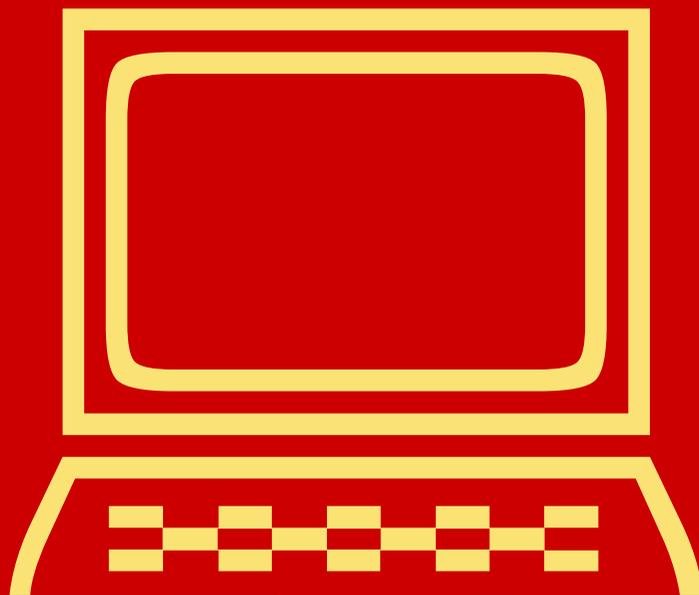


LEA
BOOKS

VOL 20 NO 1 BOOK SENIOR EDITORS LANFRANCO ACETI, SUSANNE JASCHKO,
JULIAN STALLABRASS / BOOK EDITOR BILL BALASKAS

The Leonardo Electronic Almanac is proud to announce the publication of its first LEA book, titled "Red Art: New Utopias in Data Capitalism." The publication investigates the relevance of socialist utopianism to the current dispositions of New Media Art, through the contributions of renowned and emerging academic researchers, critical theorists, curators and artists.



RED ART

New Utopias in Data Capitalism

LEA is a publication of Leonardo/ISAST and MIT Press.

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Leonardo Electronic Almanac

Volume 20 Issue 1

January 15, 2014

ISSN 1071-4391

ISBN 978-1-906897-28-4

The ISBN is provided by Goldsmiths, University of London.

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Cover Illustration

Bill Balaskas, *Re: Evolution*, 2013

Courtesy of the artist and Kalfayan Galleries,

Athens - Thessaloniki

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Leonardo, the International Society for the Arts,
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Leonardo Electronic Almanac is published by:

Leonardo/ISAST
211 Sutter Street, suite 501
San Francisco, CA 94108
USA

Leonardo Electronic Almanac (LEA) is a project of Leonardo/
The International Society for the Arts, Sciences and Technol-
ogy. For more information about Leonardo/ISAST's publica-
tions and programs, see <http://www.leonardo.info> or contact
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Leonardo Electronic Almanac is produced by
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LEONARDO ELECTRONIC ALMANAC BOOK, VOLUME 20 ISSUE 1

Red Art: New Utopias in Data Capitalism

BOOK SENIOR EDITORS

LANFRANCO ACETI, SUSANNE JASCHKO, JULIAN STALLABRASS

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The Leonardo Electronic Almanac acknowledges the institutional support for this book of



The publication of this book is graciously supported by the Royal College of Art (Programme of Critical Writing in Art & Design, Research Methods Course and the School of Humanities Event Fund).



The publication of this book is kindly supported by the University for the Creative Arts.



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Commonist Red Art: Blood, Bones, Utopia and Kittens

Does Red Art exist? And if so, who creates it and where can we find it? This special issue of the Leonardo Electronic Almanac addresses these questions and collates a series of perspectives and visual essays that analyze the role, if any, that Red Art plays in the contemporary art world.

Red Art, these are two simple words that can generate complex discussions and verbal feuds since they align the artist to a vision of the world that is 'Red' or 'Communist.'

Nevertheless, even if the two little words when placed together are controversial and filled with *animus*, they are necessary, if not indispensable, to understand contemporary aesthetic issues that are affecting art and how art operates in the context of social versus political power relations within an increasingly technological and socially-mediated world.

