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THE GRAY ZONES OF CREATIVITY & CAPITAL

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The Agency of Art in the Unconscious

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How can we explain the gray zone, the minimum distance between creativity and capitalist demand? How can we understand creative autonomy and resistance in the context of renewed expectations for art to have a direct social and political utility? What can psychoanalysis contribute to art criticism as it relates to the field of politicized visual art, now more commonly referred to as socially engaged art? What does the notion of the *avant-garde* mean for cultural production in a world of networked connectivity, participatory ideology and creative industry dispossession? According to Slavoj Žižek, when art production is increasingly subjected to commodification, and when commodities are increasingly aestheticized, artworks are no longer able to sustain the lack in the *big Other*, understood here as the agency of belief in art's social and cultural significance.⁴³ One symptom of this phenomenon is the view that art today has collapsed directly into political economy. In the words of the editors of *e-flux* journal, 'contemporary art *is* neoliberalism in its most purified form'.⁴⁴ The truth of this assertion is that artworks are particularly apt as signifiers of castration. As creativity marks ever more aspects of daily life, almost any kind of work not only can, but in a kind of frenetic hysteria, must be elevated to the place of Art.⁴⁵ While this may seem a standard postmodern argument for the breakdown of the distinction between high art and mass culture, postmodernism tends nevertheless to leave belief in the aesthetic intact, proliferating through the fields of discourse it comes into contact with. In the following, I argue against postmodern relativism, however, and wish to consider instead, to paraphrase Žižek in his thinking on Christianity, 'the perverse core' of avant-garde art production.

Art for Imbeciles

In an essay on what he calls 'enclave theory', John Roberts made the somewhat startling assertion that many of the most progressive art theories of recent years (those attributed to Nicolas Bourriaud, Gregory Sholette, Grant Kester, Stephen Wright, and even theorists like Jean-Luc Nancy, Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek, Bruno Bosteels, Felix Guattari, Toni Negri, and Michael Hardt) represent the 'invariant core of a communist programme' that is 'largely divorced from the past', in particular, from its Stalinist Communist party organizations, and is committed rather to 'culturally aestheticized [...] autonomous forms of productive, intellectual and creative community'.⁴⁶ What is surprising in this claim is the idea that these are invariant forms, and not significantly different. Roberts asks us to consider what all of these theorists' perspectives on radical culture have in common rather than what distinguishes them. This gesture might not be such a bad way to understand the so-called 'crisis' of art and art criticism in a world of cultural corporatization and neoliberal engineering of creative capital. Whatever contemporary art's failings in terms of pursuing revolutionary class struggle, it represents, according to Roberts, a kind of leftist bloc against what Sholette terms enterprise culture. Perhaps one of the most acerbic depictions of the art world as a rigged system of economic and social exploitation is Bruce Barber's 2008 drawing titled *Artworld Ponzi Scheme*, which shows a pyramid comprized of payers, prayers, and players, all of them trapped within a hierarchically inegalitarian system. The intrigue in this drawing, especially as it comes after the biggest financial debacle since the 1970s, is that the currency of art is premised on false claims, or even 'toxic assets'.

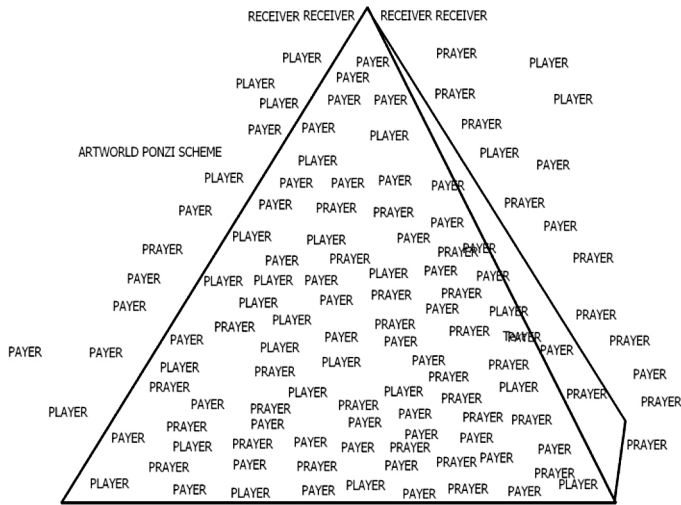


Fig. Bruce Barber, *Artworld Ponzi Scheme*, drawing, 2008. Courtesy of the artist.

