

Journal #102 - Nika Dubrovsky and David Graeber
- Another Art World, Part I: Art Communism and Artificial Scarcity
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A selection of Venice Biennale Press and VIP cards. The image was originally captioned "The Biennale Card is a new initiative for art lovers" here. Copyright: La Biennale di Venezia
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We would like to offer some initial thoughts on exactly how the art world can operate simultaneously as a dream of liberation, and a structure of exclusion; how its guiding principle is both that everyone should really be an artist, and that this is absolutely and irrevocably not the case. The art world is still founded on Romantic principles; these have never gone away; but the Romantic legacy contains two notions, one, a kind of democratic notion of genius as an essential aspect of any human being, even if it can only be realized in some collective way, and another, that those things that really matter are always the product of some individual heroic genius. The art world, essentially, dangles the ghost of one so as to ultimately, aggressively, insist on the other.

In May 2019, just married a week before, we arrived at the Venice Biennale. It wasn't exactly a honeymoon; or if it was, it was more a working honeymoon: we had the idea to make the Biennale the basis of our first joint writing project, though we weren't sure precisely what that project was going to be.

We spent much of our first day in the Arsenale—a nearly thousand-year-old structure reputed to have once held one of the world's first arms factories—trying to get past the guards. Apparently there were levels and degrees of press access, and it was necessary to negotiate our way through a complex system of authorization numbers, bar codes, and color-coded passes, encountering a variety of security personnel with different badges and uniforms and means of communication manning physical and conceptual barriers. Scores of well-dressed participants stood dutifully in line, argued in a dozen languages, shuffled from room to room, recuperated in specially provided cafe bookshops while strategizing over dinner invitations or borrowed ID cards, or assessing the relative importance of the parties they'd be attending later in the day. There was an extraordinary lack of humor about the whole business. People were flustered, stoic, self-righteous, intent; almost no one, in this cathedral of irony, seemed bemused.

The seriousness! It seemed important to establish that something of great consequence was happening here. It was not clear why. Just as there was no obvious reason to proliferate multiple degrees of advanced access in the first place, there was no reason for everyone else to feel so invested in the consequences. It only really made sense if exclusion was itself one of the main objects being produced: it was not just that everyone was playing a game whose rules were shifting and opaque, it seemed important that all players, even the haughtiest oligarch or most consummate broker, stood at least occasionally in danger of being foiled and humiliated. Or at the very least flustered and annoyed.

The art world, for all the importance of its museums, institutes, foundations, university departments, and the like, is still organized primarily around the art market. The art market in turn is driven by finance capital. Being the world's least regulated market among shady businesses, tax shelters, scams, money laundering, etc., the art world might be said to represent a kind of experimental ground for the hammering-out of a certain ideal of freedom appropriate to the current rule of finance capital.

A case can certainly be made that contemporary art is in effect an extension of global finance

(which is itself, of course, closely tied to empire). Artsy neighborhoods tend to cluster around the financial districts of major cities. Artistic investment follows the same logic as financial speculation. Still—if contemporary art were simply an extension of finance capital, works designed to look good in banks, or in bankers’ homes, why should we even care? It’s not as if cultural critics spend a lot of time debating the latest design trends in luxury yachts. Why should changing trends in decorative objects that the owners of such yachts like to place in their sitting rooms be considered relevant, in any way, to the lives or aspirations of bus drivers, maids, bauxite miners, telemarketers, or pretty much anyone outside the charmed circle of the “art world” itself?

There are two traditional ways to answer to this question and they pull in opposite directions.

1. Contemporary art defines the very pinnacle of a much larger structure of aesthetic value, which ultimately encompasses all forms of meaning-making and cultural expression, and therefore plays a key role in reproducing the larger structure of social relations which ensure drivers, maids, miners, and telemarketers will continue to be told their lives and concerns are uninteresting and unimportant, and relegate the aesthetic forms and cultural expressions that speak to their hearts to second- or third-tier status.

2. While co-opted by the rich, as well as public and private managers and bureaucrats, contemporary art still embodies, or is even the primary embodiment, of alternative conceptions of value that have the potential to explode that larger structure of social relations, and that are either unavailable, or not nearly so readily available, anywhere else.

