

The Radical Imagination Beyond the Play Principle

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In relation to the theme of the 2013 Göteborg International Biennial for Contemporary Art – “Play! Recapturing the Radical Imagination” – I would like to contribute to this reader for the Valand Academy of Arts conference, “Radical Imagination? Provocations and Dialogues,” a few questions. How does play relate to radicality? What happens, as the conference organizers ask, when one replaces the Žižeko-Lacanian concept of enjoyment with that of play and, through the process of substitution, what does the concept of *jouissance* do to the concept of play? If enjoyment is not immanently possible, is play any less of a negative reaction? Is play then not something like fantasy inasmuch as it resists mediation and masks the

inconsistencies of the symbolic order?

In *The Plague of Fantasies*, Slavoj Žižek discusses the fact that psychoanalysis is primarily concerned with *jouissance* as an unbearable excess, something that makes human intersubjectivity beyond our reach, a pre-symbolic impossible relation to the Other.

¹ In relation to radicality, play and enjoyment as fantasy are organized in such a way as to maintain the subject's distance towards the pressures of the social world and so play, like fantasy, becomes an "inherent transgression," a "primordial lie" designed to cover up and censor the inhumanity of intersubjective relations and the void of subjectivity. Play, in the context in which these questions are being proposed, might therefore be thought as one of the modalities of creative labour in an age of austerity.² How then do we avoid the traps of play as an inherent transgression of the system we wish to escape? In relation to this problem of distance, Žižek writes:

"Let us further illustrate this gap between an explicit texture and its phantasmatic support with an example from cinema. Contrary to its misleading appearance, Robert Altman's *MASH* is a perfectly conformist film – for all their mockery of authority, practical jokes and sexual escapades, the members of the *MASH* crew *perform their job exemplarily*, and thus present absolutely no threat to the smooth running of the military machine. In other words, the cliché which regards *MASH* as an anti-militarist film, depicting the horrors of the meaningless military slaughter which can be endured only through a healthy measure of cynicism, practical jokes, laughing at pompous official rituals, and so on, misses the point – this very distance *is* ideology."³

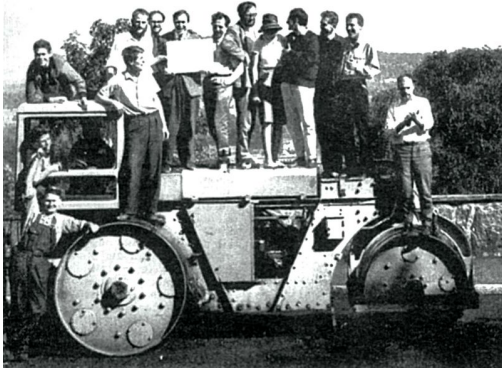
Such distance, Žižek argues, is the positive condition of ideology. The problem with play is that it works all too well as a trans-ideological, inter-subjective bond for groups unconsciously upholding a power discourse: drinking the cool aid, voting people

off the island, being a team player, being a good citizen and member of the community, just working. The radical imagination, and radical groups, I would argue, has always had a correct suspicion of play and has often been resented for this. Consider how postmodernist and cultural studies scholars typically reacted to Frankfurt School theory or to the ‘laboratory’ art of conceptualism. Radicals, however, have been less logocentric and more ‘dialectical’ in their approach to ‘bread and roses,’ pleasure and necessity. We can see this, for instance, in the example of the Situationist theory of psychogeography as a contribution to the notion of play as part of revolutionary praxis.

In a short two-page article published anonymously in the June 1958 issue of *Internationale Situationniste*, the SI argued that after two centuries of capitalist production, the primitive social function of play – one thinks here of Bakhtin’s idea of carnival – is little more than an atavistic holdover. Play today, it argues, is associated both with the progressive needs of social organization and with necessity. A progressive affirmation of play would subtract it from all notions of capitalist competition. The idea of winning or losing, which was once inseparable from ludic activity, is now manifested as part of the individual need to acquire material goods. *Homo ludens* has transformed into the acquisitive *homo rapax*. Such play is oriented toward gains, whether these satisfy concrete or illusory needs. These tendencies are exploited by conservative forces that mask the atrocity of the living conditions that they impose.

