, these models of activism gain a new social function: they act as a way of subjectivization and de-traumatization of the potentiality of conflict, that would arise as a result of the increasing confiscation of the common and the public, seen in the broadest economic and political sense of the term.

What is set as a major task of a new avant-garde practice today is primarily to figure out the exit from this formalist representational deadlock. It is urgent to find a different way to achieve the idea of horizontal participation. In order to keep the prefix “emancipatory”, the emergence of citizens in society and in the political struggle in general will need to contain a completely redefined relationship toward representation, as well as a Benjaminian [24] awareness of it. The avant-garde practice should not necessarily depart from representation as such, as the field of social action is, at least in the Western cultural heritage, so closely attached to it that the field of political struggle is almost unthinkable without it. However, what avant-garde practice will have to achieve is to get out of its formalist framework and secure a “solid” and “real” content of itself, by being subversive in relation to itself and connected to the *material conditions of production*.

Footnotes:

[1] Rancière, Jacques. *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (originally published as *Le Maître ignorant: Cinq leçons sur l'émancipation intellectuelle*). Translation by Kristin Ross. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991.

[2] Rancière, Jacques. *The Emancipated Spectator* (originally published as *Le Spectateur émancipé*). Translated by Gregory Elliott, 5. London: Verso, 2011.

[3] Ibid., 6.

[4] Debord, Guy. *Društvo spektakla* (originally published as *La Société du spectacle*). Translation by Aleksa Golijanin. Belgrade: Anarhija/Blok 45, 2001.

[5] Rancière, Jacques. *The Emancipated Spectator* (originally published as *Le Spectateur émancipé*). Translation by Gregory Elliott, 5. London: Verso, 2011.

[6] Jakić Ljubomir. “Platon Invented Communism”. Interview with Jacques Rancière, daily newspaper *Politika*. <http://www.politika.rs/rubrike/Kulturni-dodatak/Platon-je-izmislio-komunizam.lt.html>, 11/10/2012, 11am (my translation).

[7] Platon. The Republic . From <http://www.idph.com.br/conteudos/ebooks/republic.pdf>, 10/12/2010, 2pm

[8] Jakić, Ljubomir. “Platon Invented Communism”, Interview with Jacques Rancière, daily newspaper *Politika*. <http://www.politika.rs/rubrike/Kulturni-dodatak/Platon-je-izmislio-komunizam.lt.html>, 11/10/2012, 11am (my translation).

[9] The same question can be asked in terms of participatory art where the artist acts as an avant-gar-

de activist who fights for the political interests of the oppressed.

[10] Foster, Hal. "Postcritical". *October Magazine*, Ltd. And Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Winter 2012, 3–8.

[11] Kant, Immanuel. *Kritika moći suđenja* (originally published as *Kritik der Urteilskraft*). Translated by Nikola Popović. Belgrade: BIGZ, 1975.

[12] Almost the entire postmodernist philosophical tradition can be comprehended by this key.

[13] Benjamin, Walter. *The Author as Producer* (originally published as *Versuche über Brecht*). Translated by Anna Bostock. *New Left Review*, 1/62, July-August, 1970, 1–9.

[14] Althusser, Louis / Balibar, Etienne. *Kako čitati Kapital* (originally published as *Lire le capital*). Translated by Rade Kalaj. Zagreb: Izvori i Tokovi, 1975.

[15] The best example for this is the multicultural advertisement for *Benetton* with the slogan: *United Colors of Benetton*.

[16] Jameson, Frederick. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. London: Verso, 2001.

[17] Rancière, Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of Sensible* (originally published as *La Partage du sensible: Esthétique et politique*). Translated by Gabriel Rockhill. London: Continuum IPG, 2008.

[18] Virno, Paolo. *Gramatika mnoštva: Prilozi analizi suvremenih formi života* (originally published as *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*). Translated by Jasna Jakšić. Zagreb: Naklada Jesenski i Turk, 2004.

