

Changing Places

Loren Munk
East 10th Street (small), 2006,
oil on linen, 41×46 cm

As the art industry has ballooned over the last two decades, the role that art plays in city economies has become increasingly complex. *Dan Fox* talks to *Nils Norman*, *Timotheus Vermeulen*, *Anton Vidokle* and *Sharon Zukin* about art, gentrification and artistic freedom





Courtesy: the artist

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SHARON ZUKIN

is professor of sociology at Brooklyn College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, USA. Her book *Landscapes of Power: From Detroit to Disney World* (1991) won the C. Wright Mills Award. Her most recent book is *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places* (2010).

Artist-designed time-based currencies for the e-flux time/bank project curated by Anton Vidokle and Julieta Aranda (all 2009):

- 1
Nikolaus Hirsch
- 2
Sarah Morris
- 3
Francesca Grassi
- 4
Judi Wertheim
- 5
Mariana Silva
- 6
Harrell Fletcher
- 7 & 8
Superflex
- 9
Carolina Caycedo
- 10
Liam Gillick
- 11
Michael Smith

DAN FOX

Sharon, your 1989 book *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change* examined how, in 1960s and '70s New York City, artists took over buildings in areas once primarily used for industry, and re-purposed them as homes, studios and galleries. This helped create a boosterist image of New York as a cultural destination, in contrast to the economic collapse the city was then suffering; the arts became an emblem of urban pride, a useful tool for property development and tourism. Twenty-three years on, how do you see the role of artists in this nexus of real-estate, city politics and corporate business, and the 'creative industries' as having changed?

SHARON ZUKIN

Thirty years ago, people began to think that living near artists had an economic, if not a cultural, value. SoHo, in lower Manhattan, which had just been transformed from a dilapidated factory zone into an edgy artists' district, acquired a high-price aura of residential chic. At first, the residents were artists who needed large spaces at cheap rents for both living and working. But art collectors and fashion designers also began to buy or rent lofts there. Soon, their comfortable, well-equipped, beautifully designed living spaces were written up in the media. This established both the appeal of 'loft living' and the market value of living near artists.

These changes were related to a much broader commodification of aesthetics. This ranged from the production of goods connected to a more 'authentic' lifestyle, which shows the effects of the counterculture of the 1960s at least as much as the influence of artists, to the mass marketing of designer labels, which reflects a corporate response to status anxiety. Lifestyle journalism developed a huge public of readers and viewers, and major media increased both coverage and criticism of the symbolic economy of fashion, food, architecture and art. With greater affluence, many middle-class consumers developed a greater appreciation of aesthetics – or at least they developed a desire to consume aesthetic experiences. Tourism became a major Postmodern industry, and tourists did a Grand Tour of the world's art museums to get a cultural fix.

Where are artists themselves in this process? They are still the canaries in the mine of gentrification, testing marginalized neighbourhoods to see if they can develop viable forms of life. When I wrote *Loft Living*, I thought that the idea of living near artists' studios appealed to affluent people outside the art world. But now I think that they are drawn to areas where artists live because of the amenities that entrepreneurial artists develop for other artists like themselves – galleries, bars, cafés and restaurants. By the time I wrote *Naked City* in 2010, I saw the rise of Williamsburg, in Brooklyn, as telescoping SoHo's development.

It wasn't the appeal of artists that drew non-artists there. They wanted to see the neighbourhood that *New York* magazine called 'the next' bohemian district. They wanted to go to the certifiably cool restaurants and bars. Besides certifying neighbourhoods, artists also provide labour to the symbolic economy – they are graphic artists, art designers, illustrators, digital media specialists. They are performers who attract tourists to Broadway, off-Broadway, and even farther from the commercial track. They are producers whose work is offered for sale at art fairs and presented at dance and theatre festivals. Low-key entrepreneurs can no longer pay the rent for their studios or music bars and have to move out or shut down. But culture industries thrive on the continuous churn of new talent, on multiple markets. Just as culture shadows finance in the symbolic economy, so wealthy investors, developers, residents and visitors support the many markets and venues for culture that global cities provide.

Artists come to cities because of their rich cultural resources, including the social diversity that stimulates creative innovation. They also come because they have the best chance to sell their work there, or at least to get the attention of critics, curators and gallery owners. The surplus of talent, on the one hand, and wealth, on the other, gives global cities an unbeatable panorama of cultural spaces. From New York to Shanghai, these cities create alternative art spaces, commercial art galleries and spectacular art museums, each catering to its own market but all building the city's 'brand'. Public art is promoted in the media and becomes a tourist attraction. From the point of view of city officials, building a modern art museum and supporting public art is an investment strategy. But subsidizing space for artists – or providing jobs that utilize artists' skills – is not on the official agenda. Though art makes cities great, artists are compelled to make their own way.

