Variant engages in the examination and critique of society and culture, drawing from knowledge across the arts, social sciences and humanities, as an approach to creative cultural practice and as something distinct from promotional culture.

It is an engagement of practice which seeks to publicly participate in and understand culture ‘in the round’. That is, in the many and various ways culture exemplifies, illuminates and engages with larger societal processes.

We contend it is constructive and essential to place articles which address the multiple facets of culture alongside articles on issues that inform or have consequences for the very production and subject of knowledge and its communication.

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Robin Baillie and Neil Mulholland

Scottish Art since 1960: Historical Reflections and Contemporary Overviews
Craig Richardson (2011) London, Ashgate, 250 pages

In a discussion recorded over two sessions, Robin Baillie and Neil Mulholland address issues raised by Craig Richardson's recently published book 'Scottish Art since 1960', which describes its intention as:

"Providing an analysis and including discussion (interviewing artists, curators and critics and accessing non-catalogued personal archives) towards a new chronology, Richardson here examines and proposes a sequence of precisely denoted 'example' works which would self-consciously define the interrogative term 'Scottish art'. Richardson addresses key areas of cultural politics and identity to illuminate the development of Scottish art, enhancing our understanding of the dynamics of art practice today."

Neil Mulholland: The introduction is something of a literature review with spoiler, it tells you more-or-less everything that's in the book. The sense of a polemic that's in the introduction, it's never really substantiated in a lot of cases.

Robin Baillie: Craig has an agenda which he sets out, but then he does a survey and tries to stuff that agenda into it. The artists only come in as a descriptive framing, you get these wee thumbnail sketches. I'm not saying they're totally off, that they're not without validity, but they're not an unpacking. They're not analytical deconstructions of what these people are doing.

Neil Mulholland: There are places where the book does achieve this. The section on Steven Campbell does this job well. Craig looks through work as a thing in itself, then looks at its reception and does it justice. There's a sense of this subject being taken as a case study and carefully built up.

Robin Baillie: The thing about Campbell is there was international recognition of a kind for an individual doing a non-specifically 'Scottish' style. Campbell's difficult for Craig to write his bigger agenda to, because... maybe he doesn't like it aesthetically because it's figurative, it's expressive, but also because Campbell has to be placed to one side to allow the flow of neo-conceptualism to take place.

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Robin Baillie: Although there was a group of them but no group of people, a 'movement' is required.

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Robin Baillie: There's more of a sense elsewhere in the book of people doing things collectively – in the ongoing preoccupation with the values of the land and the sea. This is particularly odd given that what sometimes ends up being, rightly, celebrated in the book is the value of independent curatorial activity. I wonder, why bother with the perceived 'centre'?

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Surrendering to Young Man

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He deals with Scottish identity in a weird
anything! Findlay is the artist who should escape
uniquely and essentially ‘Scottish’. Hence Scottish
that we can make almost anything seem as if it is
excluded). To do that we would need to have an
correct canon? We can’t convincingly argue
anyone be certain of this, that we have chosen
RB:
well worn road?
Mark Boyle and Bruce McLean, who also dominate
wasn’t) produced in Scotland. It’s more a ‘what
Turnbull’s work in quite extensive detail. I don’t
turned to the present – the era that the book is
Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art. But
there’s no discussion of the specific nature of the
Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art. But
in galleries here and what was in that collection.

RM: He’s chosen works and artists that he
considers exemplars of ‘Scottish’ art. That’s
problematic on so many levels. These artists may
well have been formative influences on his own
practice, but to imagine that this alone makes them
the right artists to choose as the exemplars of what we
might ask? Of their time and place? How can
anyone be certain of this, that we have chosen the
correct artists with whom to engage? Such
questions are crucial, lest we end up
believing the claim that the Scottishness of art, as if
there were somehow
degrees of ‘Scottishness’ by which we might
evaluate matters. This act of territorialisation
is Arnoldian, Leavisite even. It implies that
the ethnic constructions of ‘Scottishness’ that we
find in and around art, imaginaries that need to be
deconstructed, are the method by which we should
judge this art. The problem here, of course, is
that we can make almost anything seem as if it is
unique, essentially ‘Scottish’. Hence Scottish
Tories, Scottish Labour, Scottish Sun, Scotmid,
dotSCOT, etc. Since ‘Scottishness’, like any other
form of ethnic identity, is constantly contested, a
moving target, we can use it as a benchmark to
evaluate anything.

RB: Try to make Ian Hamilton Findlay exemplary of anything!
Findlay is the artist who should escape this
dagobackness, because he denies many categories.
He deals with Scottish identity in a weird
modernist, minimalist, concrete way, in terms of
the sailing boats, but not as romantic aspiration
that is projected onto neo-classicism. Findlay takes
that Enlightenment universalism and he hammers
it too. He shows the extreme authoritarian edge of it – order, discipline, militarism is in there as
well. So the question then is complex, how do you
explain that in terms of ‘Scottishness’?

NM: I see very broad relations and connections
between the work of Findlay, Boyle and McLean,
but not with Turnbull. What happens to be
ethnically Scottish. Ultimately with Turnbull,
Boyle and McLean, whatever we say about their
work, I don’t see of those course we have made a
real contribution to what this book is ostensibly about,
namely the infrastructure of art in Scotland. They
all live in London, so how could they possibly make
a contribution to the story of Scottish art here on a
today-dead level? It’s irrelevant whether they were born
in Scotland or not, they don’t have the right to vote
in Scotland, they haven’t been able to contribute to
the geopolitics here... so why are they in this book
at all?

RB: This has to do with the whole Union thing;
the Union’s in us all: England, Wales, Northern
Ireland and Scotland. Historically maybe the
Union is the biggest issue for Scotland. But is
this a motivating force in Scottish art? He
lusses Scottishness from those born from totally different
positions at different times. That Scottish lassio
doesn’t fit exactly.

NM: Whether that is a lassio or a noose, I don’t
know. It comes up a lot and it’s very contradictory
(as you would expect). Fundamentally, it’s not
accompanied with an analysis of nationalism, of
what nationhood is, what it was becoming, or of
what constitutes race or national ethnicity. We
are left to speculate whether or not we can
categorise these individuals as ‘Scottish’, whether
they themselves ascribed to this identification, perhaps
most importantly, whether thinking about
such issues helps to better understand their work.

RB: That’s what I mean; it’s not rigorous. Alright,
none of us are as rigorous as well-be to be – but
this loosens his terms and goes back to this idea:
What is Craig’s aim in talking about Scottish art?
Is it to constitute it? That would be the aim of
Hugh McDermid in the ’80s, to actually say, ‘We
want to envision a kind of art we would put our
name to’. That, in a way, is what he’s doing again.
He wants to envisage a ‘Scottish Art’ through
writing up a recent history.

NM: If somebody moves to Scotland, then they
gain an involvement in its life and culture. There
were many artists present through the period
1960 to the present – the era that the book is
supposed to engage with – who have legitimate
positions at different times. That Scottish lassio
doesn’t fit exactly.

NM: McDonald and Macmillan are at least finding
something of value back there in the Scotland of
the 1960s, whatever that means. I think Craig
doesn’t value that work in the way they do – I’m
not suggesting that he should. I’d at least like to
see a considered re-evaluation of it, albeit that this
could be a negative one. We’d have to determine how
accurately the narrative is dropped to be taken to
see a sense of what this could offer. He
repeatedly uses the phrase, “One tapestry to
describe a recurring strategy of Keynesian
culturalism in the ’60s and ’70s. The first chapter
starts in 1960 because of the founding of SNGMA,
while 1967 is the year of the Scottish Arts Council’s
(SAC) formation. This offers a useful frame
of critical analysis, an insight into a managerialism
that was hotly contested at the time (still is...). He
dates this top-down management of the arts dating
back to the time that SAC still ran its own galleries
in Edinburgh and Glasgow. He, informatively,
charts a move away from SAC towards
developing a curatorial remit towards the idea that
its job was to support such activities. Unfortunately,
this level of analysis is dropped in favour of
the narrative reaches the ‘90s, despite the fact that such managerialism
hasn’t vanished (it has shape-shifted). The more
the book unfolds, the institutional character of its
bookends becomes more apparent – a telos of the
talented bureaucrat’ emerges in the increasingly
managerial tone of the book. I’m not suggesting
that this ‘Scottish art’ is a thing that desperately
needs to be managed. It comes back to a weak
institutional theory – it’s the institutions that do this
and they generally do it other badly, at least at first. But there’s a happy ending, all the
bureaucratic hierarchies are ironed out, and we all
ultimately agree with Craig’s conclusions.

RB: This is the story of his own career as a fellow
traveller, by the artist himself – he does have this
in his background.

RM: He actually writes about his own work here, in
the third person.

RB: So we’ve someone writing art history at a
professoral level who’s moved to this point from
being part of a circle of artists. Yet, he doesn’t seem to be empathising with their careers in
how he deals with them. He’s interested more
in, ‘What do we need to create a professionally
institutional art’; in who is going to help make the
decisions that are going to cement Scottish art in
its true place.

NM: There’s a lot in here about policy and
institutions, there’s nothing wrong with that, it’s
definitely an attempt to write a professionally
influenced history of institutions. Or it could have been the
narrative not so fixated with institutional
(in)effectiveness. Where the story is,
understandably, more positive, it concerns
institutions that the author has been directly
involved with, such as GSA (Glasgow School of
Art) or Transmission. Most of this
association with. So Modern Institute gets
attention, DCA is praised, and a few obvious,
older, independents are mentioned. This is an
very selective account, and not one that helps us

Steven Campbell, Young Man
Surrendering to the Landscape, 1983

School of Art. Muralism, environmental art, mixed
media were all approaches taken that are part of a
circular generation that remains very
appealing to young people today. It is
because it went from stained glass to something more
placement based. It really was a very broad church
with a rich history to unpack. From reading the
book, it feels almost as though we had jumped
here and we needed John Latham to come and
make a point that there was such a practice. Again
that’s another missed opportunity to do some
valuably research into what already existed in
Scotland.

RB: He does ask for a Scottish art history to be
written.

NM: So you’ve got to take it as it is.

RB: We’ve got too many surveys already. Most
Scottish art history is survey-based – Duncan
Macmillan’s and Murdo McDonald’s books,
for example. One exception is Tom Normand’s
‘The Modern Scot’ written about the Scottish
Renaissance.

NM: However, even here, for me, Onwin’s work opens
an opportunity to discuss how the environmental Art more
widely, the fact that ‘public art’ was taught in the
art schools around Scotland, not just at Glasgow

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build the palace of art in the form of the failed
Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art. But
there’s no discussion of the exemplars of what we
might ask? Of their time and place? How can
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well. So the question then is complex, how do you
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understand the complexity and dynamics of the situation. There are just so many more models of formal and informal art institution in Scotland -- operating at many different levels in many places, doing really incredible things -- that simply don’t fit into the box. Can’t have them all, sure, but without striving a little more off vested home turf we just can’t see the bigger cyclical picture, institutionally speaking. Instead of rectifying this problem, the National Galleries of Scotland (NGS) keeps popping in, playing the big bad wolf, even in the denouement, where Craig walks through the space and imagines how it could have been... it all ends up reading as a very top-down account, very "uptown"...

RB: Maybe Craig feels more need is needed to represent a devolved Scotland, and as such he has a plan for institutions of Scottish art?

NM: He talks, interestingly, about breaking NGS up and further devolving it to different regions in Scotland.

RB: His view may be that this kind of institution must work for the aim of constituting a 'Scottish Art'. And it must be seen to be working for this aim.

The date which doesn’t appear in the book, which is like a ghost, is the date of the first institutional government. We’re still at a devolutionary stage and maybe he stopped writing a year or two ago, but there’s this implication that this is the backdrop of the discussion.

It’s almost like he has a reality check -- ‘Well, we’ve got to Venice, we’ve got (had) the private galleries, but we know how firmly that is all its’. Of course, because it’s not exactly what’s he’s imagining -- fantasising that an enlightened avant-garde would exist in a truly independent Scotland -- it’s merely a step on the way. However, sorry, you can’t have an avant-garde national art! There’s a conceptual flaw in that formulation.

NM: There’s something similar in his demonstration of how the "Modern Institute introduced a level of hitherto marginalised market orientation of progressive and formally challenging artists." (p167) Here is a definitive correlation of the avant-garde’s inheritors, the exemplars. It’s a question of focus, the method here, which came with gallery spaces as well as studio spaces, is into German romanticism where Ossian, for example, has a massive presence.

RB: The avant garde premise of a sequence of Scottish artworks in the 1970s extended the term "Scottish Art." (p61) Was that their aim? Probably not. What is this term ‘Scottish Art’ and how did a sequence of avant-garde works extend it? Is it: ‘We’ll claim these avant garde art works for “Scottish Art”, and then bind them into its story’?

NM: That’s just territorialisation isn’t it? ‘Scottish Art’ in the New 57 Edinburgh in 1972, for example, meant something really very different on the later part at which Duncan Macmillan published Scottish Art 1460-1990. The territory is always shifting.

RB: You couldn’t say that the Demarco Gallery had anything other than an internationalist perspective. Its based in Scotland, Edinburgh more so than anywhere else. It aspired to the freedom of avant-garde movement – transfer and cross-over. Granted, Demarco takes Beuys up to the Highlands. Beuys is probably more of a postnationalist, Scottish nationalist than Demarco because Beuys is into German romanticism where Ossian, for example, has a massive presence.

NM: Demarco is transnationalist, although he’s an advocate for Scotland, he is always wishing for a postnationalist context...

The show ‘Strategy Get Arts’ is discussed here in a way that doesn’t really open it up. What was interesting about it, beyond the show itself, is that students who were there at the time, who went on to teach in Edinburgh or took over the committee of the New 57, started to make similar links in relation to what they would bring to Scotland. So it was important in terms of another legacy, its direct impact on the grassroots. It filtered down. Glen Onwin’s teaching and work at New 57 was influenced by it. Alan Johnstone is mentioned in the book a lot at points, another artist with deep roots in German (and Japanese) post-modernism. I want to know more about these connections, instead of a reiteration of what we know about the big benchmarks and creation myths.

RB: Even if he’d been more upfront about testing these people for their role in a national agenda, the survey takes over. He doesn’t want to squeeze people too hard in closer... Finds that they’re not that bothered about Scottishness. This tests his presumption that you can write a national art history in a country that is part of a bigger unit, whether that’s Britain or Europe...

RB: If you’re going to do it then you need to take it warts ‘n all. You’ve got to write about things that you don’t like, to be impartial about it. History doesn’t unfold as we might like it to.

For example, there is a section of the book that follows the story of Scottish Arts Council grants in the 70s. It’s similar to reading the New 57’s invective mail at the time; it just as easily could be a letter written last week by Generator to Creative Scotland. It’s interesting, to me at least, but the question is, how do you deal with this historically?

In the book, it is all about not being able to get what you want, hardly a new experience for artists.

RB: Once again, the question behind all of these critiques is how would a truly Scottish institution operate? Maybe he needs to nail his colours to the mast and answer that. He doesn’t evaluate Scottish government policies for funding the arts.

NM: There’s nothing in here about that, little even about the changed conditions of post-devolution Scotland. He just doesn’t get to devolution, it’s too preoccupied with other, narrower artistic goals.

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In the book, it is all about not being able to get what you want, hardly a new experience for artists.

RB: Once again, the question behind all of these critiques is how would a truly Scottish institution operate? Maybe he needs to nail his colours to the mast and answer that. He doesn’t evaluate Scottish government policies for funding the arts.
spaces of that model, Sculpture Studios and Printmakers, that were and remain crucial. The only time that this network is mentioned is via discussion of F152 by Alan Smith (1977). In this section, we hear about the closure of Edinburgh’s Ceramics Workshop in 1974. This only happens because Craig thinks that this work is ‘exemplary’. In reading this section, I kept asking, ‘what about the Ceramic Workshop, what happened there?’ It’s heresy almost as if its raison d’etre were to close in order to enable the production of an iconic work. We learn nothing about how artists used that facility or how if formed part of a network of studio-galleries. In some ways it’s not that different from what happens these days here. Artists are still showing in those kinds of workshop spaces. Glasgow Sculpture Studios, Sudbury Warehouse or Ruhaba. It’s the same situation. So why isn’t that sort of studio-practice led activity more present in this narrative, why isn’t it considered ‘exemplary’? The focus falls too heavily on the act of consumption, the packaged brand, the gallery. Talking about what the Scottish Arts Council or Scottish National Galleries were getting up to is almost pointless, and in some senses Craig has written, let’s say proven, this: There was very little of interest happening there. So if that was the case, where were the interesting things happening? There’s no way that it follows from this that the surprising going on you’ve just got to dig deeper, or you’ve got to think about it in different terms, ask what was possible? I don’t get the sense of an infrastructure being established and negotiated, how difficult that was to put in place, of sensitivity to the terms of the time and thus of an understanding of the enormity of what was achieved.

Another example is Transmission gallery. It comes in really late in the book; it’s positioned as if it’s a separate entity when it was just a continuation of ’68-style constitutionalism married to the exploitation of areas in post-industrial decline after the events of 1973. It comes from New 57 and FASPS taking the lead from Space and ACME in London and PS1 in New York – it’s all there in 57’s archive of letters. All of those artists who are discussed in the 70s were talking to each other about how to get organised, how to take over former industrialised areas (Docklands, Hackney, Queens, Leith, Gallowgate) – networking wasn’t just the business of conceptual artists or mail artists.

RB: But if Transmission leads to the Modern Institute, as it does in Craig’s narrative – that these two ‘rivers’ come out of Transmission and go on to produce the Modern Institute – if that’s the pattern, then his picture of the Transmission model is one that should be advocated and re-established at all times, in all places. Or is it inevitable that the market supersedes? Maybe the issue at stake is marketability.

NM: In ‘The Night Minds’ chapter, looking at the early 80s, he discusses Transmission’s early days. There’s a quick roll call of what happened there that culminates in more lengthy discussion of Craig’s collaboration with Douglas Gordon, Puchery Institute. Although they were both involved with Transmission, this is not explicitly to do with Transmission’s work, it’s just a collaboration of which there were many – it was just about as far as you can get from an analysis of the early days of Transmission. There are so many other better studies of this period in Transmission – there are Transmission’s autobiographies (both the published and the aborted version), Rebecca Gordon Neshit’s MA Thesis, Sarah Lowndes’ ‘Social Sculpture’, lots in magazines and journals. There’s so much to draw from, a great archive, loads of punters to interview. Instead, we are ushered on very quickly to an inside reading of the exemplary performance group Puchery Institution.

Hardly any artists feature in this book when you consider it (try running a word cloud on the Google Books version). It’s very limited. That’s an issue. It’s not that it should be completely inclusive, it can’t be and there are greater problems afoot in setting out to attempt such a book. However, I think it’s so far in the other direction as to be unconvincing.

RB: He’s putting himself in the position of being a protagonist. From this position, authority seems to be attributed to and thus is more prominent. This may lead to the attempt to define a national identity in art and to select elements worthy of promotion.

NM: There’s definitely an advocacy of ultimate legitimacy regarding what artists choose, an acceptance of what is built up by an arts community, an acceptable authority upon what’s produced and reproduced. This comes across most clearly in the triumphalism of Craig’s ‘Venice’ chapter.

RB: Which would explain that particular selection on who organised Venice, who was involved.

NM: The shameful fact that Scotland has resorted to sending national representatives to take part in the Venice Biennale, a 19th century trade fair is openly celebrated – it is unadulterated Victorian-era nationalism. What he writes here is terrifying in its proud advocacy of cultural authoritarianism: “The wisdom of the selector curators was in the careful selection of these three artists at the prime of their experiment-driven practices; the artists were beyond juvenilia but alert to any new opportunities presented by each and every invitation.” (p168)

This is the Birmingham School of Business School. (The Fall, 1992), the corporate state par excellence. It’s not meant to be a satire.

RB: Well it would have been a business plan, that was the way that the artists went about it. which is why they’ve taken the lead from Space and ACME in London and PS1 in New York. It’s all there in 57’s archive of letters. All of those artists who are discussed in the 70s were talking to each other about how to get organised, how to take over former industrialised areas (Docklands, Hackney, Queens, Leith, Gallowgate) – networking wasn’t just the business of conceptual artists or mail artists.