Obviously both of these things can and probably are true at the same time. It might even be said that the revolutionary potential of art is a large part of what makes it so effective as a principle of control. Even children of ragpickers, sweatshop labourers, and refugees, after all, are mostly sent to school, where they are exposed to the works of Da Vinci and Picasso, play with paints, learn that art and culture are the highest achievements of humanity and perhaps the most obvious justification for humanity’s continued existence on the planet (despite all the damage we inflict); they are taught to aspire to lead lives where their children can live in comfort so that their children's children can pursue forms of creative expression. And for the most part, since that is the game everyone is playing, they do aspire to such things. The world’s cities are full of young people who do see a life of expression as the ultimate form of freedom, and even those who dream of becoming soap opera stars or hip-hop video producers recognize that as things are currently organized, the “art world” is the crowning height of that larger domain of “arts,” and as such, its regulatory principle, that which holds the elaborate ranks and hierarchies of genres and forms of art—so strangely reminiscent of earlier ranks and hierarchies of angels—in their proper place. This remains true even for those who have nothing but bemused contempt for the very idea of contemporary art, or are entirely unaware of it, insofar as they exist within a world where those who produce the forms of artist expression they do appreciate, or their children, insofar as they aspire to move up in the world, will necessarily have to exist in a world where contemporary art is seen as the purest expression of human creativity; and creativity, the ultimate value.

The easiest way to measure the stubborn centrality of such structures, perhaps, is to consider how difficult it is to get rid of them. Attempts are always being made. There always seems to be someone in the art world trying to create participatory programs, explode the boundaries between high and low genres, include members of marginalized groups as producers or audiences or even patrons. Sometimes, they draw a lot of attention. Always in the end they fade away and die, leaving things more or less exactly as they were before. In the 1970s and ’80s, for example, there was a concerted effort in America to challenge the border between high art and popular music, even to the point where a few of the artists (Brian Eno, Talking Heads, Laurie Anderson, Jeffrey Lohn) actually did create work that hit the charts, and played to sold-out theaters full of young people who had

never heard of Hugo Ball or Robert Raucshenberg. Critics declared that the very idea of high and low genres was quickly dissolving away. But it wasn't true. In a few years, it was all just another forgotten musical trend, an odd sidebar in the history of rock 'n' roll.

Hardly surprising perhaps, since the art market, and the music industry, always operated on entirely different economic principles: the one mainly financed by rich collectors and governments, the other by mass marketing to the general public. Still, if there was a real challenge to the logic of exclusion anywhere in the arts, during the twentieth century, it was precisely in the domain of music, where a defiant tradition from folk to rock and punk and hip-hop actually came closest to realizing the old avant-garde dream that everyone could be an artist—though one can, of course, debate precisely how close this really came. At the very least, it established the idea that creativity is a product of small collectives as easily as individual auteurs. All this happened, significantly, at a certain distance from actual self-proclaimed artistic avant-gardes; and it is telling that the brief mutual flirtation with the art world in the eighties was a prelude to a backlash that left music far more corporatized, individualized, and with far fewer spaces for experiment than it had since at least the 1950s.

Any market of course must necessarily operate on a principle of scarcity. In a way, the art market and the music industry face similar problems: materials are mostly cheap and talent is widespread; therefore, for profits to be made, scarcity has to be produced. In the art world, this is of course what the critical apparatus is largely about: the production of scarcity; which is, in turn, why even the most sincerely radical anti-capitalist critics, curators, and gallerists will tend to draw the line at the possibility that everyone really could be an artist, even in the most diffuse possible sense. The art world remains overwhelmingly a world of heroic individuals, even when it claims to echo the logic of movements and collectives—even when the ostensible aim of those collectives is to annihilate the distinction between art and life. Even the Dadaists and Surrealists are remembered today as a handful of romantic geniuses, whatever they might have claimed to be about.