ANTON VIDOKLE

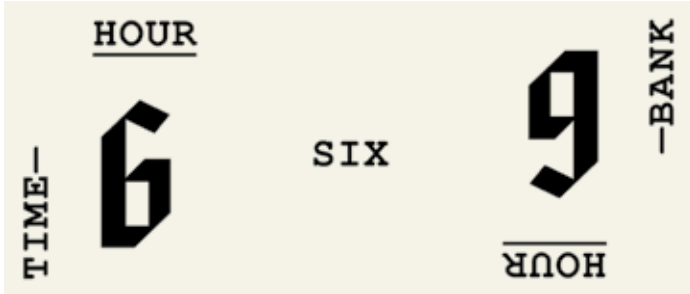
It's also important to think about time. Time is as much at a premium in a large metropolis – and maybe even more so – as living or working space. If there is this urgent need for a different organization of resources, distribution of time becomes very significant. A couple of years ago at e-flux, we started to work on a time bank. Time banks are not a new invention and are rooted in early 19th-century socialist and anarchist experiments with time-based currencies, developed by figures like Robert Owen, Josiah Warren and others, based largely on the labour theory of value. During the last recession in the US, in the early 1990s, Paul Glover, a community organizer in Ithaca, New York, set up the first contemporary time bank by convincing his neighbours to help each other get things done without the use of dollars, by exchanging their skills and time.



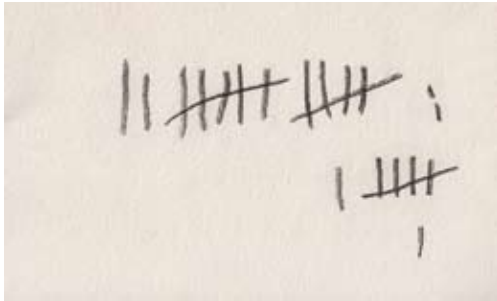
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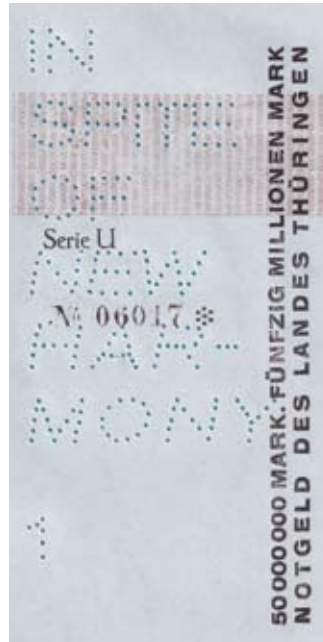
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Courtesy: e-flux, New York

'Artists are still the canaries in the mine of gentrification, testing a marginalized neighbourhood to see if they can develop viable forms of life there.'

SHARON ZUKIN



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He issued a local currency – Ithaca Hours – which is still in circulation today. We were very inspired by this model and, together with Julieta Aranda, organized a time bank for artists, writers, curators and others in the arts, as well as for those from other walks of life who are interested in being a part of such a community.

A time bank is a very different structure than a physical art space: it exists primarily as a series of exchanges that happen over time across many different locations. These exchanges tend to have a rather broad range: from practical things like getting help with fixing your bike and organization of cultural events to education and actual artistic practice. We are trying to develop a parallel economy, in which one does not have to be caught between a rock and a hard place, where there can be more balance between our needs and our pleasure.

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1
Trisha Brown
Roof Piece, 1973, black and white
photograph by
Babette Mangolte, New York

2
Free poster made by Occupy
London, 2011

3
Protestors gather in Pershing
Square after a march through
Los Angeles organized by Occupy
LA for International Worker's day,
1 May 2012

1 courtesy: © 1973 Babette Mangolte • 2 photograph: Michal Czerwonka/Getty Images

NILS NORMAN

There were some very interesting articles in the *FT Weekend* recently [28–29 April 2012]. On the front page of the ‘House & Home’ section was an article by Tanya Powley and Lucy Warwick-Ching titled ‘Stateless and Super-Rich’. The piece describes how extremely wealthy individuals are creating a new form of gentrification. As Loretta Lees, Tom Slater and Elvin Wylie describe in their book *Gentrification* [2008], it’s a process whereby a super-mobile, global elite – ‘the stateless super-rich’ – lead nomadic season-driven lifestyles and carve out enclaves in major cities across the globe.

