



**Art, continued from page 2**

the level of circulation. In other words, art acquires the commodity form in circulation rather than production. This is why we have so many parties, so many iterations of the art-world soireé: The determination of the economic value of art has to happen wholly within the sphere of circulation, not the sphere of production. A piece's value is therefore open to all kinds of mysterious and pleasurable forms of social determination involving the production of different forms of illusion regarding symbolic and personal value. So, in the completely orthodox view, the artist in capitalist society is contradictorily located, because they are producing in a non-capitalist manner a product which, if they want to give it any social actuality, must enter into the universal medium of exchange. Thus there is a constraint, an overdetermination, of their production; the artist is compelled to participate in the art speculation game that predetermines the reception of their work insofar as it is going to enter circulation. There are different ways of coming to terms with and resolving this contradiction. One of them is to pretend that the tension does not exist, and ask your gallerist never to use the word "sold."

**ZG:** Nobody asks. We just don't do it. It is an unwritten rule.

**PO:** You only need to look into their eyes to see that their soul is asking you. They cry out for you not to remind them.

**ZG:** The art world does not have a soul.

**PO:** The traditional resolution of the contradiction is that of the neo-avant garde, by which you speculatively defer the reception of your work. That is, the artist aims to produce a work in the present that is un-receivable and so resists universal circulation, thus retaining independence. But you have to put a kind of secret into the work, a time capsule. You project that your work will become historically intelligible down the line, at which point it can attain social actuality and enter into art history. The problem for most contemporary artists is that they are too impatient to do that anymore, so they have problems about the historical seriousness of their own work. They want to be historically serious and "contemporary," in the sense of having immediate impact—and that is very difficult.

**Responses**

**RD:** I was impressed with what you said, Zhoë, about how an art gallery works in relation to the market, on the one hand, and artists on the other. Perhaps you agree with what I said about art expressing the human aspiration for freedom and fulfillment. Of course, artists have to make a living, to feed themselves and their family, and thus they come up against market forces. I respect that you are trying to soften the blow, so to speak. I admire what you are trying to do, but I was also depressed by what you said about the role of rich collectors' children, who grow up to become curators and try to manipulate what the artists are doing.

**ZG:** I should clarify that I was talking about two separate things. There are curators who sometimes try to force their concept for a show onto what artists are doing, but that is different from this new wave of curators, who are financially very well endowed.

**RD:** Yes, I find both very disturbing. You suggested that art acquires more power if it is sold to a Russian billionaire as opposed to a Marxist. I thought that was an interesting comment.

In response to Peter, you started off by mentioning a Tom Stoppard play about three speakers who are all morally ridiculous, including particularly the leftist. When you did get around to the commodity form, your comments were abstract, as was the stuff you said about societies where the commodity does not play a part. What do you have in mind? The central jungles of New Guinea or South America? You might find people there who know nothing about the commodity form. Perhaps they are producing better art than the work being supported by people like Cornelia Parker. But other than that, I am not sure what you are talking about. You said that there are forms of non-wage labor involved in the process of making of art, which I find hard to believe. No one is going to do something for nothing these days. Then you contradicted yourself by saying that you cannot escape the commodity form—sooner or later, art will enter into the market. In short, your remarks were vague, far too technical, and have nothing to do with the real world.

**PO:** It is amazing that you say that. You are supposed to be the Marxist!

**RD:** I am. You just don't know what Marxism is.

**ZG:** For the record, this is why I do not identify as a Marxist. It's a lot of loud, white men. Anyway, I liked the comparison of the art world to the story of the emperor's new clothes. When you look at the art market today, it is a lot like the financial realm. You have art "bubbles" that surround emerging artists. A bubble forms when various collectors buy up an artist's work and flood the market. That bubble pops once the artist, who is often very young, gets signed to a huge gallery and is unable to meet the levels of fame expected of him or her. It is like the tale of the emperor's new clothes. A lot of talks, products, ideas about what the commodity is, and so on, but there is no political gravitas.

I disagree with your skepticism of technology, Rex. A lot of our artists are using technology in ways that provide an alternative space for freedom, especially for Othered bodies—this is, for queer bodies and bodies of color, who are unable to fit into white, heteronormative space. I was also confused by the notion that artists are not engaging with capitalism or the commodity. What about artists who speak to the reality of capitalism? Artists whose work is directly related to the way in which they are consumed as a capitalist subject, such as female artists using their body online?

If there are artists in the audience, I would like you to speak up, because so far we have been talking about art, but we are not really talking about art. We are dancing around this idea of the "commodity," which serves as a placeholder for a product. We should be talking more intimately about art itself because, otherwise, what are we talking about?

**PO:** Rex, I did not say anything about societies without commodities. I said something about commodities in societies without capitalism, which is a different thing. Also, I did not say artists don't engage with the commodity. My position is that artists are in a structurally contradictory position. They relate to the commodity form by limiting the freedom of their own art in order to make it distributable, but they have to do that in such a way that the limitation itself appears as a form of their freedom. That reduces it to one sentence, which may be unintelligible to some of the audience, but it is very simple. Rex claims not to understand anything. It is an old rhetorical form. My position is that we have a contradictory structure in which the power and critical status of art depends upon how one negotiates that contradiction. But negotiation requires that one does recognize a contradiction. If you think you can do art in a Romantic, individualistic, bourgeois, free way, then you haven't got much chance. On the other hand, if you think there is only "commercial art," if you like, then you haven't got much chance either.

