

Ecology

Simon Yuill

(summary by Leigh French from working notes)

Varying and contrasting politics and intentions, but nevertheless part of a general pattern that has been evolving in discourse and practice of curation and arts management.

There are three elements to this:

- 1) open, self-organised structures
- 2) references to forms of radical, political experimentation of the past, particularly the 1960s counter-culture
- 3) the concept of the arts as a creative or cultural 'ecology'

This has become a widespread pattern of discourse within the managerial sector of the arts world, the co-ordinating classes, particularly in regard to attempts to define an overall structure to current practice.

On the surface these may all seem like a 'good thing': self-organisation, openness, radical experiments, and ecology, but I would argue that in most cases what we are seeing is the use of these as empty structures, rhetorical devices that are utilised to clothe and implement a set of developments that are quite contrary to the ideas such concepts may evoke.

1) open, self-organised structures

The reshaping of software production as a gift economy has been one of the key concepts taken up by those who have further abstracted form Open Source into other forms of production, such as Charles Leadbeater's 'We Think', and is one part of the basis for the business model of Facebook, etc.

The gift economy is often presented as some form of altruistic alternative to the monetary economy and to capital, but this need not be the case. Eric Raymond - right-wing Libertarian, free-market fundamentalist, who developed 'Open Source' - himself acknowledged and promoted its role within capitalist practice and Mauss' classic anthropological analysis of gift economies presented them not as egalitarian systems but rather as means of constructing and reinforcing hierarchies.

Feminist anthropologists, Lisette Josephides and Marilyn Strathern have argued that where there is a distinction between those who make the gifts, or who are themselves gifts, and those who make the exchange and thereby benefit from the circulation of gifts you have an exploitative economy very similar to that of conventional capitalist economy in which there is a separation between those who produce and those who exchange and thereby control the acquisition of capital - in the gift economy people themselves and personal characteristics become commodified.

It is exactly this form of gift economy that we see in the Facebook model, and is being replicated in forms of cultural production.

In this the gifts are not important as commodities in their own right but rather the construction of a gift economy serves as a mechanism to encourage large scale interaction and self-generated activity. This in turn is analysed and harvested for data, in other words the aggregation of many people interacting with one-another in a self-organised fashion is in itself a commodity from which various forms of economic value can be derived.

That the artist-run scene provides a spectacle of creative energy which can be marketed in itself, the artist-run strand of GI serves this purpose as do projects such as VOLTA in Art Basel: "True to its character of identifying new trends, VOLTA7 returns to the Dreispitzhalle in an area that has grown rapidly into an artistically vibrant neighbourhood. Next door, newly-renovated studios host local artists ..."

The energy of creativity manifested by the aggregate of numerous young artists organising their own projects becomes a commodity that is used to sell the city.

2) references to forms of radical, political experimentation of the past, particularly the 1960s counter-culture

Often these references become stripped of their politics, or the politics are presented as only relevant to the context in which they occurred as a period of immature idealism, rather than providing a reference point for current critical practice.

As stripped-out stylistic references the forms are presented as suitable for adoption in the present, we can see this in film-making where the stylistic forms of past radicalism are adopted but the modes of production and distribution are often replaced by a conventional marketing of a commodity form.

In particular the recent curatorial interest in groups such as the Black Audio Film Collective, where the mode and context of production is often written out entirely, one which was based within radical community media, not experimental arts practice, and one which consciously adopted forms of unionisation through the 'Grant-Aided Workshop Production Declaration' and were constituted as a co-operative, as well as working closely with Stuart Hall and the Centre for Cultural Studies in Birmingham, thereby consciously relating their practice to a developed body of critical discourse that reflected on the processes they were involved in.

Where once 16mm and 8mm film were a relatively cheap, populist form of production, they are now exclusive artisanal media, and have become popular within the commercial arts sector as they enable the creation of films as 'limited edition prints'.

This is also echoed in the marketing of artist-made films via FVU and LUX, which, whilst placing themselves as 'successors' to the previous era of radical practice, operate within a commercialised atelier-apprenticeship model.

There is often a nostalgia implicit in these references, as though the radicalism is 'charming' in its naivety, but does not measure up to the needs of our current more mature era, this echoes Marx and Engel's analysis of the popularity for past art forms:

"The charm of their art has for us does not conflict with the immature stage of the society in which it originated. On the contrary its

charm is a consequence of this and is inseparably linked with the fact that the immature social conditions which gave rise, and which alone could give rise, to this art cannot recur." (The German Ideology)

The past, political structures of artist-run practice thereby become forms of 'charming immaturity'.

3) the concept of the arts as a creative or cultural 'ecology'

In discussing a particular area of production as an ecology, suggests a complex yet coherent and self-sustaining structure.

Popular amongst neoliberal thinking.

This has become a widespread pattern of discourse within the managerial sector of the arts world, the co-ordinating classes, particularly in regard to attempts to define an overall structure to current practice.

But the rhetorical devices that are utilised to clothe and implement a set of developments are quite contrary to the ideas such concepts may evoke.

Adam Curtis has explored what he calls: 'The Use and Abuse of Vegetal Concepts' - as part of series 'All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace'.

The notion of an ecology creates an over-arching context into which all aspects of production and consumption are integrated, each necessarily supports the other, or is recognised only insofar as it supports the other.

Isomorphism (when one shape adopts the form of another) is used to describe process in which an organisation, regardless of its internal structure and mode of operations, may become forced into operating in ways determined by the context in which it is active: the situation of mutual and co-operative businesses in contemporary capitalism.

This can be seen in the position for artist-run spaces outlined in recent discourse of a creative/cultural ecology - they are 'stepping stones' to a career as a 'real artist', as opposed to a distinct and separate form of artistic production in their own right, an apprenticeship for entrance into professional art making, it is precisely this position that the artist-run spaces occupy as the ecologies as set out by others.

The ecological metaphor masks the process of management that is controlling this, lending it an air of naturalness, organicity and self-realisation, whilst in fact serving as a means of devalorising much of the activity that takes place within it.

Particular forms of practice that develop in one set of economic and political conditions may acquire a very different significance in another context. What was at one time a form of free self-activity may later become a means of enslavement or exploitation.

There is therefore a need for constant self-reflexive critique, a questioning of the ways in which we work and produce -- not simply to take on particular forms but to understand how those relate to the larger structures in which we are currently producing.