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*The Consequences of Capital*

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The Frieze Art Fair, and the other events that satellite it, catalyse and promote discussion panels such as this one. We know that Art, capital and critique are discussed regularly in art journals year in year out - for better or for worse, but when the Art Fair comes around we get a little more nervous about the status of art in this context. This anxiety is situated I think in the following paradox - that on the one hand the production of a critical culture supports and is advocated by the market, but at the same time, we rely upon critique as a means to reform what a politics of art might mean that can redistribute these exact power relations.

Unlike classic liberalism that frames up a laissez-faire economics, now, in neo-liberalism we see political economy and symbolic economy intersecting where the market is no longer autonomous from the state. And, at the art fair, we see the entangling of political value and economic success; the intellectual, business and leisure aspects of art; and the leisure class and the productive class. These are the very categories that critical art had traditionally relied upon as being separate where it could reason out the political field. This correlation between the political and economic value of art has therefore effectively de-radicalised, de-politicised and historicised a vanguardist critique that we might associate with a Marxian inspired politics. The possibility of art on the side of a proletariat who can seize control of the distribution of wealth and power is weakened when art itself is not free to declare its own value.

Despite all this, art practice has thrived on this type of social politics. It has often looked to the streets, to the public, and more recently has re-thought the white box as a social space and the art fair stand as the socio-political and ideological backdrop for secularised communitarian exchanges. By doing this, its political agency is defined at the point that it excludes itself from one kind of politics – an economy driven politics in order to effect a social politics where art can transcend the soulless work of capital to find something more ‘real’ and meaningful underneath these operations.

But the main problem with giving precedence to a social politics of the arts is that it perpetuates the fantasy that arts political and economic value are distinct. This fallacy is proven both within and outside of the artfair where the presence of cultural quarters in inner cities, the idea of an artist coming in to work with urban planners in new-town projects, a Biennial perhaps, a large strange-shaped gallery, and the proliferation of process art in local areas now act as the prime signifiers for regenerating communities. Liberalism, tolerance and openness generate new wealth and investment. Understanding what makes us different can also make us more unified and more comfortable. This produces quite a singular view of democracy that risks neutralising the potentiality for the kind of conflicts we might associate with it.

To give one more example of this problem from another perspective: When I was in Frankfurt recently after visiting Documenta, I saw an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art called “Das Kapital: Blue Chips and Masterpieces.” It was a selection of works from the museum collection put together with the newly acquired Rolf Ricke Collection.

By using without hesitation a strap line of commodity fetishism as a fitting and complimentary subtitle to *Das Kapital* the exhibition conditions the historic polemic of the social hope of egalitarianism and the aspirations of capitalism in a natural marriage. It knows that together they act as the standard of a rich and exciting critical art, where the cash value of blue chip art is as good as equal to the moral respect warranted by a masterpiece. Marx is the both the museum and the collectors' pin-up boy turned around and tooled up as a true liberal, the individuated reactionary with a Che Guvera-style charisma. The market guarantees what political equality promises – that we have the right to be different. And, as Destiny's Child reminded us a few years ago that 'all the honeys making money' also win solidarity and independence.

Back to the exhibition, and the press release that says:

*"The quality of the exhibits derives first and foremost from the utopian element in art, the opportunity it creates to think of the new, and its ability to shake us up specifically by not adhering to given forms and rules."*

However, the artworks themselves seemed to establish two main camps of critical practice that figured up some rules of critique. First ironic works mostly in the pop-art tradition played off two economic systems – that of art and of everyday life as a means to question the status of value. The other category of works seemed moreover to be doing institutional critique, where artworks were concerned with culture and its politics, setting up the dualism of freedom and constraint. Both sets of works played out a concern with the status of their own effectivity and their limitations and definitions as art. Problematically, this critique that centred around making distinctions between culture, politics and economics, seemed to withdraw itself from the political consenting to the spectacle of acquisition itself as the central protagonist.