NM: Anyone can go to Venice, it’s a case of getting the money together, negotiating a space, and representing your own interests. You have the Peckham Pavilion, Sheffield and Manchester, these cities and boroughs representing themselves independently of states or nations. You have nations that are not states, like Scotland, and you have many more nations that are states that aren’t there because they haven’t been selected. So recognition is not something bestowed upon you, if you’ve got the money and the savvy, you can go, you can be there. Venice, as an operating surplus – it’s not just a market, it encourages pure opportunism – “take the piggies to market”. The quasi-fascistic overtones of this commercial Egoalism requires more in-depth analysis – it’s not just for the World Trade Fair.

RB: A lot of things he wants you take you to the market ultimately. I think he gets confused by this himself. He’s promoting ‘Scottish Art’. He wants it to have a radical edge, achieve visibility in terms of the art world, and produce a body of critical writing. However, if these goals have been achieved, so to speak, there has been no political radicalism to accompany achieved success. Of course, the one thing that doesn’t exist, that he wants, is a contemporary Scottish art market.

NM: If there was any home-grown market it has imploded in the last couple of months, it’s totally fallen apart. … (The book makes no mention of private galleries such as Ingelby, Soreca Dallas or Mary Mary, despite the fact that they all were significant in the period it encompasses. Nor does it acknowledge the launch of many new artist-run initiatives from which some of the new private galleries (aggregating...) There are many ways of looking at this. One way is to fetishise taking ‘Scottish art’ to the international market. Another is to focus on how art in Scotland has internationalised or broadened itself in terms of who’s here, who’s come to Scotland. Both are present in the book, but far more much is made of just two private galleries – Modern Institute and dogfighter – than of the non-commercial activity that so obviously outstrips the commercial sector in social, economic and artistic terms. The fact is, only a tiny minority of artists based in Scotland are, or have been, represented by the home-grown private sector. Two or 30 years ago, to say that the book is either wishful thinking or strategically disingenuous. The public sector of the 1990s is also, at times, a fantasy funding land too in the book. Contrary to what is implied, very few artists were supported by art school teaching income in Scotland, fewer still by what Craig calls the “pre-eminence of supplied research support in British art” (enabled by the) Arts and Humanities Research Board and improved levels of income from charities such as the Wellcome Trust.” (p154)

RB: It’s strange he refers to a Scots ‘diapora’. I hear talking about Scots abroad (ethnic Scots who’ve moved elsewhere) or a Scottishness that’s a kind of a network. I think it’s the latter the book is about.

NM: There’s long been an opportunities for Scots diaspora as in the ‘London-Scott’, Scots who have gone away because they want to further their career. They go to a bigger pond. Others became diasporic. People were taking to that just because of clearances or since they had no other economic opportunities. So the diaspora’s are different depending on who we’re talking about. If it’s players in the art world, it’s generally opportunistic in more recent years. I wouldn’t imagine an artist these days being forced out of Scotland in the way that they might have been in the ’40s or ’50s. I can see why they would go, but not for quite the same reasons now.

RB: That would be MacDiarmid’s point in the ’30s: ‘Why can’t we sustain our own artists? Why can’t we recognise the artists amongst us who are truly forward thinking and advanced?’ Craig quotes MacDiarmid’s book on William Johnstone, where MacDiarmid contrasts his friend’s work with the Colourist school. Craig’s ready to pick out those who oppose conservatism but then he’s ambivalent about the break represented by Steven Campbell’s work. Maybe this is because Craig romanticises the impact of certain styles as opposed to others.

NM: There was a confusion in a lot of art in the ’90s between the ideologies of modernism – generally taken as a narrow range of avant-garde Constructivism – with a certain modern so look that people were beginning to revive not just in art, but in design also. People were taking to that just on formal terms, they liked the way it made them feel as consumers. There was never the delusion that this exercise in taste was a new avant-garde as the book seems to suggest. There was an embargo on claiming to be avant-garde from the end of the 70s, it became a joke. “You’re not Sidney Tallis’ follower.” I’m Pat Neve’s son and you’re not avant garde”, as Ian Dury put it.) Neomodern was one of those well thumbed avant-garde grave stones, a mere signifier, a mainstream dressing up box, a text book lesson in how modernism failed (one we had already learned in the ’80s) that took itself very seriously. This was just like any other revival – like the late ’60s revival, or Biba reviving ’30s fashion in the ’60s – it was purely aesthetic, without any political edge. It keeps popping up, it’s constructed corpse, as if it were avant-garde. It wasn’t then and it isn’t now.

The full exchange is available online at: www.varvar.org.uk
The Economy of Abolition/Abolition of the Economy

Neil Gray in exchange with Marina Vishmidt

Marina Vishmidt’s article for Rearticulacija, ‘Human Capital or Toxic Asset. After the Wage’, reflects upon, among other things, human capital exploited as investment portfolio in ‘The Big Society’, affirmation and negation as political potentialities; the fragmentation of the class relation based on waged work; financialisation and the collapse of social democracy; the politics of reproduction; and the imposition of, resistance to, and potential negation of debt. All this through the prism of the ‘communication thesis’ which seeks to move within-and-against defensive ‘programmatic’ struggles that tend to rely (class) identities, towards everyday struggles that supersede value, exchange, market relations, and proletarian identity itself – in a constitutive rupture with its previous situation. Not just a change in the system, but a change of the system, not later on, but now. This thesis, which develops from a long view structural perspective of post-Fordist/Keynesian conditions in the labour market, is fraught with difficulty given the seeming hegemony of neoliberalism and the evidential need for defensive strategies against market command. Yet the communication thesis describes the problematic of the present class relation in an extremely prescient manner that takes us well beyond the rote formulas of the present class relation in an extremely prescient manner.

The communisation thesis describes the politics of post-Fordist/Keynesian conditions in the labour market, develops from a long-view structural perspective (TC), share a common heritage with the extra-European iterations – for Lenin and Stalin it meant the transition to a ‘higher phase of communism’ and thus was implicitly always a way off to the future, once socialism had been achieved. And then we could move on to communism. Generically, communication can mean just the process of the abolition of private property and direct control of production by a classless humanity. But in current debates it has become pretty solidly linked to the French post-Althusserian ultra left (‘Theorie Communiste, Gilles Davoe’) and to Tiipponi, whose ideas are somewhat incompatible versions in one sense as the former focuses on class struggle and structural analysis of changes in the relation between capital and labour, whereas the latter is about developing a theory of insurrection and thus provides a more voluntarist account. But importantly they are linked by a rejection of mediation or any theory of transition or hegemony.

NG: You ask that we envision the struggle from the worker to the debtor as the “definitive social identity”. But there are many different forms of debt and each has different affects and assumes different responses. What would a campaign based around a ‘refusal of debt’ look like? How would it be enacted? Edo-factor have called for a debt abolition network to campaign against student debt as part of a “general struggle against the contemporary slavery of credit cards, mortgages, and the international debt system” – is this the kind of political work you have in mind? How might such a struggle be generalised from and beyond the student milieu if we take that as an example?

MV: Not to speak for Edu-factory here, but in thinking about struggles around debt, I was thinking more of the whole field of social reproduction and production, and how it is structured around debt and credit throughout, from monetised welfare services to the housing bubble to pension-fund financed neoliberal accumulation – which is not to downplay the student loan bubble, which now looks set to be the next major item of consumer credit to detonate in the U.S. economy. Debt of course exerts a powerful discipline in the workplace and impairs the possibilities of collective action. As Costas Lapavitsas writes, “Workers have become heavily

THE STRATEGY OF REFUSAL

Mario Tronti
implicated in the activities of the formal financial system both in terms of borrowing (mortgages and consumption) but also in terms of assets (pensions and insurance). These developments owe much to the withdrawal of public provision across goods and services comprising the real wage: housing, health, education, pensions, and so on. Financial institutions, consequently, have been able to extract profits directly and systematically out of wages and salaries. This process is called financial expropriation.

So what that seems to indicate is that the centrality of debt both to continued accumulation (drawing debt servicing payments out of workers and students directly and through the structural role of different kinds of credit as tradeable and hedgeable asset classes) and the degradation of living conditions more generally – worldwide, force people are fighting on the terrain of debt and the repudiation of debt. Take Greece for instance, which is being positioned as the sacrificial test case for how far the implementation of policies by international financial institutions to leverage debt for the restoration of their profit rates can go. It seems that struggles hinge on the identification of debt as key mechanism of the current crisis of reproduction and the maintenance of the current and increasingly unstable gang governing the system. That the main function of debt is to keep reproducing capital as it is now, which becomes directly antithetical to reproducing social institutions and communities.

The dominance of debt over the material conditions of our lives also has intensely subjectifying effects. Jason Read has written recently: “Debt is a mutation of homo economicus: it is no longer, as Marx argued, the subject of ‘freedom, equality, and Bentham’ but the subject of obligation, inequality, and Becker […] the entire economy of debt is implicated within a work on the self, in which the individual is governed by the idea of maximizing value and managing risks in a series of choices that are radically individuated, but what he does not mention is that the perception of these risks crosses the terrain of thoroughly moralized ideas of hard work, national, and communal belonging”.

This is something Lauren Berlant elaborates very well in the interview Gesa Helms and I conducted with her about a year ago. The economist Michael Hudson talks of the expropriation of pension-fund savings as one of the more innovative methods by which the wage was attacked from the ’60s onwards. Instead of supporting workers and the industries they labour in, these funds – advanced by companies in a trade-off for a slower growth in wages they should be noted were typically invested for financial gain in stocks and junk bonds as forms of corporate speculation and hoarding that operated on labour and against ‘productive’ employment and working conditions by siphoning money away from what Hudson terms productive capital formation.

We don’t have to agree with Hudson’s yearning for a ‘good’ productive capitalism under Keynesian conditions, to see that the old idea of the worker as the producer of wealth would be the classic figure of the programmatic workers’ movement, the idea that since workers produce all the wealth, the bosses are just parasites who can be made redundant through the initiative of those workers, or their class organisations. In a number of historically and locally differentiated ways, this idea, and the associated political trajectories, runs from the mainstream of the social democratic or Labour left in the 20th century all the way to the discourses of the ’commons’ today, and it inheres, albeit problematically, also in the ‘negation’ and ‘refusal of work’ tendencies of Operaismo and autonomism. Whether it’s as producers, or as ‘reproducers’ performing unwaged or care labour, the idea is that we could run all this better ourselves. The question of social relations organised through the form of value does not come up.

What financialisation shows us is that value is defined these days as that past few decades, from the old capitalist dream of money making money, and workers are a cost, unless they are debtors: for a financialised capitalism the class relation is between owners and debtors, and we only create value for capital through the extraction of our debt (which is to say, we create value – not because it is excessive, if unorganised, waves of defaults and bubble deflations, but because that’s not where value comes from). So the response to how the commodification thesis relates to financialisation is that it tries to assess the situation where labour is no longer a source of value to capital, only a ‘cost’, nor to its subjects, who increasingly do not find sustainable sources of reproduction in waged work.

In his discussion of the rentier economy, Hudson argues that rental incomes derived from private property (unproductive “free lunch” gorged from the economy at large, forcing an ever-higher proportion of wages to be spent on rent and basic social subsistence, and denying it for more socially useful means). And Marx, in the Communist Manifesto, summed up the theory of communists in a single sentence: Abolition of private property. Yet struggles around rent (and its corollary, debt) are routinely viewed as secondary to workplace struggles. A central argument of yours is that the extraction of rent (characterised by debt) has superseded the extraction of surplus value from labour power as a primary motor of capitalist accumulation – at least in the ‘advanced’ capitalist economies. In conceptual and practical terms, what might emerge politically from an understanding of this shift?

Well, I think here some of the thinking by Edu- factory, George Caffentzis and Silvia Federici on the repudiation of debt, particularly student debt, is interesting, following their ongoing, decades-long analysis and activism around the geopolitics of debt and enclosures in e.g. Africa and the ‘global South’ through Structural Adjustment Programmes. We see this kind of looting being practiced on a much more over scale in the West now, which was already to greater or lesser degree leveraged as nation-state economies, with an increasingly demented and thus shrinking social expenditure when that debt-financing has to be restarted in less favourable global conditions. Federici and Caffentzis are very good on the disciplinary and atomising effects of debt, its corrosive effect on social solidarity or social change.

Another kind of shift might be what I was hinting at with ‘toxic asset’ – if your debt is an asset, become a toxic asset class. A significantly inessential labour force which supports capital through its levels of debt-financed consumption (like the sovereign states themselves), which has it inculcated that their only source of social security is asset prices, such that prices appreciating, and that capital’s fortunes are their own – well, in a time of crisis, with deteriorating living standards becoming actual for more and more people, that practical identification between the interests of capital and the interests of ‘consumers’ is harder and harder to sustain. Thus a politics of debt becomes an issue simply because debt is so central to sustaining people’s lives, with extreme job insecurity and flat wages, rising unemployment – it might become harder to link political claims to work when work is so precarious and degraded. But most workers are also debtors and are also users of social services at one or another point, so it’s the linking up between these struggles, and where the axis of them might be located at any political conjuncture, which can help us track the shift between the political register of work to the one of debt.

Also, it must be stressed here that workplace politics and a politics of work are not the same thing – that’s why communication theory’s account of the implications of the loss of salience of politics tied to the identification with or as labour is relevant for me here. It is trying to understand what the proletarian side, or the revolutionary potential, of the negation of the capital-labour relation by capital might be. Perhaps it does risk a sort of one-sidedness here in its emphasis on the agency of capital, just as it can be said the broad category of ‘autonomism’ risks the one-sidedness of worker’s agency, whether through refusal of work or practices of ‘self-valorisation’, being the leading variable in the capital-labour relation. It is risky though to dissociate ‘self-valorisation’ practices, or theories, from their specific social and historical milieu in 1970s Italy, because in the neoliberal era, it just sounds like human capital, valorising yourself – we have to hold on to the collective and contestatory element of self-valorisation, its practical critique of/antagonism to capital’s self-valorisation – but also put it in context.

The unconditional! ‘Right to Work’ campaign suggests the affirmative nature of the wage-labour relation just at a time when ‘the Left’, with no shortage of evidence, might be better served forming a coherent critique of wage-labour, exchange and the state. This defensive position suggests a loyalty to the state in misconceived form given the advance of Uber neoliberalism and the irretrievable demise of Keynesianism (even at its best, a form of state intervention designed to preserve capitalism). In this context, how might critique and practice be carried out in order to enact what Habermas termed the ‘Legitimation Crisis’, the potential mass withdrawal of support and loyalty for the state? What role does a politics
of debt, or in your terms, the struggle for an “uncapitalised life” have to play in this regard?

Yes. Looking at the Occupy movement, even if qualitatively different, they are so heterogeneous in their politics and social composition (probably less so than in their political makeup) that it is impossible to hold out that there is any hope for seeing this kind of withdrawal of loyalty and support happening on a mass scale, unless it’s through the self-administering of autonomous austerity. Saying that, why would we expect it to be any different? All that people know of social provision and political power is in the form of the state and other legitimate actors, in most people’s awareness and experience, for implementing consequential changes, as opposed to bottom-up small scale community-building or activism. The state still sets the operative framework for people’s lives, and representation in that state is still a viable demand to many for this reason. Even a politics of debt takes place on the terrain of the state, which is quite legitimate in some ways, as it’s fighting against relinquishing concrete working-class gains (or ‘social gains’, if you like) to an ever more rapacious and privatised/state privatising state. The state is totally indissociable from transnational financial institutions and unelected organs of transnational governance like the European Central Bank (ECB). Its role as enforcer, facilitator and legitimator of that process of extraction and setting up paypoints in a molecular, self-consuming fashion on the social terrain, rather than simply being a means to an end – through direct extraction and setting up paypoints in a molecular, self-consuming fashion on the social terrain, rather than extensively, that is, by interpolating people into an expanding form of production.

If, as Seymour writes in his recent text, ‘Short Circuits: Finance, Feedback and Culture’24, “the diffusion and networking of risk enabled by derivatives displaces risk from the local to the systemic level”, then this risk has to be both assumed and ruptured by a politics of non-repayment of debt, a refusal of austerity and a raising of the risk premium for the whole financial system – this is the only way to dis-embrace from the financial system we are all totally involved in at every level, whether we are benefit recipients, unpaid domestic workers, academics, gamblers, property developers or City analysts. But saying that is just to demonstrate the comprehensiveness of the financialisation of capital and our lives as reproducers of capital. The class content of those positions in the relations of (non)production are very, very disparate and incompatible – which is what is both captured and totally missed in the 99% slogan. But to retreat now as the debtor as a repudiation of production, and the point Ben makes about risk operating on a systemic level, I guess is another way of saying, in terms of strategy or modes of organisation, is to operate on the same systemic level, and to attack infrastructures of financial bondage is to do so immediately – at the attack capital as a whole, no matter how local the attack is. So I am not convinced by the idea that such attacks prompt merely local reforms which would just displace the risk and the austerity onto others, either geopolitically or socially. I don’t see a horizon for reform here, simply because the nature of systemic risk militates against local concessions. Which also brings to mind Walter Benjamin’s thinking on the necessity of creating a ‘real state of emergency’ through organised proletarian revolt, through materialising the violence of the system that creates an emergency for ever-growing numbers of people every day and turning against it.

Some more considerations I would add here, albeit definitely more in the character of tentative questions which are cast aside in this inadequate form because of their importance, would be the individualising and atomising effect of debt which comes with local reforms which would just displace the risk and the austerity onto others, either geopolitically or socially. I don’t see a horizon for reform here, simply because the nature of systemic risk militates against local concessions. Which also brings to mind Walter Benjamin’s thinking on the necessity of creating a ‘real state of emergency’ through organised proletarian revolt, through materialising the violence of the system that creates an emergency for ever-growing numbers of people every day and turning against it.

NG: The solution to the economic crisis is obvious from the point of view of both the right and the left – more productivity in order to generate more ‘wealth’. The only argument is over how much is distributed, with the left seeking a ‘fairer’, more equal share of surplus wealth for all. The problem with this is Marx long ago made clear in his Critique of the Gotha Program, is that it ignores the basic alienation and exploitation that underpins surplus value extraction (profit) at the point of production. This is more decisive when thinking through the global production chain without the myopic lens of those who inadvertently mistake ‘the economy’ for the spectre of the Keynesian state. The ‘Open’ Marxist school, and those associated with the radical left of both communism and anarchism have consistently challenged this logic of production and trammelling of creative, free labour into ‘abstract’ and alienating wage-labour, yet a critique of productivism remains marginal in the UK. Can the figure of the debtor release us from the spectre of Stakhov’s22 and the productivist ‘model worker’ – ‘so-called’ immaterial, ‘affective’, ‘creative’, ‘whatever...

Yes. It’s interesting to consider that while the neoliberal era in the UK has seen the eradication of a mainstream (oppositional) working-class culture, and while fewer and fewer people derive their self-definition, sociality or political engagement from their waged labour, the residues of collective struggle in the late-60s/early-70s has not been given adequate recognition as a generation; by and large, in the U.S., for example, where student loans are non-dischargeable, and that will now also be the case with the tripling of fees in the UK. Or the fact that the rise in student tuition acts as collateral for university borrowing on the market. It helps pay stratospheric administrator salaries. Given just how profitable debt is across so many layers of capital, the moralised debt-repayment argument is increasingly hard to defend. Thinking of debt as individuation here, as self-investment in one’s human capital, as an emblem of maturity and creditworthiness, is particularly laughable when it’s a matter of employers offloading their training costs onto individuals (or credit markets, ultimately).

What does this mean for communication’s ‘breakdown of the class relation’?23 So here again it would be a question of class composition analysis of the type所说的class composition analysis of the type that goes from the point of view of debt rather than in work, when debt, or is rather, has sustained more and more of people’s reproduction rather than their generation. The financial form loses its centrality in mediating social reproduction, capitalist production itself appears increasingly superficial to the proletariat: it is that which makes us proletarians, and then abandons us here.24 Perhaps now that could even be modified to say, as we tried to formulate with the recent Mute panel at the Historical Materialism conference, capital is leaving labour much more rapidly than most people have derived a politics from losing an identity as labour. NG: The project of Italian autonomist Marxism is often understood as the workplace struggles of the ‘mass worker’ in its autonomist variant, or the information/communication struggles of the ‘immaterial labourer’ or the ‘cognitariat’, in its post-autonomist guise. While Theorie Communisme seems to critique autonomy and ‘self-organisation’ primarily with the figure of the mass worker in mind, my feeling is that the 1970s wave of reproductive struggles (rent strikes, occupations, mass squatting, ‘self-reduction’) that followed on from the high point of the mass factor in the late-60s/early-70s has not been given enough attention as a means by which we might orientate the struggles of the present. Here we have an exemplary analysis of the breakdown of the class relation and a theory of re-composition to accommodate it: To my mind, Lotta Continua’s account of the ‘Take Over The City’ movement in 1973, for instance, is a considerable advance on the
largely rhetorical analysis of contemporary ‘Right to the City’ advocates. Despite reproductive issues emerging at the forefront of struggles in Glasgow recently (e.g. the Govanhill Baths campaign, the campaign to block the M74 Northern Extension, the occupations of both Primary Schools and Universities, the defence of Public Park space at Pollok Park and North Kelvin Meadow, and the Save the Accord campaign), there is limited evidence that the implications of these struggles have been understood theoretically as part of a wider shift in reproductive relations. What are your thoughts on these forms of reproductive struggle in relation to our present conditions? And how do they relate to contemporary discussions of communisation?