**ZG:** I agree with that.

**Q&A**

*I can't believe there is a "Marxist theory of art." It is a daft idea to me, like a Marxist theory of geology or astronomy. I also don't really see the massive constraint that the art market is supposedly placing on artists. The fine art market has been in a pretty massive boom since the mid-1980s, despite a hiccup in 2008. All luxury production has been off the charts for the last 20 years or so, in fact. Capitalism, far from being the enemy of art, seems to have promoted a tremendous upsurge in creativity. Can you imagine all of us peasants, full of "artistic meaning" as we toll away? That would be grim. Whereas now I can go everywhere and see David Shrigley—I mean, I'm tripping over the damn stuff. There is too much of it! It's boom time for artists. Capitalism has done quite good by them lately.*

**ZG:** You are talking about the blue chip gallery world. David Shrigley, Anish Kapoor—all of them are killing it. They are making cash. But even the big-name institutions like the Tate and the British Art Council, which had been getting all this money from the Tory government, are now facing drastically reduced funding. Even these big institutions have to go out like the rest of the galleries and find patrons, or at least rich people who may not give a shit about art but who "love Picasso." There is a major disconnect between the emerging galleries, such as Arcadia Missa, and these blue chip spaces. We need to do things differently. There's no money. It is a tiny section of people, maybe one percent, who collect any art. Reduce that by 80 or even 95 percent, and those are the people who collect contemporary art.

*That's true. But the people in that one percent are very, very rich.*

**ZG:** Still, it is a very small pool. Where does an emerging gallery go for support when blue chip galleries poach your artists as soon they have one show at the Tate? Yes, in the blue chip world, things are looking great. But there is no money in the emerging art market.

*In the 1960s you had things like "happenings" and performance art emerge as forms intended to resist commodification, but now videos and other records of these events are widely available. New technologies might initially be used for liberatory practices, but it feels like we are running out of things and places that resist being commodified. Is that good/bad—or does it not really matter?*

**ZG:** I have no aversion to commodification. What matters is if the work is important, if it is good. As long as the artist is feeling comfortable with the work that they are making, and they believe in what they are making—

**PO:** Sorry, I'm just so touched by the fact that you don't want artists to feel uncomfortable.

**ZG:** Oh my god!

**PO:** They seem to be such sensitive beasts.

**ZG:** They are!

**PO:** Do you think these artists might be too comfortable, perhaps?

**ZG:** They are not comfortable! Being an artist is a hard job. This is going to sound ridiculous, because of course being in the army is a hard job, being a doctor is a hard job, and so on. But being an artist is psychologically difficult, really. You are alone all day and you have to dare to think.

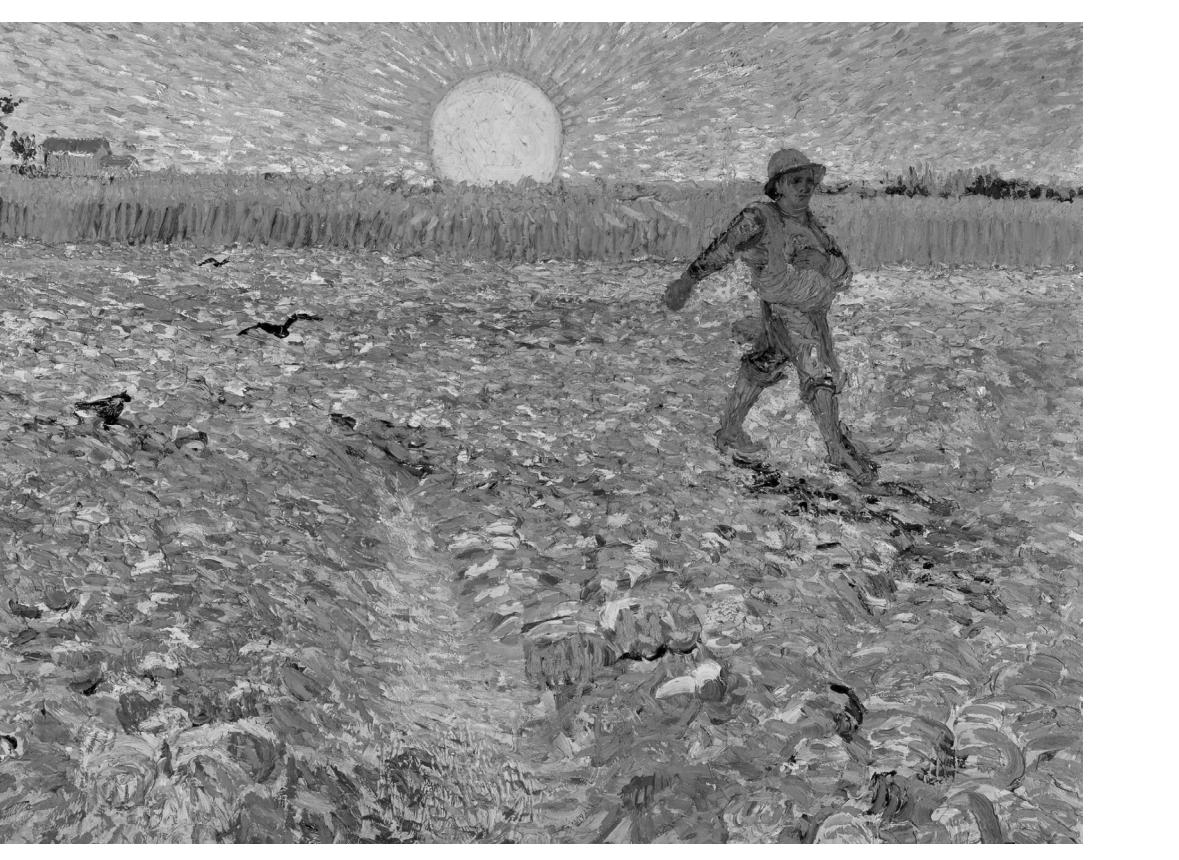
**PO:** Of course, it is a hard job. I'm just confused about why comfort is such a priority.

