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CULTURAL REVOLUTION

From Punk to the New Provotariat

'Those who want to supersede the old established order in all its aspects cannot cling to the disorder of the present, even in the sphere of culture. In culture as in other areas, it is necessary to struggle without waiting any longer for some concrete appearance of the moving order of the future.' Thus Guy Debord, in his 1958 'Theses on Cultural Revolution'.[1] In appropriating a term Lenin used in 1923 to signal the need for a true socialist culture in the USSR, Debord affirmed his belief in a full-blown remodelling of the social life of the senses, rather than a mere takeover of the state. Seeking to re-excavate the original aesthetic promise of communism, the avant-gardes of the 1960s likewise took up the term, which would have a significant career during and following the upheavals of 1967 and 1968. By then it had acquired Maoist connotations that were hard to avoid—and which tainted the concept for some, while only increasing its allure for others.

In certain obvious ways, the notion of cultural revolution appears to be all too much of its time—inextricably entangled with hopes that were soon dashed. Yet it is as a problematic and therefore potentially productive concept that I want to re-examine it. As such, it has the potential to dislocate dominant theories and histories of 'political' art practice, which roughly fall into genealogies of institutional critique on the one hand, and extra-institutional aesthetic activism on the other. At a historical moment when cultural practice is locked between Fordist forms of distribution and post-Fordist forms of production—between filesharing and paywalls, between activist-artistic networks and the construction of McGuggenheims for massive stainless steel sculptures—can the notion of cultural revolution help us to comprehend the antinomies that make

up our present? My contention is that it is indeed useful far beyond the heyday of its use, from the late 1950s to the early 1970s, and that it can be employed to probe the historical logic and contradictions of radical practice in the intervening period. First, though, it may be helpful to unpack some of the understandings of cultural revolution that emerged during the 1960s.

Structural and manifest

Raymond Williams, who did much to elucidate the history of the notion of culture, proposed in 1961 that a 'cultural revolution', which he defined in terms of an 'extension of communications', was one of the main manifestations of what he termed the Long Revolution—alongside the industrial revolution and the 'democratic revolution'.[2] At this comparatively early moment, Williams was already pursuing a critique of the base/superstructure model and its tendency to reduce culture to mere ideological reflection—whose appearance of relative autonomy is itself pure ideology. By the late 1960s, Williams was far from alone in this. Theorists such as Hans-Jürgen Krahl and the Italian workerists would revive Marx's understanding of the growth of scientific power and the ensuing establishment of a 'general intellect', arguing that the 'wissenschaftliche Intelligenz' was now integrated in the productive forces.[3] The fact that intellectual labour was as stunted and specialized as manual labour in fact formed part of the conditions for revolutionary action. Krahl, who collaborated with Rudi Dutschke on the famous 'Organisationsreferat' of 1967, developed the fullest theoretical formulations, drawing on Marx's notions of the general intellect and real subsumption to argue that the contemporary revolution could no longer be based exclusively on the traditional working class, the industrial proletariat.[4]

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[1] Guy Debord, 'Thèses sur la révolution culturelle', in *Internationale situationniste* 1, June 1958, p. 21; in Ken Knabb, ed., *Situationist International Anthology*, Oakland 2006. Thanks to Alexander Galloway for comments on an early draft of this text.

[2] Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* [1961], Cardigan 2011, pp. 9–15.

[3] See Hans-Jürgen Krahl, 'Thesen zum allgemeinen Verhältnis von wissenschaftlicher Intelligenz und proletarischem Klassenbewusstsein' (1969), in *Konstitution und Klassenkampf. Zur historischen Dialektik von bürgerlicher Emanzipation und proleratischer Revolution*, Frankfurt 2007, pp. 336–51.

[4] See Hans-Jürgen Krahl, 'Produktion und Klassenkampf' (1970), in *Konstitution und Klassenkampf*, pp. 392–414. On Krahl and Marx's notion of general intellect, see Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*, New York 2009, pp. 58–70.