The element of competition, the Situationists then argue, should disappear in favour of a collective conception of play: the creation of ludic ambiances. The important distinction the SI wishes to make is the one between play and actually existing everyday life, which makes play an exceptional, marginal activity. Play should not be limited to a specific time and place but should permeate all of life, should be a permanent vacation from “History.” Permanent experimentation with play should not,

however, exclude the ethical and should overcome the competitive spirit.



Situationists fraternizing with Swedish workers at the Göteborg Conference, *Situationniste Internationale* #7 (April 1962) 30.

But the optimism of the Lettrists and the Situationists in the 1960s soon became the working presuppositions of a culture industry that learned to take the play impulse into consideration as a strategy to rehabilitate a new post-industrial culture of consumption. In the 1970s, Pierre Bourdieu defined the “fun ethic” as the tendency of the new executant petty bourgeois ‘middle’ class to reverse the ascetic moralism of the older culture of work and to supply the economy with the “perfect consumer.”⁴ This tendency would seem to be reinforced today, as the cultural habitus of high-income managers and professionals is increasingly distanced from legitimate culture and comes closer to the sensibilities of semi and unskilled workers, who prefer action, thriller, and adventure movies, Steven Spielberg films, John Grisham novels, rock or country and western music, landscape painting and Impressionism.⁵ Whereas the Situationists

fought the conditions of spectacle, looking for the chance to intervene, pluralist artists went along with the culture industry's dismantling of bourgeois high art, anticipating today's mix of museum culture with creative cities discourse, with DJ parties, nuits blanches, public participation and culture of performance.

In relation to yesterday's presentations (Nov.15) I would like to offer a few simple remarks and a few ideas. Among some of the words that were used and that carry a great deal of significance in terms of contemporary discourse are the following: indecisive, uncertainty, hesitancy, part-knowingness, not-mastered, not dictated, irrational, etc. These terms correspond very much to what Alain Badiou, in his 2010 essay "Does the Notion of Activist Art Still Have Meaning?" argues about the possibility of a militant art today.⁶ "In a militant art the place of ideology is the place of the contradiction and of the dubious results of the struggle. And so we have, in some sense, an art of the dubious struggle as opposed to an art of the glorious victory."

"Militant art," Badiou writes, "is an art of what has not yet been completely decided. It's an art of the situation, and not an art of the state of the situation. And so militant art cannot be the image of something which exists, but must be the pure existence of what is becoming."

"Today," he adds "there is no common ideology and we must observe that democracy is the clear example of a weak ideology, and not a strong ideology. It is too consensual; it is too much in complete equivocation between the reactionary camp and the revolutionary camp, between progressives and conservatives, and so on. In fact, everybody is a democrat today. But when everybody is a democrat, we can see that the ideology is certainly weak." Militant art is therefore in a relationship with a strong ideology, in a concrete relationship with local political experiences, which creates a common space based on the existence of a strong ideology and strong organizations. "In the

absence of all that, the common space must be a practical common space...”

Henri Lefebvre, in his book *Vers le cybernanthrope*, once stated that the “cybernanthrope” is armed with blunt instruments, ideological and otherwise.⁷ The spiritual weapons of the “anthropes” are a sense of humour, irony, satire, and a sense of solidarity against the “cybernanthropes.” The anthropes also have secret weapons: art, literature, modernist culture – haven’t these always carried with them a notion of combat, he asks? The war of the anthropes, he writes, is a guerrilla war; we will need to elaborate a strategy founded on the disturbance of social order and “cybernanthropic” equilibrium. We must not be intimidated. And we must understand the situation instead of fraternizing with or dreaming of a peaceful coexistence, leaving the field to the cybernanthropes. And so the undecided must decide, meaning those people of prolonged ambiguity, the “anthropes” that they ignore, the “cybernanthropes” that take themselves for “anthropes” and even the “anthropes” that take themselves for “cybernanthropes.”