**ZG:** As a gallerist, you want your artists to be within a space where they feel complete creative freedom. You can't do that living in the real world.

**PO:** I don't think artists need complete creative freedom. Complete creative freedom is complete indeterminacy. They would have no idea what to do.

*Can't you see the contradiction in talking about art in such a patrician way, as though you are allowing your artists this freedom? It seems very patronizing.*

**ZG:** Yes, I can see how that comes off as patronizing. "Comfortable" is the wrong word, but as a gallerist we provide a platform for artists. We support our artists—whatever that entails.



Van Gogh's *The Sower*, 1888.

**Art, continued from page 3**

Stalinism betrayed the revolution. It has nothing to do with 1935. The artist, in his or her own way, is aspiring to be free, by playing around with form and content. If they are not doing that, they are not artists!

**Can you name an exemplary critical artwork? What does it mean for an artwork to be "critical" today, if that is even possible? From what Rex said, it sounds as though the last moment of critical art ended with Malevich or Rodchenko, whereas Zhoë obviously believes that art can still have some kind of power.**

**ZG:** The first thing that springs to mind is "Double Income No Kids: D.I.N.K.," a piece by Hannah Quintan and Rosie Hastings, a young artist duo I represent. It has computer-generated imaging on a large light box, depicting a dystopian vision of Fire Island, which is just off of New York City, after some sort of natural disaster. Hannah and Rosie's practice in general speaks to the diminution of queer spaces due to things like gentrification. Fire Island is likewise being destroyed gradually because of hurricanes. It is a perfect analogy for how queer spaces are being removed from the world.

**PO:** The role of the state in art production is contradictory. It is a form of cultural management, obviously, though the parameters of state funding have always been like that.

**ZG:** Generally, if a government body provides funding, it is because they want art for the people. The intention is that the artwork will be seen widely, outside of the art world.

**Do you think there is a problem with socially engaged art, then? Is it actually able to address the social problems it raises?**

**ZG:** I do not want to be dismissive, but I was just at Frieze last week, where people are taking selfies in front of art all over the place. This struck me as a representation of where we are in terms of community funded projects. Europe has *Kunsthallen*, which get private and public funding. They also speak to more than just the art community. A wider range of social strata visit *Kunsthallen* compared to museums or galleries here in the UK.

**RD:** Something that is eternal, in terms of the human aspiration for freedom in relation to art, is that beauty is form, and ugliness is the absence of form. If the artist is working within this framework, even only instinctively so, then they are more likely not to produce a work of art. As for recent examples, I'd offer two. First, there is a Land Art piece composed of a building without a roof. You can go inside it and look at what is passing over your head. At night, you can watch the stars. Second, if you want to look at works of art using technology, I would suggest all of the movies made by Ken Loach, who is on the radio at the moment, talking about his work, by the way. Loach uses the craft of filmmaking, if you like, in order to create films that have a political message, but they are art because, through them, he articulates how ordinary people want to be free and need to resist the system in order to achieve freedom.

**RD:** Since the financial crash of 2008, state funding in general has been drastically cut. Although limited in many ways, this funding did give artists some guaranteed income and therefore more freedom to create. I do think art must come from leisure time rather than from work, although in a communist society work will become more aesthetic, while life becomes an end in itself, but we are not there yet, clearly. However, state funding is also a form of control. Artists would not be given support for projects that are highly critical of the state or of the system more generally.

**This is a question in relation to art as anti-capitalist praxis, as opposed to talking about it in terms of commodification. What might this skepticism toward form express? Do the postmodernists capture something about the state of human spirit in contemporary society?**

**PO:** There is only form. I mean, form hasn't been about beauty for a long time, right?

**What does that express? What does it mean that form is about ugliness?**

**PO:** Ugliness is one thing it is about, but not the only thing. Form is a really big question. You might say form is the question, because form is in some sense the criterion in an object's art status. But art no longer follows traditional aesthetic theories about form.