MV: I agree that those reproductive struggles have not been sufficiently taken into account, and part of an explanation for that, I think, is that TC, et al. give all their emphasis to the ‘programmatist’ strand of Operaism and Autonomism – Troml’s ‘Copernican turn’ that workers’ struggles are the independent, not the dependent variable, in the development of the capital relation – and not to the expansion of struggle beyond the workplace, beyond and often against the identity of the worker. These kinds of struggles on the terrain of reproduction are historised by them as ‘ancillary’ and ultimately reliant on the primacy of the ‘mass worker’ as an insurgent political force. This is something I’ve tried to approach through the paradoxes of the ‘Wages for Housework’ movement which seems to be a great illustration of this primacy. The other ‘copernican turn’ of Italian autonomism feminism, the discovery that women were productive labourers because they were producing the commodity labour power, also should be seen in connection with this primacy of the productive worker, even if its ultimate meaning was to break the invisibility of the reproductive circuit – but in the terms of the workers’ movement. This is also of course contradictory; it also underlines – as we can understand that primacy by positing unwaged work as a moment of a much more expansive terrain of labour for capital which is not recognised by it but without which it could not survive. This is of course true and crucial for any communist or feminist analysis, yet it also leads directly to the obsolescence of the law of value thesis, the ‘we are producing value all the time and everywhere’ notion of the productive multitude which is probably the most obvious fallout of autonomism’s crypto-identification with the mass worker.

However, it doesn’t seem to me that you can confine those episodes and those struggles to an epiphenomenon in that way. Their contribution was indeed, as you say, much more thoroughgoing, and indeed provided many examples of both the theoretical and political measures that would have to be taken in the process of communisation. There is an extent to which the work coming out of the ‘communisation’ tendency, in development since the 1970s, is both coming out of and is a reaction against the dominance of workerism and post-workerism on the ultra-left, so the perspective on the limitations of those struggles articulated in that analysis has been a useful one in that respect. In some way, we can read/take part in reproductive struggles the same way as we do in workplace struggles – they are about the same issues: to problematise of already significantly degraded living conditions and, in anti-gentrification struggles, the privatisation of what public goods remain. I can’t really see a principal difference in horizon between them in terms of success, but they must be fought regardless as it’s the only way of building counter-power or composing any form of collective organisation to live ‘deprived of capital’ as we do now, or ‘after capital’ as either a disastrous or positive scenario. Certainly, there’s not much mileage in a politics of reproduction displacing a politics of production since both are subject to the same financialising and totalitarian, ‘looting’ imperatives. This is the scale of reproduction which seems crucial to focus on – how the reproduction of the capital relation is unfolding now. We can of course look at it from the perspective of gender, class, race and other social divisions operative to the current regulation of access to social wealth and division of labour, and here you certainly still have massively enforced stratifications based on access to the wage, stability of employment, state or private provision, and how differential the impacts of re-structuring in the austerity of regime are.

NG: I was taken by your description of the dialectic of affirmation and negation in social movements. First, the notion that in any social movement there needs to be a clear identification of a position of exclusion or injustice, and that this identification is inevitably contradictory or antagonistic in the sense that the excluded group must frame their exclusion in relation to the dominant relation of capitalist hierarchy, or patriarchal or racial or class. This first moment of affirmation (or self-recognition), then leads to the second moment of negation whereby the very conditions that frame those hierarchies must be overturned in order to supersede those relations and divisions per se. In this sense, difference is a fundamental category in the understanding of the common. But how might identitarian ‘flag-waving’ for the ‘working-class’?, for instance, be superseded in favour of a mobilisation which seeks the abolition of all classes in a movement of communisation? What is the moment of affirmation on the wage? Can communisation in this context be a genuine mass movement, or merely a partial and fragmentary movement of those who have forgotten how much they’ve already learned?

MV: I think a similar question was posed by Benjamin Nays recently in the panel launching Communisation at the Societies, a book which he edited. In response to one of the panellists making the point that capital migrates from countries with strong labour laws and labour class identity, where working-class struggles had been victorious at some point, to countries with few legal rights or little social organisation of labour, (where there had barely ever been fought or defeated or where the degree of industrialisation was lower), he said something like: ‘so communism and capital are interested in the same thing: a weak and atomised working class’. This was not said in all seriousness, and clearly the type of interest we’re talking about is very different – at its most basic level, an interest in a political diagnosis of the present in order to overcome it, versus an interest in maximum profit. Still, what both of you are pointing at here is what is taken to be a sort of ‘catastrophism’ which can strike some as immanent to the communisation hypothesis – things are so bad now, the chances for communism have never been so good. But there is of course another way of reading that, which is to read it as a fairly modest claim – given how things are, that if certain things would happen in order to do away with this situation: a descriptive one, as opposed to a prescriptive one. This delineation is not always clear in publications working with the communisation hypothesis, and it has been referred to as a conflict between humility and hubris in the reach of the theory. Another lesson which should be appended here is that communisation doesn’t consign all, or any, defensive struggles (over wages or benefits) as positive or misguided, seeing as they fall short of total social revolution. It only says that they encounter their limits very soon, both contradictions within the movement and in the likelihood of their demands given capital’s global valorisation crisis. I think what’s been happening in Greece, as much as the movements that have been happening here in the UK, couldn’t be a clearer demonstration of that. But no revolt, no improvement, however limited, no concession, should ever be disregarded.

The question does remain however, about the nature of the subject ‘proletariat’ as the agents of communisation in communication theory. To me, it seems you need at least a number of some class subject to distinguish communising from rioting and looting – or be forced to admit that rioting and looting is an important sense communication – and at the moment, I am not convinced that distinction can be made within communisation theory without sneaking in some faint but vital trace of ‘programmatism’ through the back door, which is the proletariat as a kind of (non-)subject. This is something that would need to be resolved, for me, through further reading and discussion like. It seems to me that a number of presuppositions in communisation theory which are not articulated as such but which seem to ground a lot of other structural elements in the theory – but which are also problematic in terms of other elements, like the idea of class belonging as constraint. It may be that this residual proletarian identity is something that needs to be recognised actively in the communising process, rather than passively as it is by capital right now – in this respect it functions like ‘self-organisation’, which is a precondition for revolution but must be overcome within it. But I am not yet clear where the residual affirmation of a revolutionary subject is coming from.

NG: That, for me, begs the question of ‘unity’ – the eternal mantra of the left. What does call for ‘unity’ mean when we are facing fragmentation and labour, unity can no longer simply be based on the wage? I think the autonomist conception of class composition is potentially extremely useful here: where, finally, might we see a re-composition from below in present conditions?

MV: Unity develops out of a situation of autonomism which has two poles: negation and possibility – the refusal and the proposition (not the demand). The feeling that it’s possible to do something together is a demand for the possibility of possibility, regardless of whether that’s a ‘destructive’ or ‘constructive’ event, or what the content of its practical critique of the prevailing barbarism might be. Unity, unlike contradiction, is a product of rather than a precondition of a sequence of struggles, and from this perspective I’m very interested in the ‘programmatic’ perspective advanced by members of the communisation current, in and outside of the main collectives. The combination of ‘work’ as a category of subordinate worker and social being in every class society, and its function within the capital relation in particular, relates to overcoming groupings as part of the autonomous principle of communication. The abolition of gender seems to me one way of producing unity through rupture, through inevitable division of interests and positions in the reproductive
apparatus and in the movement. It’s the idea of the ‘revolution within the revolution’ which bridges the analysis of Italian autonomist feminism, the insurrectionist tendency (Claire Fontaine, Tiqqun, specifically Fulvia Carnevale who has taken part in both entities), and the TC/Endnotes commoditisation tendency. This seems like a very promising direction, and I am curious to see how or whether other divisions instrumental to the survival of capitalist domination, such as ‘race’, might enter into this analysis, and what kind of role they might play in the current prospects for the kind of re-composition you’re talking about.

Notes
2 For an insight into some of these problems and potentialities, see, Nors, Ronjanne (ed), Introduction, ‘Communication and its Discontents’, http://www.minorcompositions.info/?p=299
4 Endnotes: http://endnotes.org.uk/
5 Theorie Communiste: http://theoricidecommuniste.comcommunication.net/?lang=en
6 “Also important to distinguish TC from Endnotes here as the main English-language exponents of commodification theory (there are also Swedish and Greek groups: Riff-Raff, Blaumachen, etc), as Endnotes tend to foreground empirical economic analysis and value-theory critique (Postone, Arthur) much more in their work, reflecting their own political experiences, debates and milieu” [Marina Vishmidt].
7 Tomba Massimiliano, ‘Revisiting the Grundrisse and the Fragment on Machines’, talk at Goldsmiths, University of London, 8 November 2011.
9 Endnotes 1, Afterword, October 2008, available here: http://endnotes.org.uk/articles/14: “The crisis of the social compact based on the Fordist productive model and the Keynesian Welfare State issues in financialisation, the dismantling and relocation of industrial production, the breaking of workers’ power, de-regulation, the ending of collective bargaining, privatisation, the move to temporary, flexibilised labour and the proliferation of new service industries.

The global capitalist restructuring – the formation of an increasingly unified global labour market, the implementation of neo-liberal policies, the liberalisation of markets, and international downward pressure on wages and conditions – represents a counter-revolution whose result is that capital and the proletariat now confront each other directly on a global scale. The circuits of reproduction of capital and labour-power – circuits through which the class relation itself is reproduced – are now fully integrated: these circuits are now immediately internally related. The contradiction between capital and proletariat is now displaced to the level of their reproduction as classes; from this moment on, what is at stake is the reproduction of the class relation itself”.

10 See Endnotes 1 for a recent discussion between Gilles Dreyfus and Theoricide Communiste that outlines the developing contours of the commodification thesis: http://endnotes.org.uk/issues/1.
11 Tiqueur: http://tiqueur.jottit.com/
12 Edu-factory: http://www.edu-factory.org/wp/campaign-against-debt/
17 Even here, as an important article in Endnotes points out ‘the general law of accumulation’ means that technical fixes in production soon create surplus populations of workers: contrary to received opinion even China has not seen an increase in its labour force lately (1993-2006). See ‘Money and Debt’, Endnotes 2, 2010, pp 20-51. Online at: http://endnotes.org.uk/articles/1
23 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexey_Stakhanov
26 Gonzalez, Maya and Manning, Caitlin, Political Work with Women and as Women in the Present Conditions: Interview with Sylvia Federici. Available at: http://reclamationsjournal.org/souffl_silvia_federici.html
27 See for instance, ‘Crisis in the Class Relation’, Endnotes 2, http://endnotes.org.uk/articles/2
28 See, Theorie Communiste, ‘Self-organisation is the first act of the revolution; it then becomes an obstacle which the revolution has to overcome’: http://www.theoricidecommuniste.org/
30 For a brief discussion of Wages for Housework, see, Vishmidt, Marina, Human Capital or Toxic Asset: After the Stage, http://www.varkritikaucija.org/?p=1487
31 Interview with Werner Bonsfeld, Shift magazine, Issue 5, http://shift.mag.co.uk/?p=260
32 “Class analysis does not partake in the classification of people – its business is the critique of such classification. Class struggle is the struggle to dissolve class society, relations of class domination and exploitation, in favour of commune – this society of the free and equal, an association of the freely assembled social individuals. So if correctly understood, class should be a critical concept, not an affirmative concept. The old class concept was an affirmative concept; it affirmed class position. It wanted to re-distribute in order to create a fairer deal, a new deal, for those on the wrong side, or the wrong end of the stick. The critical concept of class, which is to dissolve class, battles against the existence of class society.”
“How does political change occur? Does it stutter along in a series of incremental developments, accidents and setbacks, creeping so slowly that we barely notice its happening? Or does it leap forward in a sudden rush, carrying everything along with it?”

In March 2007, Virant commented that the publication of the Draft Culture (Scotland) Bill “marked a defining moment in the relationship between the state and its cultural workers”1. The Bill itself was the direct product of a lengthy review2 and a three month consultation3. However, its form had arguably been cast as far back as 2000, with the Executive’s publication of “Creating our Future...Minding our Past” – Scotland’s National Cultural Strategy4; a future proposed in 2004 through an urge that “we should make the development of our creative drive the next major enterprise for our society5, and concretised in 2006 when government’s “role and responsibility to help strengthen, support, and in some cases provide for, Scotland’s cultural activity”6 was formally defined. It then underwent a reduction in scope in the wake of the 2007 Scottish parliamentary election – which saw the Scottish Nationalists emerge with the largest share of the voting, forming a minority government under the previous Lib/Lab ‘partnership government’. And with the parliament’s first working majority, replacing the previous fixed electoral system, the power and political and cultural dimensions of this change are difficult to locate. This at a time when the cultural and constitutional (re)imaging of Scotland is prescient. Comment, let alone sustained analysis and considered critique, seems frustratingly absent. To what extent this is ‘absenteeism’ borne from decisive retraction or is indicative of a shift in the cultural activity of academia is open to debate. It would be reductive not to also point to the tentative silence which pervades the sphere in which Creative Scotland seeks to operate. While many are mindful of the developments above and maintain engagement by way of an expectant gaze, the drip-feeding of policy details and the unfamiliarity of Creative Scotland’s chosen tongue has left critical activity within this sphere ostensibly subdued. Of all the silences this is by far the most understandable. Apathy, resignation, expectation, confusion and naivety combine to create a field of practice whose collective potential seems fated to wait; whose questions are being held until they can correctly be asked in the appropriate form. But the refusal of the community to the current conditions which must be recognised. In spite of a pervasive silence, policy continues to aggregate, revealing the wait for articulation to be essentially a wait for Creative Scotland to frame and construe the parameters of the debate. One thing Creative Scotland has articulated at length is the Scottish government’s belief in the economic utility of art and culture. Accordingly, the time for re-imaging is now, save we be left with no option but to understand ourselves in the language and function that others intend for us. Virant, feeding our creative, has sought to proactively and collectively consider the potential impact of these changes for artistic practice and, more broadly, for the meaning and possibility of cultural activity within this sphere ostensibly subdued. Of all the silences this is by far the most understandable. Apathy, resignation, expectation, confusion and naivety combine to create a field of practice whose collective potential seems fated to wait; whose questions are being held until they can correctly be asked in the appropriate form. But the refusal of the community to...

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11 Conducted by Lisa Bradley, Virant
12 Conducted by Leigh Fraser, Virant
Responses to variant’s interview with andrew dixon, ceo of creative scotland

Andrew Dixon is positioned as a figurehead for creative Scotland, where there was none in such a way before. So we needed to deal with what he represented as his opinions. He appears careful to say appropriately inclusive things but he displays the qualities of a politician and therein lies the problem. Once the image of the arts and culture is constricted he does not appear without a case, always the last straw – a difficulty in categorising themselves from contradictions that appear to be inherently specifiable. The gap between the rhetoric and the examples he uses. There is little room here for the analysis of the exemplary strategies. He is quoted in the press. As it seems he and I talk of what I would delve further into.

The language used by Creative Scotland (CS), which Dixon is the mouthpiece for, seems to have changed from that of the Scottish arts Council (SAC) with a number of distinctions being made about the value of culture. I would like to point to a number of assumptions that have been made and how I think it is symptomatic of a general neo-liberal turn in the meaning of the word ‘value’ from social to economic worth.

A personal example I could give is my experience in the last couple of years as a committee member of an artist run space. One which had survived on SAC funding for several years but being outside of the new funded loop, completely ignored strategically since CS took over. Why is that? Quality! No, that doesn’t seem a consideration. Reduction of budget? No, following its new logic, you think that CS get more value from a wasting of materials than from a reduction of funding. You might actually want to stay here. So we invested in two things.

...what I feel most is that in reality, the arms-length principle is gone, completely. And we are now, all of us, cultural workers.

Like workshops, studios, places where artists could work and talk in cultural activity, the arts, would lead to a reduction in ASBOs on Friday and Saturday night. And the next night it was Umberto Eco, telling the truth as well: they’re all lying. And these old men are chuckling because I’m sure he actually believes what he’s saying. It’s pathetic.

I: How can I be angry? I mean, I should be angry, but it’s just, you look around – I mean, just look. See, I’m going to sound like another old man; I am an old man. I wish I was angry instead of just grumpy. Not even grumpy, sometimes I’m hungover. Well, the fuck is this all about. And I’m sad at a lot my fellow human beings, the inhabitants of this planet, this country, this town. Because Glasgow boasts Shopping with Style, it’s a shopping culture. The arts: they’ve become part of “lifestyle”. And really what one wants is to get out there with the guys in George Square. There should be more events there, shouting louder. And that’s where the artists should be. And that’s where old guys like I should actually be, to encourage the younger artists to be more political and to be, basically, subversive. [...] And I come back to what worries me most, those, like Variant, who have never enjoyed any secure funding. And Creative Scotland, now Creative Scotland. And long may they not in a sense, because as long as they don’t show that they’re doing a good job it is irritating the establishment. And that’s what more artists and groups we think would be doing.

I: Where is the space for that?

I: Come to Peacock. No seriously, and places like Street Level in Glasgow. There are some of us that actually want to see more subversion. And sometimes, I’m disappointed. You get a call for open submissions and ideas; proposals. And frankly, the artists [pauses] what the hell are they – what’s happening to artists who go to art school?

I: You trace a couple of trajectories, one in terms of the lineage of policy formation, but there’s also a real-world context which seems to mirror the policy context.

Shona Macnaughton

13
I can't tell whether it's policy shaping the real-world context or whether it is the real world to which policy is responding. I see that for Creative Scotland, where did it come from; where is it going?

LG: Creative Scotland, it didn't come from nowhere. There's a history. It came from the late '70s, early '80s, the Thatcher era. It's not that they've been trying to convince politicians to put more money into the arts. And hence the instrumentality. Andrew Dixon talks about the prizes, for example. But it was an era of generational change, and we had meant trying to convince politicians to put more money into the arts. And so it's that, coupled with the present Scottish Government. The other stuff you're asking about, I find hard to assess. Myself, Moira, David Harding and Sandy Ainslie, organised a conference called State of Play: Art and Politics in Scotland. Here Sandy reminded us of that very interesting and exciting time in Scottish politics in the mid '70s, in the lead up to the watershed that was 1979, the 40% referendum on independence. There was a sense back then that artists and intellectuals could actually come up against the state that there was an opportunity to shape our destiny as a country. It was exciting. But we were young. Does it feel like that now, Lisa? You're young.

LB: It certainly doesn't, no.

LG: Why's that do you think?

LB: There seems to be a sort with the apathy that seems ever more prevalent, while at the same time I am frustrated that there's not many spaces in which I can critically engage. That doesn't feel possible within existing spaces in a critical sense. And my interest in art and culture comes then, in viewing its transformative potential. And I don't mean that simply in an instrumental sense, I think it excites me that the sphere of culture and the arts can exist as the antithesis of the state and as such can be a space for contestation and difference. And I think that's why the language of cultural policy and the manifestos of that language concern me so much.

LG: No, I totally agree. Sometimes I do get depressed, not necessarily about the things you were talking about there, but about stuff like the art press, I see, the projects I see. And every so often you come across something that's, like, powerful, Effective. Beautiful. Usually where it has empowered other people; where people can tell their story and they can communicate the circumstances they find themselves in. We did a lovely project in Aberdeen called ASB, Aberdeen Street Skaters. One day I noticed around the offices of the City Council, these metal skate-stopper things that looked like twelve-inch long, metal phalluses, had been built overnight. So I said to a friend of mine who was living in Aberdeen – “Eva”, a photographer – “will you photograph this shit?” Because it was just so absolutely, aggressively: “you are not going to have fun here”. Even worse: “you are not going to have fun here”. So we photographed the disenfranchised, the people who wanted to go skating. And of course the funny thing is that most of those kids, we photographed the kids. They were the terrible, polite young boys who went to a good school. So they organised a group called Aberdeen Street Skaters, and they realised that they had to have a manifesto. And the ASB manifesto says: “The Association's principal aim is to improve communication, inclusiveness and openness in all aspects of public interaction and to emphasise the fact that people come before buildings and economics. It is the citizens who create and develop culture in the community. This culture should be supported, not obstructed by the authorities – always remember – never forget it. [...] So no kind of, empowering, you don't have to accept all this shit.