I asked Andrea Phillips yesterday what the “we that is not a we yet” proposes in terms of a collective project. The publics we create, she said, should be singularized, networked, performative, appearing and disappearing at will, eschewing the fiction of egalitarian discursivity and of arts cultivating civic purpose. This networking, this society of the code and of post-materialist sign value, and of ‘idealinguistry,’ is a new necessity that tends to cultivate a distinctly social capital, or the ability to manage real bodies in terms of aesthetic formations. Does networked sociality create publics and how does the behaviour of such publics coexist with other publics? How did *Art House Index*, for instance, the work of Vermeir and Heiremans, coexist with those publics protesting gentrification?

Certainly these are not new questions. For at least three decades

now the predominant theories of the “public” in “public art” and “art publics” have worked to challenge the foundations of universalism and to explore instead the contingencies of social difference and social antagonism as various counter-publics vie to occupy the hegemonic “empty space of power,” which in fact is not empty but which confronts us in terms of the concrete universality of global capital. The ‘Lefebvrian’ right to the city that Phillips discussed is a matter of surplus value production and a demand that urban life be less alienated and more a living process in which revolutionary impulses are animated by visions of a better life for all. From out of the structural violence and creative destruction brought about by urbanization processes on a global scale, the right to the city today takes the form of revolts.

Part of the problem in even bringing the question of rebellion to the table is the fact that the notion of the “public” in art has long been a staple of liberal democratic discourse, a political ideology that overlaps with today’s neoliberal politics of community. The spaces in which we work, which are not based on a strong ideology and strong organizations, makes it difficult if not impossible to distinguish ‘liberal individualist’ pathways from ‘socialist politics.’ As Patrick Fitzsimons argues, the most direct function of community within market-oriented neoliberal thinking is as an adjunct of the devolution of responsibility for social welfare away from the state towards the community, and further, from the collectivity to the individual, leaving the space open to the performance of a virtuous citizenry that is ultimately not responsible for anything or answerable to anyone.⁸ What is implicit in neoliberal discourse is a reorganization of the relations between the state and civil society that seeks to ensure, through relations of force, flexibilization, corporate restructuring, risk management, hierarchy and competition, and the greatest amount of self-exploitation on the part of individuals, defined as units of capital. The space that is created is the space that collectives and virtuous citizens are sometimes all too eager to exploit. Today’s

art confronts society with its shortcomings, producing work that is too active to actually do anything that would, in a revolutionary manner, radically alter the balance of political power.

I would counter Phillips' pragmatics and bodily hexis with dialectics and would in this regard refer to Negt and Kluge's still-helpful analysis of the distinctions between 1) the false totality of the bourgeois public sphere, 2) the consequent predominance of production public spheres, which includes the Discourse of the University, and 3) the proletarian by-product, the people that serve as the raw material of capitalist innovation.⁹ In the Discourse of the University it is the commodity that speaks, that provokes us to speak, and that confronts artists directly, leaving publics in the position of surplus, and decision, certainty, knowingness, mastery, rationality, and so on, in the position of the hidden yet latent truth. Commodities for us are maybe not such a concern – academic publishing does not produce so much economic value, not for us anyway, and rarely do artworks make it halfway up the art world as ponzi scheme (Barber). We're rather more subject to the restructuring of our services, to the counting of units, the measuring of tuition (increasingly a private matter), the measuring of cash flow, etc.

Instead of this, it is the role of the artist, of we "anthropes," to address, to speak to and maybe to confront publics directly, which are only ever para-publics and which is one of the reasons why the fetish of the political party still makes sense.¹⁰ This is what it means, as an artist or as an intellectual to have a room of one's own – to come back to Gertrud Sandquist's talk. It means indeed, as Badiou reminds us, to understand the productivity of the loss of mastery, but it does not justify that we abandon our collective goals and a strong ideology. I would conclude that the agonistic struggle for the empty space of power is one of the ways that class conflict is fought today. In the academy it remains at the core of our practice, even if today's radicalization has begun,

finally, to seep in through the cracks. It is our duty to contribute to this radicalization also from the inside outward and not just as an alibi for our contribution to discourse.