[19] Michaud, Yves. *Umjetnost u plinovitom stanju* (originally published as *L'art à l'état gazeux: Essai sur le triomphe de l'esthétique*). Translated by Jagoda Milinković. Zagreb: Ljevak, 2004.

[20] Graw, Isabelle, ed. *Art and Subjecthood: The return of the Human Figure in Semiocapitalism*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011 (Hal Foster's footnote).

[21] What was condemned in Minimalism as a concern with objecthood was really a concern with objectivity – the objectivity of structure, space, bodies in space, and so on. This concern drove the primary line of work out in Minimalism, but now a secondary line has become dominant. On this reversal, see "Painting Unbound," in my *The Architecture Complex*, London: Verso, 2011 (Hal Foster's footnote).

[22] Rancière, Jacques. *The Emancipated Spectator* (originally published as *Le Spectateur émancipé*). Translated by Gregory Elliott, 6. London: Verso, 2011.

[23] See: Bishop, Claire, ed. *Participation – Documents of Contemporary Art*. London: Whitechapel, 2006.

[24] Benjamin, Walter. "Umetničko delo u veku svoje tehničke reprodukcije" (originally published as *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*). In *Eseji*, translated by Milan Tabaković, 114–151. Belgrade: Nolit, 1974.

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Partisanship in Art

Vesna Vuković

A Conversation between Rena Rädle and Vesna Vuković inspired by an article by John Roberts

R.R.: One of the contentious issues between modernism and realism in the 1930s was the relation towards propaganda. John Roberts wrote a concise article about this debate titled *Realism, Modernism, and Photography: At last, at last the mask has been torn away* where he discusses the works of Ernst Friedrich's *Krieg dem Kriege* [War against War] (1924) and Kurt Tucholsky and John Heartfield's *Deutschland Deutschland über alles* [Germany, Germany Above All] (1929). According to Roberts modernists argued that "where propaganda fails, [...] is in its identification of the truth of the artwork with a singular and univocal position." Propaganda is seen here as a language of persuasion that intends to bring about partisan identification of the reader or spectator. Modernists contested such unreflected monological character of art and granted the autonomy of the spectator. Postmodernism finally established multiple and recently also 'queer' identities.

The bourgeois society of the capitalist countries dismisses the language of propaganda according to Roberts as "failed forms of democratic speech", as not "balanced" and the intention to persuade is equalled with coercion. He is thinking here of the Western capitalist societies. How was the relation between propaganda and art in the Yugoslavia of the 1920s and 1930s?

V.V.: Roberts describes the 1920s also as a time of *exchange and interfusion* between realism and modernism, and it is exactly these two analyzed photo-text books that he sees as *a new hybrid form of artistic production* in which *modernism steps up to ironize the claims of realism and realism steps up to ironize the claims of modernism*. This period, he states, represents a time when the separation of the partisan and nonpartisan breaks down, allowing realism and modernism to infect and redefine each other.

If we want to talk about partisanship in the Yugoslav context, we have to start from the same period – the late 1920s – and the so-called 'Dispute on the Literary Left'. Lasting until 1952, the dispute was taking place between two left-oriented groups of authors: surrealist poets and authors of social literature, or in other words between two poles – aestheticism and literature as instrument of the class struggle. It was framed by the first international conference of revolutionary authors organized in Moscow in 1927 with the aim to broaden fronts on the intellectual left and it's there that the avant-garde's pluralism and aestheticism were strongly criticized. But the a-historical discussions, either stating the partisanship being inherent to art, as art historian