Given this, going over my two examples, that of a social art and that of the show *Das Kapital*, I'd like to consider the following points. Each is a consequence of the idealisation of culture as autonomous and political –

- 1) An art that acts on the categories of politics and culture is connected to the belief that knowledge prefigures action
- 2) The production of the categories of politics and culture and the ideal of arts autonomy are mutually supportive.
- 3) Whether art does politics by getting closer to life, or if it does politics by taking a distance to it, it still relies upon a normative ground from which to operate.
- 4) The construction of this ground establishes the inequality of the categories of politics and culture. Consequently, through these processes the frameworks of capital are reaffirmed and legitimised by critical practice, the frameworks, which distribute art stand as the determining political agents.

The question I want to turn to finally is what are the politics of critique when we know that these categories of culture, politics and economics are not natural but we also know that they are not distinct in categorical terms. This is a question of a politics of art in terms of re-distribution.

What is interesting and problematic about Frieze or any of the other of the art fairs is that they operate through redistribution. The art fair has to renew itself, to be open, liberal and to be *for difference*. It is based in and forms the ethics of the free market economy by ensuring and guaranteeing plurality, diversity and choice. If art has lost faith in its Marxian politics of social transformation through unity, then its maxim remains attached to what we inherit from the Enlightenment, a legacy of individuation as a form of common

freedom. We move from collectively to individuation. The ground for this politics is the state of groundlessness itself. If, in the spirit of liberalism I understand that cultural works are politically significant because they invent new and therefore conflictual senses of a common presentness or common futurity, or that they produce new narratives we use to define ourselves in terms of our being together, then it becomes questionable as to what narratives are initiated and produced through and around the artfair in particular.

At the art fair, the pluralistic processes of difference become the key symbolic value of a democratic culture. These are secured in the choreographing of debate, conflict, and competition, and where newly commissioned artworks, talks and events, meet with the trade stands. All this evidences that critique is hipper than ever but moreover that the art fair is self-consciously producing a form of democratic critical culture. This notion of critical capital produces a central contradiction for art; although art and money dovetail in a symbolic and political currency, where art participates in shaping the political field, it seems that money is sustained as the independent variable and art is dependant on it. Art achieves its sense of political equality at the cost of economic equality.

*And some thoughts for discussion....*

Here, it is easy to bring out the old argument that democracy and capital are incompatible. This is because the top-down distribution system of neo-liberal government which embeds money with power, struggles with the task of preventing economic and social inequality. In fact, its version of democracy seems moreover to be established in sustaining existing inequalities.

Ironically, when it comes to the art fair, it is often because galleries are aware of the problems of a market led art that they pitch themselves as being within but unrelated to the market. By this I mean that galleries rely on the connectedness of economic and political value to sell work, but at the same time disavow any connection between the art fair and a critical curatorial practice. This process repeats the patterns that we have seen before. It relies upon the subversive nature of art but supports the objectification and dependence of art on capital.

Taking this into account, the question of what is a critical artwork has for the most part been situated still in a traditional debate over whether art is political because it is 'simply heterogeneous' or if it is political because its natural heterogeneity provides the perfect place from which to do politics from. In other words, the question has been, is difference the subject of politics or is difference the ground for political action? Either way, this is the question of how to act, or what is to be done. But, what limits this question is that the heterogeneity of art is established already as a normative category. The problem then is how we secure and create politics, without falling back on a politics of discovery - a Platonism that requires the work of an established but supernatural knowledge to do some critical work, or to discover those fissures and gaps between those systems.

In this context we now have to think through arts politics as private. But, this notion of privacy I'd like to offer, is not to say that artworks are unpolitical, or that they are destined to the *same* self withdrawal from the political that I have just sketched out above in my examples of a social art or of the works in *Das Kapital*. The privacy of arts politics does not equate with its being unpolitical. This issue of privacy sets out the problem of how we idealise art's politics. Here, we need to think past the paradox that arts social hope widens the gap between rich and poor through its aspiration to close it and to rethink how

art has and does regulate its politics. What kinds of new and different inequalities can art produce?

Although I have argued against the precedence of knowledge established in the critical methods I have looked at, I don't want to conjure up a picture of art as something like a Nietzschean idea of private self-creation because reason is still integral to critique. So, how this politics of the private takes its place within the public realm then becomes the key question.