**RD:** That is a good summary of Trotsky's position, which holds that the division of labor denies the proletariat the freedom and the opportunity to create art. The creation of a new art in a socialist society would require the abolition of the division of labor and the education of everyone as a whole individual. The examples of "proletarian art" around the time *Literature and Revolution* was written took an instrumental approach to art. Art is not instrumental; Trotsky criticized the "proletarian art" of the time precisely because it was trying to serve a directly instrumental function.

**PO:** As there is no cultural unity to collective labor, I am not sure how the concept of proletarian culture has any applicability in contemporary capitalism. Take Marx's later concept of the collective worker that produces more or less all of the commodities consumed in everyday life. The manufacturing and assembly of those commodities takes place across five continents. The people that produce the elements of those commodities inhabit completely different cultural and political communities. They do not communicate at the level of the unity of their labor. The development of the international division of labor fractures anything that could be called proletarian culture. There is no cultural unity to workers as such today. They are global.

**RD:** The traditional claim would be that art is a manifestation of freedom that is born out of unfreedom.

**How would the panelists account for this difficulty with the concept of freedom today? Does it have something to do with what Rex brought up at the beginning, a failure of leftist politics? If so, when did that failure occur?**

**RD:** The rise of Stalinism

**PO:** I'll go with 1935.

**RD:** Rubbish. People are asking if I have a definition of freedom or if there is such a thing as a definition of freedom. Peter, you seem to be saying that we are going to live in the permanent darkness of alienation, that there is no aspiration for disalienation, or freedom, or whatever you want to call it. When human beings reach that stage they are simply going to become automatons. If you want a definition of freedom, here it is: "The freedom of each is the condition for the freedom of all." That is what we should strive for, but it is impossible under capitalism.

**PO:** I am, indeed. It is not the case that commodification has rendered the existence of the avant-garde problematic, but rather the non-existence of political movements aimed at historical change on a large scale. It is a political problem, not strictly an art problem.

**RD:** The problem is not the commodification of art. The

real question is whether artists wish to struggle against the commodification of art. We are talking here about the main direction of art. Postmodernism, because it has abandoned the idea of aesthetic labor, in order to create an art object that has form as well as content, leaves us with a situation in which people have abdicated their position as artists. As I put it earlier, "the emperor has no clothes." For me, if art is simply a matter of producing something popular, sensationalistic, controversial—something that grabs media attention and sells—then that signals the end of art.

**The role of the state in relation to art production came up earlier. In the 1990s socially engaged art was often sponsored by state funding. In fact, it was difficult to get funding from a national arts council body unless you were doing something "socially engaged." I wanted to hear the panelists reflect on how the role of the state in art production has changed over time in capitalism. Another point in history we might consider is the New Deal in the U.S., when many artists who would become famous, such as Willem de Kooning, started off being employed by the state, in jobs that offered enough free time to make art.**

**PO:** The role of the state in art production is contradictory. It is a form of cultural management, obviously, though the parameters of state funding have always been like that.

**ZG:** Generally, if a government body provides funding, it is because they want art for the people. The intention is that the artwork will be seen widely, outside of the art world.

**Do you think there is a problem with socially engaged art, then? Is it actually able to address the social problems it raises?**

**ZG:** I do not want to be dismissive, but I was just at Frieze last week, where people are taking selfies in front of art all over the place. This struck me as a representation of where we are in terms of community funded projects. Europe has *Kunsthallen*, which get private and public funding. They also speak to more than just the art community. A wider range of social strata visit *Kunsthallen* compared to museums or galleries here in the UK.

**RD:** Something that is eternal, in terms of the human aspiration for freedom in relation to art, is that beauty is form, and ugliness is the absence of form. If the artist is working within this framework, even only instinctively so, then they are more likely not to produce a work of art. As for recent examples, I'd offer two. First, there is a Land Art piece composed of a building without a roof. You can go inside it and look at what is passing over your head. At night, you can watch the stars. Second, if you want to look at works of art using technology, I would suggest all of the movies made by Ken Loach, who is on the radio at the moment, talking about his work, by the way. Loach uses the craft of filmmaking, if you like, in order to create films that have a political message, but they are art because, through them, he articulates how ordinary people want to be free and need to resist the system in order to achieve freedom.

**RD:** Since the financial crash of 2008, state funding in general has been drastically cut. Although limited in many ways, this funding did give artists some guaranteed income and therefore more freedom to create. I do think art must come from leisure time rather than from work, although in a communist society work will become more aesthetic. While life becomes an end in itself, but we are not there yet, clearly. However, state funding is also a form of control. Artists would not be given support for projects that are highly critical of the state or of the system more generally.

