

Post-Political, Post-Critical, Post-Internet

Why Can't Leftists Be More Like Fascists?

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Precarity is both viewed as a result of lower living standards, and something that can give millennials an adaptive edge in today's 'libidinal' economy. The rise of Post-Internet style in contemporary art takes up this positioning, laying a gloss over or even displacing criticality. The authors create a framework in which to read this transition, and offer that lines may need to be redrawn with respect to representation in contemporary art.

In his address at Moscow University in 1988, President Ronald Reagan stood in front of a mural of the October Revolution. Pitting revolution against revolution, Reagan extolled the virtues of the 'tiny silicon chip,' the emblem for his revolution, which would allow humanity to break 'through the material conditions of existence' to enter a dematerialized world of information and code. His was an updated version of the American dream: a coming digital sphere promising universal connectivity, within which, value would be created ex nihilo, through the mere performativity of social signs, tying finance to the (in)formal subsumption of all aspects of life. It was not Reagan who invented this dream of a dematerialized economy but it was he who turned it into a capitalist religion: 'Like a chrysalis,' Reagan argued 'we're emerging from the economy of the Industrial Revolution – an economy confined to and limited by the Earth's physical resources – into, as one economist titled his book, "The Economy in Mind", in which there are no bounds on human imagination and the freedom to create is the most precious natural resource.' Invoking the 'ancient wisdom' of the Bible, the president concluded: 'In the beginning was the spirit, and it was from this spirit that the material abundance of creation issued forth.'¹ Reaganomics shares with information theory the notion that the world is primarily code, material concretion being wholly secondary.

When Reagan invoked the 'spirit' he was unwittingly referring to the horizon that had been delineated by cybernetics in the 1940s: reconceptualized as information systems, humans, machines and nature were rendered semiotically transparent to one another. The enormous cultural appeal of this claim is partially owed to the fact that it does not simply describe a techno-utopia, it also promises to return mankind to a non-alienated, potentially enchanted, 'ecological' condition: it epitomizes the West's pluripresent desire for the reconciliation of humanity with both nature and technology. Industrialization proceeded by shocks; its relation with the social and individual body was one of violence and mutilation, symbolic as well as literal. By contrast, the digital turn was alleged to foster abundance instead of scarcity, and integration instead of divisiveness. 'The virtual geography of the communication vector,' as McKenzie Wark notes, 'emerges as the promise of a space where the contradictions of second nature can be resolved,' and alienation can be undone: a techno-ecology promising to heal the wounds industrialization inflicted on the social

body through full participation and therapeutic immersion.²

Cybernetics also inherited the modern bewilderment over the 'being-in-communication' of so-called primitive societies, and their mode of 'participation' in all things. This is the backdrop against which one can understand Marshall McLuhan's insistence that, the information age would return humanity to a 'tribal' state of sociality.³ Rather than reflecting egalitarian principles, however, this tech-enabled tribalism was algorithmically modelled on the conventions of competition, game theory and on a certain number of ideas (and not others) about nature and evolution. To the extent that cyber-capitalism appears increasingly hard to tell apart from this over-humanized nature, it has proven relatively easy to exploit the primordial relationality of the subject, now constituted in cyber-modulated social milieus. No longer encumbered by political strife and ideological antagonism, the world, we are told, will witness unending market-driven prosperity and unabated growth, the denouement of which would be the 'end of history':⁴ the wide cultural convergence of an iterative liberal economy as the final form of human government.

In recent years several discourses have coalesced around the notion of affirmation, which stem from this belief in capitalism as totality.⁵ From accelerationism (affirmational politics) to the Post-Internet style (affirmational aesthetics), said positions bank on the above-described narrative of dematerialization-as-redemption from the 'failures of modernity' to argue that capitalism can disrupt its own processes in a creative way, and reinvent itself as a novel socioeconomic figure. Digitalizing the mode of production will automatically change the exploitative nature of the relations of production, as well as solve all of capitalism's contradictions. In order to bring about this leap, the role of both aesthetics and the political economy is to accelerate technological advances, until these quantitative developments muster a qualitative revolution, ushering in the digital technopia: a sharing economy based on collaborative consumption.