The idea that art has no socially agreed upon justifications has been addressed by anthropologist David Graeber, who wonders why contemporary theorists attending an art symposium at the Tate Museum should explain the 2008 fiasco by taking recourse to avant-garde art created between 1916 and 1922.⁴⁷ His point is that we are potentially once again living a revolutionary moment, but that epistemological subversion through culture and post-structuralist theory seems to satisfy only liberal academics. The return to avant-gardism, he argues, effects a subtle form of conservatism—or, perhaps one should say conservative radicalism, if such were possible—a nostalgia for the days when it was possible to put on a tin-foil suit, shout nonsense verse, and watch staid bourgeois audiences turn into outraged lynch mobs.

These days are gone, he argues, replaced by the immaterial labor and service economy analysis of people like Maurizio Lazzarato and Toni Negri. The art of the rich, he goes on, has more to do with the analysis of products than of social processes, floating above the mire of ordinary existence. Art today appears to contemporary political philosophers to belong

to the immaterial domain, a fact that exacerbates its condition of crisis. The art world, for Graeber, is the apparatus of people who manage this crisis. Unable to define the category of art in any way that is adequate beyond its quality as something that only rich people and museums can afford to buy, the art world cannot establish its own legitimacy. Graeber then argues that the essence of politics in social life is to make people believe. Things become true if you can convince enough people to believe them. In order to play the game effectively, one must not oneself know the essence of things. He concludes from this that if the art world was to recognize itself as a form of politics, it would also need to 'recognize itself as something both magical, and a confidence game—a kind of scam'.⁴⁸ Insofar as the art world has become an appendage to financial capital, fictive capital explains fictive cultural value as well. All the players, he argues, cynics and idealists alike, draw on outmoded nineteenth-century notions of art, even those who create 'enclaves' where they can experiment with new forms of life.

Where Graeber gets at the issue is when he later argues that for all of the fictionalization that takes place across the social field, the magically created value of art is no less real. This assertion confirms the Lacanian emphasis on the reality of illusion, which contrasts to transgressions that merely try to escape the Real. In this regard, Žižek agrees with Badiou, who argues that art is a medium of truth. This also relates to the Marxist understanding of commodity fetishism, which states that even if capitalists understand that workers produce the value of their merchandize, they nevertheless continue to believe in the miracle of exchange. The famous Žižekian example, of course, is the anecdote about Niels Bohr, who when asked if he believed in the good luck derived from a horse shoe, replied he did not, but that apparently it works even if one does not believe in it. Rather than payer, player, and prayer, then, categories that Barber leaves undefined, I would like to propose the set of three subject positions that Žižek outlines at the start of *Less Than Nothing*: the idiot, the moron, and the imbecile.⁴⁹ All three positions are premized on the Lacanian theory of the *big Other*,

which stands for the heterogeneous social rules that together comprise what Lacan defines as the social symbolic. As an impersonal social agency, the *big Other* stands in for those rules that shape the unconscious of the social subject.