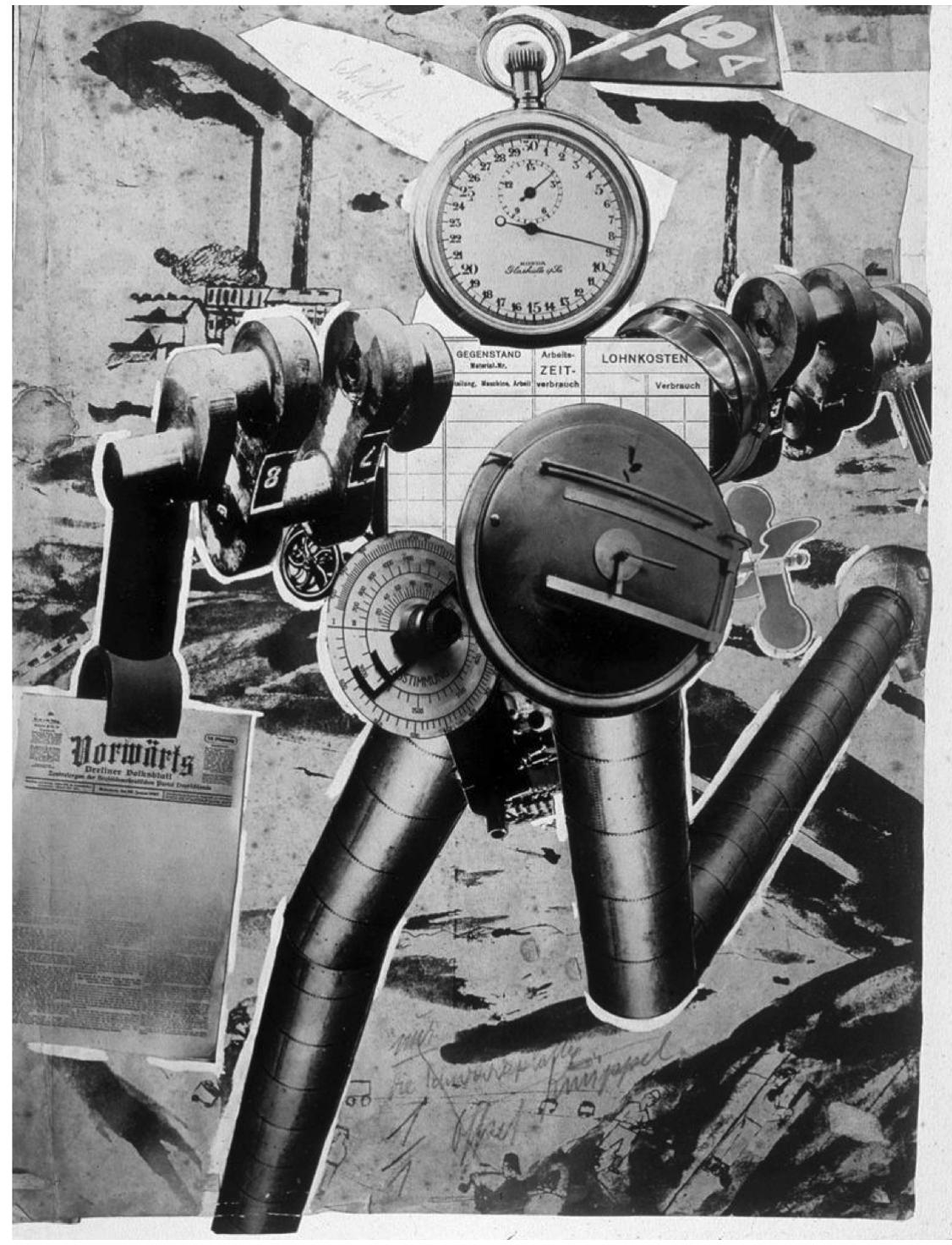
**ZG:** As a consequence of Gingrich's "Contract," the Right cannot help but portray the Left as people who "neither want nor expect our government to serve the people." The Left would not, and should not, accept this depiction. But if this is how the Right understands the Left, then it is really Trump, of all people, who challenged liberal elitism and Democratic authoritarianism. Communication between parties is breaking down—if it has not already collapsed. Political polarization is deeper than ever. So, if it is true that writers in Jacobin and Donald Trump's so-called "deplorables" agree that the foregoing government has failed our country, this agreement can only consist in a shared conclusion about neoliberalism's failure and widely different premises used to reach that "consensus."

As far as agreements go, then, the far Left, naturally, shares dismay and rejection with the foregoing administration, and shares the Right's ambition to topple it. Given the disparity in reasons on which the agreement is reached, there is great misgiving regarding Trump's ongoing purge of neoliberals Washington. And the alternative given to us by Jacobin, a demand to rage against the capitalist class, is both expected and, perhaps, cathartic. But it will not, clearly, be given support for projects that are highly critical of the state or of the system more generally.

**RD:** As for agreements go, then, the far Left, naturally,

# Art and the commodity form

Rex Dunn, Zhoë Granger, and Peter Osborne



John Heartfield's *Rationalization is on the March!*, photomontage for *Der Knüppel*, no. 2, February 1927.

On October 11, 2016, Platypus hosted a forum entitled "Art and the Commodity Form" at Goldsmiths, University of London. The panel brought together Rex Dunn, independent Marxist and writer; Zhoë Granger, a director of the gallery, project space, and art publisher, Arcadia Missa; and Peter Osborne, editor of the journal Radical Philosophy and professor of Modern European Philosophy at Kingston University. Sophia Freeman of Platypus moderated the panel. What follows is an edited transcript of the event.