LB: Seeing decisions like that delivered through policy all over the UK, signalling that there is a right and proper use of money, are we starting to see those messages being delivered through cultural policy?

LG: I have two grandchildren, I'm very lucky. My granddaughter's fifteen and my grandson is thirteen. And I often reflect, I said to them one day; and unfortunately my daughter, their mother, overheard, but I said “right guys, we're talking about rules. There are only two rules, actually there are only three: First rule is, rules are to be interpreted, but everyone has to be aware of who the opportunities are relevant for. You see increasing amounts of opportunities to increase your marketing skills; advice about how to run a business; how to interact and collaborate with the tourism industry. LB: Do you view this change in language as a benign shift or as something more purposeful?

CM: Purposeful in what sense?

LB: I suppose I'm asking whether you see it as a response to the current conditions; viewing cultural policy as sitting within a broader policy context?

CM: Yes absolutely, I see it as a funding body or an 'investment agency' adopting the language of neoliberal governance; marketised arts. But it seems to be that a lot of organisations are very adept at picking up on the language used by other people and adopting that language. And I think that's the problem here. I'm worried that the language used by a funding body in this case the language of management and business, and the imperatives they place on those applying for funding – to put their statistics to 'sustainable economic growth', to what extent do you think the language moves beyond responsive to purposeful?

LB: And when you acknowledge the position of cultural policy within a 'single purpose', more focused, investment, for 'sustainable economic growth', to what extent do you think the language moves beyond responsive to purposeful?

CM: Well, I suppose you can argue that mainstream business language within the arts and teaching arts organisations to think of themselves as 'companies', paves the way for marketisation.

CM2: And also, the business language, it's not just about talking about it when you, you know, F失效的xe it, it's not an annual thing and have meaning. But when they're put through this
business filter, they may mean something quite different.

CM1: Using friendly, comfortable sounding words to describe things. That may mask certain realities. [...] I think that everyone's pursuing 'sustainable economic growth', and that art and culture is instrumental in that, I think that causes problems. CM2: I would agree. Even more strongly. I think that pursuing economic growth, if you're operating a mode of support for arts and culture through that assumption, it becomes problematic. And I don't think it's just necessarily Creative Scotland or the Government, it applies to the whole situation of how our society is structured at the moment.

LB: Could you tell about some of these more concrete shifts you've witnessed?

CM1: I think the main practical shift is that there is no longer a specific officer with whom we have regular contact and a working relationship. That person was really vital to us, given the fact that this organisation is run by practicing artists who don't necessarily have much administrative experience or a background dealing with funding bodies. It's not so concrete, but the uncertainty created by the looming end of Transmissions which says 'What more could you do in the short term?' [...] I have no hard evidence to say that's entirely a response to the funding situation, but it seems like that to me. It seems like a step towards Commissioning.

CM2: In terms of the end of Transmissions and the beginnings of Strategic Commissioning, what do you understand of that change and what do you think it will mean for Transmission and other organisations?

CM1: If from what I think I understand of it, I can't see how this organisation, or really any visual arts organisation with a permanent premises, can fit within that structure. It seems from the interview, and also from hearing about what happens at Creative Scotland's FOJO conference last year, to be very much focused on the geographical spread of things. It's maybe a slightly more workable arrangement for each of sector. The Corporate Plan notes the purpose is "to review the cultural ecology of key sectors to inform future commissioning of production and touring franchises." One web article, obviously based on a press release, suggests that "the current FOJO programme, which runs through 2012/13, will be replaced by a new £2 million strategic commissioning programme." And Dixon suggests that "we would define four or five franchises that we'd then advertise and invite proposals to come forward." Dixon's ecological metaphor seems misplaced given the process of myopia that he describes. [...] CM2: It's explicit: "Once you've got the foundations, you want to ask: what else can you build on top of them? Could you make them even stronger? [...] Actually, if you gave them a bit more resources, what else could they do?"

LB: This rationalisation process is not so different from that found across the voluntary sector working to a funding model based on service delivery—a legacy of institutionalism we share. The larger organisations with the capacity to bid and win tenders will supplant or absorb the smaller, more diverse organisations in an unequal struggle for resources. This represents a drift towards the increasing casualisation and instability of work – short term contracts, and a shoring up of the bigger, "promotional" cultural organisations and charities as "support" organisations, thereby habouring the potential "to lead to an unwelcome stagnant and mono-cultural arts environment." 

Johnny Galley

Notes

1 A fair share – direct funding for individual artists from UK arts councils’ by Dany Louise, (a-n, The Artists Information Company, 2011). Available online at http://www.a-n.co.uk/publications/article/95849?pg=1
3 Johnny Galley's ecological metaphor seems misplaced given the process of myopia that Dixon describes. Dixon also talks about the importance of 'adding value'. When people show younger artists' work he talks about the value in that as something they can put on their CV. And that's really, really dangerous language for me. And that's not just the language, it's a point of view: It's the type of thinking that only sees value in doing something, or being involved in the arts community if it's going to get you somewhere else after being there. [...] Can I ask you to expand upon that danger; how will it materialise if what you've described comes to fruition?

CM1: It excludes organisations and individuals who are working in ways that don't fit into that prescribed career path and therefore the diversity of what's happening culturally in Scotland.

CM2: Rather than that being about freedom of expression, it's more about freedom of communication and the spaces where you are able to actually communicate publicly within a community and society. And I think that it will affect Glasgow. Maybe not a huge majority, but I would say that a majority of artists working in Glasgow are very much antagonistic towards that idea that self-organisation might actually be a choice taken by people who want to work within an alternative infrastructure rather than be forced into that, and I don't know, to the Venice Biennale or something [laughs].

CM2: There's also quite a few groups I know who want to avoid needing to apply for funding at all costs. But actually, they quite readily rely on places like Transmissions existing and are aware of that relationship. [...] There are a lot of smaller artist-run organisations and similar places that don't actively happen outside of institutions but which also contribute quite a lot to the culture of the city. Though it's almost impossible to judge those kinds of practices using Creative Scotland's current policy.

LB: What are your thoughts on the long term impact of these policy shifts?

CM1: I think there's a real risk that artists and other cultural practitioners will simply choose to base themselves in Scotland. The visual arts infrastructure which exists in Glasgow is probably the only aspect of the term 'strategic' seems to highlight the issue that decisions relating to what culture is and what purpose it fulfils are being centralised.

CM2: I also don't know much about Strategic Commissioning, but what's maybe not good form for me is [...] if the funders see two different organisations doing something that seems on the surface very similar they'll see that as a replication, and therefore not necessary.
Jan-Bert, Director of Artlink

Jan-Bert: I've been involved in looking at the transition from the Scottish Arts Council to Creative Scotland through the Cultural Alliance and I thought it'd be useful to reflect on something we're where we're at. It's also useful sometimes to understand why things happen and what impact it has. [...] Also, the politics of that change is quite interesting in the politics of being a funding agency and of being funded. So it's sometimes quite difficult to cut through all of that and clearly understand what means for culture, because that's almost like asking a question. And I don't know whether all of these subtle changes that we're experiencing are significant or not; whether in the greater scheme of things they have an influence. They have an influence in tone, potentially in intent. But I suppose my question to myself is: "how far does tone ultimately change anything?" I don't have an answer to that.

Lisa Bradley: Do you have a gut response?

JB: The gut response is that tone is setting the agenda. And there is a concern that if only tone sets the agenda, and if that tone is not well informed or informed fully, then it can be problematic. And from my experience, which is fairly significant, I don't think that actually should be, [...] On the one hand I think that Creative Scotland has set an impossible task: to have influence over creative industries with no resources for that. So that will be one of the challenges that we're experiencing to do something about the creative industries which has no clear influence over where we're at. And what its function is to do – and the language has changed – but ultimately it's there to deliver public subsidies. And of course, there is a question: "Well yes, you can call it investment but it's still public subsidy. I think the nature of what means and what that develops into is something that I watch with interest and trepidation. And I suppose partly I watch it with the..."

CM2: Yes, also I have a gut feeling that this is interesting, because the access to information is very limited and people from organisations – and that's reflected in the interview, not that you'd expect them to mention it, but if they're trying to talk about the 'cultural ecology' as they would describe it, necessarily... '

Jan-Bert: ...I think the strategic reviews that are about to be undertaken, and that have been on the agenda for a long period of time, are really interesting. And to be quite frank I've not seen any contracting or commissioning that I feel has provided a better service. Now you can talk about the new situation and the changes the relationship between the commissioner and the commissioned, and partly also changes the nature of that relationship. [...] For me there's a concern that, again, it's all a wee bit back to the moment back to front in that a corporate plan wasn't produced after the major reviews of organisations with foundation funding had taken place. Now I know that might have been done on purpose, as the review of the organisation could have informed the corporate plan, but because they came out in such quick succession I don't think there's a relationship between the two. [...] I think the strategic reviews that are about to be undertaken, and that have been on the agenda for a long period of time, are really interesting...

LB: Do you think that there's a relationship between the two, or that the strategic reviews that were undertaken and the relationships between the commissioner and the commissioned, and partly also changes the nature of that relationship. [...] For me there's a concern that, again, it's all a wee bit back to the moment back to front in that a corporate plan wasn't produced after the major reviews of organisations with foundation funding had taken place. Now I know that might have been done on purpose, as the review of the organisation could have informed the corporate plan, but because they came out in such quick succession I don't think there's a relationship between the two. [...] I think the strategic reviews that are about to be undertaken, and that have been on the agenda for a long period of time, are really interesting...

CM2: And again, there's no mention of that in the interview, not that you'd expect them to mention it, but if they're trying to talk about the 'cultural ecology' or the state of things outside of their sector, it has to be acknowledged. The art world, including the larger foundation funded organisations, rely on that on that...
sustain enough investment in arts, culture and creative industries as it possibly can. I think it’s done a pretty good job of being quite clear about how you meet government’s objectives and also how you meet objectives enshrined by law about what you are doing. [JB] “I think that in terms of the new economics which we all face, it’s inevitable that, looking at how creativity informs policy, that it’s going to have an incredibly important aspect.”

LB: Do you have any thoughts or experience of how the role of consultation differs in Creative Scotland from the Scottish Arts Council?

JB: [...] [T]here were a lot of organisations that were upset about the loss of something that we used to have and feel that’s changed us as emerged from a need to communicate to the broader policy context or is it indicative of more conscious effort to change the nature of cultural provision? LB: I think it’s a good question actually, to which I have no immediate response to because it’s too early to say. I think it’s very easy for the cultural sector to start chasing windmills and to start fighting because we feel that the language is inappropriate to our experience or to feel that the language doesn’t sit well with us. I think there are dangers in shifting language because you might lose as many opportunities as you might gain. You might lose opportunities for people that’s done to us – that’s wrong or it concerns them. And perhaps that’s being utilised on purpose, who knows? That unsettling change period is difficult for those who are used to have a particular type of relationship with an old funding body and who are now having to establish a new relationship. I also think you have to be very careful in how you use language and you have to be very careful in saying they’re Consultation – a type of language – there is concern that the language whilst being quite clear that you don’t lose the chance you feel the changes as emerged from a need to communicate to the broader policy context or is it indicative of more conscious effort to change the nature of cultural provision? LB: I think that in terms of the new economics which we all face, it’s inevitable that, looking at how creativity informs policy, that it’s going to have an incredibly important aspect.”

Where Our Margins Are Being Marginalised

“Culture [...] is what gives us a sense of identity both as individuals and as a nation.” Culture is not simply about “image and history” but about presenting a “hard commercial edge” – Culture, [Chris Smith] affirms lies at the very heart of “the mission” of the new government.”

[“Creative Scotland”] are very committed not to just being a funding body. We are a funding body, or investment agency as we call it, but we are much more of a promotional body and much more of an advocate for the cultural sector [...] The third difference [between Creative Scotland (CS) and that of the Scottish Arts Council (SAC)] is really the kind of creative industries and the economic side. You know, we still will invest in straight cultural, individual artist’s projects, but at the same time, we’ve got a remit to support the creative industries and to co-ordinate that and to encourage the likes of Learning and Skills Agencies, Enterprise Agencies, to put their money behind creative industries, whether that be the games industry design, fashion, fashionably festivals and to piece together the economic story about the cultural sector.”

Andrew Dixon, Chief Executive of Creative Scotland, interviewed by Daniel Jewsbury, Variant, issue 45, Spring 2011

Notes

1 Andrew Dixon, Chief Executive of Creative Scotland, interviewed by Daniel Jewsbury, Variant, issue 45, Spring 2011

2 From funding To Franchise (Workshop) - What does the end of East End’s funding mean for artists and the charitable sector in Scotland? Cultural Employment - Applications due 30th June 2011, Transmission Gallery http://www.variant.org.uk/events/F2F/F2F.html

A Dictionary of Modern Art

speech made by a man of culture, or a man of letters, or a man of letters, or a man of letters...
Boredom in the Furnace House
Theses on ‘Post-industrial’ Ruins
John Cunningham

“...have a permanence about them that can’t help but
remind me of the precarity attached to dwelling,
health and jobs in the contemporary city.
The book is a fairly exhaustive – and often quite
beautiful – attempt to consider how to come to terms
with the monumentality of modernist industrial ruins.
The image of the huge decaying Packard plant resembling
a concrete and iron pre-historic grotto enframed with
stalagnates puts an entirely new spin upon Le
Corbusier’s view of “factories as [the reasserting of]
first fruits of the new age”.1 But this ‘new age’ of
industrial (re)production always carried with it
a whiff of the archaic even if usually invoked
to underscore the grandeur of modernism. Modernist
architect Walter Gropius boasted that the sleek
outlines of the new industrial architecture had the same
“monumental force” as the “constructions
of Ancient Egypt”.2 Whereas photography was
instrumental in adding impetus to this new ‘age’ it
now documents the dissolution of the recent past
and present.3 Images of ‘post’ industrial ruins are
also diffused throughout the web sites on such as
‘Artificial Owl’ and throughout Flickr groups – the
group pool ‘Abandoned’ has 502,641 alone
...
neutralised subject might seem too much to read from the diffused images of dereliction but the theme park or art space is also imminent to the contemporary ruin. For instance, photographer and ruin auteur Camilo José Vergara proposed with a kind of naivety that the image of Detroit be preserved as a museum of US capitalism.10 It’s worth noting that in Germany the industrial destritus of the Ruhr valley and the mining areas of the ex-Stalinist Eastern part of the country have already been transformed into such a museum of Fordism. In an essay upon this, Kirstin Barndt goes so far as to see a “transformation of the subject” from worker to leisureed (or unemployed) consumer and a “new landscape of affect” produced through the aestheticisation of dereliction and its preservation as a post-industrial playpen with walkways, art galleries and perfectly preserved ruins.11

The presumed non-identity of a ruined space with the day to day operations of spatial production and consumption is utilised – alongside other discourses and institutions, artistic as well as economic – to reproduce essentially passive subjects. The debris of the post-industrial ruin can be an element of the apparatuses – diffuse ensembles of discourses, institutions, economic processes, etc. – that produce both subjectivity and space.12 Even the industrial ruin can be subsumed within the bio-political governmentality of contemporary capitalism that seeks to (de)form the subject and ensure receptivity to what is produced. And what might be termed affective subjects are partially produced through such spaces. As Ganser, the project director of one of the ‘post’ industrial theme parks in Germany comments: “People feel better, even though objectively the economic situation remains unchanged”.13 This can also be shaped as configuring nostalgia in the shape of mourning for the past, a past where the local population was not quite as surplus to the requirements of capital. “People feel better” is “as good a motto as any for the disciplinary apparatuses of contemporary capitalism. The point of this is not to moralise or rant about the supposed emptiness, commodification or lack of meaning inherent in spectacular capitalism since all of that can be taken for granted. Instead, it’s to place images of the dereliction of the present in wider field of images, discourses, institutions and economic processes that contribute to the management and production of subjectivity. What initially Michel Foucault and latterly Giorgio Agamben have termed apparatuses or dispositifs of bio-political governmentality. Agamben writes that an apparatus can be “literally anything that has […] the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control or secure the gestures, behaviours, opinions, or discourses of living beings”.14 In this case ruin images are relatively marginal phenomena that can contribute to this: a ruin apparatus.

It’s a fitting mirror image that the proto-type bio-political sites such as factories that sought to reproduce proletarianised bodies as workers should contribute to the over-determination of subjectivity in their decline. No wonder André Breton linked the ruin with the mechanical mannequin in the first Surrealist manifesto as examples of the unequal or ‘marvellous’; though at this point there seems little of the ‘marvellous’ about the imbrication of the subject with the spaces of the metropolis. The mechanical mannequin can easily be seen as an image of the new industrialised bodies required by factories organised by the repetitive gestures of the production line and formed through this technology. But there’s a trace of a more oppositional subject-worker in this that used the concentration of population around these sites to discover new forms of resistance and organisation. The worker as mechanical mannequin was always on the point of malfunctioning and upending the sites of her own (re)production. This is another trace contained in these images of decomposing buildings and ruin theme parks. A melancholy anti-capitalist remnant of the figure of the mass worker who revealed the conflictual basis of the ‘golden age’ of Fordism in mimetic forms of a resistance – such as mass organisation – based upon the novelty of industrial production.

Thesis three can be: the image of the contemporary ruin is part of the apparatuses that seeks to (de)form the subject and ensure a governmentality that produces neutralised and passive subjects. This is one of the traces of the subject always to be found in the contemporary ruin.

4/ Archaic Bio-Politics

Contemplating the ruins of the past led to the cultural pessimism of the early 20th century philosopher and apocalypse fanatic Oswald Oswald Spengler. In his Decline of the West the “exhaustion of forms (of civilisation) that have become inorganic or dead” reveals itself in cyclical forms of history that mirror the corrosive rhythms of nature. This is a prototype of bio-politics as Spengler writes: “Mankind appears to me as a zoological quantity. I see no progress, no goal, no avenue for humanity, except in the heads of the Western progress-Philistines...”15 This finds an echo in the melancholy of a ruin gaze that assimilates the abandoned or urban decay and emphasises the universal hubris to be found in the contemporary ruin. As one of the accompanying texts in The Ruins of Detroit notes, these ruins are, “A natural and sublime demonstration of our human destinies and of their paradoxes. A dramatisation of our creative and self-destructive vanities.”16 Ideally for capital, we graze upon the ruins suspended between being passive consumers and easily managed forms-of-life that can be twisted around the capitalist dynamic partially revealed in the ruin. In this view ruins – like capitalism – will always be with us and this pessimism would be a stance that affirms this up to the ‘zoological’ negative bio-politics of human animals scrabbling around in the rubble. This is a dead zone that dissolves the verticality of both buildings and rational human form into immersive ‘zoological’ cycles where nature and history become indistinct. Such a cultural pessimism just reflects the ‘natural’ cycles of economic creation and destruction that constitute a currently self destructing element in the self-image of capital.

An example of the naturalisation of the ruin is found in the work of the sociologist and philosopher Georg Simmel. He wrote in 1913 that “it is the fascination of the ruin that here the work of man appears to us entirely as a product of nature.”17 And Simmel – despite being an astute thinker of the urban metropolis – judged this decomposing reconciliation to be a good thing. The slow revealing through the ruin of the hubris of humanity in the midst of natural decay undercut the pretensions of human agency and autonomy. The ruin as a romantic remnant, where it’s possible to glimpse an enclaves of supposedly unmediated nature reasserting itself through a cessation of the production of things and buildings is part of both the past and contemporary phantasmatogoria of ruins. Tendrils of nature insinuated into stone as the reconciliation of nature and humanity in decomposion is part of an essentially romantic concept of the ruin. This trans-historical pessimism finds its own natural resting place.
in contemporary fantasies of a deep green restoration of Nature wherein hunter gatherers would play in the ruins of industrialism. There’s a harsher version of this found in a short story by Detroit native Thomas Ligotti in the shape of a parable of non-reconciliation between nature and industrial production. In the story The Red Tower, the eponymous tower is a factory gradually being ruined by the entropic influence of the surrounding natural landscape. The factory production of increasingly horrific novelties conflicts with a tendency towards nothingness embodied in the surrounding natural landscape. The story is marked by the lack of any human subjects as an interface between factory production and natural wasteland; a produced ‘second nature’ of factory and nature in new and uncharitable contact with a supposedly primary first nature. The nameless narrator and other human subjects are reduced to red ruin.