Red Art could be translated – within the contemporary hierarchical structures – as the art of the powerless versus the art of the powerful, as the art of the masses versus the art of the few, as the art of the young versus the old, as the art of the technological democrats versus the technological conservatives, as the art of the poor versus the art of the rich... Or it could be described as the art of the revolutionary versus the status quo. In the multitude of the various possible definitions, one appears to stand out for contemporary art and it is the definition of art as bottom-up participation versus art as top-down

prepackaged aesthetic knowledge. And yet, what does Red Art stand for and can it be only restricted to Communist Art?

The contemporary meaning of Red Art is different from what it may have been for example in Italy in the 1970s, since so much has changed in terms of politics, ideology and technology. It is no longer possible to directly identify Red Art with Communist Art (as the art of the ex Union of Soviet Socialist Republics or of its satellite states and globalized Communist political parties which were and continue to be present in the West – albeit inedulcorated forms) nor as the art of the left, but there is a need to analyze the complexity of the diversification and otherization of multiple geopolitical perspectives. ¹

If today's Red Art has to redefine its structures and constructs it becomes necessary to understand who is encompassed within the label of Red Artists and what their common characteristics are. Red Artists – if we wanted to use this category – and their aesthetic production cannot be reduced to the word 'Communist,' borrowing passé ideological constructs. An alternative to the impasse and the ideological collapse of communism is the redefinition of Red Art as the art of the commons: **Commonist Art.** ² If Red Art were to be defined as the art of the commons, Commonist Art, thereby entrenching it clearly within technoutopias and neoliberalist crowd sourcing approaches for collective participation, this would provide a contradictory but functional framework for the realization of

common practices, socially engaged frameworks, short terms goals and 'loose/open' commitments that could be defined in technological terms as *liquid digital utopias* or as a new form of permanent dystopia. ³

The XXIst century appears to be presenting us, then, with the entrenched digitized construct of the common versus the idea of the Paris Commune of 1871, thereby offering a new interpretation of the social space and an alternative to traditional leftist/neoliberal constructs. The idea of the common – as an open access revolving door, is opposed to the concept of the commune – as a highly regulated and hierarchical structure.

The 'semantic' distingo between commons and communes becomes important since both terms are reflections of constructions and terminological frameworks for an understanding of both society and art that is based on 'likes,' actions and commitments for a common or a commune. The commitment, even when disparagingly used to define some of the participants as click-activists and armchair revolutionaries, ⁴ is partial and leaves the subject able to express other likes often in contradiction with one another: e.g. I like the protests against Berlusconi's government and I like the programs on his private TVs.

I find the idea of the commons (knowledge, art, creativity, health and education) liberating, empowering and revolutionary, if only it was not expressed within its own economic corporative structures, creating further layers of contradiction and operational complexities.

The contradictions of contemporary Red Art and contemporary social interactions may be located in the difference between the interpretations of common and commune – the commune upon which the Italian Communist Party, for example, based its foundations in order to build a new 'church.'

The relationships in the commune of the Italian communists (oxymoronically defined Cattocomunisti or Catholic-communist) rests in faith and in compelled actions, in beliefs so rooted that are as blinding as blinding is the light of God in the painting *The Conversion of Saint Paul on the Road to Damascus* by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio.

[...] and from the leadership an aggressive unwillingness to allow any dissent or deviation. 'That time produced one of the sharpest mental frosts I can remember on the Left,' the historian E. P. Thompson would recall from personal knowledge of the CP... ⁵

It is this blind faith that has generated the martyrs of communism and heretical intellectuals, accusations from which not even Antonio Gramsci was able to escape. The vertical hierarchical structure of the commune and of the Communist Party produced heretics and immolations, but also supported artists, intellectuals, academics and writers that operated consonantly with the party's ideals: people that sang from the same preapproved institutional hymn sheet.