Arnold Hauser did in his article “Propaganda, ideology and art” from 1971, or claiming that having a tendency means to give up artistic tendency do not bring us too far. In his famous lecture entitled “The Author as Producer” held in 1934, Walter Benjamin sets both of these factors in a live social environment. Benjamin replaces the old materialistic question of the relation of a piece of art *towards* social relations of production of its time, with the question of its position *within* the social relations of its time, which aims for the function that a piece of art has within the artistic relations of production, i.e., its technique. The long discussion of the relationship between quality on the one hand and political tendencies of a piece of art on the other was bridged by Benjamin with a formula that clarified the relationship between these two factors: “the correct political tendency of a work includes its literary quality because it includes its literary tendency”. Coming back to the Yugoslav context, it is too easy to say that the prose was instrumentalized and that the poetry lost its status as being too individualistic and too intuitive; as always, one has to historicize. Namely, at that time, in the late 1920s, the Communist Party was banned, together with the leftist press, so it was literature that was regarded as the field for propaganda work by the Communist Party. The dispute ended in 1952 at the 3rd Congress of the Writers’ Alliance of Yugoslavia, where Miroslav Krleža held a famous speech, with Yugoslavia embracing modernism as its official aesthetics. The end of the discussion in 1952 is consistent, since the socialist project at that time had an institutional frame, so literature was no longer a privileged field for propaganda or political articulation.

R.R.: Both works in discussion are photo-text books that make extensive use of the photographic archives of that time. Amongst the more than two hundred pictures of war atrocities printed in *Krieg dem Kriege* and attributed with an ironic caption each, the most appellative is a set of photos Ernst Friedrich got from a hospital archive. It shows the brutally disfigured faces of soldiers who survived the front-line. In the very act to make visible the hidden visual archives, Roberts identifies the truly realist task: to “unveil” the real which is covered by bourgeois interests. Another point Roberts makes deals with the quality of the photograph in comparison to the realist painting. In contrast to the realist painting, photographs are not just symbols or expressions of the relation between the artist and his subject, but are considered as veridical evidence. Moreover, he states, “Photography brings to realism and the “unveiling” of bourgeois ideology the “speech” of the subject of representation.”

I would like to discuss two questions here. Is photography today, with mobile phones and social networks, still a relevant means for artists to “unveil” the real? And, taking into account the critique of representation questioning who is entitled or able to speak and for whom, my second question is, what are in your opinion possible or “successful” models of representation?

V.V.: The idea that there is a reality which is hidden and needs to be revealed in clear terms is a classical prejudice of Western modern philosophy, stemming at least from Descartes. Presupposing that there is a firm and stable outer reality which needs to be apprehended by a passive subject (or cogito) reduces the procedure of such a quest to a technical question: what is the most proper tool to disclose the ‘real’? This type of reasoning applies to the photography as well.

Furthermore, as we put art in its live social environment, one has to think both of journalism as a field which is about informing and of the advertising industry as operating with the production of images. How does art stay in relations to both? I think that it makes more sense to start by posing a basic question: Why do we need art to understand the society and its relations? And, as part of the same question, are artistic instruments privileged for understanding the society and its relations? Only if we pose these questions and bring art in relation to the other epistemological fields, we can gain some substantial insights into the potentials of photography as political tool.

There is a development I would like to stress, which comes with changes in the scientific/academic field and also in journalism, namely with their commodification: art is still a relatively open space that hosts all who want that their work – so to say – makes sense (science, journalism, philosophy...) and becomes a massive refuge for this disposed, over-educated class. In this changed structure, art has to position itself anew.

Coming to your second question, rather than speaking of successful models of representation, I would like to touch the question of the critique of representation looking at its loudest manifestation: participatory art is proliferating in the 1990s (ironically enough, at the time of the dissolution of the Eastern bloc and dismantling of the welfare state in the West). In her book *Artificial Hells. Participatory Arts and the Politics of Spectatorship* Claire Bishop analyzes increased artistic interest in participation and collaboration as a global phenomenon. She makes a historical overview of artistic preoccupation with participation and collaboration throughout the 20th century, with the basic insight of the proliferation of participatory practices and its ties to the political turmoils and movements for social change. In the process, she pinpoints three key moments: the historical avant-garde around 1917, the neo-avant-garde around 1968 and, as the third moment that triggered contemporary participatory practices, the fall of socialism in Europe in 1989, in a decreasing function – from the triumph (1917); over the last heroic resistance (1968); until the utter collapse of the collective vision of society (1989). In this historical development, the status and the identity of the audience (participants) in the participatory art practices have also changed: first the masses, then the people and, finally, communities and the excluded. In most of the participatory artworks, which today deal with minorities, the excluded, dispossessed, we see the audience (the participants) themselves. The critique of representation somehow ends up in the claim for authenticity. It is always them and their attitudes, their thinking, their emotions that are being displayed (and never paid) as authentic, and – not of unimportance – it is their only access to the art production and art institutions.