Images of the industrial ruin are similarly caught between the infusion of nature and device for history might also be a clearing away of a delusion that was always built upon labouring bodies anyway.

5/ Charm of Ruins

It’s necessary to drift further away from the image in order to investigate the psychogeographical attraction to the urban ruin. This lies in an uneasy symbiosis with the mediation of post-industrial ruins through the abstraction of the photographic image. Psychogeography often functions as an index of disassociation. This with contemporary urban space while simultaneously mapping its effects upon subjectivity and affect. A recurrent trace of the photographic process is found in the psychogeographical penchant for the ruin, the decayed left over space that suspends the remaking of the city in the (self) image of capital. The Singaporean artist Adrian DeSibahd wrote after discovering a disused 18th century tollhouse in the Place de la Stalingrad in Paris that it was a “virtual ruin left in an incredible state of abandonment, whose charm is singularly enhanced by the curve of the elevated subway line that passes at close distance.” Psychogeography has always thrived upon such oppositions between a projected image of the gleaming ‘new’ – heavily regulated spaces sponsored by capital – and the human remnants, memories and ruins of urban space. The ‘charm’ of the disused tollhouse for DeSibahd probably arose from this but also from it being an 18th century military facade of the architecture of ancient Rome. But what might differentiate this from a simple aestheticisation of the ruin? This might be found in the ‘charm’ of time doing its job upon the pretensions of French state power that sought to ensnare its commercial transactions in the monumentality of past ages. It’s in this that the more austere anti-capitalist utopian trace of the ruin resides. This is both in the revelations of the ephemeral qualities of socio-economic structure and in the mostihnt of the possibility of productive spaces that might be productive of non-capitalist relations. Even if these utopian traces are only imaginary possibilities hatched out of the musings of a psychogeographer.

It’s in this that the destructive ‘charm’ of ruins resides in suggesting that all such pretensions to monumentality can be dissolved by time and – even if only by re-imagining the city while drifting – through oppositional agency. It’s difficult to retain the deceptive ‘charm’ of ruins in the contemporary metropolis. In London post-industrial ruins seem little more than urban degradation in the midst of repetitive attempts to (re)inflates the city. The American and British capitalism through an increasingly desperate gentrifying ‘regeneration’. Every decaying warehouse or guesthouse in the industrial shell has germinating within it a block of luxury flats. These usually contain the requisite – though slightly humble – ‘affordable’ or social housing apartments carefully coordinated to ensure they infect the remainder of the development. Class relations that UK plc would love to elide appear in concrete lower down in the new development with smaller balconies or sequestered off in a separate section altogether. The surrealism of empty shop fronts – dismembered mannequins, commodity fragments, trashed cash registers – all too easily turn into a post industrial ruin we should also see a post-industrial ruin we should also see the inhuman subject called capital winking and lurking at us in its shadow. We can’t even wear our boredom as a “sign of distinction” – as Walter Benjamin wrote of the 19th century flaneur – since our boredom with ruins often expresses our own possible ejection from the neighbourhood. Even in Detroit – the alpha and omega of urban decay – the gentrification of the city centre continues at the expense of the expanse of a rapidly decomposing periphery. As Bill McGraw writes in his excellent overview of the decline of Detroit: “They might be pouring more designer beers in new downtown clubs these days, but elsewhere in Detroit, the bricks continue to crumble.”

As such, thesis five might be: if predicated upon the aesthetic ‘charm’ of ruins psychogeography might be utterly exhausted as a tactical, theoretical resource. But this doesn’t exhaust psychogeography and the critical potentiality of ruins altogether. This ‘charm’ also demonstrates that such cycles of the creative/destructive (re) production of capitalism aren’t an eternal verity and are part of specific relations of production. There’s a suggestive image in The Ruins of Detroit that reoccurs around three or four times from different derelict sites. It’s an image of the abandoned and opaque and cracked almost blocking out the view of further dereliction in the distance. Negatively, this suggests the role of the contemporary capitalist metropolis aspires to architecturally in the reflective glass of offices and shopping malls, the dream of a space transparent to both control and the flows of capital. The contemporary ruin at least suggests the uneven qualities of such a transparent homogenisation of the city. Elemental to the urban ruin as a wish image is that it might constitute a space that is opaque to the transparency of capital, unproductive on capital’s terms, a splinter in the eye of the reflective surfaces of the metropolis. In actuality, one relies upon the other: no increasingly transparent space without the supposed opacity of material waste and urban degeneration. Gentrification, theme parks and the ruin-image apparatus demonstrate the industrial ruin is produced within the same spatial and economic regimes.

However, the myth of opacity – the memory or potential existence of spaces that are more opaque to the productive apparatuses of the contemporary metropolis – can at least provide a critical tool against transparency. This is to give effect by the sensual writing of Thomas Ligotti, the imaginative writer of the ‘opacity’ of urban decay – and memory – against the transparent homogenisation that capital desires for city space while emphasising the simultaneous production of both. In light of this Thesis Five can be: Psychogeography or photography as critique can puncture the interrelated capital mechanisms of urban decay and transparency if one is utilised against the other. The utopian trace of the ruin is in the forms of decomposition revealed as inamnent to capitalism and then utilised as critique. This rests upon the negative apprehension of the ruin rather than seeing in it the embodiment of a utopian aspect in the everyday. But where might this leave the starting point of the images of urban decay and the ruin?

6/ Fantasies of Non-Reproduction

None of this is to say that the representation of such ruins can’t also carry a certain melancholic jolt to the imagination. The Ruins of Detroit contains images of a cap station left abandoned as though it has been succeeded by insurrectionists, bureaucratic documents and id photographs left scattered. What could be termed a speculative apocalyptic cocktail of the ruin image resides in something like this.
it not the simple result of cycles of capitalist (de)valorisation then such an image might be subtitled ‘We are afraid of ruins’ as the Spanish Civil War anarchist Durutti famously stated. A similar pessimistic delight in the ruin is found in the encounter with the player of an accordan upon which is written ‘Pessimism’. As the instrument is played “the whole thing starts wailing, from left to right extremum-psimom […] pessimism […] pes-pe-p... nothing more”.

While in the phantasmagoria of the 20th century the regeneration of the metropolitan occurred under the sign of ‘progress’ our own urban renovation is blunter and has no need for such metaphysical niceties. Aragon excavated and examined the 19th century arcades of Paris for subversive potentiality as though they were a buried ancient civilisation.

The obsolescent remnants of an earlier form of commodity capitalism were an unblended spatial unconscious. Thus, “when the pickaxe menaces them” the arcades suggest to Aragon that “Future mysteries will arise from the ruins of today” and the ephemeral decomposition of commodified space becomes evident. ‘Progress’ for Surrealists such as Aragon was already undercut and outmoded without the intercession of a mythical nature. This is another image of the ruin – different from the capitalised cosmological cycles outlined above – that needs to be attended to, the hubris of the outmoded commodities and buildings of capital.

Through its abstraction of dereliction in the image of industrial dereliction there’s revealed a similarly pessimistic but critical element of the way capitalist abstractions – labour, commodity, value – work in the world. The standard trope of most such images – and this is very prevalent in The Ruins of Detroit – is the monumental, looming depiction of emptied out factories and apartment blocks as being totally devoid of people. What can be apprehended in these emptied out images is the actuality of the contemporary industrial ruin as the decomposing embodiment of capitalist abstraction in the shape of dead labour. And rather than being the unconscious aspects of space that harboured the ‘marvellous’ for Aragon and the Surrealists this is a banal secret that The Ruins of Detroit underscores in its details of dereliction.

That is, these desolate buildings depicted in The Ruins of Detroit have accumulated the sweat of living labour over the generations then been destroyed as the reproductive cycle between capital and proletariat is cut by the necessity of capital to valorize itself either in more fictional, financial form or to begin its flight elsewhere. A surplus but proletarianised living labour is still dominated – if not exploited – by the ghost of capital continuing to animate the corpses of past dead labour in the shape of a repetitive refrain of ‘This world was not built for you’. Or what Georg Lukacs memorably described as a ‘charnel house’ of reified subjectivity, frozen as second nature. While Lukacs risked missing the essential staunchness that such second nature always carries this formulation catches much of the banal, monumental qualities of urban decay imagery and is the last trace of the subject within it. And while not actively built for a labouring (or non-labouring) proletariat – except to reproduce humanity as labour – the ruin as dead labour restores a more contingent element to the industrial ruin by underlining its produced quality. The essential trace of the empty space are the proletarianised subjects who originally designed, built, worked in and inhabited these ruins realised in this absence. Industrial ruins are a signifier of the becoming surplus to capitalism of a significant part of this proletariat.

The contemporary ruinae as depicted in books such as The Ruins of Detroit and the repetition of such images on the web are in their emptiness redolent of such a surplus population in both the developed zones of the west and more strikingly in the global south. This is to make absolutely clear a population surplus to the requirements of capital – unemployed, marginalised, precarious – not to itself and this is the negative ‘utopian trace’ of post-industrial ruins. To put it plainly, the severing of the reproductive cycle between proletariat and capital as a structural necessity for capital opens up the potentiality of a future without capitalism. This is also part of the ‘charm’ of ruins though whether it’s also an element in our contemporary phantasmagoria of wish images only time will tell. Thesis six is: the ruin as an empty space that might herald the non-reproduction of capitalism is a seductive image and certainly constitutes part of any utopian trace it might have for the present. Perhaps, Benjamin’s (in)famous ‘angel of history’ – as much as being horrified by the accumulated detritus and the marginal workers who worked amongst such was already a concern with photographers.

Perhaps, Benjamin’s (in)famous ‘angel of history’ – as much as being horrified by the accumulated detritus and the marginal workers who worked amongst such was already a concern with photographers.

Notes
4 Walter Gropius, ibid, p.138.
5 As the Architectural Review editor Philip Morton Shand said in 1934, “did modern photography begot modern architecture or the reverse?”, ibid, p.136. Though Eugene Atget’s photographs of ragsellers in the late 19th century suggest that an awareness of dust, decay and the marginal workers who worked amongst such was already a concern with photographers.
9 Bill McGraw, ibid, p.293.
12 This is outlined in Giorgio Agamben’s text ‘Metropolis’, available here: http://www.scribd.com/doc/69377415/Agambens-Metropolis
13 Ruins of Modernity, ibid, p.277.
20 See the excellent website Southwark Notes for much bile, whinging and critique of this: http://southwarknotes.wordpress.com/
25 For more detail on the concept of surplus population see ‘Misery and Debt’, Endnotes here: http://endnotes.org.uk/articles/1
26 ‘His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread […] His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and buries it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed.’ Walter Benjamin, Trans: Harry Zohn, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, Illuminations, UK: Harcourt, 1992, p.249.
This year has been, in large part as a response to the consequences of an increasingly brutal neoliberalism, a year of ongoing political unrest. People across the globe have taken to the streets in confronting economic and other inequalities and assaults on basic human rights, demanding an end to oppression, exploitation and repression.

In many countries these events, struggles and movements have recognised the centrality of mainstream media in manufacturing and maintaining consent to neoliberal policies and relations of oppression. As such, there has been recognition of the importance of access to alternative communications (including social media networks) and to the existence, evolution and creation of critical/radical media alternatives.

The following exchange, exploring the role of politically engaged art in protest and human rights issues, is a continuation of a public talk between Katarzyna Kosmala and Oliver Ressler at the CCA, Glasgow, reflecting on Ressler’s recent films: Socialism Failed, Capitalism is Bankrupt. What Comes Next?, Comuna Under Construction, screened at Document 9: International Human Rights Documentary Film Festival on 21st October 2011.

Document provides a rare public platform in Scotland for debating possibilities and alternatives that speak to the necessity of living, thinking and acting differently. This exchange is intended as a contribution to Document’s inspiring vision for politically engaged cultural practices.

Katarzyna Kosmala: Protest is not necessarily a purely political statement; a protest can be viewed as a cultural form of resistance. To start with, it is worth reflecting upon whether gesture or gestural forms of expression can make a real difference. You have been producing exhibitions and various projects in public spaces since 1994, and made films that address forms of resistance for nearly 20 years now. You reflect upon socio-political and economic alternatives in your work. How do you see the role of the arts in protest, drawing on the examples from your own art practice?

Oliver Ressler: I think art can have a crucial function for an analysis of the current political and economic situation, in expressing criticism, connecting to existing social movements and in thinking about alternative ways about how to organise our societies. There are multiple roles art can play directly in protest. It is a central idea in my artistic practice to give a voice to protagonists of social movements around the world, and to create a certain space through my work where these voices can be heard and be listened to. I am not interested in a balanced, “neutral” perspective (some media forms claim it exists!), but in a perspective emerging from the inside, or at least a perspective born out of participation and in solidarity with particular leftist social movements. My work often takes the form of a film production. I am interested in creating a tangible tool that can be used by the movements themselves for reflection, education and mobilisation purposes, and to contribute – through the creation of a film – to render their aims and activities spread around the world and made visible internationally.

For example, my films on the alter-globalisation movements, such as This Is What Democracy Looks Like!, Diasobabedisti and What Would It Mean to Win? were used numerous times by the movements in question to inform and to mobilise upcoming demonstrations and activities against the G8, WTO, IMF or WEF. I have also created banners and posters for the alter-globalisation movement, which helped in mobilising demonstrations and blockades at the G8-summit in Heiligendamm in Germany in 2007, for example. But I don’t believe that art should limit itself to tasks such as these; making material objects or producing visual material for demonstrations. Artists should get involved in different aspects of organising and dispersing activism, and, as a long-term goal, somehow aim at overcoming these boundaries between art and activism in practice.

This has been extremely important in Venezuela, where the society is sharply divided
into supporters and opponents of the so-called Bolivarian Process. For the whole production, it is extremely helpful that Dario Azzellini is based in Venezuela half of the year and developed a good network of people he knows in the communities who supported our filming. These first-hand contacts open a lot of doors, which otherwise would probably stay closed. Having done three films already on the Bolivarian Process, and showcasing them when negotiating with people the filming permissions, has helped a lot to win their confidence and to seal our collaboration.

KK: Let’s discuss the processes of production and post-production of these two films. What is the role of weaving document with fiction in constructing the narrative of your films?

OR: Film is never a direct visualisation or repetition of reality, but instead it creates its own reality. Under this precondition, the category of images, whether they are documents or fiction, is not a central thing – at least not from my position of a filmmaker. The majority of the material that I use for films would usually be labelled as a documentary source, but in some films there are also “staged” elements; elements that are more enacted than the interviews in the bazaar in Socialism Failed…

For example, in the 8-channel video installation What Is Democracy? (2009), in the central piece I decided to script burning of the flags (the flags from the USA, the UK, Australia and so on to Poland) in order to construct a particular visualisation, reflecting on emergent opinion of the majority of the interviewees in the piece. The video describes the temporary form of representative democracies we are living in as the failed form, or at least not “democratic” form, taking the literal meaning of the term.

While I had done already numerous interview-based films over the years, the concept applied in Comuna Under Construction of documenting the assemblies in three different locations and developing a narration based on the recorded material in the post-production, was a completely new experience for me. In this case only a few parameters could have been defined before the shooting began, including the decision for three locations that form three chapters, each focusing on different aspects. The first chapter shows how the assemblies function on the local level, the second chapter points to attempts of setting up a structure among the self-organized communities at a regional level, and the third chapter elaborates primarily upon the tensions between the community councils and the governmental institutions, which are symptomatic in a process of empowerment. I have the impression that through filming of the assemblies you do not influence the content that is being discussed in these assemblies as much as you influence the content of an interview through raising the questions of your interest again and again. For that reason, I have the impression that the film Comuna Under Construction has been shaped more through the post-production process - through the numerous decisions about inclusions and exclusions and through highlighting of certain elements – than my interview-based films are.

KK: It seems appropriate to reflect more on the current condition, since we are discussing protest in art and art in protest. There are certainly challenges associated with testing the limitation of the arts in the politics. For instance, the ways of seeing art as an agency aligned with the circumventing of dominant ideologies and obstacles – especially in relation to Euro-centric democracy, if we focus on Europe for example – can be seen as prescriptive. How do you see the process of engaging the public through politically informed art? If we consider 2011 as the ‘year of protest’, do you see such engagement in protest?

OR: Yes, a protest is one option. There is no dominance in my work for representing a specific form of protest. Over the years my work has focused on demonstrations, blockades, protest camps, property damage, militant struggles, forms of social disobedience, go-slow, and more – whatever thoughtful activists in certain contexts felt was a necessary strategy. But it is not inscribed in my work that what I do goes beyond representation and leads to action; a film hasn’t got the potential to lead directly to protest. But a film can assemble arguments and viewpoints that might lead to informing the process of protest and revolutionary ideas; I know from several people that my films on the alter-globalisation movement were central for them in shaping their personal ideas about the forms and potentials of protest today, and inspired them to become more active politically themselves. This happens often because the films are related to specific movements, so people can connect with the local active sites where they are based. My films are often presented at the events by the political organisations or at alternative film festivals, including those that otherwise probably never come across these arguments.

KK: Let’s think about the current situation in relation to protest a bit more… What we now witness internationally is the form of political action such as Occupy Wall Street, a form of protest that is globally scaled. In Comuna Under Construction you present a social political experiment, testing the limits of democracy. How can the interface between the arts and politics contribute to building a sense of community, in particular amongst those who feel marginalised and left behind?

OR: At the moment, in the framework of the Occupy Wall Street movement, activists in several-hundred cities around the world are struggling in order to change the system in a direction that takes care of their social and political needs. This is something the marginalised people in Venezuela have already achieved, at least in a significant proportion. What is happening in Venezuela today is already far beyond the system of democracy, I mean democracy as we have it in the European Convention of the 21st century. Our first film made in that context is entitled Venezuela from Below, and this title actually explains our approach and an attempt applied to all our films on the political processes in Venezuela, namely to make visible these unprecedented processes of self-organisation and democratic decision-making taking place from the bottom-up. But this challenging process of developing a ‘new’ society unfortunately is overshadowed by the Western media that is focusing solely on de-contextualised statements by president Hugo Chávez, in order to scandalise or ridicule him and to hide what is really going on in the country. I think to learn from these Venezuelan experiences would be very valuable for the emerging Occupy Everywhere movement. And films like Comuna Under Construction can surely have a role in that.

KK: The emergence of an international protest movement without a coherent programme or leadership in a sense reflects a deeper problem than the global economic crisis. It is about the failure of democracy based on the rule of law. In your project Alternative Economics, Alternative Society you explore the limits of democracy. Representative democracy functions within distinct borders and among people who are part of the same group or a nation. How can we – situated in global realms – address a “global community” based on democratic principles?

OR: What the current crisis makes so visible – and this is extremely important – is that representative democracy is less about representing people,
but more about representing capital. This was already clear to Marx, who described governments as “capital's executives”, but got tangentially ignored even from many seemingly critical Leftists over the last decades. What is apparent to most people today – that capitalism is in a deep systemic crisis – was already quite obvious to me in 2003 and even before, when I started a thorough research on alternatives to the capitalist system and representative democracy within the framework of my long-term project Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies. Among many things that I have learned through this research was that a common way for how a society and economy should be shaped in a more democratic manner does not exist, which is good as it leaves space for people for more progressive struggles in re-shaping societies according to their needs and wishes. Therefore, it is very important that the Occupy Movement does not come up with a coherent programme, as this is something that has to emerge through a process of participation. People active within this movement are spread across many hundred cities around the globe; they work together for example to make a global action day happen (such as the one on October 15th, 2011 for instance), but have very different levels of organisation or other forms of decision-making processes. And this is wonderful; while for some groups consensual decision-making might be the perfect way, for other groups the assemblies based on majority vote might make more sense.

KK: I see the possibility of making a difference in participatory art practice and art as protest. There is however a problem of inclusion and of exclusion. Taking this into account, how do you address the tensions between social and political definitions in different contexts (e.g. liberal democracy, transitional societies of post-socialist realms)?

OR: I think a participatory art practice or art as protest will differ depending on the context where it takes place. While a specific activity in a liberal democracy might be considered critical, but legal, it might be illegal somewhere else. Having had a solo-exhibition at ACAF in Alexandria, Egypt, a major problem of my work and potential danger for the art institution appeared to be the inclusion of interviewees from Israel in my video installation What Is Democracy? – and not the burning flags of ten nation states, which could potentially be criminalised in countries such as Germany, Austria or France. So what appears critical, problematic or illegal really depends a lot on the context of the presentation. Therefore, ideally, critical art develops in a close reference to specific local contexts, art that really challenges the power in place.

