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ARTISTS IN THE CREATIVE ECONOMY: INOPERATIVE MODES OF RESISTANCE

Introduction

In the contemporary creative economy, myths of the autonomy and freedom of artists have become a condition of self-exploitation, self-precarization and self-branding within neoliberal forms of governmentality, as discussed by scholars including Gerald Raunig on the work of Isabell Lorey (200). What I call a 'post-crisis creative economy' is one that is in ruins following the economic crash of 2008, which resulted in a scaling back of resources for the arts in Europe and the UK. Suggesting ruins also presents an opportunity to rebuild, reconfigure and reimagine the cultural economy (Dillon). The 'post-crisis creative economy' is one that is characterized by the emergence of cognitive capitalism, the conditions of which present increased flexibilization of the labor market (Boutang). The result is that artists are pushed to become self-realized entrepreneurs, who pursue their creative work out of passion. Silvio Lorusso uses the term 'entreprecariat' to describe the precarious conditions of entrepreneurs who are left to bear the risks of running their own business. Artists-entrepreneurs today also play a role in the processes of gentrification in cities, where they are later pushed out of the area by rising rents and property speculators. As artists become central to the global creative economy, they are left disempowered and precarious at the throes of the market. The notion of the artist as a figure of an independent, self-determined individual, becomes one that is left to bare the risks in a highly competitive deregulated marketplace. In light of this, we ask, how can artists critically and effectively engage in today's globalized neoliberal cultural economy to regain agency as creative actors in society?

In this paper, I will firstly outline a brief trajectory in the evolution of artists and their roles in social transformation, critique and innovation alongside the rise of the culture industry. I will then detail the ways in which market forces consume modes of critique rendering them impotent. The second part of the paper explores the different relationships to the market artists can take as critical strategies that can be explored creatively. The last section suggests an overall reordering of the relations between art, technology and the economy, opening up to perspectives in China as an emerging cultural and economic force. The relations produced in the West are at risk of being repeated. However, the social and political context in China provides a different narrative and sites for struggle, where resistance is not possible in the same way. It also opens up to new possibilities for a truly transformative cultural economy that does not follow the logics of neoliberal democracies.

Art and social critique

Artists have often existed on the margins in the Romantic tradition in the 18th and early 19thCentury, which celebrates artists as the individual genius and as subjects that strive for creative autonomy from routines of industrialized labor (McIntyre). Hans Abbing in his book, *Why Are Artists Poor?* details the impoverished conditions of artists that began largely in the 19th and 20th Century, where artists became more autonomous as they move away from dependencies on aristocratic wealth. During this time, there is also a growth in the number of artists without regulations like in other professions and with guilds, where anyone could feasibly become an artist (Abbing 127). Following countercultural movements of the 60s globally and the uprisings of 1968 in Paris, artists became associated with resistance movements and social change. Though within

western art history, the link can be traced back to Futurism, Dadaism and beyond (Mesch). Artists become entwined with leftist aesthetics of resistance that has evolved into forms of grassroots, DIY political-ethical subcultures and which can be found across art, music, fashion and technology.

The 1960s also saw the rise of Pop Art and the culture industry and art begins to converge with entertainment and mass consumer culture in which countercultural trends become appropriated (Adorno). Artists become cultural producers and 'content creators' as the 'long tail' becomes an economic model of the digital age (Anderson). The top one percent of artists on the art market are valued exponentially more than the ninety-nine percent. The majority of artists rely on their abilities to be entrepreneurial and to market and promote themselves online. The creative economy is celebrated as a progression for advanced economies in contrast to manual industrialized labor. In careers where one is free to be creative and pursue one's passions, knowledge work is considered desirable. However, it has also led to new forms of exploitation via low and unpaid labor, short-term contracts and precarious work conditions. As the self-realized entrepreneur becomes the ideal worker in the Post-Fordist economy, the 'independent artist' becomes 'the precariat'. The self-fashioning and self-determined individual in the economy becomes the creative proletariat and the oppressed subject within neoliberal democracies. Freedom to be creative and the aestheticization of the political, despite a desire to operate beyond the terms of the market, now only perpetuates it (Rebentisch). The incorporation of critique by capitalism has been detailed in the early work of Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello in the *The New Spirit Of Capitalism*, from 2006, which in many ways still holds relevance today.