According to the *FT*, ‘buyers aggravate the housing shortages prevalent in these cities while spending less in the local economy’, turning city centres into ‘playgrounds for the wealthy’, changing the visual order of the city and creating areas that Dutch sociologist Saskia Sassen describes as ‘feeling less like a neighbourhood and more like a corporate district’. It’s unknown how this will impact on cities in the coming years but it seems that this is the only property market that is booming now while everything else is moribund, very much like the situation in the art market, both being ‘safe havens’ for international money.

Also in the newspaper, a special section titled ‘Collecting’ has three large articles about the Frieze Art Fair in New York, and in the *FT Magazine* there is a piece on artists commissioned for the fair by Frieze Projects. International art fairs have replaced the traditional function of the gallery – possibly, some gallerists would argue, making them redundant – and their broader discursive programming, with projects, talks and seminars, can be seen as taking over the function of the biennial and local public art spaces. One article argues that, for New York, Frieze Art Fair decided to operate from Randall’s Island as a kind of off-shore operation so that it could avoid having to employ unionized labour. New York City has a rich and hard-fought culture of public institutions that have, since the late 1970s, been slowly eroded by neoliberalism and the expansion of the super-prime real-estate market described above. I don’t believe that these articles are in the same edition by coincidence. They are very much part of an ongoing globalization process in which art fairs are part of the super-gentrifying playscape they describe.

Many artists are of course complicit with these processes. (It’s hard to generalize about how artists are contributing – or not – as a generic group.) But some who are critical of how they are inscribed within gentrification processes are becoming more militant and refusing to participate in such events. Groups of artists interested in these problems are developing real alternatives amongst themselves, in communities and larger

networks, and in that sense are trying to eliminate the ‘rock and the hard place’ option through self-organizing and collective action.

DF One of the problems is that the ‘art world’ superstructure has grown so large that it’s difficult to navigate our way through it with a clear perspective on our own roles. How do you stay independent or achieve agency amid such a tangle of institutions and businesses? One option would involve leaving the ‘art world’ altogether, although most people would be reluctant to do so. I also think cognitive dissonances can be identified amongst those who Nils says ‘are critical of how they are inscribed within gentrification processes’. For instance, artists who claim radical political positions from within the support structure of major museum or commercial gallery exhibitions, and who speak in visual codes legible to those in the specialist subculture of art. But it’s tricky; even having this conversation is complicated by whatever its host context may be, whether that’s an art magazine, not-for-profit venue, or wherever.

AV Economic dependency on the art industry is probably not the only thing that keeps artists from just walking away: you can also support your art practice by doing something else and many do just that. All of these institutions you mention control access to audiences, be it the professional audience of your peers or a broader audience interested in art. This is also probably one of the main reasons why artists tend to live in cities: to be a part of a community, a conversation. Cities are not merely markets.

There have been several moments in recent history when artists tried to move out of cities for various reasons, most recently in the ’70s. It seems to me this was unsustainable and most have moved back since then. Martha Rosler, in her 2010 essay ‘Culture Class: Art, Creativity, Urbanism’, cites Chantal Mouffe’s suggestion that artists should not abandon the museum – meaning

the art world – and adds that we should also not abandon the city. I fully agree with this.

TIMOTHEUS VERMEULEN

I want to add something to Sharon’s analysis of what makes urban spaces re-appropriated by artists attractive for others. The artist is a producer who is at once the embodiment of late-capitalist production and yet at odds with what people understand that mode of production to be. The artist produces art works. The artist also produces a particular kind of space: a space that may be an area or a studio, isolated or entwined with a community, but one that appears to allow for creative agency and represents to the public a kind of freedom to do what you want. The artist also produces a time that is productive but does not necessarily adhere to the schedules associated with capitalist production (the kind of flexible economy that is, in fact, the bread and butter of our current financial system). So the part of a city re-appropriated by the artist – or rather, the urban space and time produced by that artist – introduces a rhythm of the everyday that appears playful, like a game of skipping; it allows people to join in at their own pace, and participate in the creation of the game.