KK: To conclude, can you comment on what a role is for documentation in the process of intervening and in challenging the status quo of a global economy under the reign of capitalist markets, and, more specifically, now in the context of unfolding multiple forms of global protest?

OR: For me a central role of documentation is to ‘make visible’ forms of dissent and resistance, to create a tool that brings the activities and discussions happening in one place to another, so that they can be explored, learned from and criticised. Ideally, this is a productive process that contributes towards the creation of further dissenting and resisting activities in other contexts and places, so that the isolated activities taking place locally become a movement – a global movement of ideas that becomes broader and gains more and more influence. Probably, it is true that most documentation does not have such an effect – and if it does, it is hard to prove. But I like the inherent potentiality of critical films using documentary formats to help in pushing forward the new, the unexpected and unimaginable; that challenges and confronts the deadness and deadliness of capitalist reality...

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Tales from a River Bank

Bullying, the Arts, and the Production of Museum Space

David Beel

Bullying in the Arts: Vocation, Exploitation and Abuse of Power
Anne-Marie Quigg
(2011) Gower, 266 pp
ISBN: 978-1-4094-0482-8 (hardback)
978-1-4094-0483-5 (electronic)

Introduction

There has often been a romanticised view of the nature of labour practices in the arts, culture and heritage – significant segments of the tourism industry. A common assumption is of places of work where committed, talented individuals are able to follow their artistic temperament in a vocational manner. This, from the start, is a highly problematic view of such labour but nonetheless many people are attracted into the industry with a sense that working within it – whether as an artist, curator, or in management or administration – offers the potential for more enjoyable and meaningful work/life balance. Therefore Anne-Marie Quigg’s recently published work, Bullying in the Arts: Vocation, Exploitation and Abuse of Power, reveals a very different perspective with regard to some of the problems faced by individuals negotiating ‘creative’ work. Quigg informs that those undertaking careers in the arts consistently have to deal with issues around exploitation1 as well as a variety of abuses of power. Quigg examines the very nature of harassment and bullying in the workplace, taking the reader through different forms of mistreatment and victimisation that can happen, and has happened, in a variety of arts organisations.

The ideas and concepts that Quigg brings to the fore are a timely intervention as, faced with institutional science, they may help to elucidate a recent internal report into bullying and harassment within the curatorial processes of the recently completed Riverside Museum, Glasgow. In turn, this raises a set of serious questions towards the nature of ‘outsourced’ municipal cultural governance in Glasgow. The parent body of Glasgow Life – the branded face of Culture and Sport Glasgow, an external company spun-out from council services which manages culture and sports for the city council.2 Workplace accounts point to Glasgow Life creating the conditions by which bullying and harassment took place, and then failing to take any significant action upon those understood to be implicated in an internal report.1

Bullying of all forms

Quigg’s work gives an insightful snapshot into the labour practices of arts organisations, firstly in terms of the ‘creative’ sector as a whole in relation to key trends in employment practices; and secondly, it also represents the way in which a variety of different organisations manage social relations. In doing this, the primary focus of Bullying in the Arts is therefore not on ‘artists’ per se but on the actual management of the arts in terms of how labour processes are produced. This book therefore helps towards an understanding of unacceptable management practice – such as bullying – but also points towards potential directions for improved ‘leadership’.3

Quigg usefully provides an immediate and precise definition of the concept of bullying. At one level bullying seems quite simple, reflecting what many may have experienced in some measure at school. On another, she exposes a set of practices that are both startling and intrinsically built into many of the work and management practices endured by employees. To begin, Quigg sees intimidatory behaviour as: “Bullying, mobbing or harassment is a set or series of intimidatory behaviour that occurs on more than one occasion. The frequency of bullying precludes one off incidents of aggression or violence; the most common type of bully encountered in the arts is the serial bully who picks on one employee after another and attempts to destroy them. A serial bully identifies a target and proceeds to systematically bully that person until they are forced to move on, either to another role in an organisation or to another workplace altogether.”4

Quigg, having laid out this explicit starting point, then moves to show how such behaviour can develop out of a variety of different circumstances and go unchecked for a variety of different reasons. In doing this, Quigg shows how bullying behaviours are often not just singular actors acting alone, but are often implicit of a wider working culture and due to the very institutions in which people work. Therefore she shows across the ten chapters how such behaviours can develop, from what she terms ‘Founder Syndrome’ to ‘Pair Bullying’, through to ‘Institutional Bullying’ and the issues created by ‘Artistic Temperament’. One of the most engaging but sometimes most difficult parts of this book is the consistent use of vignettes which give first-hand accounts of different incidences of bullying that have arisen in arts organisations. They give insight into the different and varied practices of bullying, showing how different sets of circumstances can produce very different forms of bullying. Beyond this, however, Quigg also provides a much more stark picture of the nature of ‘paid’ work within the arts, highlighting the mechanisms through which a number of broader inequalities are created which are at times related to bullying. These include low rates of pay, long-working hours, expectations of giving unpaid labour and overbearing expectations from managers.

Quigg identifies ‘Institutional Bullying’ as where, often due to structural changes and management abdication, bullying behaviour can be legitimised because there is sufficient organisational that illegitimate practices are not identified and ignored. Quigg shows how this can lead individuals or small groups using an apparent lack of supervision to begin to systematically bully individuals – ‘serial bullying’. For Quigg, the importance is therefore about producing positive forms of leadership in the arts. To a certain extent Quigg posits work in the cultural and creative industries as being different to other forms of labour but at the same time suggests that this is no excuse for poor or overly aggressive management. Therefore Quigg sets out to debunk a number of ‘myths’ (see box, above right) about what is often considered good management practice with regards to creative endeavour, by suggesting how they potentially lead to management malpractice. By exploring how these myths fail and destabilise arts practice, Quigg attempts to highlight how management practices that have developed in other industries or non-arts organisations should not be adopted for creative practice. Thus, she fully, and problematically, subscribes to yet another myth of creativity: that of it being exceptional to all other labour. She attempts to set out a new blueprint towards good arts management that attempts to embrace the informal, time intensive and sporadic nature of such work and to fight the desire to control, contain, and dominate such practices.

“The myth of the visionary leader offers a picture of the artistically driven and possibly hyper-intensive individual who is able to follow their artistic temperament in a vocational manner. This, from the start, is a highly problematic view of such labour but nonetheless many people are attracted into the industry with a sense that working within it – whether as an artist, curator, or in management or administration – offers, potentially, a better and more enjoyable form of labour practice, taking the reader through different forms of mistreatment and victimisation that can happen, and has happened, in a variety of arts organisations.”

Myth 1. Creativity comes from creative types.
Myth 2. Money is a creativity motivator.
Myth 3. Time pressure fuels creativity.
Myth 4. Fear forces breakthroughs
Myth 5. Competition beats collaboration

Myth 6. A streamlined organisation is a creative one

The Mythology of Creativity:

In 2011, Glasgow Life opened its latest remodelled museum, the Riverside Museum. It replaced the Museum of Transport, so as to redisplay the transport collection and house some new acquisitions. The new site occupies a strip of post-industrial land at the confluence of the Rivers Kelvin and Clyde, cut off from the city on its third side by motorway. It is encompassed within the wider ‘stalled’ urban development3 of the Glasgow Harbour Master-plan and it sits facing development of the former ship building area of Govan. The museum was built at a cost of around £74 million. Designed by ‘celebrity’ architect Zaha Hadid, it follows a now familiar urban development model centred on ‘iconic’ landmarks. As such, it is a further attempt to make urban development succeed.
The urban development agenda is having an
transferral of existing museum stock and practice.
architecture but also a supposedly ‘technical’
this it becomes obvious that the entrepreneurial
management practices that fall outside Quigg’s
the Kelvingrove Museum stands as a marker of
Project Management Team (PMT) for the project
transport objects. In doing so, many parallels with
situation in which it was to re-display its many
significantly to the re-imaging of Glasgow in the
museum in the city, one which is to contribute
is an attempt to (re)build a second ‘flagship’
Museum redevelopment. The Riverside Museum
Museums can repeat the success – measured
partnership between the Heritage Lottery Fund
point at which a variety of competing discourses
Glasgow’s ‘municipal’ museums are primarily publicly funded cultural institutions and they represent a focal point at which a variety of competing discourses come together. Thus, the wider purpose of this research project has been to understand the implicit geographies in such entanglements, as practitioners attempt to produce museum spaces.

The apparent lack of influence that the wider entrepreneurial city agenda has had on the way the collection was curated – accordingly, the ‘developers’ have their iconic building, the museum content being largely already in existence, its transfer a matter of course – elides the city’s already integrated museological strategy. Similar to the city’s schematic pursuit of a further iconic building, Glasgow’s ‘new epistemology of museums’ is itself, according to one observer, a medley of received technocratic ideas. However, the Director of Policy, Research & Development at Culture & Sport Glasgow (then Head of Museums & Galleries), posits as theory of museum praxis:

“integrating access at a strategic level across organisational structures and activities”. The perceived popular success of this approach with the Kelvingrove Museum stands as a marker of achievement to be replicated across the city. Moreover, this indicates the extent to which pressures to deliver large-scale projects such as the Riverside Museum on time and on budget are serving to legitimate and as catalyst for management practices that fall outside Quigg’s promotion of best practice and leadership. With this it becomes obvious that the entrepreneurial city does not govern the land. It governs the architecture but also a supposedly ‘technical’ transferral of existing museum stock and practice. The urban development agenda is having an influence upon museum practice, as failure to produce the museum on time would affect the image of the city. It would also be impacting other cost issues for a cash-strapped organisation – and can be understood to have led to certain behaviours that should be considered unacceptable. This reflected a wider structure of governmentality coming down to bear on practitioners in the production of the Riverside Museum. The local state’s desire to maintain its competitive position through enhancing the city’s image meant that those managing production of the museum space produced a specific ‘conduct of conduct’ – a commonly understood frame of reference for which types of management practice are deemed acceptable.

The curators’ position and role was not only altered as a result of the inclusion agenda, changes in the governance structures through which curators operate have been created in changes in their status. Starting from the refurbishment of the Kelvingrove Museum and continued in the Riverside Project, there has been a progressive ‘deskilling’ of the curatorial role. For some curatorial staff this has meant little control over the content to be contained within the museum, as the Project Management Team has sought to make almost all of the key decisions, essentially reducing curators to the function of researchers. To a certain extent, this was a functioning museum on the size and scale of the Riverside, organisational structures were likely to operate in authoritarian ways in order to complete the project on schedule. However, within the management of the Riverside Project this often went beyond what some curators found acceptable. To this end, the project process has borne “an absolutely miserable time” (Peter, 2009) due to an over-bureaucratisation in the museum process, coupled with a strong desire of some of the PMT to control and micro-manage curators, as well as other members of the PMT. Thus, when disagreements arose, dissenting voices were quickly silenced:

“...I think it’s quite widely known that there were a lot of staffing issues. A huge number of people left in the course of the Riverside project which is fairly unusual actually – the rate that people were going.” (Liz, 2009)

This became such a problem that in 2009 there was an internal investigation commissioned by Glasgow Life into the conduct of the Management Team, where accusations of bullying were made. However, due to the perceived sensitive nature of this report, it has not been published and no disciplinary action was taken. Only one copy of the report is believed to exist, held by the current Head of Service.

Variant undertook a Freedom of Information request in order to locate this report, seeing transparency in delivery of our public services as being in the public interest and integral to holding local ‘democratic’ power to account, but this has initially been declined.

On 24/10/11, Variant requested:

• All documents relating to and reporting of management behaviour level 1 of bullying referred to ‘bullying’ within the Riverside Museum Project.
• The publication of the internal report conducted by [the Information Services Manager, Glasgow Libraries] into alleged allegations of management malpractice occurring during the production of the Riverside Museum.

On 18/11/11, Culture and Sport Glasgow, Director of Corporate and Community Planning Services, responded:

“I can confirm Culture and Sport Glasgow holds all of the information that you are requesting. …However... it would appear that of the information requested is covered by an exception or exemptions … Glasgow Life believes... that releasing the information is likely to ‘prejudice the effective conduct of public affairs’. Furthermore the PMT could be persuaded, or would be likely to, inhibit substantially (i) the free and frank provision of advice and (ii) the free and frank exchange of views for the purposes of deliberation or (c) would otherwise prejudice substantially, the effective conduct of public affairs.”

Also on 18/11/11, a Glasgow Life staff E-newsletter announced a New Freedom of Information Process will involve all responses going via its Media Team prior to dispatching. For these reasons the following can only give a snapshot of some of the issues created in the production of the Riverside Museum, but it is hoped that if the report is made public at a later date, a more thorough depiction to what was a very difficult time for members of staff can be given. Below is a ‘second hand’ summary to some of the report’s findings and a brief glimpse into the reactions and feelings of staff after this enquiry. This is astonishing about this is that questioning, witnesses (in the enquiry alone) confirmed that such malpractice had taken place:

“I have now left Glasgow Museums but I understand that the investigation is going to take the first phase, which ended last December, concluded that three people had bullied and harassed, and managed ‘negatively’ (the investigation looked into bullying and harassment and ‘negative management’). A senior curator got away with it – his only fault was eccentricity (this has been greeted by much derision). It was decided not to go through the disciplinary process because staff already felt too intimidated and this could worsen things. There were 18 witnesses – only 3 spoke in support of those accused. There was also another 12 or so witnesses who called Glasgow Museums who wanted to speak to [the Information Services Manager conducting the investigation] about how badly they had been treated. They were not asked because it was said they had had their opportunity when they left.” (Peter, email correspondence, 2010)

How did this come to take place and why did such behaviour become apparent within management practice? It is important to understand that it is not my intention to accuse or blame individuals for what has happened. Rather, I wish to consider what structural factors legitimised these practices, how this created a specific geography of power, in that the production of the Riverside Museum existed with a very specific set of geo-power relations in Glasgow, especially with regards to the city’s perceived ‘competitive’ position. From the beginning, this project represented a top-down initiative driven by Glasgow City Council. This in turn had a direct effect upon the micro-practices that played out within the museum service. In doing so, it reflects upon many of the ideas that do highlight bullying as implicit in the definition of institutional bullying, where the structural set-up of the Riverside PMT and the outsourcing of the project led to a culture of work where there was sufficient management abdication from Glasgow Museums and Glasgow Life that allowed the Riverside PMT to act in ways which are unacceptable.

Abuses of Power in the Production of Museum Space

In attempting to research the role of curators in the Riverside Museum it became very obvious that this would be a difficult process, with access to many curators not being granted. While this is often not unusual for research projects that have to negotiate access to participants through senior staff, it also may point towards the sense...
of pressure and need for control to be held by the PMT during this live project. Further to this, variety and control of possible refinement if anything to the detriment of the project was stated.23 Again, this highlights something about the working relationships developed by the PMT. Through negotiating with managers, conversations with management staff and other curatorial staff (who were willing to speak) within Glasgow Museums sheds light on the discourses and processes that have been used and the conflicts that have arisen in the production of the Riverside Museum to date. In understanding why such an over-bearing sense of control was established in the workplace, one that has seen a loss of ownership in work for curators, a demoralisation of staff and created a high turnover of people working on the project, it is essential to look at the context in which the project was created. Due to the structure put in place at the start of the Riverside Project, where curators from outside were brought in, whilst existing Glasgow Museums curators continued to work on the Kelvingrove, the project experienced a change of curatorial responsibilities, with existing curatorial staff from Glasgow Museums only transferring into the Project at a later stage. As one senior research curator described: "In a way it has been allowed to become a stand alone project because the focus was so much on Kelvingrove and the Riverside was left to get on and do its own thing and then suddenly once Kelvingrove is opened we are going to now engage with Riverside and there is a bit of resistance like 'Who are you? What are you doing?' This is our project', and a kind of a bit of a failure of not involving us in your project, it's a Glasgow Museums project so there is a bit of friction there." (John, 2008)

When the Kelvingrove was completed and the wider Glasgow Museums organisation was able to shift its attention to Riverside, as John states, this created 'friction' and some people considered their desire to have input unwelcome. Riverside PMT's sense of ownership in terms of control, was reflected in the need to keep to schedules and not allow changes after decisions had been 'signed off': "So in a kind of really practical level my role is partly co-ordination of content and making sure that the curators stick to the programme, which in a live project is critical, because if we go off programme, we get in to the whole of Glasgow Museums.” (John, 2008)

This then became highly demoralising for a lot of curators as they had little control over what they would be doing. Further to this, many curators felt pressured to present work in a way that specifically fitted with what the Management Team wanted, or felt they were pressured, disciplined, censured or exclusion from the project. Peter, who at the time of interview was still a curator at Glasgow Museums, was one of Glasgow Museums staff who consistently found himself in such a position: "They set up a core content team which was to oversee the development of the content and I was told by the director that that was my job to chair the meeting. It was picked up by the project's senior curator who felt that her role was to chair that meeting. There was a group of five managers and they just gave way - an absolutely miserable time. If I wanted to carry on in chairing the meeting, if I wanted any kind of assistance, if I came along with, expressed, a particular point of view, it was automatically the opposite viewpoint taken. And it was very obvious that I was being deliberately excluded from meetings, particularly where I had a viewpoint that opposed theirs." (Peter, 2009)

Peter highlights how his ability to have agency within the project was prevented due to him disagreeing with the Management Team and, in further discussion with Peter, he was not the only one to be treated in this way as the project progressed. As the interview continued, he talked about how other curators had suffered similar experiences as the Management Team wished to retain as much control as possible. Rigidly sticking to deadlines and targets is symptomatic of the effects of neo-liberal discourses upon management attitudes, affecting how curators can go about their work. Richard Sennett - who has “explored how individuals and groups make social and cultural sense of material fact; about the cities in which they live and the labour they do”24 - argues this in terms of what is meant by ‘good work’. “What do we mean by good-quality work? One answer is how something should be done, the other is getting it to work. This is a difference between correctness and functionality”25.

Sennett highlights a tension in the practice of the ‘craftsmen’ which is then reflected in the management of the Riverside Project, where there is a split between correctness and functionality. For the managers in the museum put into a position where there is a specific set of pressures and conditions around this, means they took a more functional approach to implementing the new museum, one which seemed to guarantee the most likely possibility for the successful completion of the museum, on time and on budget. Added to this there was a sense that senior managers on the project and in Glasgow Museums
Peter shows, like Quigg suggests, that often bullying is perpetuated through a failure of management to deal with the problem and that they often in part blame the victim of the bullying. Peter’s account shows this to have taken place. Despite raising the complaint, there is a failure in the organisational structure to deal with this at the point of initial complaint. In the long run, this meant Peter felt isolated, victimised and unfairly treated, causing him, like others, to find employment elsewhere, whilst those who perpetrated the behaviour remained in post.

Conclusions

The possibility of failing to produce a museum that does not fit with the building's iconic image, that does not help promote the image of Glasgow, that is not seen to benefit the people of Glasgow, in terms of museum experience and local authority spending, meant that it becomes very difficult for management not to become over-controlling in how it implemented the production of a new museum. Hence, following Sennett’s lead, the delivery of the project becomes the key aim (the functional) which leads to the detriment of the work practices of the people who have the role of producing the museum (the correctness). With such pressure placed upon individuals in the production of the museum, and with Glasgow Life failing to offer a sufficiently strong sense of ‘good’ arts governance20, the Riverside Project failed to ensure a sound working relationship for the staff involved, resulting in a number of management failures to adequately support curatorial staff. This produced the opposite to what Quigg calls positive leadership, as the PMT took a negative management approach to the work curators did.