An important impulse was provided by the Dutch Provos, who in 1966–67 used the term 'provotariat'—referring to a heterogeneous combination of students, intellectuals, artists, bohemians and layabouts—to denote a new class basis for revolutionary action. The concept of cultural revolution was eagerly adopted by those who wanted either to propel or analyse radical social change—or to do both. In 1969 the *Kursbuch*, edited by Hans Magnus Enzensberger, used the notion as a theoretical lever in its analysis of the ongoing revolt.[5]

In around 1970, Herbert Marcuse drafted an essay—it would remain unpublished in his lifetime—on the topic of cultural revolution. He noted that, even though for the time being the movement was a rebellion rather than a full-blown revolution, 'this cultural revolution not only precedes and prepares the soil for the political revolution (including the economic changes) . . . it has, at the present stage, absorbed the political revolution.'[6] Marcuse noted that in contemporary capitalism, the working class has been extended to 'include (as sources of surplus value and therefore as "productive labour") a very large part of the "middle classes": white-collar workers, salaried employees, technicians, specialists of all sorts, even in the mere "service industries", publicity, etc. This means the extension of exploitation as an objective condition among an increasingly large part of the population.'[7] Thus Marcuse recorded the increasing integration of the superstructure in the productive sphere. A revolution in the cultural sphere would run the risk of remaining superstructural or ideological if it were simply a case of artists and intellectuals proclaiming their solidarity with the great proletarian revolution; things take on a different quality if the sphere of cultural production is itself seen as a site rife with antagonism; if class conflict is no longer located exclusively elsewhere. At the same time, however, this shift makes antagonism much more amorphous, and it is far from evident how diffuse conflict can become articulated struggle. This dual problem—imbrication of culture in production, blurring of agency—was in some ways the defining framework in which counter-cultural and critical movements had to operate in the 1970s and 80s.

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[5] *Kursbuch* no. 16 (1969); see in particular Peter Schneider, 'Die Phantasie im Spätkapitalismus und die Kulturrevolution', and Walter Kreipe, 'Spontaneität und Organisation. Lehren aus dem Mai–Juni 1968', pp. 1–37, 38–76.

[6] Herbert Marcuse, 'Cultural Revolution' (n.d., c. 1970), in *Towards a Critical Theory of Society: Collected Papers, vol. 2*, London 2001, p. 123.

[7] Marcuse, 'Cultural Revolution', p. 127.

Applying terms used by Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt, one could state that in this period projects that aspired to create a manifest revolution were constantly at risk of being reabsorbed into the ongoing structural revolution, or turning out to be the vanguard of the latter. Kluge and Negt differentiate between structural revolutions in the productive sphere and social relations on the one hand—such as the Industrial Revolution—and, on the other, manifest revolutions in which collective social action unfolds in response to the unbearable antinomies produced by the continuing structural revolution.[8] In the case of the 'cultural revolution', however, the two become more finely interwoven, with the structural revolution repeatedly being articulated as a manifest project, and the manifest project often being reabsorbed by the structural revolution. In 1972, when Negt and Kluge noted that there is a capitalist as well as a socialist cultural revolution, they argued that the first consists precisely of the bourgeoisie's structural reordering of cultural production and consumption, and of affective and intellectual life.[9]

If the 1960s idea of cultural revolution had emerged at the tail end of a post-war period of growth and prosperity, the following years were marked by a prolonged economic crisis and a relentless remodelling of Western economies along neoliberal lines. Today, we are all too familiar with the structural, capitalist version of cultural revolution—as universities are financialized and corporatized, and art spaces have their policies dictated by the need for mass audiences and sponsorship deals. Various policy makers and ideologues tend to subsume art and culture under the rubric of the 'creative industries', suggesting that we are dealing with a productive turn that sees 'creativity' itself as an industry that can partially compensate for the decline of manufacturing jobs in the West. One question that immediately arises is: if artistic labour is to some extent the model of today's 'culturalized' work, then what is the potential for artistic practice to make any kind of difference at all? Has the structural revolution completely swallowed the manifest revolution? In what follows I will look back at how a few thinkers, artists, musicians and others responded to the advance of the structural revolution, to see what

[8] Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Geschichte und Eigensinn*, Frankfurt am Main 1981, p. 660. An English translation of this, the second book co-authored by Negt and Kluge, will be published as *History and Obstinacy* later this year.
[9] Negt and Kluge, *Öffentlichkeit und Erfahrung: Zur Organisationsanalyse von bürgerlicher und proletarischer Öffentlichkeit*, Frankfurt am Main 1972, pp. 267–68.

strategies they adopted on shifting political and cultural terrain—and what lessons this might hold for the present.

After the future

In 1973, in one of his essays for the journal *Utopie,* Jean Baudrillard sought to wrest the notion of cultural revolution away from what he perceived to be Marxist orthodoxy. Noting the '"in depth" imperialism' of a 'radicalized logic of capital', Baudrillard claimed that the only form of cultural revolution that made sense under prevailing circumstances was 'not the developed form of the economico-political revolution' but instead a practice that 'acts on the basis of a reversal of "materialist" logic'.[10] Throughout the decade (and beyond), Baudrillard theorized various manifestations of *art maudit* and of excessive cultural action as new forms of anti-production, of anti-accumulation, eruptions of primitivist symbolic exchange in the realm of the code. These radical acts sabotaged the new intensified, 'culturalized' forms of accumulation that had now come to the fore.