It is also noteworthy that the only time a significant number of people believed that structures of exclusion really were dissolving, that a society where everyone could become an artist was actually conceivable, occurred in the midst of social revolutions when it was genuinely believed that capitalism was in its death spirals, and markets themselves were about to become a thing of the past. Many of these trends, unsurprisingly, emerge directly from Russia, where the period from the revolution of 1905 to the avant-garde heyday of the 1920s saw an almost brutal efflorescence of new ideas of what artistic communism might be like.

Merchandise featuring Malevich

Merchandise featuring Malevich's artwork.

Art Communism

In a Commune everyone is a creator. Every Man should be an artist, everything can become fine art.
—Osip Brik

Consider the case of Kazimir Malevich, who arrived in Moscow in 1904 from the hinterland of Ukraine to become one of the most influential theorists of twentieth-century art. In his 1920 essay "The Question of Imitative Art" he asserts: "We are moving towards a world where everyone will create ... We must set creativity's path in such a way that all the masses will take part in the development of every creative thought that appears, without turning it into mechanized production or cliché."

The new, revolutionary art, he insists, was to be based on creativity as "the human essence ..." "as the aim of life, and as the perfection of oneself."¹

For Malevich—and he was hardly alone—artists were not only the prophets of this new world, but they were to become the foundation of it, its model. As we all know, such ideas were largely stifled with the suppression of the avant-garde under Stalin. Though as Tzvetan Todorov and Boris Groys have both recently pointed out, what happened is a little more complicated. The main reason avant-garde painters, designers, and sculptors had to be killed or brought under heel was because the political avant-garde, ultimately adopted a version of the most radically exclusionary form of that exact same tradition, where Stalin himself—much like Mussolini and Hitler—became the individual heroic genius reshaping life itself according to a single aesthetic vision.

Todorov argues that in the twentieth century at least, this is what always happens in revolutionary moments. Artists start to demand not just new rights to create and distribute their artworks; above all they demand to preside over a transformation of social reality and the ways culture reproduces itself. But in the end they invariably fail. To achieve their dreams they are obliged to rely on politicians, who have no intention of sharing power with them; therefore, after a short creative surge, almost always coinciding with an opening of political horizons (Malevich himself published his first essays in a journal called, simply, *Anarchy*), a deep and harsh reaction ensues, and the politicians, inspired to carve out their own aesthetic visions on the flesh and sinews of humanity, end up doing absolutely terrible things.

Conservatives have always insisted that this will inevitably happen—in fact, this is the essential definition of what conservatism is, the assertion that applying anyone's aesthetic vision to the public sphere must always end in disaster—and in this sense, at least, conservative impulses reign. We are taught to consider figures like Malevich terrifying in their naïveté. But what did his vision of true communism actually consist of? It's not just one of a future society in which everyone would be free from the struggle for survival (this, just about everyone was anticipating at the time). It was also a vision where the “pursuit of happiness” would mean that everyone was able to pursue some sort of artistic or scientific project. This of course was founded on the assumption that people had both the capacity and the inclination, even if it just meant puttering about trying to create a perpetual motion device or perfecting a stand-up comedy routine. Malevich's vision implied that curiosity and a desire for self-expression are essential components of whatever it is we are defining as “humanity”—or perhaps all life (some Russian avant-gardists were also interested in the liberation of cows)—and that therefore freedom is more a matter of removing impediments than fundamentally reshaping human nature. This is why Malevich could argue that the basis of a new artistic world would have to be economic—though like so many other revolutionaries, he was also interested in the creation of a new universal aesthetic language. Malevich himself came from the national outskirts; he was a Pole who grew up in a Ukrainian village, and who never mastered literary Russian or received a “proper” art education. His squares and triangles were a way of transcending all that. In a similar way, the Russian avant-garde project was also educational, designed not to create the “new man” (as the Stalinists later put it) but to include those previously most excluded—the poor and provincials, the inhabitants of the national suburbs—to give them the minimal tools they would need to join in the collective project of creating a new society, in which they would, in turn, create absolutely anything they liked.