Stefania: *This young generation horrifies me. Having been kept for years by this state, as soon as they discover to have two neurons they pack and go to study, to work in the US and London, without giving a damn for who supported them. Oh well, they do not have any civic vocation. When I was young at the occupied faculty of literature, I oozed civic vocation. [...] I have written eleven novels on civic duty and the book on the official history of the Party.*

Jep Gambardella: *How many certainties you have, Stefania. I do not know if I envy you or feel a sensation of disgust. [...] Nobody remembers your civic vocation during your University years. Many instead*

remember, personally, another vocation of yours that was expressed at the time; but was consumed in the bathrooms of the University. You have written the official history of the Party because for years you have been the mistress of the head of the Party. Your eleven novels published by a small publishing house kept by the Party and reviewed by small newspapers close to the Party are irrelevant novels [...] the education of the children that you conduct with sacrifice every minute of your life ... Your children are always without you [...] then you have - to be precise - a butler, a waiter, a cook, a driver that accompanies the boys to school, three babysitters. In short, how and when is your sacrifice manifested? [...] These are your lies and your fragilities. ⁶

To the question, then, if Red Art exists I would have to answer: YES! I have seen Red Art in Italy (as well as abroad), as the Communist Art produced in the name of the party, with party money and for party propaganda, not at all different from the same art produced in the name of right-wing parties with state or corporate money – having both adopted and co-opted the same systems and frameworks of malfeasance shared with sycophantic artists and intellectuals.

In order to understand the misery of this kind of Red Art one would have to look at the Italian aesthetization of failure – which successfully celebrates failure in the *Great Beauty* by Paolo Sorrentino when the character of Stefania, and her ‘oozing civic duty,’ is ripped apart. It is a civic responsibility that is deprived and devoid of any ethics and morals. ⁷

This is but one of the multiple meanings of the concept of Red Art – the definition of Red Art as Communist Art, is the one that can only lead to sterile definitions and autocelebratory constructs based on the ‘aesthetic obfuscation of the lack of meaning’ as a

tool for the obscurity of the aesthetic to act as a producer of meaning when the artist producing it is inept at creating meaning. ⁸ Even more tragically, Red Art leads to the molding of the artist as spokesperson of the party and to the reduction of the artwork, whenever successful, to advertising and propaganda.

Commonist Art, founded on the whim of the ‘like’ and ‘trend,’ on the common that springs from the aggregation around an image, a phrase, a meme or a video, is able to construct something different, a convergence of opinions and actions that can be counted and weighed and that cannot be taken for granted. Could this be a Gramscian utopia of re-construction and re-fashioning of aesthetics according to ‘lower commons’ instead of high and rich ‘exclusivity,’ which as such is unattainable and can only be celebrated through diamond skulls and gold toilets?

Commonist Art – the art that emerges from a common – is a celebration of a personal judgment, partially knowledgeable and mostly instinctive, perhaps manipulated – since every ‘other’ opinion is either manipulated by the media or the result of international lobby’s conspiracies or it can be no more than a reinforcement of the society of the simulacra. Conversely, it may also be that the image and its dissemination online is the representation of a personal diffidence towards systems of hierarchical power and endorsement that can only support ‘their own images and meanings’ in opposition to images that are consumed and exhausted through infinite possibilities of interpretation and re-dissemination. ⁹

If Commonist Art offers the most populist minimum common denominator in an evolutionary framework determined by whims, it is not at all different from the minimum common denominator of inspirational/aspirational codified aesthetics that are defined by the higher echelons of contemporary oligarchies that

have increasingly blurred the boundaries of financial and aesthetic realms.

Commonist Art – if the current trends of protest will continue to affirm themselves even more strongly – will continue to defy power and will increasingly seek within global trends and its own common base viable operational structures that hierarchies will have to recognize, at one point or the other, by subsuming Commonist Art within pre-approved structures.

Red Art, therefore, if intended as Commonist Art becomes the sign of public revolts, in the physical squares or on the Internet. It is art that emerges without institutional ‘approval’ and in some cases in spite of institutional obstacles. Gramsci would perhaps say that Commonist Art is a redefinition of symbolic culture, folk art and traditional imageries that processed and blended through digital media and disseminated via the Internet enable Red Art to build up its own languages and its own aesthetics without having to be institutionally re-processed and receive hierarchical stamps of approval.

Red Art can also be the expression of people whose blood and tears – literally – mark the post-democracies of the first part of the XXIst century. Non-political, non-party, non-believers, ¹⁰ the crowds of the Internet rally around an argument, a sense of justice, a feeling of the future not dominated by carcinogenic politicians, intellectuals and curators, that present themselves every time, according to geographical and cultural spaces, as Sultans, Envoys of God, or even Gods.