With its rejection of the Marxist framework and premium on the symbolic and on excess, Baudrillard's take on cultural revolution was an early indication of a shift towards 'libidinal economies' and, in the work of other authors, micropolitics. The idea of the Party as revolutionary vanguard gave way to an idea(l) of multiplicity and becoming, in different kinds of social and sexual formations. The revolution became molecular. Indicative of this micropolitical turn was the changing editorial policy of Germany's Merve Verlag, a small Berlin-based house that started in 1970 with Althusser and a New Left programme; by the late 1970s Foucault, Baudrillard, Lyotard, Deleuze and Guattari had become mainstays of the programme. In many ways, Merve played in Germany the role that Semiotext(e) had in the US. As Diedrich Diederichsen has stressed, Merve helped drive a transformation of philosophy into a form of 'theory' that was bought and consumed like the latest records.[11] Characteristic titles were *Patchwork of Minorities* (1977) and *Intensities*

[10] Jean Baudrillard, 'Marxism and the System of Political Economy' (1973), in *Utopia Deferred: Writings from* Utopie *(1967–1978)*, New York 2006, p. 157.

[11] Diederichsen, 'Intensity, Negation, Plain Language: Wilde Maler, Punk, and Theory in the German 80s', in Dominic Molon, ed., *Sympathy for the Devil: Art and Rock and Roll Since 1967*, Chicago and New Haven 2007, pp. 143–44.

(1978), both by Lyotard. Diederichsen has latched onto the latter title to argue for the crucial role of the concept of intensity 'in the self-conception of hedonistic countercultures during the 1970s and 1980s—years I would describe as formative in the development of a phenomenon we see emerging today: the revaluation of this wasteful way of life as a form of work that is not merely productive, but a model of productivity.'[12] This intensification of labour is indeed crucial; it is a key form of contemporary primitive accumulation in Western economies.

If micropolitics was one defining moment of the new interpretation of cultural revolution, punk was another. While it is no doubt true that dominant genealogies of punk are reductive,[13] for present purposes the overly canonized primal scenes in New York and London in 1976–77 are nonetheless crucial, for here punk became (mock-) historical (media) event. It was the sometime New York Dolls manager Malcolm McLaren, once on the margins of the post-Situationist King Mob group, who most successfully melded the music with extravagant behaviour into a kind of nihilistic media activism, creating scandalous performances for the press. In Europe, Merve was once again an important nexus, providing a platform for the (post-)punk scene as it did for French Theory; it published Martin Kippenberger's book *Frauen* in 1980 and the collective volume *Geniale Dilletanten* in 1982—dominated by Die tödliche Doris and Einstürzende Neubauten, who investigated and celebrated the notion of dilettantism in a context where punk's 'three chords' met an industrialized Cageanism, one in which all noise was in principle acceptable as music. In New York, a similar concatenation of punk and Cage occurred in the No Wave scene and in particular with Sonic Youth.

Meanwhile, in the art world of the late 1970s Conceptualism gave way to work that was once again tangible, sensuous—and bankable. Much of the groundwork for today's inflated contemporary art market was in fact laid at the time, with the 'New Spirit in Painting' leading to an influx of new money.[14] At the time and more recently, the 'new painting' was often seen as the visual counterpart of punk: both involved a form of

[12] Diedrich Diederichsen, 'People of Intensity, People of Power: The Nietzsche Economy', *e-flux journal* 19, October 2010.
[13] For a trenchant critique, see Mimi Thi Nguyen and Golnar Nikpour, *Punk*, no. 4 of the *Guillotine* chapbook series, New York 2013.
[14] This was the title of a 1981 blockbuster show at the Royal Academy in London; it was followed in 1982 by *Zeitgeist* at the Martin-Gropius-Bau in Berlin.

primitivism, with the 'energetic' brushstrokes allegedly the equivalent of punk's three chords.[15] However, the new painting was perched uncomfortably between punk street-cred and high-art pretensions, between claims to being a return to 'real art' and a cultivation of instant fame. It was rather in the realm of performance that the most productive interactions between the various arts took place. In punk and post-punk, performance as intermedium allowed for new forms of female/feminist self-presentation, as well as collaborative art projects-cum-bands such as Die tödliche Doris, or collaborations such as that between Sonic Youth and Mike Kelley, or between the Fall, Michael Clark, Charles Atlas and Leigh Bowery.[16]

