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The Art Wedge

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If we are to accept that significant (progressive) social change will only come with the active engagement of the bulk of the population working together towards a more equal society then where does that leave the artist?

The need for a way of thinking the artist as part of the collective – or at least *for* the collective – even if indirectly, seems, at a glance, a necessary starting point for any practitioner who seeks to contribute or at least not inhibit a progressive politics (Brian Holmes (2004), for example, accuses most artists of indulging in 'picture politics' – but then we have to ask to what extent the political itself is constructed of pictures and appearances, of narratives¹).

That 'picture politics' could be politics itself understood in a degraded form might be seen as a jumping off point into the work of Jacques Rancière. For him, the distribution of the sensible (that which can be understood – and the manner in which things are understood – within a paradigm) is the narrative form within which political interventions are made (Rancière 2010). As I have noted in other essays, reality (for want of a better word) has the form of a fiction – that is, it is not in itself a fiction (in the sense of being a fake) but that we necessarily have to fictionalise it in order to understand it. For Rancière, the agreed form of narrative is labelled 'consensus' and it is through its contestation by the 'parts-of-no-part' that the (Master) narrative is restructured. Those who have either no place or only a tenuous place within the social edifice are, through their pronouncements, able to reorder the narrative of those who are included – the assumption being that this will lead to actual changes in the distribution of social places.

Rancière's concept of the 'part-of-no-part' (2010) is, by his own admission, negatively defined (Rancière 2011, 84) and as such is necessarily enacted through agonisms (to use the parlance of Mouffe (2009)) and, by way of relation, 'dissensus' (Rancière 2011). This 'voicing' of the previously

¹On this point Holmes does note the possible good that artists can do by directly engaging with the picture politics of social movements – but is this view too limited?

invisible (that which was outside of the sensible) seems to function in a way similar way to the prescriptive (Žižek 2006, 322) – the prescriptive to be here understood as a statement that describes how something *ought* to be as though it already *is*, a cutting out of the divide between the present and future state of things that creates, in its very pronouncement, the state which it describes.

Rancière (2007) uses another version of this type of prescription when he posits that equality should be presupposed, that it should be an assumed truth – irrespective of whether it exists or not – since this is, for him, the best way in which we can start to make equality exist now – by challenging those areas of life which don't hold up to the claim (the assumption being that to say that all people should be equal but aren't equal because they are not currently so has had a tendency to enable excuses to be made that on the face of it accept the desirability of equality whilst pushing it further into the future as something for which we're not quite ready (Rancière 2007).

Many commentators such as Jean-Luc Nancy posit that what is needed is for a reaffirmation of an understanding of ourselves as “Being-in-common”. This is an ontological claim (Rancière 2011, 86) that takes being-in-common as a given. Functioning as a kind of axiom, this could also be seen as a form of prescription (Žižek 2006, 322), one that denies the individual status of Being upon which Capital *appears* to rely and therefore is also potentially related to the negative form found in Rancière insofar that the prescriptive divides the social – and 'brutally' so – in its very application of a 'universal axiom' (Žižek 2006, 322).

Yet can we accept the multiple of Being as necessarily a progressive idea? And how can this feed back into art production?

Could consciousness as self-reflexion be a way of thinking multiple Being in a material, ontic mode? - one that would allow us to see how art production as well as reception might fit? If we accept that the individual as such is composed of multiple parts – that consciousness is the self-relating of disparate parts of what is otherwise known as an individual (Žižek 2006: 214) – then how might this knowledge impact on the status of a multiple subject? If language (and therefore

meaning) appears because of the ability of an organism (such as myself) to self-relate then whilst language and the meaning it produces would both in a sense be immanent to The Material would it not also be separate from it insofar that it exists *between* The Material? Beyond this in-between (the moment of self-relating) there would surely be a further level of separation; that of the relating of multiple nodes of self-relation (other subjects) – in(between) which culture and the social is played out (insofar as it has meaning in spite of its dumb material existence). Accepting that Art is normally made by a self-relating organism (a subject in ordinary language) then could we not think of the work of art as the always only momentarily complete material residue of the selves-relating of two subjects? Or as a material wedge placed between two (or more) selves relating (a wedge that both brings together and forever keeps separate those in communication with each other)?²