R.R.: Later on, Roberts elaborates on the inclusive character of classical realism that was addressing a (yet to establish) cross-class spectatorship. With the Russian Revolution, this social-democratic ideal became obsolete and “[T]he representation of the real was no longer a means of bringing bourgeois experience and proletarian experience into some kind of common connection, but of transforming the movement of the real itself in the collective interests of working-class experience and emancipation.” The working class has become an agent of the real and the counter-symbolic function of realism, so Roberts, has been replaced by a practical one. In the aftermath of the Russian revolution, he states, the newly established independent cultural institutions allowed the artists and writers “to speak directly from an explicit class position without the mediation of mass cultural institutions. They therefore did not have to allegorize their own par-

tianship and working-class interests.” In the Zagreb and Belgrade of the 1930s the artists groups Život [Life] and Zemlja [Earth] were articulating explicit peasants’ and working class interests. Could you elaborate on these groups and their position in contrast to today’s social struggles of artists (and other workers)?

V.V.: The artists groups *Život* and *Zemlja* were active in the period before WWII, in times when the workers’ movement and the unions were strong and active, as well as the Communist Party, although illegal. One has to emphasize their historical specificity, and only such framework is the proper starting point for the analysis and evaluation of contemporary artistic practices. The fact that contemporary art practices explicitly take on political agendas is actually due to the disappearance or weakening of real political forces that could implement them (left parties, unions). The collateral effect of such a development – contemporary art treatment of political questions without support of real political movements – is the following: the actor of the critique becomes the artwork itself, or in other words, it is the object that takes responsibility for the political, while the subjects of this production can stay at the safe distance. To understand the reasons for the difficulty of uniting the struggles of artists (and other workers), one has to look at the specific nature of artistic work, or at the position of the artist in the production. From the moment of establishing wage labour, art was separated from all other social activities, becoming thus an autonomous activity in the direct opposition to wage labour. This autonomy implies that the production of art is not motivated by money, which means that artistic labor is independent in regard to the definition of its price. Since there is no general price of this labour, there is no possibility for solidarity with other producers. Furthermore, creativity implies an intimate relationship with its object and therefore its uniqueness, which then brings artists in competitiveness – the constant struggle to be different, and better, from the others. All this thwarts the artists to organize in a concrete political formation. Although – and this should not mislead us – they do perceive themselves as a social group or even class, the ‘creative class’, it is more of a false homogeneity because it hides the class relations within it, and consequently, those outside the sphere.

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Realism Revisited: ArtLeaking in the Age of Art Incorporated

Corina L. Apostol

I am happy to accept this name. I am not only a Socialist but a Republican even more, and in short a partisan of all revolution – and above all a Realist...Realist also means sincere to the real truth.

Letter from Gustave Courbet to his parents, June 1848

“Here I am, because of the People of Paris, up to my neck in politics. President of the Federation of Artists, member of the Commune committee, city council delegate and delegate for Public Education; the four most important posts in Paris. I get up, I have breakfast, and I preside and sit on committees twelve hours a day. Now my head is starting to spin. But in spite of all this worry and trying to understand unfamiliar things, I am really happy [...]”