The first of the three is the idiot, defined by Žižek as someone who is 'too intelligent to process implicit social rules'.⁵⁰ The idiot imagines himself beyond the influence of the *big Other* and knows the rules (of art) all too well to be able to process them in a way beyond his hyper-intellectuality. As the first of two examples of idiots within contemporary art theory, both colleagues of mine, we have Sholette and his concept of 'dark matter'. According to Sholette, dark matter describes the 'shadowy social productivity' that haunts the high art world. The great many excluded practices and failed artists who keep the world of galleries, collections, and magazines going, Sholette argues, are today threatening this pyramidal system as their dark energy becomes increasingly visible. The book *Dark Matter* thus presents itself as a 'lumpenography' of this invisible mass of makeshift, amateur, informal, unofficial, autonomous, activist, non-institutional, and self-organized practices.⁵¹ Sholette argues that art critics, art historians, arts administrators, collectors and dealers typically have little interest in creative dark matter. There is no question that the art world is made up not only of what is known about art, but involves a complex division of labor and specialized tasks that work to keep a multi-billion-dollar industry operating for the benefit of a minority of high profile artists. This system keeps the vast majority of professionally trained artists in a state of subservience and underdevelopment. The first and most general question that is asked by Sholette is what would happen if this superfluous majority went on permanent strike and gave up on the art system's means of legitimation. Contemporary high art is thoroughly connected, he says, to Art Inc. and does not hide its profit motivations. It is only those dark practices at the margins that still hold on to this former (avant-garde) task of art to challenge commercial goals. While Sholette does appreciate the labor theory of value, he suspends the

understanding that most forms of culture are non-productive and rather dependent in complex ways on profits collected elsewhere in the proletarianized global marketplace. Bourdieu's sociology of art, in contrast, benefited from its use of the concept of social totality. The absence of the use of the concept of totality in Sholette's book prevents him from offering a class analysis of culture that would go beyond redistributive justice. Also, dark matter seems to share very little common ground with the avant-garde tradition of revolutionary art, whose distinct purpose is to represent the social function of art in class society. As Žižek has argued, an ideological identification exerts the greatest pressure on us when we fool ourselves into believing we are not fully identical to it. The epistemological crisis in the arts that is mentioned in Sholette's introduction to *Dark Matter* should therefore not be thought to directly reflect the crisis in global capital, though the connections between these spheres do indeed need to be drawn.

A second idiot in this set is Brian Holmes and his theory of 'liar's poker'. Holmes is one of the sharpest analysts of artistic resistance within societies of control and is also, like so many contemporary theorists, skeptical of avant-garde modes of contestation. Within the new flexible regimes of accumulation and casual freelance culture, the demands for autonomy, he argues, are diverted into new modes of control.⁵² The premise of liar's poker, as he puts it, is that 'when people talk about politics in an artistic frame, they're lying'.⁵³ Cultural institutions, he argues, constantly demand that artists 'picture politics', playing the art game and representing those who are excluded to those who are safely nestled inside, especially transnational corporations, who then support the realm of art as a sphere that is separate from abstract financial decisions. Anti-art artists who work directly in the public sphere or on the terrain of everyday life, or within new technological and scientific landscapes, only pretend to leave behind the artistic frame. In reality they collude with curators and directors to show images of political reality. Because the latter are averse to such realism, the artist has to bluff their way through. Holmes assumes, however, that an artist

involved with a social movement is an artist that has successfully challenged the guilt relations of the art system. Because of this he is deeply suspicious of the function of belief, which, he argues, is a powerful or interesting fetish, an illusion that gets players caught in the game rather than directly confronting power, as in the case of artworks that deepen the links between art activism and social movements. What distinguishes Holmes from Žižek, however, is that he does not ask us to believe even more in art and to directly assume the lack in the *big Other*—a small distinction, but a crucial one if we are to see art institutions as anything more than duplicitous. Like Sholette, Holmes is concerned that institutions seek cultural capital among ‘the more radical fractions of the artistic field’.⁵⁴ The artist has to produce the ace of politics, he argues, while proving all the while that the ace is merely a joker, thereby undermining the reality of the illusion. Like so many leftists, Holmes assumes that the big Other is or can be occupied.