The philosopher Henri Lefebvre, whom Sharon has written about elsewhere, talks about cities being produced in a dialectic between three forces: the representation of space – how large corporations, governments and planners imagine a space to be; the representational space – the dreams and memories of those inhabiting space; and spatial practice – the ways in which we think we need to use space (drive on a motorway and not the pavement, walk on the pavement and not the motorway, etc.). For Lefebvre, the force that is dominant in the production of modern cities is the representation of space, the power of banks and national and local governments. In big cities, CEOs and officials decide how places can be used. Exchange of money: yes. Occupy: no. Commuter: yes. Homeless person: no, and so on.



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‘Branding, city tourism, creative industries, gentrification and so on have turned the artistic rhythm into just another tune stored on the keyboard of capitalism.’

TIMOTHEUS VERMEULEN

What artists do, at least in the popular imagination, by introducing alternative rhythms of everyday experience, is strengthen the forces of representational space and spatial practice so that the community, too, regains its part in the decision-making process. The irony is, of course, that those who seem to seek this equality most – the gentrifiers – are precisely the ones whose very job it is to destroy it. I think the negotiation that Dan talks about – between

doing one thing while also seeing the value in doing its opposite – is one of the key issues of our current era. In modern times, such a negotiation did not need to exist because you were supposed to choose one thing – the Utopia of the Enlightenment, the Utopia of neoliberalism, the Utopia of communism – over all other things. In Postmodernism, this negotiation was irrelevant because all things were equally significant. Yet today, pressured

by economic, political and ecological crises, we feel the need to choose, whilst still understanding that no one thing is inherently more valuable than another. I think it is about a constant repositioning, where the artist needs to continually re-appraise the pros and cons of the situation. One might call this hypocrisy, but it could also be seen as the game of skipping.

AV These things that Tim mentions – the freedom to do what you want, the production of urban space-time, the skipping game – interest me a lot. It seems to me that artists today can aspire to a certain kind of sovereignty. In theory, at least, contemporary artists can decide what kind of practice they want to have, what subject matter is important to them, or what form it may take – not merely to satisfy a patron, but to follow their own interests. This feels so natural now, yet only a few hundred years ago this type of artistic position was pretty much inconceivable.

The possibility of artistic sovereignty did not emerge from nothing, but was a result of a long struggle for independence from religious authorities, from class hegemony, from normative and conservative public tastes, from critics, and so on. While this freedom now appears to be synonymous with the very definition of art, I don't



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1 & 2
 Digital renderings of the Marina Abramović
 Institute for the Preservation of Performance
 Art (MAI), Hudson, New York

3
 Mladen Stilinović,
 from the series 'Artist at Work', 1978,
 black and white photograph

think it can be taken for granted. Much like popular sovereignty, artistic sovereignty is perpetually being contained, contested, detoured or co-opted by the art market, the state, art institutions and other powers. While as an artist you may think that you are free to do what you want, in order for it to be economically sustainable, critically acknowledged or just even to bring it into contact with the art audience, it needs to conform to certain network protocols that dictate what sort of production can enter circulation. With the ever-increasing professionalization in the arts today, and the economic restraints of the art world, it seems that the field is moving towards restoring a more prescriptive position towards the artist.

TV I agree. Artistic sovereignty is a discursive construct, perhaps even a myth, that is always negotiated through cultural, spatial and historical parameters.

When I say that artists can introduce a particular kind of rhythm into the city that makes people want to participate in its production, I don't mean to say that cities have no rhythm of their own. They do, of course – the pulsating, throbbing rhythm of Robert Musil's Vienna; the irregular, even atonal rhythm of Roberto Bolaño's Ciudad Juárez; the sluggish rhythm of Aki Kaurismäki's Helsinki. What matters is that artists introduce an alternative rhythm in the mind of the public, merely by dint of what artists and their art have come to be associated with ever since Romanticism: alternative production, power of play, freedom of expression, autonomy. This imaginary or actual rhythm – a rhythm of artist's squats as much as street markets and bars – may complement the existing rhythm or it may disrupt it. But whatever it does, it allows for the idea that rhythm is adjustable, that it is something in whose production we might participate.

Branding, city tourism, creative industries, gentrification and so on have turned the artistic rhythm into just another tune stored on the keyboard of capitalism. It is a tune that can be played on demand, designating a specific area an 'alternate' economy: Shoreditch and Bethnal Green, Prenzlauer Berg and Kreuzberg, Williamsburg and Bushwick. The tune on the keyboard is composed of functions and algorithms set in advance. It may be irregular, it may seem relaxed, but it is still set in advance. The 'artistic rhythm' is so appealing precisely because it is able to adapt to the pitches of its participants. And so artists leave the area whose rhythm has become part of the keyboard, looking for another place to temporarily make their

own: Berlin's Prenzlauer Berg is left for the Potsdamerstrasse; Shoreditch abandoned for Elephant and Castle or Brixton.