Channelling start-up philosophy, the editorial collective in charge of curating the 9th Berlin Biennale, names itself DIS. DIS evokes 'disruption,' an abbreviated form of 'disruptive innovation,' the entrepreneurial mantra of the tech industry; a new-age version of early twentieth-century economist Joseph Schumpeter's 'creative destruction,' it aims at disrupting existing markets and value networks, displacing established agents, products and alliances. When applied to the institutional context within which contemporary art circulates, 'disruption' means the displacement of critical theory and the collapsing of the (ever-thinning) distinction between art and the creative industries.

Fittingly, the so-called Post-Internet style claims to constitute a 'condition.' Grafting biological concepts onto aesthetics and moral values onto evolution, the introduction of the Internet is said to constitute an evolutionary threshold: in a *Logan's Run*-like logic the concept of digital natives, masks a sociopolitical loss (the decline in living standards) as an evolutionary gain (millennials have an adaptive advantage). Hence the shiny, glossy surfaces, Post-Internet leans heavily into: these slippery, liquid surfaces are a cypher for social instability, but precariousness is not challenged or addressed politically; rather, infused with sexual energy, it is recuperated into a libidinal economy.

Generational gaps are themselves an effect of the way consumer goods are marketed to different demographics. Post-Internet cuts itself off from the legacies of institutional critique, net art or relational aesthetics – obvious artistic precedents – to exploit the legacy of art as locus of the 'creative' bourgeois subject, conflating the mediatization of the social sign, social-media enhanced narcissism and the magic of financial value-creation. 'Digital' here does not simply refer to a mode of production; it instead refers to a mode of representation and to the cultural logic of its value form. The Post-Internet style is the aesthetic regime of dotcom neoliberalism: an ideological category that blends together an

element of truth (the contemporary art market is, much like financial markets, seemingly able to generate value out of nothing but social investments and desire, thus acting out the elitist fantasy of a world without proletarians) with an element of untruth (this historical contingency is misrecognized as the 'essence' of the artwork) to implement a world in which art can only exist as branding and the artist can only exist as a brand name. All ideologies result from the confusion between what nature is and what convention does: arguing that the only valid form of engagement with the digital economy is via the reification of its hegemonic modalities, the Post-Internet style reconceptualizes the role of contemporary art in order to render aesthetic experience a direct extension of corporate spectacle.

A notable example featured in the Berlin Biennale, is Christopher Kulendran Thomas's *New Eelam* (2016), a start-up for global housing time-sharing that contends collaborative consumption is the only way to stave off nation-state genocidal tendencies. Lumping together the mass slaughter of Tamils by the Sri Lankan government in the final stages of the civil war, with Amazon founder Jeff Bezos's business acumen, Kulendran Thomas concludes that the sharing economy is the only feasible communist utopia. Kulendran Thomas's idioms speak the language of inclusiveness and harmony, but in order for this utopia to materialize, citizenship must be tied to shareholding, not to birth or naturalization rights. *New Eelam's* motto is 'Liquid Citizenship.' Not surprisingly, PayPal founder Peter Thiel, also believes that citizenship rights ought to be restricted to shareholders. 'Liquidity' is a convention of plasticity, which carries the promise of malleability demanded by post-Fordist economies. Irony, here, is in the eye of the beholder: because art audiences have been trained to recognize celebration as a critical gesture, ever since Pop was marketed as a significant conceptual turn, these works can feed off affirmation as the default mode of criticism whilst finishing it off.

Needless to say, Post-Internet did not invent affirmation as a commercially viable mode of artistic production. In the face of an overpowering culture industry and the new symbolic universe of market semiotics, which emerged in full force in the 1970s, the field of cultural production that became known as 'contemporary art' began to extensively employ mimetic or affirmational strategies,⁶ in order to secure its precarious and paradoxical state of semi- autonomy. Echoing earlier avant-garde strategies of negation as immanent critique, this slippage between partial identity and semi-autonomy came to constitute the content of the artwork: the widely accepted cultural form upon which contemporary art's boundless expansion was built.