The second subject position outlined by Žižek is the moron, defined by ‘the stupidity of those who fully identify with common sense, who fully stand for the big Other of appearances’.⁵⁵ Two notable cultural theorists who might in some ways fill this description are Grant Kester and Claire Bishop. Kester is a seasoned art critic with a long track record of insightful writing on the shift from public art and identity politics in the 1980s and 90s to the new phenomenon of community art in the 90s and 2000s. The type of site-specific collaborative work that he champions unfolds, he says, through an extended interaction with local communities. Like many proponents of the new tendencies, he has worked to anchor his theory of ‘dialogical aesthetics’ in both social and political history as well as the philosophy of aesthetics. While erudite and knowledgeable, Kester’s polemic, as presented in his book *The One and the Many*, is intensely prescriptive.⁵⁶ For the sake of artist groups like Park Fiction, Ala Plastica, and Dialogue, all avant-garde tactics (reduced to formalist modernism) are proscribed, including the work of leading cultural theorists like Barthes, Derrida, de Certeau, Lyotard, Kristeva, Blanchot, Badiou,

Deleuze and Guattari, Agamben, Nancy, Levinas, and Rancière—anyone associated with the post-May 68 generation of postmodern pessimism and who programmatically guard against premature totalizations.

We are witnessing today a certain disenchantment with the existing parameters of avant-garde art and an attempt to rearticulate the specificity of the aesthetic in relationship to both the viewer and to other cultural and political practices.⁵⁷

The leitmotif of avant-garde and theoretical post-structuralism, he argues, is the impossibility of social cohesion.⁵⁸ In contrast, Kester is interested in the global phenomenon and success of collaborative modes of production, as found for instance in the work of Border Arts Workshop, Group Material, REPOhistory, Gran Fury, Platform, WochenKlausur, and Grupo Etcetera, where emphasis is placed on multiple authorship, participatory relation to audience, and process-based activist intervention.⁵⁹

Despite his critique of what he calls the 'intellectual baroque', Kester's dialogical aesthetics retains many of the typical leitmotifs of postmodernism, especially the distinctions that are made between pluralism and an older avant-garde notion of culture that retained some links to the class politics of socialism. With globalization, I would argue, social forms have channeled culture in such a way as to give it a privileged role in economic development. According to George Yúdice, culture is today treated as an expedient, construed as a resource for sociopolitical ameliorism and job creation, a process that coincides with capitalist ideology and biopolitical regulation.⁶⁰

The role of culture, Yúdice argues, 'has expanded in an unprecedented way into the political and economic at the same time that conventional notions of culture have been emptied out'.⁶¹ Unlike Sholette and Holmes, Kester tends to underplay this problem of institutional mediation, leaving actually existing institutions all the more operative in the administration of socially engaged art.

Another critic we could add to the group of morons is Claire Bishop. Bishop is well-known for her 2004 *October* essay in which she criticized Bourriaud's relational aesthetics for its

rhetoric of democracy and emancipation.⁶² The open works advocated by contemporary critics like Bourriaud foreground interaction rather than contemplation and engagement rather than passivity and disengagement, assuming that these former modalities are inherently political and emancipatory. She argues that Bourriaud wants to equate aesthetic judgement with political judgement. 'But how', she asks, 'do we measure or compare these relationships?'.⁶³ Dialogue, she says, is assumed in advance to be democratic, excluding other modalities, like autonomy, antagonism, oppositionality, destabilization, and artworks that recognize the limits of 'society's ability to fully constitute itself'.⁶⁴ She defines the autonomy of the artwork in terms of the social antagonism that is mirrored in the tension between art and society. Bishop insists that we should be better able to judge art itself and not merely better politics, and therefore acknowledge the limits of what art can do. One of the problems here is the return to the function of criticism and the assumption that art, by itself, can be the object of objective assessment. In this gesture Bishop obviates the notion of antagonism that she otherwise recognizes. While she exposes what is repressed in the idea of social harmony, she ignores how art itself acts as this agent of repression. In this regard, *Artificial Hells*, her latest treatment of participatory art, mostly expands the number of examples rather than improve the initial theory.⁶⁵ She worries about the instrumentalization of participatory art, something Kester is less troubled by, but perhaps misses the point that this apprehension is misplaced insofar as it concerns itself with art *per se* and art criticism as a means of institutional legitimation (perhaps to satisfy critics like Graeber). She very correctly recognizes that the new European cultural policies enacted under *New Labour* in the U.K. are a form of social engineering but fails to produce a theory that addresses how and why art eludes such institutionalization.