There is a more cynical take on the relation between art, cities and capitalism, which is that the city always already allows for numerous areas to adhere to the possibility of alternate rhythms. In this view, it doesn't make a difference whether artists or institutions are the canaries in the mine. After all, the mine is owned by the same people that own the canaries ...

AV This resonates strongly for me. It could be interesting to try to describe this 'artistic rhythm' you speak of. We seem to inhabit this sort of flattened, urban, capitalistic time, in which each tick of the clock is a potential investment, because we use time to make money. That's a really monotonous rhythm.

Someone like the Croatian artist Mladen Stilinović comes to mind, and his photographic series of himself sleeping or thinking in bed: 'Artist at Work' [1978]. In his writings from that time, he suggests that Western artists are bad artists because they work too much, and that a good artist is a lazy artist. That's a different rhythm: syncopated by a certain refusal to perform, to be productive. Very different from, say, flexible time in creative industries today.

NN Discussions around gentrification tend to romanticize the subversive and autonomous agency artist's projects have in these processes – the tactics, the skipping, the interventions. This is combined with an idea that somehow everybody wants to live like artists, a theme heavily exploited by Richard Florida.

One question I am frequently asked at conferences about city spaces and gentrification is what alternatives artists are producing that counter gentrification, as if artists, myself included, have some special powers or insights. This question always strikes me as a contradiction in that artists and alternative art methodologies are integral to the process of removing one less powerful

class from an area by another; that's why its called 'gentrification', a word we shouldn't lose sight of.

Artists operate within the strategies of gentrification because they have been allowed to do so by the state, property developers and local politics. I don't believe that they stumble upon or find new areas by some kind of chance or intuitive way. Conditions are created for them in order that they can gentrify them. The rhythms that are being described are an important part of the gentrification process.

SZ What about Marina Abramović, who plans to convert an old theatre in the newly gentrified Hudson River Valley, north of New York City, into an arts centre named after her and focused on her long-duration performance pieces? In *The New York Times* [7 May 2012], she said: 'The concept is very clear. I'm asking you to give me your time. And if you give me your time, I give you experience.' Has she found a way to market Conceptualism that seems to compensate for our time-starved modernity?

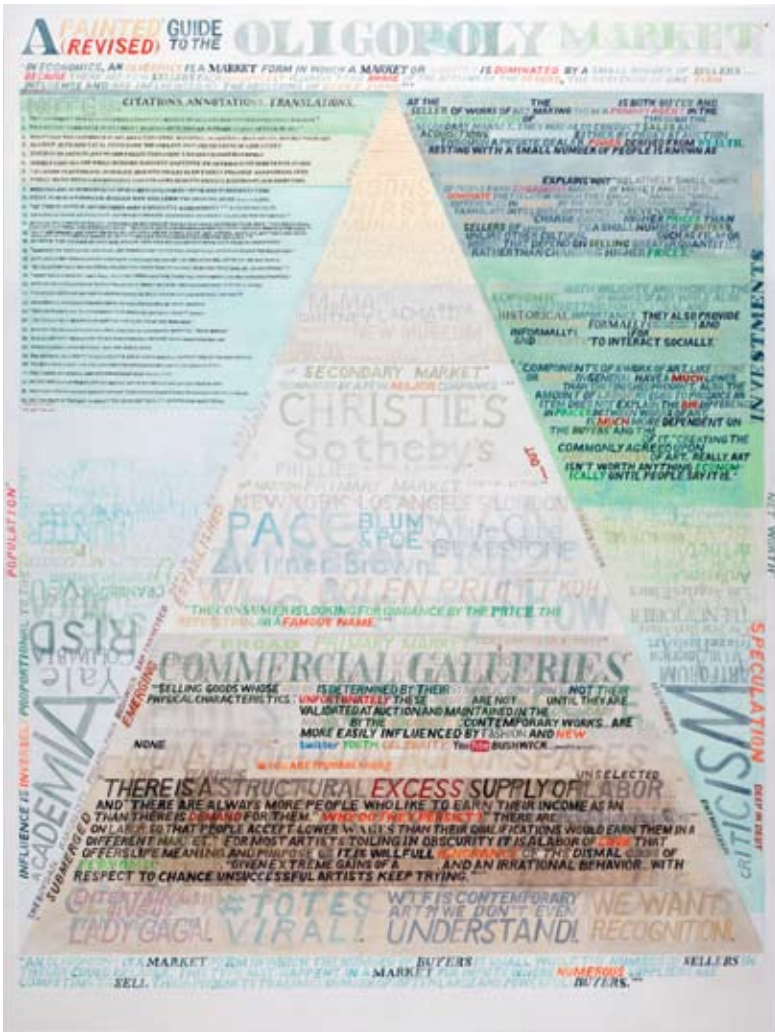
AV Sounds frightening. Does one have to be naked the whole time there too?

