



farewell, Art in Context: The Time of the ‘Warming Condition’ Has Come

In Western capitalism, much of contemporary theory and everyday experience has been considered to be all about space. For western imaginaries, time hasn't been an issue since the 1990s; it was eradicated through the instantaneous connectivity afforded by the internet and digital technologies. Now time has come back to haunt us, taking the form of cataclysmic weather events that are the product of human time: years of fossil based economies. Namely, the continuous increase in temperature, what Andreas Malm refers to as the 'warming condition', is the outcome of two centuries of burning fossil fuels.¹ This is a specifically British Invention that was and is an integral component of both the technological acceleration that allowed for the labour relations that Marx observed in *Das Kapital*, and the ongoing waves of colonial domination perpetrated by western sovereign powers over the past 300 years and into the present day. *farewell, Art* concerns time: it aspires to understand our past and present ways of living and producing so as to imagine possible futures.

For around three years, we, the committee of Rhubaba Gallery and Studios, an artist led space in Edinburgh, have dedicated a large part of our programme to understanding our position, as cultural practitioners and collectively as an organisation, within the reproduction of our social, cultural, economic and material existence. This process did not emerge spontaneously from some juncture in the past and will not end with this project, nor does it have a singularly defined method, concern or direction. Our non-hierarchical committee structure is an ongoing experiment in the possibility of collective self

¹ Andreas Malm, *The Progress of this Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World* (London; New York: Verso, 2020).

determination and autonomy; a claim that would be hollow without an ongoing critical dissection of these aspirations and the assumed conditions upon which they rest. Indeed, this ongoing work has mostly revealed the extent to which we should be questioning whether self-determination or autonomy were ever materially possible in spaces (and times) like ours at all.

farewell, Art emerges from this ongoing process. We began by engaging with the idea that we might soon experience an utter collapse of communication across distant geographies, thinking what this would mean for the organisation of everyday life, our institutions and politics. We invited artists Bureau d'études to explore this hypothesis; they responded to it by bringing it closer to home - namely, interrogating the role of art institutions and art itself - and relating it to the 'warming condition'. We arrived at a research question: *what will, or should, Art be like during and after the collapse of life as we know it on Earth?*

To this, Bureau d'études responded,

*[a]esthetic art objects and practices should shift to more useful forms.
This is an 'art of life' which is not an art of well-made representation,
but an art of living in the ruins and an art of living, doing, and
imagining together.*

But what does this really mean for art and the ways in which we practice it and experience it?

Bureau d'études were in Scotland from late February until early March 2020, visiting organisations and communities that engage with different ways of making: that make/reproduce different things, some of them are straightforwardly utilitarian, some others less so, or, seemingly, not at all. Casually, it seems quite obvious that crofting (a small agricultural unit in rural Scotland) is far more useful to the reproduction of life than a painting, regardless how radical the painting's representation is. That said, through looking

at these different ways of making, Bureau d'études set out to propose a) a new way of making art that will include painting, farming, planting seeds, and other activities, both traditionally 'artistic' and not; and, b), a new position for art, not 'autonomous' but constituent of and integrated within the organisation of life.

The issue of art's usefulness, or lack thereof, has been a decisive concern for 20th and 21st century aesthetic theories and theories of art that discuss revolutionary-minded art practices. Historically, this debate has been dominated by the work of Theodor Adorno, who famously argued that '[i]nsofar as a social function can be predicated for artworks, it is their functionlessness.'² For Adorno, the radical separation of art from everyday life and direct functionality - manifested in the absolute abstraction of its form - was believed to allow art to occupy a position of autonomy through its form as 'a redemption of alienated labour'. This is to say that whilst 'autonomous' art participates in exchange value, its non-instrumentalised form - radically different from other products - '[...] call[s] into question a society where nothing is allowed to be itself and everything is subject to the principle of exchange. By appearing to be detached from the conditions of economic production, works of art acquire an ability to suggest changed conditions.'³

However, the extent to which Adorno's theories can be credibly applied to the actual circumstances of material cultural production throughout the 20th century, are, to say the least, highly suspect. Nevertheless, these arguments were highly influential and their legacy can be seen broadly in the construction of cultural value in the west that we still live amongst and within, and specifically in the history of western cultural policy, from the post-war period to the present day. This conflict, between the so-called 'intrinsic' and 'instrumental' value of culture (and therefore, the rationale for its sometime and partial decommodification by various liberal states) has not yet resolved due in large part to the fact that the two conflicting expressions of value serve different purposes for the states that employ them; Intrinsic cultural value is predicated on an enlightenment conception of cultural production, where the work of talented individuals is supported due to it being

² Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: The Athlone Press, 1997), p. 227.

³ Lambert Zuidervaart, *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991), p. 89.

considered part of the 'public good', a civilising force within the populace or contributing to national status. This form continues to serve as a useful tool for state and class based soft power operations⁴. Instrumental cultural value on the other hand describes conditions where cultural policy preferences cultural forms for their impact on a secondary political goal. A common form of instrumentalised cultural policy can be seen in the economic and spatial violence enacted on post industrial urban populations through 'creative city' style policy initiatives⁵ or other state valorisations of new (ever more precarious) 'creative' labour forms⁶.