#### Panel description

If it is true that the "commodity-structure" (Lukács) is the defining feature of modern capitalism down through the present, then it stands to reason that it has no less impacted the way art is produced, consumed, circulated, and exchanged. This shift in art's character happened both objectively (e.g., as in an article produced for exchange on the market), and subjectively (i.e., as a kind of experience and form of expression for the social and individual body). However, art's relationship to its status as a commodity is ambivalent: Art has been freed from past forms of domination, but its freedom is constrained when subject to the dynamics of capital. Art's status as a commodity is both cure and poison, and has become a social problem for its practice. Reflecting on this problem, artists, philosophers, curators, and critics have taken various approaches in seeking to overcome it.

How has art under a capitalist society changed from its pre-capitalist practices? What is the commodity form, and what is art's relationship to its logic? Must art seek emancipation from the commodity form, or is it at home in it? In what sense does art take part in the Left and emancipatory politics, if at all? By asking these questions, this panel seeks to reinvestigate art's relationship to the commodity form, and make intelligible how this problematic relationship still sticks with us today.

#### Opening Remarks

**Rex Dunn:** Thank you for inviting me to speak this evening. I expect I am going to catalyze an awful lot of arguments, so please be prepared for that. As a classical Marxist myself, I would say that we are an endangered species; we need to be protected and then reintroduced into the social environment, before it is too late!

I would like to begin by distinguishing between a Marxist theory of the aesthetic, which is both possible and necessary, and a prescriptive "Marxist aesthetic," which limits the freedom of art. The latter is something I want nothing to do with.

I have divided my talk into eight points based on my reading of Marx and critical theorists in the Marxist tradition: (1) The bourgeois epoch introduced the making and appreciation of impractical art objects, which can be valued for themselves, as well as perform a social function. Aesthetic structure is indispensable to the work of art. This is achieved through the unity of form and content. The artist experiments with form in order to express the content of the artwork. This is the basis of aesthetic labor, or the free play of humankind's physical and psychic faculties. Such free play expresses the human desire for freedom and fulfillment. In so doing the artist is able to establish his or her individuality, or style, and point of view. Aesthetic labor is therefore the antithesis of wage labor, which is unfree. Art is subjective from the standpoint of the

feelings and thoughts of the creator. In that sense it is different from philosophy and science, which are based on the objectivity of concepts. The artist should be seen as an "unproductive worker"; if the artist works primarily for the purpose of the accumulation of capital, then he is merely a productive laborer. Given his or her desire for freedom, the artist is compelled to protest against prosaic reality because the latter is exploitative, alienating, and oppressive. Hence we can speak of art's relative autonomy. Although it cannot escape commodification entirely, it does come close to disalienation. At least it is free, or should be free, from the coercion of either the church or the state and, hopefully, of market forces. Therefore, the artist may be seen as the harbinger of *homo aestheticus*, and I consider this to be a positive achievement of the bourgeois epoch.

(2) The telos, or the final form, of art can only be achieved in a future communist society. The latter will abolish the bourgeois division of labor, or the separation of intellectual from practical labor, which is necessary for the accumulation of capital. It will also introduce more leisure time, leading to the all-sided development of the whole individual. Only communism can establish the material basis for the development of human power, which is its own end, the true realm of freedom. Thus we will see the emergence of *homo aestheticus* on a broader and higher basis, whereby people will be able to engage fully in artistic activities.

(3) Under capitalism there has always been a tension between art, which gratifies the senses, and the commodity form. But the longer this tension continues, the greater the threat to the survival of art's autonomy, for four main reasons: a) The bourgeois division of labor continues unabated despite the internet. b) More than ever the artist needs the imprimatur of the art institution, which is linked to the market. Therefore, art remains a separate realm produced by a remote spectrum of "experts." c) The artist isolates the producer from the consumer, especially the worker. d) Increasingly, art is reduced to a mere commodity, degrading it. The tendency is for price to become the determining factor, not the quality of the artwork. The inverting power of money can make black white, reason nonsense, and so on.

(4) Today, nonsense is all-pervasive, due to false consciousness at both the individual and institutional level. Compare the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with the instrumental present and, for example, the role of writing workshops right now. The heyday of art's autonomy and the form of aesthetic modernism are long gone, as is the artist who produced impractical art objects based on an inner need to create, not just to live off the fat of the land. Today, alienation goes far beyond the drudgery of wage labor, which reduces skilled and unskilled worker alike to a mere machine. Thanks to the rise of the new mass media, the commodity form provides the basis for the society of the spectacle, that is, the unreal reality of advertising, news or propaganda, and the entertainment industry.