DF To me, Abramović reinforces a stereotype of the artist who has access to mystic truths; that crypto-religious thing, whereby if you make the pilgrimage to the temple to sit in front of the oracle and stare into her face, you will access some profound emotional core of your being, because the oracle has endured extremes of pain and discomfort (and spent large amounts of free time) on your behalf. It's another version of the skipping game: the artist as an individual with a direct line to some higher level of knowledge/experience.

TV I wouldn't say it's 'higher' but it's different, in the sense that art still assumes in the public mind a mode of production that is different from the mode associated with capitalism. An area inhabited by artists may just be perceived as an area that allows for alternate production and participation, not necessarily the production of money. Isn't that something many people long for?



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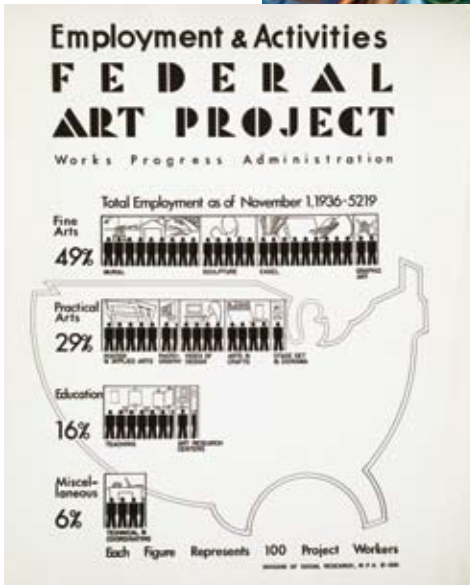
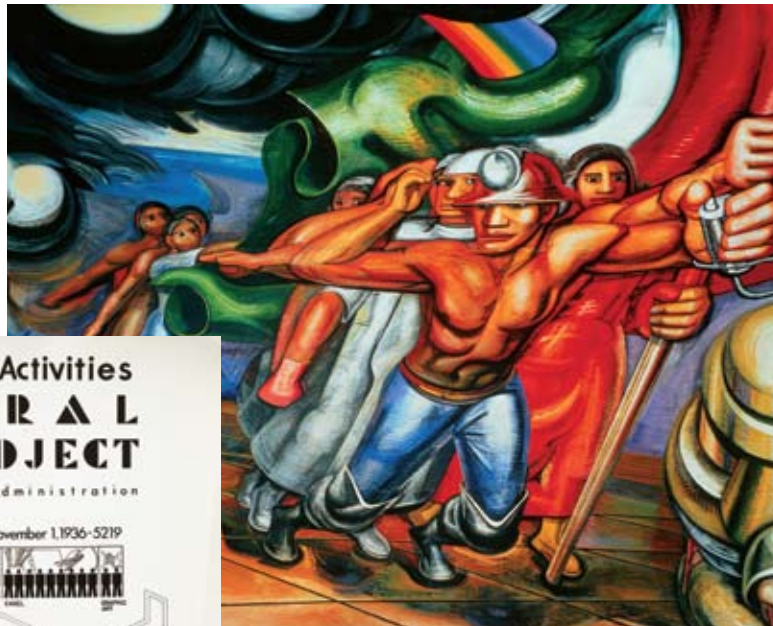


1
William Powhida
Oligopoly (Revised),
2011,
graphite acrylic ink,
coloured pencil and
watercolour on panel,
152x112 cm

2
Employment and
Activities poster for
the Works Progress
Administration's Federal
Art Project, 1936

3
David Alfaro Siqueiros
*For the Complete Safety
of All Mexicans at Work*
(detail), 1952-4,
mural, Hospital de la
Raza, Mexico City

4
Rob Pruitt
The Andy Monument,
2011,
Union Square, New York



SZ This image of artists as the desired Other, men and women who represent – and live – an alternative to the crass, materialistic market society; where might such Others be? Historically in Europe, after artists, writers, musicians and other creative producers and performers freed themselves from aristocratic and ecclesiastical patrons, they lived and worked on the margins of urban markets. They sold their work when they had to and when they could, but most artists lived without a steady source of income and with little social prestige.