Did Malevich's vision definitively fail? It might seem that things could not have possibly gone more wrong. Millions died in the civil war and under Stalin, and even afterwards, the dream of communism was indefinitely postponed. Still, there was a side of Soviet society—and state socialist society more generally—that we rarely acknowledge. It was almost impossible to get fired from one's job. As a result it was quite possible to work three or four hours a day, or even two or three days a week, and thus to concentrate one's energies on other projects, or, for that matter, not much of anything at all. There was plenty of time to “think and walk,” and since capitalist-style consumer pleasures were not widely available, and cultural resources like libraries, free lectures and lessons, and so forth, were, the Brezhnev years in particular saw whole generations of “watchmen and

street-sweepers,” as they were called—people who intentionally found undemanding jobs, managed to live whole lives on the small bits of money guaranteed by the state, and used their free time to write poetry, make pictures, and argue about the meaning of life.

All this obviously was under the watchful eye of the totalitarian state, but one could well argue that this is precisely why those running the state felt it had to remain totalitarian. The revolution had produced a society where almost everyone was in a position to become a thinker or artist, to plot and scheme, to question everything. So they had to be directly suppressed. In the capitalist West, most people simply didn't have the time to do any of these things.

We are taught to dismiss the revolutionary avant-gardists as romantics. It's not clear if all of them would have refused the designation. The revolutionary tradition—Marx included—in many ways traces back directly to Romanticism, and while nowadays this is generally seen to be precisely what was wrong with it, it seems to us that the real history is decidedly more complicated.

Let us then proceed step by step to explain why we believe this to be the case.

Commemorative Novalis silver medal by Werner Godec, 1993.

Commemorative Novalis silver medal by Werner Godec, 1993.

The Confusing Legacy of Romanticism

Romanticism in general has come into very bad color nowadays; it is seen as silly and possibly dangerous. “Romanticizing” has become a term for sentimental idealization, whether of nature, peasants, noble savages, the poor, or imagined creative geniuses. The political embrace of Romanticism is seen as leading most naturally to some kind of authoritarian nationalism, or at worst, the Third Reich. But the avant-garde tradition as well is almost entirely rooted in Romanticism.

Part of the problem is that few nowadays are aware of what early Romantic thinkers actually said—though to be fair, they often didn't help things much by writing contradictory things in a deliberately obscure and difficult style. Still, certain consistent strains can be unraveled, and they are not what we commonly imagine them to be.

As an example, consider the endless modernist fascination with comparing art produced by what Hal Foster famously labeled “the privileged triad of the primitive, the child, and the insane.” What did these three really seem to have in common? In the twentieth century, the usual assumption was that the collapse of the cultural authority of the Church had left Europeans without a common visual language, and that by studying the similarities between savages, lunatics, and children, it might be possible to recover some kind of pure, pre-social, and therefore universal visual language on which a new one could be built. As we've seen, revolutionary avant-gardes could sometimes take up a version of these ideas as well. But the original Romantic conception was far more radical. It was in fact closely tied to the concept of culture—itself originally an invention of German Romanticism. The idea that the language, folklore, manners, myths, sensibilities, and even forms of happiness typical of a nation or social group all form a kind of expressive unity, products of some kind of “popular genius,” was rooted in the assumption that everyone was, in a sense, already engaged in artistic expression. In this view of culture, our very perceptions of the world around us are given meaning and emotional color by generations of ancestral creativity. “We see through hearing,” Herder wrote, because the myths and poetry of our childhood define what we actually see when we look at a mountain, forest, or another human being. But the creation of culture is ongoing. As the German poet and philosopher Novalis famously wrote, “Every person is meant to be an artist.” Artistic genius was simply “an exemplification and intensification of what human beings always do.”

The problem, Romantics insisted, was that bourgeois society had created social pressures and expectations so stifling and atrocious that very few make it to adulthood with their humanity and freedom intact. Bourgeois education had the effect of murdering the imagination. What children and unschooled “primitives” were really thought to have in common, then, was simply that they had not (or not yet) been crushed. In a pathological society such as our own, in contrast, those individuals who do somehow manage to preserve intact that inborn artistic “genius” with which all children begin their lives, do so at tremendous personal cost; they are typically driven half mad by the experience. German Romantic novels, like those of Theodor Goffman, typically counterpose some half-mad artistic or spiritual loner and a monotonously monstrous set of provincial types—the doctor, mayor, mayor's wife, and mistress—united against him, since they perceive his very existence as an attack on their petty and hypocritical reality.