Beyond the matter of disciplinary societies and societies of control, part of the problem of today's ultra-postmodern "insiderism" can be assessed as a matter of belief. Žižek argues that we often do not need to believe in something ourselves in order to believe but that we believe through others, or through external signs, symbols and other material surrogates, as is the case in the story he tells about Niels Bohr and the lucky horseshoe.¹¹ One of the functions of curating is to relieve us of the function of believing by effectively performing this function for us. Within the conditions of market capitalism, the curator mediates the proper relationship towards artists and audiences as subjects involved in commodity relations. In this process, a kind of "curatorial complex," artists and publics lose whatever autonomy or independence they might have had and are reduced to part objects within an ideological matrix. Today these relationships are compounded as *social capital* increasingly replaces the kinds of *cultural capital* that were previously considered substantial enough to sustain a legitimate art practice. Networking, community, cooperation, collaboration, participation, possibility, potentiality, openness: these can be and sometimes are the watchwords of increased interpersonal violence.¹² On this score, and in terms of class relations, very little of our social exchange has been transformed since Marx characterized the rights of man as the paradise of "Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham."¹³ Given that so-called social mediation (social constructionism, performativity) is the necessary means to translate stakes in the world of class relations into the worldlessness of today's theory, contemporary curators and other institutionalized cadres call on publics to reconnect with art – however, without believing in it themselves. The problem, then, is not that contemporary curating is theoretically concerned

with critique, but that it does not do enough, in the terms of curating, to display and challenge the forces that structure the impersonality of social relations. The emphasis that is placed on bodies, affect, language and identity does very little to reveal those impersonal forces since it avoids the concrete terms of social reproduction. Consequently, contemporary curating might very well prevent us from making difficult distinctions between conservative, liberal and radical perspectives, allowing art, with all of its post-ideological affinities with “the political” (in Jacques Rancière, as opposed to the police) and “agonistic public spheres” (in Chantal Mouffe), to replace radical political organizing.

Whereas today’s post-postmodern institutions continue to operate according to what Pierre Bourdieu defined as the function of art within class society, this social function is all the more difficult to assess as the majority of institutionalized players refuse the language of class distinction. One is more likely to find the values and politics of liberal ideology expressed in terms of pluralism, affectivity and culture wars than in terms of class struggle.¹⁴ This culturalization of politics, however, provides further indications that few today continue to believe in art itself, that it is nothing but a bad joke unless it can translate into those kinds of struggles that are easily appropriated by the ruling classes and thus operate as stakes in a game that is framed by social mobility and utility. The art game becomes today a knowledge game, an experience economy or any other term by which the global underclass appears as only a problem that justifies the existence and rule of experts.¹⁵ As for the dark matter that Gregory Sholette identified as the raw material that feeds the art world, “the structural invisibility of most professionally trained artists whose very underdevelopment is essential to normal art world functions,” the system usually has nothing to say.¹⁶

How then to get past the psychosocial drama that would pit

cooperative artists, networkers and perennial insiders against resistant, difficult subjects? Communications scholar Darin Barney suggests that we should replace “players” with “workers,” and that as artists and intellectuals we should endeavour towards “making a public contribution to fixing up the place.”¹⁷ Today’s institutional player seeks to escape the burden of work and substitutes for it networking, interdisciplinary research and working in teams. “The structure of opportunities in the contemporary academic economy might favour the player,” he writes, “but it is as workers that academics will find the solution to their problem of how to engage with the world.”¹⁸