Since the 1960s, the expansion of educational systems created many more ‘day jobs’ as teachers for artists. At the same time, the creation of arts curricula in universities and the establishment of many more art schools produced a steady flow of ‘professional’ artists who needed jobs. Business services like advertising, graphic design and publishing grew rapidly in the post-war consumer society, offering markets for creative work of various kinds. Government grants also increased dynamically after 1960, eventually funding individual creative work, public art projects and filmmaking by different kinds of artists.

Access to art markets broadened through the increasing scale of museum purchases, especially their token but gradually more significant commitment to contemporary art, and the multiplication of markets through various circuits of ‘alternative’ galleries and art spaces as well as both non-profit periodic exhibitions like biennials and festivals based in specific cities, and commercial venues such as art fairs. In brief, Other markets developed for Other artists.

Living in New York, I am fascinated by the shifting geographical locations within the city of these multiple art markets. Though some people think about the shifting locations of artists’ live-work districts as a reflection of gentrification, recalled in painted maps like Loren Munk’s *SoHo: The Center of the Center of the Art World Universe* [2005–6], I am at least as impressed by the ability of entrepreneurs to create new display districts where different types of art are shown and sold – which also relates to rising real estate values. As a global city that attracts both the rich and those who serve them, New York has multiple art gallery districts – some still so dispersed they lack a neighbourhood name.

Any artist who wants to sell their work must apply to the gatekeepers of one or more of these hierarchically arrayed districts, a point graphically made by William Powhida in *Oligopoly (Revised)* [2011]. These gatekeepers are curators, gallerists, critics, journalists and, above all, entrepreneurs. They may be entrepreneurs for economic reasons, or for cultural reasons: to provide goods and services for people who share their aesthetic tastes. And for social reasons: to create a community. In brief: many art-world entrepreneurs are artists.

'We need to start looking at possibly more militant and collective activities that step outside of the prescribed rhythms of artistic activities and traditional artists' lifestyles.'

NILS NORMAN

This entrepreneurialism of the self has become widespread. Call it Thatcher's enterprise society, Reagan's casino society, or neoliberalism: the modern man and woman are required to sell themselves if they want to sell their work. The other day at a conference on fashion studies, a professional 'image consultant' spoke about the need to present a 'curated self' by choosing the right clothes and overall look. This reminded me of the eras when self-help books promoting the development of selling skills reached a broad audience – the 1920s, say, and the early 2000s – when people were encouraged to become speculators in their own careers. Are these also periods when the speculative economy is heading for a crash? Social media and the Internet have raised the stakes of 'curating' our self. We are always visible to the world, and we have so little time to put on the right face.

AV I'd add that there were other instances when artists could expect something more than this sort of marginal existence without a steady income or social prestige. Interestingly the inspiration for the Federal Art Project part of the Works Progress Administration, which is one such period, came from Mexico, where, after the revolution, artists were offered a modest state salary, so that a painter of murals would get the same wage from the state as a carpenter or a plumber. Apparently, one of David Alfaro Siqueiros's students ended up being an advisor to Theodore Roosevelt and suggested this idea. Then of course there was the USSR, and in fact the whole socialist bloc, with its massive artists' unions that distributed state commissions, acquisitions, art supplies, studios, summer vacation packages and so forth, in a planned, rational way. It's sad to read the letters that Alexander Rodchenko wrote at the end of his life to get the union to accept him back as a member. He was living in poverty because he was expelled from the union for not making art work that conformed to the standards of Socialist Realism. The union did become an oppressive tool of a totalitarian state, but it's a complex history. It's hard for us to imagine art without an art market, but historically and geographically speaking, a market for art is more of an exception than the norm ...

NN Sharon brings up an interesting point about hyper-individualized self-curation becoming the predominant theme in social media and markets. We need to start looking at possibly more militant and collective activities that step outside of the prescribed rhythms of artistic activities and traditional artists' lifestyles. For instance, in Copenhagen, Hamburg, Geneva and Berlin (and I



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would imagine elsewhere), collective property ownership is being used as a strategy in which groups of friends and communities of people get together to collectively own an apartment building, house or even streets in some cases.