But by considering the objects and actions (and by extension, the narratives holding together the distribution of the sensible) as the actually existing (albeit inactive) forms of Being-in-common, we seem to not only automatically incorporate the production of art (even that of the individual author) back into the common but also have inevitably to admit that all material existence including (and perhaps especially) the products of Capital in that assumed common Being. How are we to reconcile this? Are the movements of Capital (into knowledge Capital and the privatisation of knowledge) and the increasing exclusion of sections of the population from the field of production to be seen as something in which picture politics can intervene? Is this a shrinking of the distribution of the sensible in the most violently literal way – or can we still see the potential for dissensus insofar that, whilst particular forms of knowledge and social inclusion become more exclusive, there is still a strong shared knowledge of the wrongs being enacted?

Perhaps this point serves well as a reminder that whilst collective forms of production (indeed we could include acknowledged democratic forms) are not necessarily progressive by virtue of them being collective since Capital itself is the original engineer of social production. We seem to have

²Adapted from a reply I made to Tom Trevatt's *The Universal Address*, 2013

lost the way at some point forgetting that Marx thought that socialised labour might create the conditions for liberation and that it never was in and of itself a form of liberation. Art, on the other hand does not *necessarily* incorporate a division of labour.

Art is, in the mode in which we are studying it, still able to be described as not being fully subsumed under capital (Beech and Prug 2013). According to Dave Beech, Art is not a commodity because it is neither produced through a properly capitalist division of labour nor paid as wage-labour. He also posits that the consumption of art is different from that of normal manufactured products (and I here include services) insofar that Art is produced not just for a potential owner of the object-thing but also as an intervention-addition into the common fabric of meaning. If we accept these points then we could easily identify Art, despite its entanglement with Capital, to be just about autonomous enough (at least in some of its functions) to serve as a possible alternative model to the Capitalist mode of production.

But that would be too easy. For starters, I disagree that Art is not a commodity or form of commodity production (albeit a different form). I would say that Art has, on the whole, been (formally) subsumed by Capital but that there might still be scope to claim that there has (on the whole) not yet been a *Real* subsumption of Art under Capital; that is, whilst the Art-objects are a type of commodity (though not of the Capitalist variety), the labour of the art practitioners who make them isn't usually regarded as the commodity. It (their labour) remains to this extent unalienated; the production of Art (in the choices of form and content – and the formal recognition of its completion by the viewer) – paradoxically – remains relatively useful for producing additions to and interventions into the sensible *because* it still requires an authorial origin. And despite this authorial origin (which is also a claim to a form of originality – which may be located in an individual or a collective but which still functions the same either way) the fact that contemporary art seems only able to function insofar that it is not subject to the same kind of controls over intellectual property as many other enterprises might point to this being more than just an inner contradiction; it is both how it is so easily subsumed formally (because of its development

alongside early Capital) and yet retains a level of independence. But this (aristocratic) independence is most likely an atavism, also there from the start, rather than a new development. It seems to me that this atavistic trait is the condition both of Art's (or more specifically the artists') relative independence and the reason why a truly critical and self-reflexive Art cannot be taken under the Real subsumption of Capital without it ceasing to be Art.

Here also is perhaps where we catch a glimpse of the thin edge of the wedge we call the professionalisation of the arts (of which art education is a part) – as well as the utilisation of Art as a form of social work (in the literal sense) – that is, a Real subsumption of Art under Capital would socialise all that the artist is and require a levelling of art (as a perceived, if not actual, object of elite consumption) that would on the surface appear as a democratisation of Art (akin to film production – something that is not so hard to imagine) but would actually reduce it to another tool of Capital. What then is left to us? Do we at this point rehabilitate Greenberg?

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