Inoperative modes of resistance

In the 'post-crisis creative economy' artists operating in modes of cultural organization based on social critique, transgression and radicalism either become incorporated into the market or remain on the fringes barely subsisting and largely disempowered. Considering the rising cost of living in urban centers, to remain staunchly independent and anti-market can also suggest one's privilege, where artists in urban centers often are the ones who come for well-to-do families who can afford time to pursue art and relish radical thought (as an example, the term 'champagne socialist' reflects the contradictions of the liberal elite). Globalization has created a new proletarian creative class in cities, yet it has also alienated those outside of the cities in former industrialized towns that have emerged as the 'alt-right', resulting in the current culture wars. Radicalism and modes of resistance begins to take new meaning, as it is no longer solely associated with a revolutionary leftist working class tradition.

Simultaneously, the modes of resistance often associated with the left have also become coopted by the far-right, rendering them impotent (Berardi). As culture becomes central to the global economy (since the 1990s), we see the institutionalization of critique and the co-optation of the aesthetics of resistance. The aesthetic modes of organizing normally associated with leftist politics are glorified in advertising and branding initiatives (see Andrea Phillips's *The Revolution Brought to You By Nike* from 2017). The example here is fiction but there are also countless real-world examples, such as Pepsi's use of protests featuring Kendall Jenner (Wong). The language and aesthetics

of resistance are employed as branding strategy that renders them to mere spectacle. They become inoperative in their intentions to produce change and are appropriated to sell commodities in a projection of a certain lifestyle as affective advertising. The failures of the Occupy Movement are amplified as the aesthetics of protest becomes coopted by the economies that it sought to challenge.

Additionally, music subcultures and underground scenes often associated with radical political views are celebrated in magazines such as *Vice* and *I-D* magazine that promote youth culture and transgressive lifestyles as branding for advertisers (Thornton). The cultures of 'cool' that we promoted with 'Cool Britannia' become a neoliberal trend-chasing cycle that continually coopts grassroots cultural movements into the mainstream. Notions of 'cool' can be traced back to the beatniks and the Beat Generation of the 1950s and beyond through art and music cultures. Media promoting cool and progressive culture have been revealed to be rather regressive through allegations of sexual harassment and exploitation of content creators (Steel; Nolan). It has become evident today that subcultures are not intrinsically ideologically left, but also included those who are now associated with the far-right (Houpt).

In th art world, the aesthetics of resistance including radical protest movements and transgressive activist subcultures are also fetishized: for instance in the presentation of Occupy at Documenta 13 and the Berlin Biennale 7,[1] and exhibitions like *Disobedient Objects* (at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, in 2014) featuring videos, objects and ephemera from historical political movements.[2] These efforts take political movements out of their context and aestheticize them for an audience. Any action becomes inoperative in its intention to instigate change when placed within an art institutional context. The gestures to occupy a museum when it is permitted as art, no longer holds the political power of a staged illegal occupation within a space. Though art and aesthetics can potentially provide a transformative experience to alter one's perception of the world, the effects of direct action, collective organization against a political system and risks of arrest are removed. The political movements become an experience and performance that takes away confrontation with the issues at hand and are rendered impotent of their politics when presented as high art.

The art world is fraught with contradictions where the more radical or progressive works gain value and recognition despite reinforcing the institutions that they may seek to undermine (see Charlie Brooker's *Black Mirror* episode "Fifteen Million Merits"). It becomes evident in practices stemming back to institutional critique, where critique becomes institutionalized (Fraser 278), and as described by Marina Vishmidt it becomes as a 'homeostatic' process in which critique maintains and supports existing systems of power in which it self-adapts to challenges to it (263). Suhail Malik argues that contemporary art is caught in a bind after Duchamp, in which art continually tries to challenge the notion of art itself and yet continues to perpetuate it, unable to provide an exit from it:

> as re-iterations of the logic of escape, these efforts also perpetuate and entrench the very limitations of art they seek to overcome. The resulting interminable endgame of art's critical maneuvers serves after a short moment to provide new paradigmatic exemplars for it, a condition of tamed instability that characterizes contemporary art today… (Malik).