In Copenhagen this has a longer tradition and collectives are formed in buildings in order to strategically block property speculation. It is much harder to resell a collectively owned property, and if the collective sets up its own terms of ownership, where profits cannot be made from reselling the building or apartment, this also helps deflect speculation. It is harder for other property owners to then sell their properties at an inflated price.

These collectives come in all shapes and ideological shades and some are not that far from practicing individuality in a collective way rather than the individualism that animates capitalist society and which Kristin Ross formulates and explores in her great book *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune* [1988].

AV I understand what you're saying, but what if I don't want to lose myself in non-art activities or become collective? I don't think that all artistic activities are prescribed and not all artists' lifestyles traditional, or that Facebook-type self-design is an appropriate metaphor for artistic or curatorial activity in the sense that I



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'It's sad to read the letters that Rodchenko wrote at the end of his life to get the union to accept him back as a member. He was expelled for not making work that conformed to the standards of Socialist Realism.'

ANTON VIDOKLE

understand and respect it. Maybe we are not talking about same thing? There are different kinds of artists in the world. Just because we don't like plastic surgeons, we don't want to get rid of all doctors ...

I grew up in a society without the market system and have been to plenty of places where the market is not the main shaping force. Certain types of collectivity are a daily reality in many places, where people live together with extended families and so forth, because the kinds of individual lifestyles you can have in New York or Copenhagen are just not possible for economic, religious or traditional reasons. This can be rather oppressive; not something people necessarily do by choice. So if we talk about the presence of artists or art projects in a city only in relation to gentrification and the market, it becomes a very privileged conversation that excludes much of this world and also excludes all of the other aspects of art

NN I think there are, of course, many projects out there and artists living in situations that don't increase an area's gentrification process or potential. Examples of these are long-term community projects in which artists work in a durational way with a group of people they either live with or have some kind of connection to. Some examples have been mentioned already.

SZ How can we create alternatives to the mainstream market economy? By trying to withdraw from it – say, to a mountain in Utah or Nepal? By changing our individual awareness of consumers' effect on the cosmos – and consuming slow, or less, or not at all? By developing diversified networks of exchange like Ithaca Hours or community-supported agriculture or barter? Or by making structural changes to eliminate over-production, to tax those who consume too much, or to turn the production of toxic goods to goods that benefit collective well-being? And how does any of that apply to the production of art?

AV Well that's the economic aspect of production, but as an artist one also has to

produce meaning and affect. It's not only about working with minimal damage to the environment or to others. How do we talk about that? How do we account for it?

SZ Consumption takes in the production of meaning and feelings, it's not just economic or environmental. There's a deep spiritual longing – for the good, the beautiful and the true, as I discovered when I did research on shopping a few years ago; for authenticity, if we use that to mean what is good both inside and outside the self; for communion, community and satisfaction – all longings that are often pursued through consumption. Artists express these longings, and we who are not artists sometimes manage to craft something – a loaf of bread, a specially knitted scarf, a self-built table – that expresses them too. How can we make it possible for everyone to develop means of expression? Or are critics, artists and writers going to remain in opposition in every form of society?

AV My favourite passage in Karl Marx's writings is where he describes how life can be organized without narrow professionalization: one day you can be an artist, next day a cook, then a 'critical critic', and so forth. Identities in such a society will be fluid and alienation will disappear. I think that everyday life will then become so full of beauty that it will become art. In such a society, artists, critics and writers will not remain in opposition. But, until then, opposition is OK with me ...

TV What makes this discussion difficult is that it has become so hard for us to think beyond the current financial system, beyond the idea that something is worthwhile if it can be measured along mathematical scales and graphs, reduced to a market value. Just look at politicians today. Instead of turning their back on it, looking for something else, they embrace the very financial system that let them down. And rather than acknowledging that the current form of democracy does not seem able to cope with recent technological and



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1
Portrait of the artist, photographer and graphic designer Alexander Rodchenko with his wife, the artist Varvara Stepanova, c.1925

2
Alexander Rodchenko
Novyi Lef (New Left), issue no. 5,
1928, magazine cover

environmental changes, they close their eyes and hope for the best. Whatever else Postmodernism gave us, it also took away the idea that there are alternatives. But just because we cannot instantly think of a viable alternative to the current financial system or political apparatus, it does not mean there are no alternatives. Surely there are more than the few financial configurations mankind has produced so far? And I do not believe there are no other political representations than autocracy, fascism, democracy, communism, and so on. The task for artists today, it seems to me, is to try and think the impossible possibility of an alternative with the tools and materials we have at hand. ♦