The late 1970s were also the moment of *autonomedia*. As the decade progressed, Italian, German and French theorists increasingly abstracted the notion of autonomy from its narrow class basis in the late-1960s notion of workers' autonomy. Italian Autonomia and the confrontation around Radio Alice in 1977 gave rise to several pieces by Félix Guattari in which he developed a new theory of counter-media. A text collage by Guattari introduced Merve's book on Radio Alice, while his more elaborate 1978 essay 'Popular Free Radio' effectively recast Enzensberger's 'Constituents of a Theory of the Media' in autonomist-micropolitical terms.[17] Here Guattari argued that the monolithic mass media were increasingly generating a drive 'toward miniaturized systems that create the possibility of a collective appropriation of the media, that provide real means of communication, not only to the "great masses", but also to minorities, to marginalized and deviant groups of all kinds', creating 'the perspective of a new space of freedom, self-management, and the fulfillment of the singularities of desire'. No technical property of the medium of radio imposes the unidirectional nature of mainstream broadcasting, and now it was time to return to the '"natural" evolution of

[15] Diedrich Diederichsen offers a subtle and dialectical version of this argument: see Diederichsen, 'Intensity, Negation, Plain Language', pp. 142–53.

[16] The key projects here are Mike Kelley's *Plato's Cave, Rothko's Chapel, Lincoln's Profile*, performed in 1985 with Sonic Youth, and *I Am Curious, Orange*, the 1988 collaboration between Michael Clark and The Fall (The Fall's soundtrack album being titled *I am Kurious Oranj*).

[17] Félix Guattari et al., 'Vorwort: Millionen und Abermillionen potentieller Alices', in Kollektiv A/traverso, *Alice ist der Teufel: Praxis einer subversiven Kommunikation*, Berlin 1977, pp. 5–14; and 'Popular Free Radio', in Neill Strauss and Dave Mandl, eds, *Radiotext(e)*, New York 1993, pp. 85–98. Enzensberger's 'Constituents of a Theory of the Media' was published in NLR 1/64, Nov–Dec 1970, pp. 13–36.

the technology', which had been curtailed, and adapt it to the formation of 'group subjects'.[18]

These developments should not be seen, however, as the handy superstructural 'expression' of a transformation in the base, amid the crisis-ridden transition to neoliberalism. Rather, micropolitics, punk and autonomedia participated in a transformation that was *as economical as it was cultural*. At a moment 'after the future'—in line with Bifo Berardi's later argument that 1977 was the year the future died[19]—the cultural revolution could no longer be seen as a single revolutionary push. The structural revolution of capitalism showed no sign of abating, only of accelerating, as if in triumphalist mockery of Marx's and Trotsky's notions of 'permanent revolution'. In the midst of this neoliberal version of 'revolution in permanence', manifest radical activity becomes permanent counter-revolution. When compared with the ongoing structural revolution of which they are part, and against which they react, such manifestations may appear fitful, faltering and contradictory. Yet in their excessive and doomed splendour, they form illuminating constellations; Benjaminian fireworks.

Reaping discipline

In the late 70s and early 80s, with the neoliberal turn of Thatcher and Reagan, the structural revolution of capitalism had entered a new epoch. While the punk ethos was of course opposed to Thatcherism, and while bands such as The Clash wore their left-wing politics on their sleeves, the punk DIY ethic was in many ways a bizarre realization of the neoliberal utopia. This became fully explicit later on, when British artists of the 1990s used self-organized exhibitions to launch themselves as cultural entrepreneurs: as Lane Relyea has recalled, 'by the mid-1990s London's entrepreneurial YBAs would be labelled "Thatcher's children".'[20] Even much earlier, however, there were moments when a fundamental complicity emerged—as in The Fall's track 'Tempo House' (1983), the lyrics of which attack a 'serious man in need of a definitive job' who,

[18] Guattari, 'Popular Free Radio', pp. 85–6. This call for a different radio did not go unheeded; to give just one example, the legendary pirate radio station Radio Rataplan in the Dutch university town of Nijmegen hosted a variety of programmes by and for squatters, gays and lesbians, feminists and so on.

[19] Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, *After the Future*, Edinburgh 2011, pp. 44–50.

[20] Lane Relyea, *Your Everyday Art World*, Cambridge, MA 2013, p. 114.

however, becomes dependent on the welfare system and puts 'his claim into Tempo House' (the latter being, according to Fall exegetes, the location of a dole office). Ultimately, however, with his characteristic 'uh'-endings and cryptic lines, Mark E. Smith does not so much deliver a message as de- and recompose language, offering a series of non-sequitur sneers and harangues whose referents are cryptic at best ('Snow on Easter Sunday/Jesus Christ in Reverse'; 'The Dutch are weeping in four languages at least').