Letter from Gustave Courbet to his parents, April 1870[1]

The renewed interest in the French art worker and activist Gustave Courbet (1819–1877) coincides with the present-day turn towards a model of the politically engaged artist and, more specifically, as the editors of this issue bring to question, what reclaiming the tenets of realism means today. This takes place on the background of a re-emergent activist art, political art, even collective art, historical categories which escape easy categorizations into either a particular artistic genre, or an aesthetic category. This upswing of social forces, both present-day and historical, both revolutionary and familiar is paradoxically doubled by the art world’s domination by cultural capital, or what Julian Stallabrass coined as “Art Incorporated,”[2] power-driven by profit making. The present-day bind between the logic of the all-pervasive art market and calls for an autonomy of art compelled me to revisit a time of comparable artistic and political conflicts dating even before modernism.

Indeed, in the 19th century reactionary appeals to an art for art’s sake clashed with principles of an emerging avant-gardism. Courbet’s major artistic accomplishments began during the Revolution of 1848, when he penned his own Realist Manifesto, immediately after Marx’s famous Communist Manifesto, and ended with the Paris Commune of 1871. While the extent to which he participated in these historical events has been put into question, his

bold self-confidence and passionate belief in the artist's role in changing society – broadly conceived – towards a liberated and socialist future were strongly shaped by these events. Those were turbulent times of class and political conflicts, from the moment the working class entered the scene as an autonomous political force – which was brutally suppressed by the bourgeoisie – to the French workers' brief, yet powerful Commune.

In the second half of the 19th century Courbet called on Parisian artists to “assume control of the museums and art collections which, though the property of the nation, are primarily theirs, from the intellectual as well as the material point of view.”[3] Courbet's statement responded to the paradigm shift of the economic framework, wherein the transfer of capital accumulated by capitalist organizations created a new class. This bourgeoisie had accumulated economic means and invested heavily in the salon art production to flaunt their power. Emerging as new spaces for the presentation and enjoyment of art by the bourgeoisie, the salons of the 19th century operated autonomously from the church and the monarchy; while self-fashioned as disengaged from everyday production, they at the same time built themselves as powerful, independent entities in the field of art. Courbet challenged both the salon system and later even the political classes it upheld through his infamous monumental canvases depicting labor, sex workers and peasants and through his continued support for the removal of the imperialistic Vendôme Column by the communards in 1871 and his seminal role as commissar of culture in the Commune committee.

The transformation of the artist's subjectivity as art worker and activist during the latter half of the 19th century, spearheaded by the Realist movement, was an initial landmark moment that continues to define the relationship between art and social movements. Courbet's appeal was one of the first instances when artists' aspiration for social change led them to align themselves with a wider workers' movement and break with the bourgeois institutions of art and the monarchy. Transgressing from artistic praxis into political action, artists could then be considered as a counter-power, occupying political functions in a new order, no matter how briefly this lasted.

Inspired by the historical precedent of Realism Courbet, as well as a tradition of institutional critique from the left in the 20th century, ArtLeaks [4], the organization which I co-founded in 2011, also considers the role of the artist as a citizen as well as the political nature of art and its institutions explicitly. At the same time, our perspective is not only local, focused on our immediate context but international. Our platform's foundational period coincided with the wake of the Arab Spring, the summer and autumn of the Occupy movement, the widespread anti-authority demonstrations in Russia, the so-called Euro-crisis and Gezi Park, when artists were also heavily involved in emerging social and political movements, as creators and citizens. Given this context, ArtLeaks developed as a thinking platform which sought to analyze concrete production processes and build a solidarity network that may have the power to confront violent capitalist production processes inside the institution and the exploitation of art workers. Our long term goal still remains to connect art workers with other precarious social groups, as the former are not a group that is disconnected from the dominant mode of production, as they are often presented. In this sense, we are also aligned to the Gramscian demand for the consolidation of the organic intellectual (prefigured by Courbet) who serves as a guide by identifying herself/himself with the plight of the destitute class. Building a counter-power or a counter-hegemony (Gramsci) would make our struggle visible,

more coordinated and stronger. The question is then, how to set about this task, one to which ArtLeaks makes a modest contribution.