Interestingly, despite the internal inquiry finding against some of the members of the PMT due to the way they operated on the project, little was done due to the desire to complete the museum. As a result of this, the head of the PMT (accused of bullying but found to not be directly culpable) was recently nominated for an award for “Outstanding Leadership” for “his management of the highly successful Riverside Project” in the Glasgow Life Staff Recognition Awards 2011.21 This despite, at the very least, missing blatant examples of malpractice in his own Management Team. However, he was awarded the ‘Chief Executive’s Award for Outstanding Achievement’ stating: “As project director over the last ten years, [the project manager] has been at the helm and his leadership and direction helped to ensure the £74 million museum was both delivered on time and in budget.”22

Notes

1 E.g. concerning the use of unpaid interns in creative industries organisations, see Carrot Workers Collective: http://carrotworkers.wordpress.com/
2 See: ‘Glasgow Life or Death’, Rebecca Gordon Nesbitt; Variant, issue 41: http://www.variant.org.uk/41texts/rgn41.html
4 Itself not an unproblematic or ‘value free’ concept, see, e.g., ‘Artist as Executive, Executive as Artist’, Kirsten Forkert; Variant, issue 35: http://www.variant.org.uk/35texts/CultLeader.html
6 ibid. p.1
7 For a critique of this see, e.g., ‘Make Whichever You Find Work’, Anthony Bass & Marina Vishmidt, Variant, issue 41: http://www.variant.org.uk/41texts/silvesthmnd41.html
10 http://www.clydeporto.co.uk/index.php/site_id=3&page\ id=623
http://www.clydeporto.co.uk/index.php/site_id=3&page\ id=626
13 See, ‘Blaimir on the walls at Kelvingrove’, Stephen Dawber; Variant, issue 27:

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10 http://www.clydeporto.co.uk/index.php/site_id=3&page\ id=623
http://www.clydeporto.co.uk/index.php/site_id=3&page\ id=626
13 See, ‘Blaimir on the walls at Kelvingrove’, Stephen Dawber; Variant, issue 27:
Disposable Women, Not Natasha, and the Economics and Politics of Sex Trafficking

Roberta McGrath

“‘To be honest I give more importance to taking the story out into the world once it is finished. That plays again an important part in the photographic process.’” Dana Popa

“Media alone cannot transform public policy, but it can influence change, create social awareness and make more accessible the language of public policy.” Forum on Migration and Communication

Sandwiched between Romania and Ukraine, Moldova is the poorest country in what is called, without a hint of irony, the new Europe. In 2006, Dana Popa, a student on the MA Photojournalism and Documentary programme at The London College of Communication, travelled to Moldova and began a project to tell the stories of young girls sex trafficked across Europe.7 Popa was then commissioned by the London-based human rights and photography organisation Autograph ABP and the Economics and Politics of Sex Trafficking commissioned by the London-based human rights and photography organisation Autograph ABP to work. She returned. The result is the exhibition, and small book, Not Natasha. Natasha, as Popa tells us at the very start, is the generic name given by panners to prostitutes in East European looks. It is a name that instantly strips these women of their sense of self, identity and individuality. The women hate it. Their testimonies are recorded here and the stories they tell are of betrayal, captivity and abuse. These are women who have not simply been exploited, deceived or seduced, but systematically violated, degraded and repeatedly raped.

When Popa has talked about the work, she often begins gently with a shot taken from the window of her mother’s flat in a middle-class area of a prosperous town in Romania. This is a shot taken from within but the prospect without is bleak: it is a street scene painted along a drab grey block of flats on the other side of a long, straight road. Popa begins her story: at the end of the road as the daylight dims, women are brought and here, and just beyond the middle-class apartments, sex is bought; bodies are sold. Her point is clear. At the end of many streets – just around a corner, just beyond where we care to look, the same story is repeated. We choose, she says, not to look; not to see; and consequently not to think of who is there. We learn not to speak about it; we choose to disavow our knowledge. Popa however does not. She is driven to look further; to think about what lies beyond the end of the street, to trace the lives of women, in that place, there, who are bought and sold. It is a story that goes well beyond what we either care to see or what we want to know. It takes her on a bleak journey across Europe to the edge of Asia: From London to Moldova, across the Black Sea to Istanbul and back again.

Survival, Missing Women and Working in Soho

Sex trafficking is commonly seen as a sub-set of, and secondary to, the wider problem of human trafficking; a general exploitation rather than specific sexual abuse, torture and rape. Popa shows us that it is not. Sex trafficking lies at the intersection of two problems. On the one hand, a problem of economic migration and the trafficking of people: of men, women, children who are desperate to escape lives of poverty and persecution. On the other hand, it is a specific problem of gender: it is primarily women who are sex trafficked. As Mark Sealy states, remarkably: “It was not until 1993 that the General Assembly of the United Nations finally adopted the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women”. Article One reads: “For the purposes of this Declaration, the term ‘violence against women’ means any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life”.7 Add to this the fact that in Moldova a third of the workforce lives and works abroad, and, in 2006, 80% of households remained unable to generate a subsistence income of $48 a month.7 Female unemployment, as Popa tells us, may well be as high as 68%. The consequence is that those who are most vulnerable, young women, often no more than children, are most at risk. It is estimated that in Moldova since 1989 (with full ‘independence’ granted in 1991) somewhere between 200,000 and 400,000 women have been sold into prostitution elsewhere. This could be as high as 10% of the female population.8 These staggering numbers of girls and women are the make Moldova the exporter of ‘sex slaves’ for the European continent. Increasingly, Moldova has also become a major destination for sex tourism. This exacerbates the problem by creating internal sex trafficking.

Writers such as Siddharth Kara remind us that this is the direct result of general “powerful macroeconomic forces unleashed during the process of economic globalization in the post-Cold War era.”9 These economic forces “have more direct responsibility than any other force for the unforgivable rise in contemporary slavery” but sex slavery is particular. As he points out, “even though only 4% of all slaves are sex slaves worldwide, [they] generate almost 40% of the total profits.”9

This is a harsh reality for women in struggling, fledgling capitalist economies who are routinely forced by the economic equivalent of a scorched earth policy to leave ‘home’ either to support their families, or to seek better futures elsewhere as families fall apart and there is no one to support them. As Zimmerman suggests, it is the congruence of “[e]xtreme poverty, a severe reduction in economic earning capacity and multiple forms of discrimination, disadvantage and abuse” that are the “risk factors that make some women and girls increasingly vulnerable in their countries of origin to being recruited and coerced into the sex industry”.8 But it is also true that some of these women are neither recruited nor coerced. They are simply sold into sexual slavery. As one woman testifies: “My Husband-to-be sold me for $2,200.”

Sex trafficking is then an international, illicit, highly profitable activity. Kara points out that “unlike narcotics which must be harvested, refined and packaged, the female (or we might add, male) body requires no such processing and can be repeatedly consumed.”10 However, it is indeed the bodies of women and children – and most commonly of all, therefore, very young women that are at the sharpest end and most women who enter prostitution do so first as minors and, “approximately 80 per cent of transnational victims of trafficking and forced labour are women and girls, up to 50 per cent of which are minors”.11 There is a picture here of two sisters holding hands. They have open, pretty faces and look no more than 13. They are simply disposable. It is this world of extreme exploitation that Popa sets out so not much to expose, but more to unearth, to bear witness, and give vision and voice to what is overlooked or simply unheard. These are extraordinary photographs.

That, despite their narratives of brutality, are gentle. This is deliberate. There is no sensational or sentimental retinal excitement offered here; she simply opens up a space for the viewer. We are tucked in between her images, the photographs, and the stories the images tell. Her work has recounted to her, and we begin to contemplate. Tucking in features a lot in Popa’s images: neatly folded corners, a carefully made-up makeshift bed with its thin, washed out counterpane carefully smoothed by the stroke of a hand; cushions neatly stacked, throws folded, a remnant of lace artfully draped, a sleeping baby swaddled in a net curtain. This attention to detail makes reading the short testimonies painfully uncomfortable. There is no soft padding here, the words are stark; they are assaults. In Popa’s work it is the prose that is raw. These are not captions. Rather, in place of the usual fare of photojournalism a strange stillness fills the photographs. It is as if we are for a moment suspended. This, coupled with a high degree of detail and richness of colour, reverses the usual relationship between form and content in the documentary image. We notice the texture of a piece of thin yellowing paper or the nap of velour fabric. Melancholy and loss are worn between cheerfully coloured fabrics and worn faces; a lone handbag, perfectly arranged sits on a pillow at the top of a bed no longer slept in, in another image we see the possibility of a future, of lives to come as two girls lie on the grass holding hands; smoking they look up and into the sky above.

Here, in London, Popa tells us that the girls come to Regent’s Park on a Sunday to watch weddings. Popa is good on metaphor. She uses gentle persuasion to make us look long and to think hard about the economics and sexual politics of trafficking. There is little room for abstraction in her work. Her lens is clear and sharp; her eye deft. We can tell from the angle of the images that she is small in height; she often compensates for this by bringing us close in.

In other images, however, trauma is written on the body: the impossibly sad look of a mother who has lost her daughter and who sits solid and silent, defiant before the camera, holding between finger and thumb a tiny puppet-like image; a child-like, crudely cut out and poor copy of a photograph glued onto a piece of card. This tiny figure is no more than a few centimetres tall. But it is all at that she now has left of the daughter, a token
in place of the girl she once held in her hands. These older interiors are made of wood. They are poor interiors, simple and dark, rich in colour, full of floral fabric in vivid turquoise blues and cochineal pink and blood reds. They seem to be full of nature. The world outside that encroaches is much nastier and more dangerous. It is a dumping ground of discarded objects. The clinics where women receive treatment for sexually transmitted diseases and psychological disorder appear pale and wan; the fabric flowers washed out. We see the cut arm of a girl. Her body covered with a sheet; only a listless forearm hangs out. There are images here of the children born from unwanted sexual liaisons; two boys, twins, one stands wearing a crudely made paper mask, the other lies on a bundle of blankets on the floor. Hine meets Arbus. In another image, a woman’s face is covered by her hand; an ill-fitting wig is awkwardly propped above her head. Pope knows the “art” of Arbus and Serrano; Sherman and Woodward, but it is a very different politics that animates these images.

Like the Israeli writer Azizah Azzulay, Pope asks us to consider how, despite an ever growing discourse of human rights, two groups in particular – women and non-citizens – are increasingly abandoned not simply in social, legal and political discourse, but equally, and perhaps increasingly importantly, in the very media that ostensibly represents them. In her book The Civil Contract in Photography, Azzulay employs the legal concept of ‘contract’ (as a binding obligation) in order to move us beyond liberal terms such as empathy, pity or compassion that have organised so much empty rhetoric on ‘the gaze’. For Azzulay, and Pope, it is the political sphere of photography that might be reconstructed through the concept of civil contract. Parity of participation (which is one general meaning of justice) is at the heart of their arguments. Azzulay puts it like this: “[p]hotographed persons are participant citizens, just the same as I am!” (my emphasis) And we, the spectators, are too. Azzulay and Pope challenge us, urge us to move beyond being participant observers and to become members of an active, politically engaged community, to join, in Azzulay’s words, a global citizenry of photography that extends far beyond the borders of the sovereign nation-state. For Pope, “taking the story out into the world once it is finished [plays] an important part in the photographic process.”

In Dublin the exhibition became a focal point for a unique collaborative project between The Forum on Migration and Communications (FOMACS) and the Immigrant Council of Ireland’s (ICI) campaign Turn Off the Red Light. The ICI is pressing for legislative change to make purchasing, or attempting to purchase, sexual services a criminal offence.15 (A similar campaign was launched in Glasgow at the end of 2009.)16 The ICI recognises that sex trafficking takes place both within countries and across borders and indeed it is the “demand for a continuous supply of women to be available for commercial sexual exploitation in destination countries provides a highly profitable market for international traffickers.”17

The State’s current response “is complicit with the interests of the trafficker and strengthens the position of the trafficker in relation to the woman who is trafficked. This helps to keep trafficking a hidden and clandestine problem”.18 Legislation in Ireland has mainly focused on removing prostitution from the streets, but this represents a particular problem for migrant women who constitute 90% of all women involved in indoor prostitution.19

In cases of sex trafficking, these women are primarily perceived as illegal immigrants first, and prostitutes second. It is difficult to prove that they have been trafficked, and not simply ‘willingly’ become sex workers. Most commonly they are deported and so end up being returned to their country of origin.20 As Pope tells us, the traffickers are often waiting to collect what they perceive as ‘goods’, rightfully returned to their owners to simply be re-trafficked. Pope’s lens becomes darker here: when she photographs from below deck on a boat in the Bosphorus, the window is smear, the sea a filthy grey. And in another shot taken in a lurid hallway in Soho, harsh neon light illuminates a chipped yellow metal chair against set against a dirty puce-coloured wall. These images are in stark contrast to Pope’s use of photography as a means towards restorative justice. Here she harnesses the other side of photography’s power: to lay bare, to expose, to explicate. The showing of the work in Dublin harnessed the work to public policy. Here it became part of a far wider programme of education and activism involving Tánaiste, Senators, City Councillors (including the Mayor of Dublin), Trades’ Union Activists, and Health Professionals.

We might prefer not to listen, not to hear these stories, nor to look at these photographs; it is more comfortable to turn a blind eye or deaf ear. Pope’s images, however, are utterly compelling. She challenges us to think beyond what is contained within the photograph’s frame and shows us how the local and ordinary lives are linked to a global supply that is driven by high ‘consumer demand’ well beyond the boundaries of the nation-state. Prostitution is not a career choice. As one participant at the closing event reminded the audience, no child has ever uttered the words: ‘Daddy, when I grow up I want to be a prostitute’. Not Natasha was exhibited in a Pop-up Gallery in Creation Arcade, Duke St., Dublin, 7 July - 5 August 2011.

www.danapoppa.com
www.fomacs.org
www.immigrantcouncil.ie
www.augraph-abp.co.uk

Notes

1 I have included this to remind students that they should think big. Many excellent projects can begin at this stage.


6 Cathy Zimmerman et al, Stolen Smiles: The Physical and Psychological Health Consequences of Women and Adolescents Trafficked in Europe, (London: London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, 2006)


8 Cited in kelleher


11 Since 1999 the Swedish Government introduced a law that made purchasing, or attempting to purchase, sexual services a criminal offence, punishable by a six month fine.

12 http://www.endprostitutionnow.org


16 The ICI is campaigning to:

*Immediately ensure access to independent legal representation for all migrant and trafficked women in the sex industry at a grant of €300 to purchase, sexual services a criminal offence, punishable by a six month fine.

*Make a renewable reflection and recovery period available to all trafficked women, including migrant women exploited in prostitution who have been identified as suspected victims of trafficking through an inter-agency approach.

*Establish a programme, with clear protocols and an inter-agency approach, through which residence permits would be granted on ‘humanitarian grounds’ (when there is evidence of a risk to all victims to enable them to go to another country to prevent them in the context of prostitution or trafficking

*Residence permits should also be granted to women who have existing prostitution and must return to their countries of origin for reasons relating to their safety, age, state of health, family situation and other factors relating to their humanitarian or medical needs


2 http://www.endprostitutionnow.org


6 Cathy Zimmerman et al, Stolen Smiles: The Physical and Psychological Health Consequences of Women and Adolescents Trafficked in Europe, (London: London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, 2006)
Anarchism & Sexuality

Tracey McLennan, Gordon Asher in exchange with Jamie Heckert

Anarchism & Sexuality: Ethics, Relationships and Power
Edited by Jamie Heckert, Richard Cleminson (2011) Routledge, 238pp
978-0-203-82844-1 (electronic)

Jamie Heckert is a founding member of the Anarchist Studies Network and the editor of two collections of perspectives on anarchism and sexuality – a special issue of Sexualities (2010) and Anarchism & Sexuality: Ethics, Relationships and Power (2011) co-edited with Richard Cleminson. Anarchism & Sexuality is described by the co-editors as “a set of serious, sustained engagements with the ongoing and often imaginative internal tensions between anarchism and the politics and practice of sexuality...a collection of passionate, provocative papers that incite the reader to recognize the relevance of anarchist ideas to queer and feminist sexual politics.”

Heckert and Cleminson further clarify their intentions as: “first, to make fresh anarchist perspectives available, especially the contemporary debates around sexuality, second, to make a queer and feminist intervention within the most recent waves of anarchist scholarship; and, third, to make a queerly anarchist contribution to social justice literature, policy and practice” (p1). Anarchism & Sexuality consists of a collection of works, many of which have origins in a 2006 conference and workshop convened on the same theme, which are interwoven with four “poetic interludes” and an interview with Judith Butler – whose book Gender Trouble (1990) fundamentally challenged the way we conceptualised gender – relating her work to dialogues around anarchism.

We would like to thank Jamie for this opportunity for exchange and for the speed and generosity with which he responded to our questions – themselves the result of divergent exchanges following engagement with this collection of works and discussions around the issues it raise. Tracey McLennan/ Gordon Asher: One of the aims of both the ‘Anarchism & Sexuality’ conference and the book, is that they were intended to provide a space for academics and activists to be together and to learn from each other.

This aim is picked up by Gavin Brown in his contribution ‘Anarchism and Anarchist in the Creation of Autonomous Queer Spaces’ where he discusses his concerns about how his presentation would be received by the more “activist” elements of the audience” (p201). Throughout the book, is “activist” used to convey ‘experience-based writings’, perhaps not formalised as Participatory Action Research, or more infrastructure-based action, which includes activist organisations, regular workshops and conferences, publications and social gatherings? Or do you feel that there is a clear distinction between activists and academics, specifically with regard to the complex relationships between anarchism and the politics and practices of sexuality?

If so, how do you interpret what is meant across the book by “activists” in terms of engagement outside academia? As one of the editors, alongside Richard Cleminson, how do you perceive the book to approach any such division?

How does academic exploration/criticality – in the form of ‘queer theory’, anarchist studies – connect with contemporary sexual activism, politics and practices aiming at the realisation of sexual equality and justice?

Jamie Heckert: Thank you for starting off with such key questions! I’ve long been interested in these different identities: activist and academic. And they do fit together interestingly with queer theory which likes to shake up questions like “are you one of these or one of those?” So no, I don’t feel there is a clear distinction between activists and academics. These labels are not truths of selves anymore than ‘heterosexual’ or ‘homosexual’. Each of us has complex thoughts and feelings, desires and behaviours. We all have effects on the world around us, of which we are a part. So, I suspect when Gavin was writing about his concern, he was aware of the normativity that goes with these identities. Just as societies of control function, in part, by getting us to worry about whether we are ‘real men’ or ‘real women’, with a clear line in between, the same can go for academic and activist. Obviously, right, if you are a real activist, you can’t be an academic and vice versa. Or so they say. Sometimes.

When we are attached to either identity, or both, we might look to others for reassurance that we are contributing to our communities. And of course, that feedback can be invaluable. However, not being attached to either identity can lead to a more relaxed and selfless form of service. Not worry about being either a ‘good activist’ or ‘proper academic’ (or trying to do both at once) frees up a lot of energy to simply contribute to the wellbeing of others. And what we need for wellbeing may not be what we think. Contributions can be surprising, strange, queer – neither good nor bad. Therefore, even with what we call the state and capitalism, we all have effects on the world, we all have to worry whether we are ‘real men’ or ‘real women’, with a clear line in between, the same can go for academic and activist. Obviously, right, if you are a real activist, you can’t be an academic and vice versa. Or so they say. Sometimes.

Anarchism & Sexuality, ‘activist’ is used in the book in various ways to recognise those differences. And even some of us get into a university in one way or another and open the doors, it can be amazing to share that space with people who have diverse ways of engaging with social change, different ways of writing and speaking, and to listen to and learn from each other.

This book is very much a product of those queer, liminal spaces. It’s not either an academic book or an activist book. It’s both/and, and, and. ‘The writing comes from, and contributes to, thoughtful activism and engaged scholarship.’ It’s less about categories and more about connections. In the book, queer theory and anarchist studies, intertwined with ethnographic, biographic and literary storytelling, work to nurture a sense of imagination, to see not only what might be possible, sexually and socially, but also what already is. Too often, politics is focused on the future, and what is missing in the present. Perhaps awakening to the beauty and vitality of life, even with what we call the state and capitalism around, is even more relevant. This book does that in many ways: bringing attention to the potential playfulness of power (Lewis Call), the revolutionary nature of love (Laurence Davis), the diverse ecology of contemporary queer autonomous spaces (Gavin Brown, Marta Kolárová & Kristina Weaver), the erotic nature of nature (Helen Moore) and the wealth of historical and theoretical inspirations available to us (Jenny Alexander, Judith Butler, Lena Eckert, Judy Greenway & Stephen Shukaitis). Even the very painful and/or angry autobiographical pieces (Fergus Evans, Jamie Heckert & Tom Leonard) have their beauty.

TM/CA: Among the aims of the conference that gave rise to the book were “to bring the rich and diverse traditions of anarchist thought and practice into contact with contemporary questions about the politics and lived experience of sexuality.” Both in style and in content, the book is conceived as aiming to question, subvert and overhaul authoritarian divisions. Do you have any thoughts on whether more contemporary fiction may have made the book more involving for non-academics? For example, questions of imbalance of (male) power, sexuality and ethics are explored in much contemporary popular vampire fiction – with (predominantly female) humans occupying what is often an uncomfortably physically weaker and seduced/submissive/subsumed position. As Caitlin Brown writes: “The power dynamic of male vampi/ female human is in fact uniquely set up for the possibilities of subversion and exploration of the nature of power in any male/female relationship. It is a preconfigured metaphor for the dominance of men within society and that vampire capacities to this power imbalance available open to women.”