Art, culture, and politics converge in the post-crisis creative economy, where transgression maintains a neoliberal cycle in an on-going appropriation with no way out.

Moreover, and to a greater effect, online tactics normally associated with the left have been appropriated by the alt-right neo-nationalist movements. This shows how these technologies and tactics employed by artists and activists can be used for both social change and destruction, or in the words of Bernard Stiegler a *pharmakon* as both a remedy and poison. Right-wing groups can equally employ the tactics of hacktivist for racial profiling and online abuse, which has been made apparent by writers like Angela Nagle. The attacks from the far-right introduce a stark self-awareness of our biases and ideologies. This requires being sensitive to positions as educated, liberal populations living in urban centers, and to remind us of the tensions and conflicts created by those left out by globalization. Does the appropriation of modes of resistance and countercultural tactics by the far right and the market render them impotent, as they appropriate the means (memes) of production (Goerzen)? Do we abandon these modes of organization to find new ones? Is re-re-appropriation in an on-going culture war the answer?

DIY hacker culture also undergoes a transformation and assimilation into the neoliberal paradigm as maker culture, fab labs and accelerators.Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron discuss the 'Californian Ideology' where radical libertarian counterculture together with neoliberal free market ideals provided the foundation for the emergence of Silicon Valley as a dominant economic force (Cameron 12-17). Technological innovation constantly searches to 'disrupt' and revolutionize the industry without ever challenging its underlying logics. Sebastian Olma refers to Naomi Klein when he talks of "technologies of changeless change", when we are trapped in simulations of progress as innovation continues to perpetuate inequalities of wealth and power. Notions of sharing, collaboration and horizontal organization are valued and incorporated into corporate structures. The works of Simon Denny, in his exhibition "Products for Organizing" at Serpentine Gallery in 2016, illustrates the history of hacker culture and its evolution to corporate structures through models and processes of Holocracy[3] and Agile[4] management. The anti-authoritarian values of countercultures of hackers become coopted as protocols for productivity and control within corporate environments. The sense of freedom over one's work also provides a situation in which teams are self-organized yet still under the legal framework and financial control of a corporate entity.

Other examples of the appropriation of collaborative culture include the widely celebrated and critiqued 'sharing economy' such as Airbnb, which claims to take power away from large hotel groups to create a 'peer-to-peer' economy. However, despite good intentions, it presents a model that is not truly peer-to-peer when mediated by a centralized platform that skims a percentage off the top of every transaction. The amount of money funneled into Silicon Valley globally creates a more centralized power. In the 'Californian Ideology', internet and social media initially celebrated for its civic and revolutionary potential, no longer stands as a tool of liberation. Both the cyclical nature of artistic critique and techno-creativity that seeks constant innovation creates a homeostatic loop with no means to escape. It becomes urgent for artists to critically interrogate the economies in which they operate, without becoming complicit or subsumed by it.

Dispositions to the market

Artists on the left require a new strategy when considering their positions on the fringes becomes one of disempowerment through conditions of precarity and instrumentalization by the market. Infrastructures of a social system create power relations in which we are embedded. There is a need to reconsider the infrastructures, as well as the roles and narratives surrounding artists and creativity in society.Artists can take a multiplicity of relations to the market in which they can actively or passively engage or disengage with it. Disposition as discussed by Keller Easterling is a "relationship or relative position… as the unfolding relationship between potentials, resists science and codification in favor of art or practice." (251) Disposition is a set of potentials and relations that are possible within different situations. Easterling refers to dispositions primarily in context of urban architectures, however, it can also be approached through socialtechnical systems and modes of organization within the creative economy. For Easterling, "Altering perceptions, attentions, and habits of mind in this relationship may be as powerful as altering the geometric and volumetric space of the city. Any of these adjustments can re-center attentions, unseat powers, or redistribute economies." (251) To move between these codified relations is to also open up to a creative practice in relationship to the market in a mode of play to explore infinite possibilities. Below is a scale of some of the relations to the market artists can take, from total 'withdrawal' on one extreme to 'acceleration' on the other. This is my own interpretation of the current state of the cultural economy that also opens up to explore 'disposition' as a latent potential to experiment with the possibilities in-between. Artists employ different strategies in relationship to the market