Ambiguity also marks the figure of the New Puritan, eponymous subject of a 1980 song, who appears to encapsulate Smith's at times bizarre, self-constructed working-class punk ethic. On the one hand, this character would seem to be a reprehensible prude and zealot, but on the other he embodies punk as a higher puritanism, as a discipline born out of decadence ('All decadent sins will reap discipline'). The song was featured in Charles Atlas's 1986 TV film *Hail the New Puritan*, which is essentially a fictionalized day in the life of the Michael Clark Company. The opening segment shows an oneiric scene in which dancers go through their motions while others pose and preen. Leigh Bowery, queer performer par excellence and Clark's costume designer, opens his mouth to reveal TV static, and the static then becomes that on a TV screen next to Michael Clark's bed; we see Clark wake up in his studio/apartment, and a day of rehearsals and interviews begins. After studio segments of Clark dances set to songs by The Fall, the staged day ends with a different type of dance: Clark and others go clubbing, and the relentless practice necessary for performing his dances is replaced by the stylized poses of voguing. Interestingly, part of this final segment shows the crowd imitating Clark's movements; he seemingly 'controls' them from the stage. The scene suggests that the media day never ends, and that the distinction between performing and viewing is eroding.

Worlds away from this particular post-punk scene, in the US Joe Strummer and the Clash became important role models for Public Enemy's Chuck D, who appreciated Strummer's musical eclecticism and generosity towards his inspirations and sources as well as his politicization of pop. Famously treating rap as 'the CNN of the black people', Chuck D fused punk with the radical aesthetics of Malcolm X and the Black Panthers. Public Enemy were an autonomous and indeed alien interruption of the pop-cultural continuum of the late 1980s and early 1990s—in terms of their militant look, but especially sonically and

lyrically, with Chuck D's baritone intoning stern moral and political lessons, though with a penchant for playful rhymes, puns and spoonerisms ('lies buried in a lie-brary').

In their vastly different and indeed incompatible ways, both Public Enemy and the scene around Michael Clark represented cultural warfare against the conservative backlash embodied by Thatcher and Reagan. In the 1980s, the US in particular became the site of 'culture wars' rather than cultural revolution; or rather, of cultural revolution in the guise of culture wars. With attacks by the likes of Jesse Helms on all art that did not conform to the Bible Belt's vision of America, and particularly the work of Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano, it was effectively the right that pioneered a new form of cultural activism—producing, recontextualizing and contesting images as a way to effect social change. As critic Brian Wallis noted at the time, 'one irony of this struggle over representation is that it is conservative politicians and intellectuals who have most effectively colonized culture as a site of ideological struggle in the 1980s. This is particularly ironic since their claim is generally that culture should be non-ideological, free from politics.'[21]

In responding to such 'activism', the left—or whatever assemblage of micropolitical groups now occupied the place of 'the left'—ran the risk of reverting to a purely superstructural definition of culture. However, projects such as the Dia Foundation's 1988–89 shows *If You Lived Here* by Martha Rosler, which focused on the housing crisis in New York, and *Democracy* by Group Material, sought to make interventions that would reflect on the relation between artistic practice and the social and political context. The four *Democracy* shows included a number of discussions, and sections on education, electoral politics, 'cultural participation' and the AIDS crisis. In the late 1980s, even as AIDS sufferers' bodies collapsed, they were made productive; pharma giant Wellcome charged sky-high prices for the first AIDS drug, and politicians scored points by catering to homophobia.

For activist groups such as ACT UP and Gran Fury, graphic art was crucial, as in the famous 'Silence = Death' slogan/logo; video activism was equally important. On 24 March 1987, ACT UP staged its first protest, at the New York Stock Exchange, targeting Wellcome. Artist Gregg

[21] Brian Wallis, 'Democracy and Cultural Activism', in Wallis, ed., *Democracy: A Project by Group Material*, Seattle 1990, p. 8.

Bordowitz picked up a video camera and filmed the event; this was the beginning of his involvement with activist and community television in New York, for instance with the 'Living with AIDS' cable show—for which Raymond Williams was a theoretical point of reference.[22] For Bordowitz and others, this was activism after the future, to cite Berardi's phrase once more. The structural revolution, in its Reaganite phase, was in full swing, and it was almost literally eating its children.