True, the early, democratic phase of German Romanticism gradually descended into conservative nationalism. But those core ideas fundamentally reshaped all subsequent thinking about both politics and art.

This is in particular evident in the legacy of the French Revolution. On the face of it, most of the French revolutionaries, with their cult of Reason, might seem about as far as one could get from the tradition of German Romanticism. True, Rousseau embraced some Romantic ideas, but for the most part, the language and sensibilities could hardly be more different. Still, one of the most radical Romantic idea was simply that, if everyone is born a free and ingenious child, then the lack of freedom and genius, or the spread of stupidity, malice, and hypocrisy in that society can only be the product of social conditions. This was considered shocking at the time. French revolutionaries were often so determined to prove it that they sometimes placed aristocratic children with the families of drunks—just to prove that they would turn out to be drunks themselves.

The notion of the avant-garde, however, emerges from the immediate wake of arguments about how that revolution lost its way. (So, incidentally, did modern conservatism, and social science.) Reactionaries argued that the cult of Reason would lead inevitably to the Terror. But so would the cult of Imagination. Attempting to wipe the slate clean and start over would inevitably mean destroying everything that held society together and made life meaningful: community, solidarity, status, authority ... basically all those things which have become the themes of social theory ever since. Those who believed social change was good and inevitable nonetheless took such objections very seriously. The notions of artistic avant-gard, and political vanguard emerged directly from the resultant debates. Originally, in fact, they were assumed to be exactly the same thing.

Here we are obliged to provide a somewhat brutal summary of a very complicated history, but suffice it to say that the debate in France, typified by arguments between the followers of Count Henri de Saint-Simon and those of his one-time secretary Auguste Comte, largely came down to an argument about how to manage the transition from an agrarian feudal social order, to a commercial and industrial civilization. Medieval lords—so the argument went—might have been harsh and often arbitrarily violent; they might in many ways have been little more than so many bands of thieves. But they had the Church, and the Church was capable of mobilizing structures of beauty and meaning to give everyone a sense of precisely where they stood in the larger social order. This was precisely what they saw as lacking in industrial society. The Church was now useless. But the captains of industry seemed to feel that the material bounty they provided should simply speak for itself. Clearly it didn't. Political chaos and social anomie was thus the direct result of the lack of any new class to fulfill the priestly function. Comteans imagined these to be scientists: hence Comte's eventual creation of the religion of Positivism, in which sociologists would play the role of clerics. Saint-Simon cast about a bit (for a while he focused on engineers) but ultimately settled on artists as the vanguard who would lead the way towards a culture of freedom and equality, one in which the coercive mechanisms, he believed, would ultimately wither away.

For over a century, would-be revolutionary vanguards continued to debate whether they would be more like scientists, or more like artists, while painters and sculptors formed themselves into sects. Revolutionary parties endlessly tried to patch together alliances between the least alienated and most oppressed. The dream of the collapse of the barriers between art and life, which would eventually return us to a society in which Novalis's vision would be realized, was always an inherent part of the revolutionary project. By the twentieth century, many of the best-known avant-garde artists were no longer even producing much in the way of immortal works of art, but instead largely plans on how to share their power and freedom with others. As a result, the supreme twentieth-century avant-garde genre, or at least the most accomplished and original, was not even the collage but the manifesto.

At this point we can return to Russia.

The Russian revolutionary avant-garde was rooted squarely in the tradition we have just described. Its imagined "people of the future" (Budetlyans) would not only to be liberated from those unfair and malicious social conditions that stifled their creativity; they would also have the freedom of children. Obviously, no one was so naive as to believe they would live like children in any literal sense, that communism would create a world free from death, betrayal, existential fear, morbid obsession, or unrequited love. Only real children would experience such a paradise. Rather, it would create a world where future people would have the right, duty, and opportunity to reflect on those inevitable adult existential problems in startling beautiful ways. Communism would be a world no longer divided into mad geniuses and dull, obedient, fools—spectators, either uncomprehending or adulatory. Everyone would become both at the same time.

To be continued in "Another Art World, Part II: Utopia of Freedom as a Market Value"

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