(5) How did we get where we are today? The answer is not to be found in technological progress, which in itself is not a determining factor. To find the answer we need to look at history. Arguably, the October Revolution of 1917 occurred at the right time but in the wrong place. As long as the revolution remained isolated and backward, the victory of the counter-revolution was inevitable. This took the form of the Stalinist bureaucracy, which based itself on the nostrum of

"socialism in one country"; therefore, the international revolution had to be suppressed. The Russian avant-garde were reduced to the servants of the regime, which went on to murder millions in the name of socialism. The Stalinist interregnum might be over but it has left a poisonous legacy for human consciousness. The social revolution is deemed to be utopian, or believed to lead only to barbarism. Therefore capitalism is seen as the lesser evil.

(6) Stalinism also opened the door to post-war mass consumerism, the mass media, the culture industry, and the society of the spectacle, where the individual becomes increasingly fragmented and atomized. Hence we see the rise of identity politics, against the tidal force of mass culture, but the need for affirmation expressed thereby is largely negative and protective. It leads to institutionalized censorship and even self-censorship. This is reinforced by the internet and smartphones. These tools do not play a determining role on their own, but they certainly have an effect in the hands of large private corporations, such as Google and Facebook. A lot of contemporary art is only a reflection of the conditions and aims of the existing system.

(7) In the 1960s and 1970s the vacuum that was left by the failure of the social revolution was filled by postmodernism. This meant the corruption of Marxism by late critical theory, structuralism, post-structuralism, and the postmodern theory of art. I would describe this as the logics of disintegration: the overthrow of the "grand approach" to knowledge along with the notion of stable forms of reality. Relativism and pluralism rule in harmony with the market. We have the engulfing of quality by quantity in the aesthetic as well as the socio-economic realm. This amounts to post-modernism's reconciliation with late capitalism, rather than Hegel's earlier reconciliation, which he then went on to describe as the essential foundation of progress. Thus the commodity-form, commodity fetishism, permeates the whole of society, not just during the hours of work, but also during our leisure time.

(8) Postmodern art privileges conception over aesthetic labor, at the expense of form. Therefore at best such artworks are only able to critique reality in an ambiguous or ironic way. I would describe this as low-grade art, or not art at all. But this is not a new epoch for art, as postmodernists claim. They have forgotten about Dadaism, which in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century had posed itself as a provocation against the bourgeoisie, imperialist war, and the art market, which ultimately appropriates everything, including avant-garde art.

Today all this is confusing to the masses, which makes them cynical about art in general, as are the postmodernists themselves. Art objects acquire an inflated monetary value via the art auction, for which the art institution provides an intellectual fig leaf. The story of the emperor with no clothes springs to mind. In a recent interview, the British artist Cornelia Parker reassured viewers that the sale of British art has replaced the manufacturing industry. Note the mindset, even if she was having a bit of a laugh. We see a growing fusion between the artwork and the commodity form, which amounts to the degradation of art in the epoch of capitalist decay. To paraphrase Marx, without the overthrow of capitalism, the decadence of modern art becomes inevitable. Thus, from the standpoint of classical Marxism, art and the commodity form have always been irreconcilable, but never more so than right now—The freedom of art for the revolution, the revolution for the freedom of art.

**Zhoë Granger:** I will be using language that is a lot less academic. I want to speak primarily about what I know as a gallerist and a millennial, focusing on artists. First, I want to note that there are no visual artists represented on the panel, which doesn't seem right to me, given the topic we are discussing. Art doesn't exist without artists.

The gallery I work with, Arcadia Missa, sits between a project space and a commercial space. We do big art fairs like Frieze and Art Basel, yet we have the freedom to show projects from our community that are exciting to us. If we want to work with a young artist to provide a residency, we can do that. Because we are in Peckham, most of our collectors never come to our gallery. We have openings with hundreds of artists and others in our wider community, but collectors usually do not come. We deal with collectors at art fairs.

We have this freedom because we offer studios within our gallery space. We have a large railway arch in Arcadia Missa and about a third of that is taken up by artist studios which, for the record, are really well priced within Peckham. They have stayed the same post-gentrification. We have tried to position ourselves this way as it keeps us from being completely bound by sales targets, meaning our artists are not jeopardizing their integrity or politics, which is fundamental to our position as a gallery space. Austerity Britain is not the flush, cocaine-laden, sexy art world of the 1980s or the Young British Artists' 1990s.

To make a gallery work, the amount of labor is intense. Painting walls, wrapping up, press admin—all the usual gallery stuff—is time consuming and we often do not pay ourselves for it. Because we are also a commercial space, affective labor takes up most of our time. That means attending dinners, openings, and events every night of the week. Or, you know, partying with a collector until 4 o'clock in the morning. We're placed in this kind of insane position, where we are operating as a commercial space in the way that we are going to events and communicating with people who are going to purchase our artists' work, but we are also running a program which we strongly believe in and working with artists whom we really treasure.

We don't like to confront the artwork as a commodity. Even at commercial spaces like Sadie Coles, they will not directly address the fact that money is exchanged for art. You avoid words like "sold" or "bought" in favor of words like "gotten." It is something of a game where no one really talks about the exchange, which is kind of insane, but also possibly a good thing. Good or bad, when dealing with artists, I do not want them to be implicated, to make them feel like their work is being sold, because it sounds so crass. It is important that our artists feel comfortable. It's a form of trust and mutual respect. We do not want them to feel like we are commodifying them as human beings.