Culture class

Fast-forward two decades, and some of the strategies deployed by the post-punk cultural counter-revolutionaries have been smoothly incorporated into the art-world establishment. As Mark E. Smith drawled in 'New Puritan', 'the experimental is now conventional'. In 2010–11, Michael Clark presented dance rehearsals and performances in the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern. As part of this project, 'non-dancers' from the public were invited to take part in workshops and perform a piece written especially for them; this project turned the punk ethos of 'anyone can do it' into a contemporary participatory mass event at the heart of the culture industry—with free labour provided by those who were happy to have this unique opportunity. Volunteering for exploitation is endemic to the contemporary culturalized economy. Life becomes a permanent audition. Queues make a return: last year there were 1,600 applicants for a job working at the cloakroom of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, and at the Prado in Madrid, 19,000 people tried to get one of eleven attendant jobs.[23] In Berlin, artists lined up around the block for an 'open' exhibition at the Deutsche Bank Kunsthalle.

The latter example comes from Hito Steyerl's lecture-performance *I Dreamed a Dream: Politics in the Age of Mass Art Production* (2013). Steyerl begins with an imprisoned Kurdish fighter, 'Comrade X,' who dreamed of writing a sequel to *Les Misérables*—that primal scene of *Sozialkitsch*. In contrast to Comrade X, Steyerl focuses not so much on the work's pseudo-revolutionary content but on its productive logic as manifested in its form—which was shaped by 19th-century newspaper serials and

[22] Gregg Bordowitz, 'Operative Assumptions' (1996), in Bordowitz, *The Aids Crisis is Ridiculous and Other Writings, 1986–2003*, Cambridge, MA 2004, pp. 76–77.

[23] 'In het Rijksmuseum werken "prachtige hertjes"', nrc.nl, 18 May 2013; 'Casi 19.000 parados se presentan para 11 plazas de bedel en El Prado', *El Confidencial*, 23 May 2013.

the modes of production and consumption they generated. Like the 'real' feuilleton hacks with whom he had to compete, Hugo 'rambles on commission' and pulls out all the stops to retain the reader's interest—the pitch has become part of the drama. From this, Steyerl effects a montage with Susan Boyle's performance of *I Dreamed a Dream* from the musical version of *Les Misérables* on a British talent show, and forges a now-time between the 1832 failed revolution portrayed in Hugo's novel and the situation of 2011. She goes on to imagine and perform a pitch for a project on the basis of Comrade X's dream, which she reads in front of a karaoke screen showing the lyrics to *I Dreamed a Dream* (with accompanying music). Her project involves a green-screen montage of people surrounded by 19th-century and contemporary museum architecture, with a 'rabble' of post-Fordist extras about to be slaughtered on the barricades. In this bizarre pitch situation, the audience of the performance becomes a quasi-jury, complicit in the culture of permanent auditioning. We live in a casting economy, in which we constantly pitch our projects.

What forms of artistic praxis are possible in this situation? Questions of collaboration and self-organization are once again to the fore, yet here as elsewhere, the ongoing structural revolution has complicated the search for possible revolutionary subjects. As Steyerl puts it:

> Contemporary art's workforce consists largely of people who, despite working constantly, do not correspond to any traditional image of labour. They stubbornly resist settling into any entity recognizable enough to be identified as a class. While the easy way out would be to classify this constituency as multitude or crowd, it might be less romantic to ask whether they are not global lumpenfreelancers, deterritorialized and ideologically free-floating: a reserve army of imagination communicating via Google Translate. Instead of shaping up as a new class, this fragile constituency may well consist—as Hannah Arendt once spitefully formulated—of the 'refuse of all classes'.[24]

This refuse may indeed exhibit an irksome refusal to play the part of an insurgent multitude. And what about the incompatibilities between different groups of 'refuse'? For a 2012 installation titled *Join Us*, Sharon Hayes assembled six hundred flyers that announce various social protests and manifestations, including gay and black civil rights. Just as one

[24] Hito Steyerl, 'Politics of Art: Contemporary Art and the Transition to Post-Democracy', *e-flux journal* 21, December 2010.

has trouble imagining a late-1980s collaboration between Public Enemy and the Michael Clark Company, some of the groups responsible for the flyers collected by Hayes would no doubt have trouble seeing eye to eye.