Beyond similarities of class conflict, nowadays, our possibilities for action are also different, given shifts in economic and political frameworks, as well as technology. The widespread development of the Internet, and the use of social media to spread information, network and political actions, has led to another type of agency within the configuration of power and capital. But there are also pitfalls. The same social networks that have been instrumental in making knowledge-power more transparent by the Occupy Movement or tactical media artists, have also been utilized for spreading disinformation, and a greater surveillance part of the neoliberal political order. In this scenario, ArtLeaks drew inspiration from the more subversive role of WikiLeaks, a platform which spoke truth to the power of the international military industrial complex. Building on Courbet's aforementioned dictum to be "sincere to the real truth," ArtLeaks has been working to disentangle its artistic equivalent. Utilizing the power of the Internet and group networking, ArtLeaking has for the past three years engendered a space to vocalize protests against the pervasive symptoms of Art Incorporated: corruption and abuse in the art world, its pervasive corporatization, the accumulation of cultural capital by banks or foundations through the labor of cultural workers who are not compensated in return, and the suppression of any kind of debate around these conditions of exploitation and the politics of corporate and state sponsorship. This counter-narrative of realities hidden beneath the shiny veneer of the biennialization of the art world, the domination of art fairs and galleries and the privatization of artistic education.

Therefore, ArtLeaks seeks to reclaim realism today, not only as an artistic practice, but also seeks to influence a political practice on the level of what is usually referred to as civil society, where hegemony is built. For without seriously putting into question the relations of cultural production in today's capitalist societies, we cannot image the complexities and reproduction of everyday life. By critically taking into account the position of art workers as a precarious class of producers, we can begin to get to the roots of changing the hegemony.

And what is the reality? ArtLeaks' online active archive exposes cases of political censorship, homophobic or xenophobic censorship, union rights and toxic leadership are documented, saved, updated, and intensely debated. ArtLeaks has expanded the notion of art workers, which dates back to Courbet's own self-identification, to refer not only to artists but also interns, assistants, curators, and critics – categories that are in various degrees subjected to conditions of inequality, precarity, and/or are threatened by censorship from more powerful structures whether working in the Balkans or in Western Europe or United States. If one were to go through this subversive archive, one would discover no major revolutionary accomplishments or grand histories of struggles, but rather transitory moments of resistance, local insurgents, connected through a social network where the negation of the status quo counts more than the accumulation of professional capital. These flickers of revolt are marginalized by the dominance of the contemporary art market and business culture, yet they remain largely unabsorbed by reactionary processes. They are part of a non-linear, counter-narrative of art history, which continues to undermine essentializing aesthetic hierarchies and style periodizations.

Even more, by organizing open workshops and assemblies, ArtLeaks drew attention to how theorists, cultural workers, and artists need to organize, as they have the power to resist today's reactionary tendencies. In these forums participants talked about local issues, common troubles, and possible solutions to change the unfortunate current state of the arts and we

subsequently publish reports to inspire people to make their own collaborations. Artleaking therefore not only focuses on bad examples, but stresses the need for solidarity and for a “change it together” spirit in the art world, in response to atomized, agency-less subjectivity. We look to historical examples ranging from the aforementioned Realists to Dadaists, from Constructivists to Situationists, from the Art Workers’ Coalition to Artists Meeting for Cultural Change, which at important historical moments in their respective milieus articulated a great variety of ways of contesting the reactionary status quo, and interventions in art and politics that took place both inside and outside the Salon, the Museum, the Academy or the Gallery.

To be clear, I am not arguing for the existence of some “clean” or “authentic” zones, suppressed by the Art World Incorporated: ArtLeaks’ archives instead attest to a heterogenous cluster of practices and forms that influence the mainstream, collide with it and remain structurally marginalized by normative cultural institutions. Rather, one of the main debates that we face concern the very spaces, including the cyberspace, in which resistances are effective, and the type of pressure we can put on these institutions. Should we abandon them altogether or engage with them, with the aim of transforming them, and if so what kind of engagement is necessary? Knowing full well that they have become complicit with neoliberal capitalism, how can we retake, as Courbet once said: “from the intellectual as well as the material point of view” our factories of art, which are more about spectacle and surplus value than a site of critical practices? Have artists now working under post-fordist, neoliberal conditions become wholly instrumentalized and bound to the reproduction of the system? Is resistance still possible inside the institutions?