Contemporary vampire fiction has also covered subjects such as alternative approaches to sex and relationships. The fourth series of True Blood makes an attempt at covering the subject of polyamory – consensual, responsible non-monogamy – both between the vampires themselves and in a relationship between a human woman and her male vampire boyfriend(s). To what extent do you feel that the book, both in style and content, achieves its aims
to “question, subvert and overthrow authoritarian divisions... between seemingly mutually exclusive activism and scholarship; between forms of expression such as poetry and prose”?

How do the contributions begin to address the conundrums of academia and the limitations on academic publishing (beyond the recognised limitations of its current hardback format)?

M: You know, Jesse Cohn, the anarchist literary theorist, and I half talked about writing something together about the race, class, gender and sexual politics of True Blood. But I must admit, I lost interest early in the second series. It seemed to me to lose some of its emotional and political subtlety and rely more on the shock factor of gore and violence. So I’ve not caught up on the whole polyamourous plot. But I am curious. Maybe I’ll give it a look.

Clearly there is value in a popular cultural pedagogy that engages with material that people are already reading or watching and I’d be delighted to see folk developing that in relation to anarchism and sexuality. Would that have attracted more non-academics to the book? I don’t know. I do know that Lewis Call and Laurence Davis have written beautifully engaging essays inviting readers to engage with literature they may not already know. Of course, Ursula Le Guin is pretty famous (and contemporary as far as I’m concerned!), especially for her anarchist classic The Dispossessed and her genderqueer feminist one The Left Hand of Darkness – even when it’s published you’re sending it out into this void, hopeful it’s full of readers. And the way they read it is what makes it a story. They find it. If it’s not read, it doesn’t really exist. It’s wood pulp with black marks on it. The reader does work with the writer’s

As for academia, well. Does it have a situatedness? Sure, it has histories and associations with privilege. We might say it has places. But it doesn’t have a place – it’s an abstraction, a label. Let’s turn that question inside out and look at the tremendous range of situations, encounters, relationships, publications and spaces that may or may not be considered part of academia. This book works to point this out in various ways. For one, the superior status commonly granted to academic theory is questioned, queered, interrogated. It has places. But it doesn’t have a place – it’s an abstraction, a label. Let’s turn that question inside out and look at the tremendous range of situations, encounters, relationships, publications and spaces that may or may not be considered part of academia. This book works to point this out in various ways. For one, the superior status commonly granted to academic theory is questioned, queered, interrogated. It has places. But it doesn’t have a place – it’s an abstraction, a label. Let’s turn that question inside out and look at the tremendous range of situations, encounters, relationships, publications and spaces that may or may not be considered part of academia. This book works to point this out in various ways. For one, the superior status commonly granted to academic theory is questioned, queered, interrogated. It has places. But it doesn’t have a place – it’s an abstraction, a label. Let’s turn that question inside out and look at the tremendous range of situations, encounters, relationships, publications and spaces that may or may not be considered part of academia. This book works to point this out in various ways. For one, the superior status commonly granted to academic theory is questioned, queered, interrogated. It has places. But it doesn’t have a place – it’s an abstraction, a label. Let’s turn that question inside out and look at the tremendous range of situations, encounters, relationships, publications and spaces that may or may not be considered part of academia. This book works to point this out in various ways. For one, the superior status commonly granted to academic theory is questioned, queered, interrogated. It has places. But it doesn’t have a place – it’s an abstraction, a label. Let’s turn that question inside out and look at the tremendous range of situations, encounters, relationships, publications and spaces that may or may not be considered part of academia. This book works to point this out in various ways. For one, the superior status commonly granted to academic theory is questioned, queered, interrogated. It has places. But it doesn’t have a place – it’s an abstraction, a label. Let’s turn that question inside out and look at the
sure what the balance of power means. Does that relate to a notion of power as something you either have or don't have, like an object that can be weighed? I experience power as something you do, or perhaps on an even more subtle level, something that moves through us. So I’m not very interested in trying to measure power relationships but to nurture a capacity for sensitivity, for perceptiveness. What would it mean to acknowledge that non-human animals also have emotions and desires, and to honour those by listening?

For many, a perceptiveness and a sensitivity to the emotions of non-human animals is entirely incompatible with eating them. Emotionally and spiritually, that is my own way in life. It is not everyone’s way, nor would I want to impose it. I’ve noticed, in myself and others, that trying to have a certain diet for political reasons can be less about loving other beings and more about judging oneself as not good enough in one way or another. The diet becomes yet another method of control. I’m also inspired by a politics of becoming-indigenous, connecting with the land individually and through the processes of nurturing cultures that are internally and deeply intertwined with place. For most indigenous peoples, eating meat with respect for the spirit of the animal and with a profound awareness of the interdependence of life, is an integral part of the culture. For the UK, Simon Fairlie12 has made some pretty compelling production, such as Martin Crawford’s13 sweet by sailing ships? When we look at things like nut

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raised meat as part of an ecologically sustainable
diet.

While I keep a vegetarian diet myself, I do wonder about food and climate change. Where
does my vegetable fat and protein come from at the moment? How much energy is used to get

them to my plate? How much could we produce locally? What could we swap for olive oil traded

by sailing ships? When we look at things like nut

production, such as Martin Crawford’s sweet chestnut trials in Devon, the question of how to

relate with the squirrels who are generally much quicker at picking the nuts immediately comes up. When I was growing up in Iowa, we ate grey squirrels. Martin also kills and eats them both to sustain himself and in order to get accurate measurements of the productivity of the chestnut trees so that those of us who prefer to eat the nuts can benefit from the results. And I know I certainly prefer the respectful hunting of wild squirrels to the industrial production of meat.

Eating, of course, is not the only intimacy. We all share our lives with non-human animals, even if we don’t intentionally have any in our homes. They live all around us and have evolved with us. We cannot escape this intimacy, but we can cherish it.

TM/GA: The book mentions labels in a number of contexts. Jenny Alexander relates to how their use can lead to lack of discussion in some situations when discussing Alexander Berkman. She makes the point that Berkman is well known as an early 20th century political figure and an anarchist, who served 14 years in prison for the attempted assassination of businessman Henry Clay Frick as an ‘act of propaganda of the deed’. However, his writings on sexuality have been “largely unremarked in his re-circulations in anarchist and scholarship-of-anarchism contexts from the 1960s to now.” (p32) Jenny Alexander suggests that this lack of attention may be because the intimate relationships he described having in prison “do not fit the categories by which we in the twenty-first century are generally given to understand passion, sexual desire and intimacy.” (p32) Berkman describes his encounters with two other male inmates as passionate, but that there was not any physical relationship between Berkman and either of the other men.

In ‘Fantasies of an Anarchist Sex Educator’ you discuss your own concerns about how labels can be applied for positive reasons – identifying as an outsider can bring the benefit of support from other outsiders and provide a way of dealing with spending time in what might otherwise be a hostile environment. However, an effect of this can also be that those same labels may “inhibit transformations of consciousness or social relations” (p160) – labels limiting and constraining how people think and act.

Gavin Brown – ‘Amateurism and Anarchism in the Creation of Autonomous Queer Spaces’ – writes of his worries about being labeled overly intellectual by the activist members of the 2006 conference audience. He also says, “... and worried how the more ‘activist’ elements of the audience might react to my attempt to uncover impulses toward autonomy in a range of spaces beyond activist circuits.” (p201)

Sexual identity is a personal, public and social construct. Labels pathologize, prejudice and discriminate against... and labels are adopted, adjusted, and reconfigured in the social imaginary. Sexual practices have impacts on those who participate in them and on the societies in which they are done.

Why does the conference book seek to specifically focus on anarchism in terms of its relation to sexuality, when most notions of sexualities apparently sit productively within neo-liberalism?

In what (anarchist) political way can lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and transsexual perspectives, queer perspectives and approaches, be said to be distinctive?

JH: For starters, the relationship between a diversity of sexualities and neoliberalism isn’t so clear cut. Yeah, there are many ways in which the impulse toward LGBTQ liberation has been diverted by the attractions of privilege and profit. That’s understandable when we are seduced by the confusion of individualism. And it kind of works for some people. We suggest anarchism is a rich tradition of resources that can help everyone have the kind of freedom and well-being that capitalism promises that can never deliver, even to the so-called 1%.

While the labels of LGBTQ have been taken up by hierarchical institutions, the impulse for liberation has been left behind. Emma Goldman spoke to this many years ago: “Individuality is not to be confused with the various ideas and concepts of individualism; much less with that ‘rigged individualism’ which is only a masked attempt to repress and defeat the individual and his [sic] individuality. So-called individualism is the social and economic laissez faire: the exploitation of the masses by the classes by means of legal trickery, spiritual debasement and systematic indoctrination of the servile spirit, which process is known as ‘education’. That corrupt and perverse ‘individualism’ is the straight-jacket of individuality. It has converted life into a degrading race for externals, for possession, for social prestige and supremacy.”

If someone believes that externals are what makes for a good life, they may well throw themselves in with neo-liberalism. Anarchism potentially offers something deeper. (I say potentially because interpretations of anarchism sometimes get caught up in that great distortion of resentment.) Anarchism emphasizes freedom and equality, individuality and community. Nathan Jun has summarised this as vitality, which certainly describes the life of Emma Goldman. And while Sheila Rowbotham is correct to say that we can’t all be Emma Goldman, we can each be vital, vibrant, full of life in our own ways. And we can help each other to do this.

But not when we let labels get in the way. Folk like Jasbir Puar, Jin Hiarrworn, Sara Ahmed, Judith Butler and others have pointed out how the label Muslim is linked with the labels terrorist and homophobe, creating racial divisions within potential LGBTQ communities and reinforcing those global patterns of relationships who might call Empire. So, neo-liberalism isn’t working for Muslim LGBTQ folk. And when being gay is about wearing certain labels, it becomes a class issue. I’ll never forget performance artist The Divine David saying, “I can’t afford to be gay.”

So while some LGBT identities may reinforce state and capital, others are creating queer alternatives. Still others may be queering that supposedly clear border between the state and autonomy or ‘anarchy’ (as I’ll discuss in this chapter).

Is there something distinctive about LGBTQ contributions to anarchic politics? Probably yes, but not necessarily. Ben Shepard, for example, highlights the role of playfulness in queer anarchist politics. And while you don’t have to think of yourself as queer to be playful, there is something outside the normative about adults playing in streets or on the picketline. Like Emma Goldman, we want dancing in our revolutions. And like Ursula Le Guin, we want loving in our community. Nathan Jun has

interpretations of anarchism sometimes get offers something deeper. Anarchism potentially in with neo-liberalism. Anarchism, like any ism, has the potential to become rigid, dogmatic. To keep it vital, we can each bring our own experiences, our own truth, our own individuality. The labels might fall away.

TM/GA: Laurence Davis’s ‘Love and Revolution in Le Guin’s Four Ways to Forgiveness’ describes a slave character within Le Guin’s work. The character is shunned by her own people and sexually abused by her captors. Over time, she starts to identify strongly with these masters. She has no agency to avoid spending so much time in their company and so being intimate with
He goes on to describe a relationship between two characters from Octavia Butler's Patternist series. The relationship starts with Doro enforcing another character, Anyanwu, to submit to him. She does so in order to avoid being killed. Over time she learns to eroticise the power relations which exist between her and Doro. (p141)

The relationship between Doro and Anyanwu is described as an ethical relationship desired by both parties. However, there is little in the paper that explains how this can be so. Anyanwu's change in viewpoint could be seen as the psychological fallout from having to repeatedly submit to the will of another in order to remain alive. In this extreme imbalance of power, Anyanwu appears incapable of sustaining any individuality. Her own opposing wishes and agency is completely overtaken by the control which Doro exerts over them; a control of all of her actions and restriction of her choices.

Could you say more about this “exploration of the nature of power in any male/female relationship” as “a preconfigured metaphor for the dominance of men within society and the varied responses to this power imbalance available open to women”?17

I: Have you read Wild Seed? It’s incredible! And I think Lewis is spot on in his reading of what appears to be a paradox. How could Anyanwu love someone who could kill her? I’m not sure the story is about a power imbalance between women and men as that would suggest power is an object that some people have and others do not. And that reading is understandable. Doro can kill at will. Nothing can stop that. Perhaps, love. Lewis suggests a poststructuralist reading of power, not as a noun but a verb. It’s not something you have, it’s something you do. And there are different ways to do it. Doro’s practice of power is state power — power over life. And he is a beautifully tragic character, unable to find love because he desires control. Anyanwu is a shape-changer who learns she does not have to be afraid. She practices power from below. Yin, rather than yang. And in doing so, disarms Doro. What an anarchist!10

TM/GA: ‘Anarchism and Polyamory’18 — a collection of writings on the theory and practice of open relationships from an anarchist perspective — sees anarchism as “a sexual practice that challenges mainstream economic, social and political power relationships, and polyamory as a similar challenge to the mainstream view of romantic relationships.” In ‘Anarchism & Sexuality’, polyamory is discussed by Marta Kolářová in her contribution ‘Sexuality issues in the Czech anarchist movement’. Both works raise a question regarding pressure to conform to social norms from within anarchist movements.

Kolářová describes how polyamory is frowned upon amongst Czech anarchist movements. “Anarchists practising polyamory have been criticised by others. This form of social control in the movement has pushed multiple relationships to dissolve and shamed individuals into returning to monogamy.” (p118)

Social pressures around conforming to polyamory in UK anarchist movements are described in ‘Anarchism & Polyamory’ in Sour Mango Powder’s contribution ‘Let them eat cake: Anarchist polyamory theory and reality’, where the author describes pressure put on women to engage in sexual relationships with what he describes as “in-group dominant males.” (p27)

Discussion of the pressure to conform is continued in ‘The rise of polyamory: leftist men’s self-serving cure all for sexism’ where the author “Lost Clown” describes her break away from being a practicing polyamorist because the power imbalance existing between men and women in anarchist movements in the 1960s meant that for women polyamory resulted in them not being “seen as human, but as sexual chattel.” (p144)

Given these explications of different potential tensions between anarchism and polyamory, could you comment on whether you are aware of such issues existing in UK anarchist groups? — and if so, how they have been, or could be, addressed?

I: I helped organise a session called ‘Love, Sex & Anarchy’ at the Anarchist Bookfair in London last year. Three of us gave short talks on different aspects of the theme — including sexual violence, the meaning of queer, and polyamory — to introduce the session. Nearly all of the questions that followed focused on the latter. How do you cope with jealousy? How do you manage time? Why does it seem so hard to love? So yeah, clearly a monogamy and polyamory are key issues for folk in anarchist networks here in the UK.

My concerns is when polyamory becomes normative in anarchist circles. As if having multiple romantic, loving and/or sexual relationshipship is a way to establish one’s anarchist identity or credentials. ‘Hey, look at me. I’m liberated.’ This is the flipside to that 1960s (and ongoing) feminist critique you highlighted, where so-called sexual liberation becomes sexual harassment. ‘Hey, baby, what’s the matter? I thought you were liberated.’

Now, Laura Stacey-Portwood, writing about the US anarchist movement, has argued that sexual anarchonormativity can be ‘wielded strategically’: “There is power in identity… Where the disciplinary power of anarchonormativity is used to promote a queer critique of hegemonic sexuality, and thus makes life more livable for those whose desires are repressed by dominant institutions and discourses, it has positive political potential. Where such power is used to generate new forms of repression or to foreshadow relationships of solidarity or to distract from efforts to combat material oppressions, it is less strategically sound.”19

She and I are in disagreement here. I’m not convinced that a new normativity, a new conformity, is necessary to displace old ones. Personal preference is generally to focus on common ground in a way that allows appreciation for difference without it becoming either the truth of the self or the other. Monogamous or polyamorous, gay or straight, or living across or outside these categories, we all experience challenges in our intimate relationships. Things push our buttons. We get excited, or scared. We love.

I see the question of how to undermine, subvert or overflow heteronormativity as intertwined with the same questions about capitalism. In a recent critical engagement with the book Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism by Michael Schmidt and Lucien van der Walt, Gabriel Kuhn comments on the narrow, and controversial, definition of anarchism given by the authors. Rather than suggesting there is one true path to dismantling capitalism, an anarchonormativity which can be wielded strategically, Gabriel argues, “the answer cannot be to only organize with anarchists we have no
disagreements with. The challenge for anarchist organizing rather seems to develop forms of organization that can thus exercise to a destructive threat to a productive tool. This is tremendously difficult, but I think it is the only chance we have.

So for me, an anarchist politics promotes neither monogamy nor polyamory, but provides spaces and practices for us to notice how we might get along in our fears or desires leading us to pressure others. Anarchism, ultimately, is the faith that we can all get along with each other without anyone having to be in control. This requires a great capacity for sensitivity, empathy and communication regardless of whether or how we might label our relationships. These capacities we can nurture in ourselves and each other.

TM/GA: Christian Klessie in ‘Notions Of Love In Polyamory - Elements In A Discourse On Multiple Intimacy’ writes “Survey data collected on USA polyamory communities affirms the educated nature and advanced class-position and ethnically/racially exclusive nature of polyamory communities, an image which is reproduced in most publications on polyamory.”

Could you say something about the subject of inequality at work in different relationship practices – for instance, how socio-economic disparities impact the power dynamics of any possible relationship?

Do the criticisms of class relations, for instance, help us to address such power dynamics, as regards anarchist emphasises on communication, respecting recognising capacities we can nurture in ourselves and each other. Class or racism or capitalism that itself creates this apparent scarcity. So the only way to be okay in life is to compete with good reason – the drawing of lines between anarchy, I find most difficult to practise. For mutual aid to be truly mutual is to acknowledge vulnerability. Dammit, that’s just not how I was raised! And to ask, rather than demand, is to accept that the answer might be ‘no’. Hearing and reading feminist criticisms of macho behaviour in anarchist spaces, I know I’m not the only one facing these challenges.” (p157) You also talk about attending non-anarchist communication courses and deliberately taking care over who you interacted with during the stressful period of writing up your PhD.

‘Amateurism and Anarchism in the Creation of Autonomous Queer Spaces’, Gavin Brown discusses how autonomy is always in a process of being built since there is always a tension between autonomy and our dependence on hierarchy. (p202)

Kristina N. Weaver hints at the need for ongoing work in ‘On the Phenomenology of Fishbowls’ when she comments that she had expected the 2006 conference that gave rise to the book would be “at best the chance to slot a few more nodules into my network of activist and academic contacts; at worst an encounter with the kinds of social policing so common in queer spaces.” (p224) If we, collectively, have an idea about how relationships can be more ethical, about how fluid sexuality can be/should be, then pointing out the gap between theory and where we are now is a useful, if essential, transitional step. However, while societal constructs/constellations are always undergoing change, we struggle with this difficulty. How might positive societal change at the level of interpersonal relationships be proactively enacted starting from where we are now?

JH: Practice. Gently. I think Foucault, for example, was so eager to something writing about counter-practices and practices of freedom. Each of us can find practices that help us to live our lives well, to see that life is beautiful, even when it’s painful. We can share our insights freely without expecting overt disagreement, and take up the same practices. The first axiom of queer theory is “People are different from each other.” Let’s honour that and be gentle with ourselves and each other.

For me, I’ve learned so much about freedom from non-violent communication, permaculture, yoga and meditation. This could be dismissed as more ‘lifestyleism’ when clearly what we need is organisation. My question about that is, what enables organisation to work and what makes it fall apart? So many anarchist groups and other efforts at creating alternative systems fail apart because people have trouble working together. That’s okay. It’s not easy. It’s very easy to get attached to the idea of being right, to decide in advance how things should be or which ideas are better than others. It can be challenging to let go of that, to notice that beliefs and ideas can be helpful but don’t need to be given too much attention, to listen to something deeper. Subterfuge. Listening to the body and mind, and to land to others are at the root of anarchism (and sexuality), for me. Everything else follows from that.

Notes
2 http://www.tnatinews.com/trouble-goes-poly.html
7 http://www.insep.uk.edu/insf
13 http://www.sagelibrary.co.uk/trusted.html
14 http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/11/11 gay-club-scum
15 http://www.unep.org/page/demographics
16 http://www.insep.ugent.be/insep/
17 http://www.insep.uk.edu/insf
20 http://www.radicalbooks.co.uk/product/dysphoria-1-april-2010-anarchy-polyamory
21 Can also be read here: http://dysphoria.files.wordpress.com/2010/05/polyamory-6_web.pdf
22 http://www.radio4all.net/index.php/program/49503
24 http://www.anarchist-studies.org/node/529