Class was always super- as well as substructural, as economic antinomies and struggles were articulated in the form of class consciousness. But where does the decline of old classes and the emergence of new classes or micropolitical class-like formations—perhaps on the basis of gender or race—leave class as *project*, possessing historical agency? Perry Anderson has differentiated between three types of agency: the pursuit of purely private goals; public projects that may be either individual or collective, and that by virtue of becoming public act in history, but without transforming social relations as such; and finally those 'collective projects which have sought to render their initiators authors of their collective mode of existence as a whole, in a conscious programme aimed at creating or remodelling whole social structures'.[25]

Occupy Wall Street was a new 'provotariat' in which many artists and intellectuals turned precarity into a form of mutant performance. For a certain period, Steyerl's lumpenfreelancers developed a shared horizon beyond their own survival. However, the class basis remained comparatively narrow. Taking cues from Hayes's array of incommensurable flyers, one can argue that what matters is precisely assemblage or montage. The various sub-classes, ex-classes and potential classes have to be connected at least partially and momentarily. This is neither easy nor impossible: it is the productive problem of contemporary aesthetic and political activity. In effecting a montage between different forms of exploitation, the point is of course not that 'artists are the new asylum seekers', as a deluded Dutch novelist put it. Rather, in opposition to a certain post-workerist tendency to focus exclusively on immaterial labour in the metropolitan Western context, one should precisely insist on discrepancies as well as similarities, and on solidarity on the basis of vast disparities in privileges among the underprivileged.

Global potlatch

Implicated in an economy of spurious growth and real social and ecological destruction, contemporary art has become excessive and *maudit* in

[25] Perry Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism*, London 1980, pp. 19–20.

a different way—a global potlatch for the 0.1 per cent. As Andrea Fraser has put it, 'it must be abundantly clear by now that what has been good for the art world has been disastrous for the rest of the world.'[26] There are of course those, Fraser included, who maintain that another art world is possible. Many practices and projects in today's art world explore alternatives to this potlatch: more sustainable forms of exchange and collaboration, and coalitions with groups outside the cultural sector. To give one example, in 2011 a group of artists working under the name of Gulf Labor started a campaign against the exploitation of migrant workers in the construction of the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi; in Europe, others have collaborated with undocumented migrant cleaners and domestic workers, and with asylum seekers awaiting their deportation. These activities often take the form of informal and impromptu networks; they are hard to sustain over prolonged periods—artistic and intellectual precarians always have the option to move on. However, the need for alliances and collaborations again and again imposes itself as a quasi-necessity, even while often revealing itself as a near-impossibility.

Quoting a remark by Andrea Fraser that 'we are trapped in our field', Gerald Raunig has identified 'a recurring problem in art: that of reducing and enclosing more general questions in one's field'.[27] This diagnosis is to the point, but a social field such as the art world is potentially boundless if it uses laptops and smartphones made in Chinese factories, or if the latest McGuggenheim is built with what comes perilously close to slave labour. In visual art, the practices that came to be known as institutional critique had worked to open up this seemingly autonomous field of art, foregrounding not only art institutions' political and economic entanglements—as in Hans Haacke's trenchant exposés of sponsors' neocolonial business practices—but also the critical subject's own implication in, and reshaping by, institutional structures. The latter aspect became particularly pronounced in later work, especially that of Fraser. Admittedly, some strands of institutional critique ended up being a kind of Biedermeier of criticality, comfortably nested in institutional environments and paying them the ultimate homage of 'reflecting critically' on them. But is there not also, in a further ironical twist, a sense in which institutional critique as an embedded and relational practice

[26] Andrea Fraser, 'Le 1%, C'est Moi', *Texte zur Kunst* no. 83, September 2011, p. 122.
[27] Gerald Raunig, 'Instituent Practices: Fleeing, Instituting, Transforming', in Raunig and Gene Ray, eds, *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique*, London 2009, p. 5.

contributed to the retooling of the institution, and of 'art work'? Today's collaborations and projects are often sustained by networks of small and relatively informal institutions, to the point where it can be difficult to say where 'project' ends and 'institution' begins. (Is a group or network such as Gulf Labor not also a practical exercise in self-organization, an informal counter-institution?) Moreover, the participants in these quasi-institutions exploit themselves to ever higher degrees and become pioneers of 'informational' primitive accumulation. In Western societies, the rise in 'creative' and 'affective' labour has placed new demands on workers who can either be part of a small, well-paid elite or, in much greater numbers, of a growing 'precariat'. Too little time, and too much of it; the subject can no longer compartmentalize and the work of art, or the work of intellect, becomes boundless.

Revelation and self-implication

We began this essay with Debord's theses on cultural revolution. 'Art can cease being a report about sensations and become a direct organization of more advanced sensations', states Thesis Two. 'The point is to produce ourselves rather than things that enslave us.' The claim is no doubt open to charges of essentialism and binarism: 'Produce ourselves'? 'Things that enslave us'? Today we are accustomed to thinking about networks with human and non-human agents, and often refrain from raising the question of whether any particular *agencement* of subjectivities and quasi-objects is desirable or acceptable. Data-gathering and pattern-recognition operations go on everywhere, but the 'classic' critical act of 'revealing' such facts seems increasingly problematic.