at different points in their career. This scale helps provide a broader understanding of the possibilities for artists to suggest how they can regain agency through their disposition to the market and society.

Engagement with Market <——> Disengagement from Market
Accelerate | Innovate | Hack | Exploit | Participate | Adapt | Resist | Cope | Withdraw

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Figure 1: Market Relations Scale – Artist's relationship to the market.

To withdraw from the market is to quit art all together, for instance likenMarcel Duchamp who famously left the art world to play chess. To exist beyond the market could also mean to remain on the fringes as an outsider artist or hobbyist.

To cope is to employ strategies including therapies and meditation as a means of dealing with contemporary life. This strategy can be seen in artworks exploring themes of dealing with anxiety and mental health. An example could be works employing Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR) such as Claire Tolen and therapeutic Virtual Reality (VR) experiences such as those featured in the Big Anxiety Festival in Australia. These works provide relief and a way of dealing with the conditions of capitalism.

To resist is to protest and lobby for fairer labor conditions for artists. There are several groups including Working Artists and The Greater Economy (W.A.G.E) in the US and Precarious Workers Brigade and the Carrot Workers Collective in the UK who protest against unpaid internships, low and no pay for artists and exploitation of creative workers.

To adapt is to find other kinds of work to support one's living as a means to maintain integrity of one's artwork that is free from the market. Most artists will operate in this realm

by teaching for instance, to sustain their art practice.

To participate is to create works that are sellable as commercial artists who actively promotes themselves and seeks gallery representation.

To exploit the market is a strategy employed by artists such as Andy Warhol, Shepard Fairey (Obey Giant), Xu Zhen (MadeIn Gallery) who turn their artistic production into brands and mass produced commodities. Many of these artists will already have an established career and are able to sell their works to a wider audience. Artists can market and produce works that are easily sellable as products exploiting many distribution channels.

To hack or subvert the market is to create interventions or alternative economies. Paolo Cirio is an example of an artist who hacks the market by creating his own model in his Art Commodities project. In this project he creates an alternative model for the art market in which socially engaged projects gain value the more they are shared. Works are low cost so that anyone can participate. The project is underpinned using blockchain and smart contracts that ensure the artist is remunerated. His project subverts the systems of value within the art market, to make it accessible to anyone rather than the elite few.

To innovate is to create new business models and innovative start-ups for art. Jeremy Bailey's *LEAN Artist Project* is an example in which he creates an accelerator for artists. Using the language and formats of start-ups he invites artists to participate in boot-camps in which artists are asked to come up with a start-up as art project with support of mentors to ultimately pitch their idea to investors. The projects are intended to be functioning social businesses that can also support the artist's practice.

To accelerate is to take innovation and marketization to the extreme, and to approach a post-work society in which artists would be free to create beyond the market. This includes developments with artificial intelligence and imagining a world in which machines take over our jobs supported instead by a Universal Basic Income, freeing us to be creative beyond economic concerns (Srnicek and Williams).

This model is not intended to be definitive but to help guide an understanding of the different strategies of artists in relation to the market. The potential is to operate in-between in ways that do not follow existing models and ideological positions to the market. To consider one's disposition to the market opens up for new possibilities beyond dogma in a situation where there appears no way out. How can artists critically and creatively engage with the market to instigate change from within and beyond existing roles and ideologies? Overall, the individual may be limited against large economic powers and this requires a larger structural re-ordering which another social, political and cultural context and narrative may provide.