ArtLeaks’ recent collaborations with political artistic groups, such as Occupy Museums [5], W.A.G.E. [6], Liberate Tate [7], Fokus Grupa [8], Precarious Workers’ Brigade [9], Ragpickers [10] and others have brought to light approaches which take the long march through the political institutions or use exodus to concentrate on alternative social relations outside of the state-capital power network. These strategies which Gramsci referred to as “war of position,” are aimed at powerful institutions, or the dominant hegemony, in order to question and suggest transformations in how they operate. Operating mostly at the cultural level, where subjectivities are constructed and may be politicized, they also bring an awareness of economic and legal ramifications and activist know-how.

While Occupy Museums target important private museums in Europe and the United States, and attempt to hold them accountable to the public via means of horizontal spaces for debate and collaboration, Liberate Tate have engaged in a continuous wave of creative disobedience against Tate, urging them to renounce funding from toxic oil companies. Operating from New York, W.A.G.E. are dedicated to drawing attention to economic inequalities that are prevalent in the art world, developing a system of institutional certification that allows art workers to survive within the greater economy. Similarly, Precarious Workers’ Brigade and Ragpickers call out in solidarity with those struggling to survive in the so-called climate of economic crisis and enforced austerity measures, developing social and political tools to end precarity. Finally, in their project “Artists’ Contracts and Artists’ Rights” Fokus Grupa remind us of the importance of the 20th century artists’ manifesto that agitated against a bourgeois art/world and the documents post war artists devised in order to protect their rights, as well as critique the position taken by art in relation to the market.

Given our different, yet contiguous strategies, we all share the conviction that we cannot keep waiting and seeing how things would develop from the sidelines, or what answers would be given to us from powerful players and institutions. Instead ArtLeaks sought to directly shape and engage with the discourse and structure of the military industrial cultural complex of today, embedded in capitalist production. Embracing political artistic strategies, as both legitimate and important, we continue to foster positions of contestation, making visible conflicts that lead to the emergence of politicized subjectivities. At the same time, we must realize that these critical practices and tools which we continue to test and develop are limited, in that they cannot substitute political practices that could bring an emancipatory hegemonic order. The revolutionary moment cannot be brought about only through artistic practice, which operates at the level of subjectivation, and which remains but one dimension in the struggle for a new emancipatory order. In other words, we are not yet “up to our necks in politics,” as Courbet, not satisfied only with transforming his artistic expression into a realist position acted in 1871, when together with the communards, they sought to change their social and political reality.

Footnotes:

[1] Both quotes courtesy of the “Courbet Dossier,” Musee d’Orsay, Paris. Accessed online, July 2014:

<http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/courbet-dossier/courbet-speaks.html>

[2] Stallabrass, Julian. *Art Incorporated: The Story of Contemporary Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

[3] Courbet, Gustave. “Letter to artists of Paris, 7 April 1871”. In *Letters of Gustave Courbet*, ed. Petra ten-Doessachte. Chicago:University of Chicago Press, 1992.

[4] ArtLeaks is a collective platform initiated in 2011 by an international group of artists, curators, art historians and intellectuals in response to the abuse of their professional integrity and the open infringement of their labour rights. See more at: www.art-leaks.org

[5] See: <http://occupymuseums.org/>

[6] See: <http://www.wageforwork.com/>

[7] See: <http://liberatetate.wordpress.com/>

[8] See: <http://fokusgrupa.net/>

[9] See: <http://precariousworkersbrigade.tumblr.com/>

[10] See: <http://ragpickers.tumblr.com/>

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