In his lecture-performance *Walkthrough*, Walid Raad—a driving force behind Gulf Labor—examines Moti Shniberg, the entrepreneur behind the online aggregator MutualArt and a scheme called the Artist Pension Trust, and his ties to Israeli military intelligence. However, at the end of his investigations Raad asks: 'Do we really need another artwork to show us (as if we don't already know) that the cultural, financial and military spheres are intimately linked? No. No we don't. This may be intelligent but it is not insidious, and it is certainly undeserving of more of my words.'[28] In a previous performance, Raad had questioned the efficacy of 'revealing' the pattern of CIA rendition flights, as any such revelations

[28] Walid Raad, 'Walkthrough, Part I', *e-flux journal*, 48, October 2013.

are easily shrugged off.[29] There has to be the possibility of a concatenation, of a coalition, that takes things beyond the Enlightenment gesture of revealing the truth to a 'general public'. Gulf Labor is a case in point; it doesn't so much show or critique a state of affairs as draw direct consequences from it.

Some of the most culturally significant acts of recent years have taken the form of spectacular revelations, and both their strengths and their weaknesses derive from this. Their perpetrators come more from the technoscientific than from the artistic or cultural side of 'immaterial labour'—but in fact this only demonstrates the growing integration of the two. During the 1960s and 1970s, the new means of production were difficult to access for artists, and even more difficult to actively control; yet hacker culture has always been informed by a certain Californian countercultural habitus and, in Europe, by the punk DIY culture. By the mid-1990s, with the creation of the Nettime mailing list, an autonomist hacker culture that included media theorists and activists as well as 'net artists' had emerged. McKenzie Wark has presented the hacker as a contemporary collective folk hero, but one who embraces and works with abstraction rather than smashing it in the Luddite manner:

> Who are the agents struggling in and against the emergent productive forms who can shape the affordances of those technologies and labour processes? One of the answers is: the worker. But another is: the 'hacker'. The worker is the one who struggles in and against a productive regime. The hacker is the one who contributes to designing new ones, or at the very least populating the existing ones with new concepts, new ideas—recuperated by the new property forms of so-called 'intellectual property'. These are the accelerators of modernity: those who labour in and against it.[30]

Is the hacker the new cultural revolutionary par excellence, precisely by virtue of being located at the leading edge of capitalism's structural revolution? Aesthetic-activist practices like that of the design collective Metahaven, who have produced several essays, installations and videos on the cloud and data surveillance, seek to think through some of the consequences of these developments for their design work, and for

[29] Walid Raad, 'I Feel a Great Desire to Meet the Masses Once Again', lecture/performance, 2008–09.

[30] McKenzie Wark, '#Celerity: A Critique of the Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics', available at Synthetic Edifice blog.

cultural praxis in general.[31] Edward Snowden's act, meanwhile, could be seen as a form of extended institutional critique. It was not simply an abstract revelation about wrongdoings elsewhere that have no direct bearing on the lives of 'the public': it implicated us all. Yet this fact itself was widely disavowed. In a stunning collective litany, newspapers published comments by upright citizens who repeated their mantras: 'We knew or suspected all of this anyway', 'Nothing new here', 'Every state does this', 'I have nothing to hide, so why should I worry?' In contrast to the ACT UP activists, many contemporary citizens of First World countries in decline are happy to be owned; happy to be mined for data and metadata, as long as it helps to fight terrorism, which is to say, helps to prolong global inequalities and slow down the decline of the West.

The *promesse de bonheur* of liberal politics becomes the exclusive property of an ever smaller upper and upper-middle class that is content to live in a paranoid surveillance society in which the number of threatening Others keeps growing and growing. When healthy and wealthy Google CEO Larry Page states that he does not understand why anyone would object to making their medical data public, he seems to announce a new wave of data accumulation, one that has the potential to create a class of biopolitical outcasts.[32] If the current level of NSA and GCHQ data gathering is deemed acceptable, then who is to say that the next wave will meet with mass opposition? In response to these fatal mechanisms of disavowal, which have so far proven extraordinarily difficult to counteract, contemporary aesthetic and political action needs to stress that *we are the others*; that the structural revolution will end up eating (almost) all of us; that it will end up poisoning, disenfranchising, crippling ever larger numbers of people.

[31] See for example the three-part article 'Captives of the Cloud', in *e-flux journal*, 37, September 2012; 38, October 2012; and 50, December 2013.

[32] Speech to Google I/O developer event, 15 May 2013, available at TechHive.com.