Reality check: Creative economy as cultural hegemony

The contemporary conditions and struggles within the culture industry in the West is one that presents itself as universal. However, it is one that is specific to 'advanced' economies suggesting a linear progression from an industrial to a post-industrial economy as the only way for social and economic progress. This trajectory is imposed globally as a hierarchy of development for emerging economies to follow. To exit from this dominating

discourse and conditions of oppression is to situate oneself within another context and political and economic timeline.

When considering the context of China, it presents an opportunity to re-think notions of resistance and cultural development. The creative economy has become a globalizing force that drives modernization in developing countries where it becomes a form of cultural hegemony as gentrification promotes a particular lifestyle and urban aesthetic. It is projected as an aspirational model, as Hong Kong and China rapidly develops its creative economy with new museums and cultural districts with cafes and restaurants and implied liberal cultural values.

Figure 2: Photo taken by the author of the interior decoration of a restaurant in Hong Kong featuring icons from US and UK popular culture, a fake fixed gear bicycle and 'free Wi-Fi' without any actual Wi-Fi available; an example of cultural hegemony and gentrification.

However, China remains largely oblivious to the culture wars in the West as the internet remains tightly controlled by the Communist Party, who filters out any dissenting voices. It makes the powers of Chinese state censorship seem impressive when even video bloggers are 'disciplined' for use of vulgar language online in the government's attempts to 'beautify' the internet (BBC News). Freedom celebrated as part of the libertarian ideals of the early internet is taken for granted in the West, but has also led to destructive cultural clashes and online

abuses. At the same time, market freedom in the West has allowed for companies like Facebook and Google to monopolize and control all data and information in support of plans for mass surveillance and predictive advertising. Control takes another form in democratic societies, placing power in the hands of corporations. In China, modes of resistance must take another form where change can only be instigated in collaboration with the government.

China has an authoritarian government, yet the Chinese Communist Party understands the necessity for freedom, and loosens regulations to allow for innovation within informal economies to emerge; particularly in Shenzhen as one of the 'Special Economic Zones' (Lindtner, Greenspan and Li). Experiments with capitalism are then incorporated into national policies, however never undermining the socialist regime (Wang and Li). There is tension between chaos and control in an environment that allows for a more agile economy with lax labor and copyright laws. In a state of growth, the country allows for creative and economic liberties though always under close watch of the government, and there are constant risks of over-stepping the line. Internal friendships with the state become integral to getting things done and for achieving economic goals. China presents an opportunity to provide an alternative to Western democratic capitalism, which has now found itself in a state of destruction with the culture wars, and in a homeostatic loop of neoliberal innovation. Though authoritarianism is clearly not the answer, China offers a re-framing and potential to consider another narrative for artists and their roles in society.

While the economic crisis had an impact on the Asian economies as the demand for exported commodities declined, it did not affect the emerging creative economy, and rather encouraged Hong Kong to move away

from its dependency on finance. Because of lower employment, people sought out cheap entertainment through online media and games, and as a result the creative economy grew in China following the economic crisis. Therefore the Asian economy puts efforts into developing creative content that pushes forward the creative economies in the region (Wuwei).

Precarity is, as discussed above, a condition of post-industrial developed economies. China's economy is still largely industrialized, though there is a shift towards a knowledge economy as a path carved out by the West. Cultural work is for those who are educated and can afford to pursue creative careers. In China, notions of precarity exist, but more in terms of rural migrant workers moving into cities in vast numbers often to work in factories in hopes to raise their family out of poverty. For a Chinese family, creative work is often considered non-lucrative and impractical. It first and foremost one's indebtedness and responsibility to one's family through 'filial piety' that will often place financial security before pursuing unstable creative work. The notion of 'saving face' often becomes more important when considering a career in art. Issues of precarity within the knowledge economy still exist in globalized urban centers like Shanghai, Shenzhen and Hong Kong. The gap in wealth and education between rural villages and advanced urban centers in China are unparalleled as inequalities are magnified. President Xi Jinping takes capitalism as a subsidiary to the socialist regime where it is managed and controlled by the Party, providing the necessary checks and balances to the market. However, the ultimate power of the state is also taken to the extreme where discipline, surveillance and control by the state have no limits.