I would argue, in contrast, that it is quite possible for an artwork to be valid as an autonomous and critical work and at the same time to defy institutional capture, and this, without denying the incompleteness of the social. For me to say this, I should think

that I belong to the third group in Žižek's series: the imbeciles. An imbecile is someone whose mental retardation causes him to be aware of the need for a *big Other*, but who does not rely on it. The imbecile is somewhere between the idiot and the moron, who recognizes the function of language but who distrusts it.⁶⁶ The *big Other* exists, but is inconsistent. The question for aesthetics, then, is to consider in theoretical and not only sociological terms the ways in which the art world guarantees the consistency of the rules of art, allowing for dark matter to be distinguished from consecrated artists. What unites the idiot, the moron and the imbecile is the inconsistency of their belief in the *big Other* of art and, as I argue further on, this inconsistency represents the 'perverse core' of aesthetics as such.

The Reality of the Fiction

What is the significance of critical art in the context of contemporary cultural theory, within the space of culture in general, and as it is being reengineered to conform ever more tightly with the needs of accumulation—leading many to presume that avant-garde artworks and films have been made obsolete by new social relations and by the new regimes of production? Here I would like to pursue the path of the imbecile with reference to Žižek's chapter on Christianity in the opening 'Drink Before' section of *Less Than Nothing*. The trick is to not reduce theory to empiricism and to focus on the negative energy of art rather than the positivity of the social causes that artists are being increasingly expected to deal with directly. While I do not agree with those who argue that art and reparative social work or political propaganda are inherently separate activities, I do think that socially engaged art benefits from some aesthetic theorizing that goes beyond German idealism.

Žižek's attention to Hegel in *Less Than Nothing* is largely due to

the overlap with Lacan and Žižek's view that among the German idealists, Hegel alone is able to sustain the idea of the lack in the *big Other* and the dialectical reversal that occurs when an epistemological obstacle is transposed directly into the Thing itself—here the work of art.⁶⁷ 'Our inability to know the thing indicates a crack in the thing itself, so that our very failure to reach the full truth is the indicator of truth.'⁶⁸ No wonder then that dark matter, to take up the metaphor, is obviated by the obsession with the celebrity star system: Picasso, Van Gogh, Ai Weiwei, Gerhard Richter, Jeff Koons, what have you. One problem in the structure of ideology, Žižek explains, is that there is no public, no symbolic agency that is there to register or witness the disasters of capitalism. What is missing is the *big Other*, the space of symbolic inscription and ideological suture. In contrast to Claire Bishop's quest to determine institutional criteria for judging participatory art, Žižek writes:

Schoenberg still hoped that somewhere there would be at least one listener who would truly understand his atonal music. It was only his greatest pupil, Anton Webern, who accepted the fact that there is no listener, no big Other to receive the work and properly recognize its value.⁶⁹

There are no guarantees for art and this becomes one of the principal axioms of the notion of creativity. Those who worry that all creativity is today harnessed by capital miss an important point: the form of illusory appearance remains on the surface of things and is thus closer to the Real than historical reality itself. The concern of political moralists and reformists is often to escape from the Real of illusion through some kind of transgression that seeks to show the true, so-called 'phenomenal' reality, usually by pointing to some token of reality: bodily affect, group interaction, S&P indicators, the haptic qualities of new media, etc. The idea that art criticism should be more global in scope, representing a greater diversity of experiences, is one way among many to avoid the Real of illusion.⁷⁰ What then can artworks tell us about the changing parameters of what Peter Bürger defined as the 'institution art'?⁷¹