In *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974), Peter Bürger offers an alternative rebuttal to Adorno's narrative of art's autonomy by stating that '[i]n Aestheticism, the social functionlessness of art becomes manifest. The avant-gardiste artists counter such functionlessness not by an art that would have consequences within the existing society, but rather by the principle of the sublation of art in the praxis of life.'⁷ Bürger identifies this practice with the historical avant-gardes, which spanned the first four decades of the 20th century: the left avant-garde in the Soviet Union and Germany, Dada, Futurism and Surrealism. This was momentarily actualised by the latter, especially Russian Constructivism, where the artist became a creative force of the overall organisation of social life and sought to break down the barriers of the art institution as a sphere of autonomy that was produced as such by the bourgeois subject. The creative forces of Russian Constructivism included key figures such as Alexander Rodchenko, El Lissitzky and Liubov Popova who produced furniture, typography, ceramics and propaganda, amongst other 'useful' products. This merging of artistic labour and its semantic value structure with the material processes and purposes of mass production would go on to influence Bauhaus and western Modernism more generally. This dynamic, whereby previously non productive

⁴ For an extensive analysis of the ways in which the CIA supported abstract expressionism during the Cold War, see Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper?: The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London: Granta Books, 1999).

⁵ See Richard Florida's praise of so-called creativity as key to the effective urban and life design overall. Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class, Revisited* (New York: Basic Books, 2012).

⁶ McRobbie, Angela, *Be Creative: Making a Living in the New Culture Industries* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015).

⁷ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), p. 51.

labours are transformed, valorised and subsequently made to produce capital has occurred repeatedly through the 20th century and into the 21st.

For Roberts, this transformation is the “failure” of Constructivism, claiming that by prematurely abandoning the ‘autonomy’ not of form, but of mode of production, the ultimate aim (by his account) of a revolutionary avant garde, as described by Bürger, ‘the sublation of art in the praxis of life’⁸, is prevented. Roberts extrapolates a new theorisation of contemporary avant-gardes, proposing that the avant-garde never ended in the 1930s but transformed, this time responding to new socio-political conditions, specifically to the structures of advanced globalised capitalism. The term ‘neo avant-garde’ clusters a number of diverse practices, all of them sharing usefulness - ‘capacity to address or intervene in real-world problems, be they practical or ideological’⁹ - as their common reference to historical avant-gardes.

Roberts, along with other Marxist art historians such as James Leger, argued that whilst community and participatory based art do indeed recraft social relations - through the concepts of care, affect and love which attempt to oppose and undo the capitalist logics of competition and social alienation - they often do this by utilising the pseudo-democratic nature of institutions that may indeed retain some of the ‘economic exceptionalism’ of art’s mode of production¹⁰, are nonetheless embedded within the aforementioned neoliberal politics of contemporary cultural policy and value. These projects are therefore necessarily unable to live up to the ‘pathos’ for a complete and radical transformation of the social relations, as it was imagined by the historical avant-gardes (in a context assisted by the revolutionary real politics of the Soviet Union).¹¹ This dynamic commonly is apparent in a form of inherent contradiction commonly present within many state funded arts institutions whereby the political values espoused through public exhibition and event programmes are undermined by the labour practices within the institutions themselves or by the political

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ John Roberts, ‘Revolutionary Pathos, Negation, and the Suspensive Avant-Garde’, *New Literary History* Vol. 41, No. 4, What Is an Avant-Garde? (AUTUMN 2010), pp. 717-730, p. 722.

¹⁰ Beech, David, *Art and Value* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2016).

¹¹ Roberts, *ibid.*

interests of the institutions funders and patrons.

Art should then recognise its position in the current system of production and the absence of the revolutionary forces that were present within the historical avant-garde, a position of 'subordination' from radical political praxis that marks its inability to radically change the conditions that shape social relations. That is not to say that art should abandon its possible 'functionality' but that this functionality should be accompanied by a critique of the social relations wherein it exists. As Roberts put it,

The primary function of the new avant-garde's totalizing critique, then, is not to generate a Utopian acceleration away from the world, but, on the contrary, to seek out those points and fissures in actuality where new cultural relations and forms of organization are possible or emergent.¹²

farewell, Art fits comfortably under Robert's description of the new avant-garde. Its critique is indeed 'totalizing'; it doesn't seek to 'generate a Utopian acceleration away from the world'¹³; it does the opposite, attempting to discover and invent ways to bring art in closer proximity to the condition of living in *this world*.¹⁴ Environmental deterioration here is the 'fissure in actuality' that *farewell, Art* wants to crack open by exposing its intrinsic link with and rampant intensification through the capitalist mode of production; and subsequently locate through and against it the imperative of aiming toward the organisation of social life beyond capitalism, wherein art might be socially constituted alongside and

¹² Ibid., p. 729.

¹³ Here we use the term utopia as elaborated by Fredric Jameson, that is a truly historical method for imagining the end of history - namely, the end of the organisation of our societies as we know it. Lamenting the withering of utopian thinking in postmodernity, he posited that '[...] it is difficult enough to imagine any radical political programme today without the conception of systemic otherness [utopia], of an alternate society, which only the idea of utopia seems to keep alive, however feebly. This clearly does not mean that, even if we succeed in reviving utopia itself, the outlines of a new and effective practical politics for the era of globalization will at once become visible; but only that we will never come to one without it.' Fredric Jameson, 'The Politics of Utopia', *New Left Review*, Vol. 25 (January – February, 2004).

¹⁴ For a thorough discussion on the possibility political action through art's aestheticisation, see Boris Groys, 'On Art Activism', *efflux journal*, #56, June 2014.

within a politically radical lifeworld to be (that is an art of life).

In the now, *farewell, Art* pragmatically suggests that art should join other politically-minded organisations/communities (ways of making and doing that reject the profit-making logic of capitalism) to organise together in adversity. In these circles of solidarity, art might have to abandon aesthetics as its primary purpose - but not entirely - and channel its efforts to the making of functional art objects and practices that are used by everyone, in everyday life. Paradoxically, art will be useful through its very ability to aestheticise, excavating and recrafting forms of making through which to *imagine* a life beyond the ruins, together.