The culture in China remains highly conservative and strongly patriarchal. For instance, it does not recognize gay marriage and oppresses minority populations particularly in Nepal and Western China. Many of the values and guiding principals from the Confucian and Taoist tradition help to maintain harmonious order in society. Philosopher Yuk Hui in his book, *The Question Concerning Technology in China* encourages China to develop its own technological and cultural model grounded in its own histories and technological relations embedded within Chinese philosophy. He suggests that every culture and country should explore its own history to create a plurality of relations with technology, which do not follow Western models of modernity. This challenges globalization and modernization (as well as the culture industry) as the economic model that has become a universalizing force and narrative. How to reconnect and redefine technical relations in China and internationally remains a broader challenge and long-term project to work towards.

Overall, the situation in Europe and America after the economic crisis in 2008 is largely a conflict caught in a neoliberal cannibalistic cycle and culture war. The current situation instigates a sense of fear, anxiety and uncertainty, and a lack of vision for the future. Artists on the left are powerless as their positions are subsumed by the market and coopted by the far-right. To regain agency artists can consider their relationship to the market as part of their creative practice itself. It opens up for possibilities to experiment and explore the extremes of engagement with the market, and also to find the spaces in-between that may open up new possibilities. The context in the West is often presented as universal; yet it potentially blind us from the possibilities of another path. The context in China offers its own version of capitalism with Chinese characteristics (though not without its own pitfalls). It offers another political and cultural context that opens up to considerations and possible relations with

technology grounded within Chinese history and philosophy. In a state of growth, China is optimistic towards the future, actively experimenting with the possibilities of the market, but also with the power to implement appropriate checks and balances under ultimate state power. Though rapid development has led to ecological disaster, which is a global concern, a centralized government also has the power to make the necessary broad sweeping changes. The failures of neoliberal democracies become apparent with the rise of the alt-right and the monopolization of the internet by large corporates such as Google and Facebook. In China, art and culture is tied to industry as a model for economic development with a large presence of art in shopping malls, however, creating a model for art sustained by commerce and without contradiction. Though this model may not be ideal, can we find ways to reconnect art and technology's role in society beyond notions of progress, modernization and economic maximization? What new models for culture can we imagine where artists can truly play a crucial role in shaping the future of the world and economy without being complicit, instrumentalized or subsumed by it?

Notes

[1] Sebastian Loewe's paper details the difference when the Occupy movement is presented within an art context such as in Documenta or the Berlin Biennale. The act of resistance is no longer present since there is no resistance against the institution of art and the aesthetics of protest become spectacle or a 'human zoo' presented as an artwork framed as a Joseph Beuy's social sculpture. These presentations of Occupy in art exhibitions did not add to the movement or aid its political demands, but rather rendered them impotent. The context of art becomes an ineffective platform for instigating any political change beyond awareness or aesthetic pleasure.

[2] The exhibition features objects from different historical protests and social movements as symbols of the practices of resistance. Posters, banners, graffiti and loudspeakers feature widely as the aesthetics of protest take precedence over the issues and results of their struggles.

[3] Holocracy is a method of non-hierarchical management created by entrepreneur Brian Robertson that encourages peer-to-peer collaboration and a system for democratic consensus decision-making. However, in the case of the company Zappos, which adopted this method, it was revealed to be extremely hierarchical, bureaucratic and restrictive form of management (Denning). This reflects the appropriation of values into corporate management structures that appear ideal on the surface, but rather reinforce existing power structures.

[4] Agile management is a popular form of self-organizing of teams in a flexible, collaborative and reflexive manner for software development and design projects. It ensures problems are dealt with as they arise in an iterative process. It is a means for managing creativity that end up being more of a management trend to appeal to employees and ensure productivity of workers. Simon Denny's exhibition draws links from the evolution of hacker culture to its incorporation into the corporate structures of Silicon Valley.

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