As a Post-Internet gesamtkunstwerk, the 9th Berlin Biennale performs one single conceptual gesture: to affirm the identity between art and capital. Paradoxically, this gesture is rendered legible by that which it denies, being the legacy of modernism as an oppositional or autonomous figure vis a vis the political economy. The Post-Internet style is, one could say, the negation of the negation. But this double negative points toward a positive; optimized for financial accumulation, Post-Internet art constitutes the value form of digital capitalism,⁷ a global visual idiom that conflates the vectors of Silicon Valley commodity space with the strategy space of the United States empire. Revolving around an endless semiotic loop, history itself becomes an 'enclosed space surrounded and sealed by American power.'⁸

This inability to imagine an outside to financial subsumption can also be construed as a symptom of the overwhelming fear of exclusion that accompanies the increasing precarization of life: a social anxiety masquerading as an aesthetic theory. The critical vantage point might no longer secure admittance into capitalist systems of valorization, hence the need to perform one's complicity – a quest for inclusion, that turns 'life' itself into a job application for a non-existing job you hope will prevent you from falling into the ranks of surplus populations that are rendered invisible, voiceless and ultimately non-

existent. But however hysterically blind, this modality of engagement is also and above all a call for mobilization – a form of violence in the service of coming total warfare.

‘Why Should Fascists Have All the Fun?’ asks a Not in the Berlin Biennale (a communication and marketing campaign created for the 9th Berlin Biennale) poster by Roe Ethridge, Chris Kraus and Babak Radboy. The image features a disabled woman sitting in a wheelchair wearing kitten heels, her legs crossed in a slightly sexual pose. Presumably a disabled body should also be able to tap into the reservoir of sexual energy fascism epitomizes and share in the allure of dominance and submission. But to link sexuality and power is not just another fantasy. The ‘fun’ that fascists are having is the fun of forcing others to yield. The political correlate of this libidinal investment in asymmetry is inequality – and what would seem worth defending as a minority or adversary taste, can become indefensible once the context changes,⁹ once the fantasy of the fascist super body is not just a sexual quirk but an increasingly strong political force.

This eroticization of unyielding strength is underscored by Radboy’s rhetorical swagger – ‘We should learn from Trump’ in order to ‘Make art fun again!’ as well as by worship of the venture capitalist and the hacker – the only political subjects the Berlin Biennale recognizes. The hacker, here, is not an experimental, collective subject, but rather the self-sufficient lone wolf, the West Coast version of the American pioneer. Having missed the historical opportunity to actualize a techno-emancipatory social form, these figures reconcile the imperatives of self-reliance and individualism with the current social immobility and cultural atavism via a universalization of survivalism and the weaponized psychology from which it springs. By grafting evolutionary tropes onto information theory, this survivalist psychology legitimizes the devolution of the social as slipped into a new ‘natural condition.’ Feeding off the conflation between the digital revolution and the conservative revolution brought about by Reaganomics, the social Darwinism that captured the imagination of the elites in the age of imperialism (fuelling fantasies of racial superiority and naturalizing genocidal extinction) returns, here, as the ‘tribal’ martialized imaginary of the self-fashioned digital natives in the urban jungle.

Only able to grasp sociality as a temporary alliance made to exact some calculable benefit, this Malthusian subject exhibits a quasi-religious commitment to the deep identity of capitalism and nature: memes stand for the digital economy as genes stand for evolutionary theory. But this deep identity is conventional, not material, and as such, it needs manufacturing – that is the role of artists like Timur Si-Qin, a self-professed ‘evolution nerd,’ whose work is the latest redress of Herbert Spencer’s ‘survival of the fittest.’ Micromanaging the evolutionary claim Post-Internet makes on a meta-level, the advertisement-inspired aesthetics of Si-Qin’s artworks allegedly mirrors how ‘humans’ are evolutionarily ‘programmed’ to read signs and clues about ‘fitness’ in their environment.¹⁰ Elsewhere this goes by the name of ‘evolutionary aesthetics’: by and large an attempt to subsume aesthetics in sexual selection and sexual selection in natural selection and its ‘byproducts,’ Si-Qin’s discourse assimilates creativity onto a reductionist biological functionality: the Internet and Facebook are just ‘natural’ extensions of the mechanisms of gene reproduction and evolutionary coding. Instantiated as corporate animism, Si-Qin’s installations ‘paradoxically’ link a sexualized, martial survivalism with a false, CGI-powered ‘reconciliation’ of nature with culture, by subsuming the former under the ‘ultimate causes’ derived from the latter. Though it would be possible to think of ‘evolutionary aesthetics’ as a decoupling of signs from instrumental functionality, what is proposed here is its opposite: a de-autonomization, which seeks to firmly tie cultural signs to the ‘evolutionary’ principles of capitalism-as-nature. ‘Science,’ here, is just a cipher for authority. Mimicry is its aesthetic ideology. Hence the need to turn semantic indeterminacy into the idiom of the fetish: the fetish turns lack into showmanship, into a drama of presence and absence charged with sexual intensity.