The unique quality of art is that more than most other things in our social universe it can express the reality of illusion through any random object. This illusory quality is a secret, in Marx the commodity fetish, or in Lacan, the ineffable *objet a* that allows anything to be elevated to the concept of Art and allows it to be installed in the symbolic order. The artist comes closest to this understanding when he or she intervenes through the neutral position of the analyst.⁷² The artist's neutrality cannot be socially localized since the art thing has no ontological reality but is a virtual point. This is what Lacan refers to in the notion of *le père ou le pire*—the oedipal father or the worse, the choice of art as the worse option, which more effectively undermines the entire symbolic field. Avant-garde works represent a negative force against the organic unity of community and as such are vital to emancipatory politics.⁷³ Strict egalitarian emancipation cancels rather than preserves the organic unity of the hierarchical social order. Radical art operates as the obscene disavowed underside of the art world ponzi scheme. How so?

Almost every artwork preserves some aspect of the idea of art as a reserve, or background against which we can measure deviations. Art's non-art status is therefore inscribed into the idea of Art—something that Duchamp was perhaps the first artist to expound. Art is deeply atheistic, to put things in terms of belief, and perversion is at the core of the aesthetic. The obsession with the ineffable *big Other* is sublated into acts of creation, something that Lacan defines as drive. Creativity can therefore be defined as the eruption of a new form that reorganizes the social field, imposing itself as a new necessity through an act of ungrounded subjective decision, abandoned by Art and with no guarantee of aesthetic value or art world consecration.⁷⁴ The inscrutability of the aesthetic *big Other*, even as blue chip investment, is the certitude of creativity, the condition of its ecstatic production. Since art is dead and the author is dead and since therefore the function of the critic is nullified, art making and art judgments are sacrificed to a pure Otherness of subjective destitution.

Art making is a scandal that undermines art from within. Such

work has a tragic self-effacing quality that socially engaged art sometimes refuses in its resentment and narcissistic hatred of the 'no' of Art. It denounces art in favor of ethics but it does so through the disavowal of the love of art. It proffers the socially networked artist as the better of the avant-garde artist but it is the latter who properly betrays the extortion of creativity. The revolutionary artist acts unconditionally and therefore comes closest to art's expression of freedom and emancipation, insisting, much like Antigone, on symbolic demand. The creative artist is consequently excluded from the community of humans. Holmes' notion of 'liar's poker' can be explained as the insistence on aesthetic sublimation rather than the insistence on the refusal of co-optation; it implies an awareness of the monstrosity of the game since the game is not only fixed in the symbolic order, but more radically, since through his or her act the artist believes in the game more than s/he is aware. The artist acts as though he or she is not aware of capitalist recuperation, observing the appearances, the virtuality of the illusion of the real. In the case of Barber's pyramid, the 'prayer' in the set represents a transitive function; he or she does not have to believe since belief is presupposed by the artwork as virtual entity. No wonder then that so many artists today are attempting to go beyond the making of objects, taking social interaction itself as the direct instantiation of art. This becomes possible due to the perverse core of art and is an indication of the transitivity of belief. The paradox, however, is that if we take away whatever stands in for belief, we lose the reality of the illusion and so any claim to emancipation through the community of believers is equally annulled. The function of the art world, therefore—critics, museums, magazines, even this essay—is to maintain appearances, in particular, against any agency or Master who would pretend to know everything. The master artist is the person who possesses an almost God-like ability to both make art and to simultaneously prohibit the making of art. This prohibition takes the form in capitalist society of symbolic castration through surplus value. A provisional definition of the avant-garde artist can therefore be the condition

of the acceptance of the inexistence of aesthetic criteria. There are no guarantees for the social importance of artworks, only the passage from creativity to consequences. For things to happen, creation must be a condition of the truth of illusion.

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