In the last week I was at Frieze, an opportune moment to think about this, which is basically an art

supermarket. You have collectors walking around saying, "buy, buy, buy." So it is a good place to think about art as a commodity. The idea and the role of a patron has changed. You have these sort of—I want to use the phrase "collectors' children," even if it is not quite right. But there is a group of people whose parents were influential in the art world that have decided they are going to become curators. They use their own or their parents' money to purchase a lot of art, usually from on-trend artists. They will curate a show and then sell the artwork to their friends or their parents' friends. This makes it very difficult for emerging artists. It also means that few patrons provide money directly to artists, which would be the best way to help them realize their work, their art. I hate the term "work" when talking about art, actually. It sounds kind of ridiculous.

Another issue right now is that there's a certain style of curation that ignores the voice of an artist. I do not mean to be bashing curators, as they are an important part of the art world. But some curators have a pre-established concept of a show. These curators will manipulate the artist into accepting their vision when it should be about the artists and their art, not about the curator.

Finally, I have something to say about the panel question, "In what sense does art take part in the left and emancipatory politics, if at all?" The other panelists may disagree with me here, but politics is exclusionary. If an artwork is sold to a Marxist professor or a Russian billionaire, the impact is the same. If anything, the impact is probably more powerful in the Russian billionaire's home.

**Peter Osborne:** I feel like I am in a Tom Stoppard play from the 1970s, which always have the same kind of structure. They always involve three or four social archetypes: an academic, some kind of leftist, and a socialite. These plays all discuss some morally purposeful topic, very seriously, and are all comically ridiculous. And yet, the moral seriousness in some way redeems the characters from their absurd comic fate. So, in the spirit of a Tom Stoppard play from the 1970s, I will adopt the necessary serious mode, in order to be comic in the correct way. That means that my language is going to be even more academic.

I want to respond to some of the questions in the panel description, which, when I read it through, I wrote "no" in the margin, just as some Tom Stoppard professor character might. The panel description begins, "if it is true that the commodity structure is the defining feature of modern capitalism"—and I think that the "if" is supposed to be rhetorical, because we are supposed to accept that the commodity structure is the defining feature of modern capitalism. But, from a strictly theoretical point of view, Marxists really ought not to believe that. It is possibly the defining heresy of Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* that he did believe that, and it is possible that the whole of Western culturalist Marxism and its cultural-theoretical legacy, in non-Marxist forms, follows from this general principle.

To suggest that the commodity structure is not the defining feature of modern capitalism is not to say that it is not the all-pervasive feature of modern capitalism. All you need with respect to this topic is the first sentence of *Capital*, Volume 1, the one where Marx talks about the fact that the world presents itself, in capitalism, as a vast accumulation of commodities. In other words, in what I deem to be the eminently orthodox Marxist position, the commodity is, if you like, the "phenomenological form" of capitalism. The commodity is the way that you encounter capitalism every day, because it is commodity exchange that connects everybody up. Commodity exchange becomes the universal mediator of social relations, but it does not thereby define modern capitalism. It does not define capitalism at all because there are non-capitalist societies that nonetheless produce commodities.

Capitalism is not tied to the commodity form in general, because there are non-capitalist forms of commodity exchange. So, in terms of what we think of as art—in the modern, Western, post-18<sup>th</sup> century sense of being autonomous, and what some people confuse with being aesthetic—the fact that the commodity is the main social form within which such works are exchanged is not, if you like, "fatal" to them in some capitalistic sense. It does not tie them to capitalism in the way that exhibiting the "defining feature" of capitalism would tie them to capitalism.

According to the orthodox position—so perhaps I am going to out-orthodox Rex here—is not commodification, but rather the commodification of labor power. It is the commodification of one specific commodity, labor power, that leads to capitalism. Not commodification in general, but the commodification of labor power in particular. The commodification of labor power leads to capitalism because it leads to surplus, and surplus leads to accumulation, and capitalism is a society based on the accumulation of capital. Art has an intrinsic relation to something called "the defining feature of modern capitalism" only insofar as it first relates to wage labor or, second, is a distinct type of capital—which, of course, it is. Art is a special kind of speculative financial capital. You can track it on all the financial sites, like any other form of capital.

My point is that, if we are talking about art under capitalism, then the relation of art to the "commodity form" is not the primary issue. It is not the commodity form that is "fatal" to art. What's fatal is the commodification of labor. The thing that saves art within capitalism from the fate of other forms of labor is that art in an authorial sense is not generally, or at least not exclusively, produced by wage labor. There are lots of wage laborers employed by famous artists producing their art. But they do not count as the producers of the work. Their wage labor is just like everybody else's. So the Romantic salvation, if you like, of art within capitalism has always been that art is a form of petty commodity production in which artists get to overdetermine the ends of their practices to a degree that other forms of labor in capitalism do not. Of course, artists do not get to determine the ends of their practices absolutely, if they want their work to have any social actuality. And generally artists do want their work to have social actuality, even if it is important to them to pretend that they do not.

If artists want their work to have any social actuality, it must enter the nexus of exchange. But it enters at