It is as players, it would seem, that we are paradoxically reduced to the role of external observers, condemned to the role of a pure gaze, observing the art game from a safe distance, which keeps it sunning smoothly, preventing a more passionate engagement with both art and politics. This is not to say that we should or can give up on play, however. Play may be part of a prolonged effort to avoid the anxieties and pressures associated with the social rules that structure reality, or at least an effort to ‘screen’ such processes, leading us to a moralization of reality as an alibi for the more traumatic Real of our fantasies. Play therefore operates paradoxically as a fantasy that masks the basic facts of social antagonism and the contingency of the Real – traumatic irruptions into the field of one’s perception. Because the loss of such illusions can lead to illness, play functions as a coping mechanism through which we negotiate our relationship to social demands. Play is a psychic resource through which we both deceive ourselves and resist the rules of art. As a common feature of the brave new world of creative labour, precarity and austerity, and as part of the breakdown of the division of work and leisure, play, or ‘playbour,’ as Andrew Ross calls it, compels us to better understand the intersubjectivity that defines our true position in the game.¹⁹ The paradox is that the rules of the game – in our case the rules of art – although played as real, do not concretely

exist.²⁰ Play provides us with a certain distance from such a realization – a modality that today contributes to our collective dispossession.

Notes

1. Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997) 10.
2. On this, see Marc James Léger, “The Non-Productive Role of the Artist: The Creative Industries in Canada,” *Third Text* 24:5 (September 2010) 557-570.
3. Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, 20.
4. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, [1979] 1984) 371. For a contemporary treatment of this issue, see Gerald Raunig, Gene Ray and Ulf Wuggenig, eds, *Critique of Creativity: Precarity, Subjectivity and Resistance in the “Creative Industries”* (London: MayFly Books, 2011).
5. Tony Bennett, “*Habitus Clivé*: Aesthetics and Politics in the Work of Pierre Bourdieu,” *New Literary History* 38:1 (2007) 201-228.
6. Alain Badiou, “Does the Notion of Activist Art Still Have Meaning?” Lecture presented at the Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York City, October 13, 2010, in collaboration with *Lacanian Ink*.
7. Henri Lefebvre, *Vers le cybernanthrope: contre les technocrates* (Paris: Denoel/Gonthier, 1967).
8. Patrick Fitzsimons, “Neoliberalism and ‘Social Capital’: Reinventing Community,” (2000), available at <http://www.amat.org.nz/Neoliberalism.pdf>.

9. Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, [1972]1993).

10. See Jodi Dean, *The Communist Horizon* (London: Verso, 2012). The main difficulty with Dean's analysis in this context is the fact that her political analysis does not allow for art theorization beyond the reduction of culture to the immanentism of communicative capitalism and the limitation of art to activist agonism.

11. Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (London: Routledge, 2001).

12. With regard to potentiality, Badiou teaches us that an event "is not the realization of a possibility that resides within the situation," but "paves the way for the possibility of what – from the limited perspective of the make-up of this situation or the legality of this world – is strictly impossible." See Alain Badiou, "The Idea of Communism," in Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek, eds. *The Idea of Communism* (London: Verso, 2010) 6-7.

13. Karl Marx, "The Sale and Purchase of Labour-Power," in *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, [1867] 1976) 280.

14. To give one example, at the October 2012 Creative Time Summit, Tom Finkelpearl, Director of the Queens Museum of Art, compared Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X and recommended that artists be more like the former and cooperate with publics and institutions rather than take a militant stance.

15. On this see George Yúdice, *The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003) as well as Marc James Léger, "Art and Art History After Globalization," *Third Text* #118,26:5 (September 2012) 515-527.

16. Gregory Sholette, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of*

Enterprise Culture (London: Pluto Press, 2011) 1-3.

17. Darin Barney, “‘Taking a Shit in Peace’: Players and Workers in the New Academy,” *Topia* #16 (Fall 2006) 129-130.

18. Barney, “‘Taking a Shit in Peace’,” 133.

19. See Andrew Ross, *No-Collar: The Humane Workplace and Its Hidden Costs* (New York: Basic Books, 2003) and *Nice Work If You Can Get It: Life and Labor in Precarious Times* (New York: New York University Press, 2009). See also Barbara Ehrenreich, *Bright-Sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2009) as well as Marc James Léger, “Welcome to the Cultural Goodwill Revolution: On Class Composition in the Age of Classless Struggle,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Protest* #7 (2009), available online at <http://joaap.org/7/leger.html>.

20. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, [1992] 1995).