This is why the 'drag' of the biennale's subtitle 'The Present in Drag' does not point to a queer or camp magnification of that which is often misrecognized as natural, but rather to a programmatic erasure of (critical) difference, which recuperates the feminist critique of nature / culture binaries in order to deploy it in the service of domination. Once 'nature' disappears everything becomes a human sign, what German author Diedrich Diederichsen called a 'vulgar Latourian fairy-tale' in strict conformity with the regime of neoliberal finance.

But the triumphalism of its sexually charged surface-effect notwithstanding, this post-critical attitude also conceals outspread despondency and deep-seated resignation. By subjugating the 'products of the human imagination' to biological functionality, evolutionary aesthetics is but a defeatist call for adaptation via conformism. In biology, mimicry is usually seen as an adaptive behaviour: faced with an impending threat life resorts to 'defensive adaptation' blending into its surroundings – a reaction that was first identified by art critique Carl Einstein in the 1930s as 'defence against death through the anticipation of death' and later theorized by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. In order to survive, life must mimic death, it must become inanimate and insentient, just like inorganic matter. Adaptive strategies, however, rarely save the animal from falling prey – in fact, they tend to make most species more vulnerable. Renegade surrealist Roger Caillois referred to it as 'dangerous luxury,' a spell that ultimately traps the sorcerer. By making the critique of power directly useful to power itself, 'contemporary art' contributed to the subsumption of working class experience and sociality into corporate culture: mimetic critique has, in this sense, been a paradigmatic 'dangerous luxury.' The intensifying alliance between art and finance revolves around this tacit agreement to simultaneously obscure and celebrate this 'curious flip-flop of power and assimilation.'

Now that this tacitly accepted paradigm that gives contemporary art its institutional consistency has grown to become a hegemonic cultural modality, what had hitherto been concealed can be flaunted openly, namely that affirmation adds 'to the power of the thing critiqued' rather than subtracting from it.¹¹ But that also means that the term 'contemporary art' came to acquire contradictory meanings: it can refer to ways of effectively claiming representation, or it can refer to a mode of expression which employs a set of formal tropes as a means to limit ways of effectively claiming representation – and it is thus high time to draw the trenchlines anew.

Some of the ideas in this essay appeared in previous writings by the authors, namely: Ana Teixeira Pinto's 'Can the Cultural Logic of the Digital Era be Exhibited?' for *WdW Review* and in Anselm Franke's column 'Emancipatory Mimesis' for *Metropolis M*.

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Footnotes

1. Ronald Reagan, address at Moscow State University, 31 May 1988. 'I want to talk about a very different revolution that is taking place right now, quietly sweeping the globe without bloodshed or conflict. ... It's been called the technological or information revolution, and as its emblem, one might take the tiny silicon chip, no bigger than a fingerprint...'
2. McKenzie Wark, 'The Sublime Language of My Century,' *Public Seminar*, 14 May 2016, www.publicseminar.org.
3. See Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).
4. The concept of the 'end of history' was put forth by conservative political scientist Francis Fukuyama in his 1989 text 'The End of History?,' *The National Interest*, no. 16 (Summer 1989):4.
5. Once historical contingency (the hegemony of the capitalist mode of production after the fall of the USSR) is misrecognized as political necessity, it becomes self-evident that there is no outside to capitalism, hence the only way out is the way through.
6. Benjamin Buchloh had already referred to Conceptual Art's paradoxical mixture of antagonism and affirmation by stating that its 'critical annihilation of cultural conventions itself immediately acquires the conditions of the spectacle'. See 'Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetics of Administration to the Critique of Institutions,' *October 55* (Winter, 1990): 105–143.
7. Stefan Heidenreich in 'Freeportism as Style and Ideology: Post-Internet and Speculative Realism, Part II,' *e- flux journal 73* (May 2016).
8. Paul N. Edwards, *The Closed World: Computers and the Politics of Discourse in Cold War America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 8.
9. Susan Sontag, 'Notes on "Camp,"' *The Partisan Review* (Fall 1964): 515–530, <http://faculty.georgetown.edu>.
10. See www.sleek-mag.com.
11. Michael Taussig, *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 43.

Tags

Aesthetics, Art Discourse, Capitalism

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