Red Art, the Commonist Art that perhaps is worth considering as art, is the one that is self-elevated, built on the blood and bones of people still fighting in the XXIst century for justice, freedom and for a piece of bread. Art that rallies crowds’ likes and dislikes based

on the whims of a liquid Internet structure where people support within their timelines an idea, a utopia, a dream or the image of a kitten. ¹¹

This piece of writing and this whole volume is dedicated to the victims of the economic and political violence since the beginning of the Great Recession and to my father; and to the hope, hard to die off, that some utopia may still be possible.

Lanfranco Aceti

*Editor in Chief, Leonardo Electronic Almanac
Director, Kasa Gallery*



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1. Larry Ray, "At the End of the Post-Communist Transformation? Normalization or Imagining Utopia?" *European Journal of Social Theory* 12 (August 2009), 321-336.
2. Commonism was used by Andy Warhol. In this essay the word is rooted in Internet 'commons,' although similarities, comparisons and contiguities exist with the earlier usage. "Thus Warhol's initial preference for the term 'Commonism' was as ambivalent, and ambiguous, as the oscillating signs 'Factory' and 'Business.' Although it flirted with connotations of the 'common' with the 'Communist' (from cheap and low to 'dignity of the common man'), the term betrayed no hidden, left-wing agenda on Warhol's part." Caroline A. Jones, *Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 205.
3. "For one thing, utopia has now been appropriated by the entertainment industry and popular culture – what is termed the contemporary liquid utopia – as a kind of dystopia." Anthony Elliott, *The Contemporary Bauman* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 17.
4. The blurred lines between real and virtual do not exempt click-activists or armchair revolutionaries from the persecutions and abuses of the state police. The sitting room within one's home becomes the public space for conflict and revolts. One example of many around the globe: Alexander Abad-Santos, "Turkey Is Now Arresting Dozens for Using Twitter," *The Wire*, June 5, 2013, <http://www.thewire.com/global/2013/06/turkey-twitter-arrests/65908/> (accessed January 10, 2014).
5. David Kynaston, *Austerity Britain, 1945-1951* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 342.
6. The English translation from the Italian is from the author. *La Grande Bellezza*, DVD, directed by Paolo Sorrentino (Artificial Eye, 2014).
7. "Anti-communism was never accepted as the moral equivalent of anti-fascism, not only by my parents but also by the overwhelming majority of liberal-minded people. The Left was still morally superior." Nick Cohen, *What's Left?: How the Left Lost its Way* (London: Harper Perennial, 2007), 3. La questione morale or the 'moral issue' in English is the problem identified by Enrico Berlinguer and that questioned the role of the Communist party and the Left in general in Italy. The moral issue has not been resolved to this day and is at the core of the current impossibility to distinguish between the ideological frameworks of Left and Right – since both political areas are perceived as equally and intrinsically corrupt as well as tools for an oligarchic occupation of democracy. For the original interview in Italian of Enrico Berlinguer see: Eugenio Scalfari, "Intervista a Enrico Berlinguer," *La Repubblica*, July 28, 1981 available in "La questione morale di Enrico Berlinguer," Rifondazione Comunista's website, <http://web.rifondazione.it/home/index.php/12-home-page/8766-la-questione-morale-di-enrico-berlinguer> (accessed March 20, 2014).
8. "Under the surface of images, one invests bodies in depth; behind the great abstraction of exchange, there continues the meticulous, concrete training of useful forces; the circuits of communication are the supports of an accumulation and a centralization of knowledge; the play of signs defines the anchorages of power; it is not that the beautiful totality of the individual is amputated, repressed, altered by our social order, it is rather that the individual is carefully fabricated in it..." Michel Foucault, "Panopticism," in *The Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Vanessa R. Schwartz and Jeannene M. Przyblyski (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004), 78.
9. There are those who think that the image is an extremely rudimentary system in comparison with language and those who think that signification cannot exhaust the image's ineffable richness. Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," in *Visual Culture: The Reader*, ed. Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall (London: Sage Publications, 1999), 33.
10. Non-believers stands for skeptics and does not have a religious connotation in this context.
11. Lanfranco Aceti, *Our Little Angel*, Lanfranco Aceti Inc., personal website, January 10, 2014, <http://www.lanfrancoaceti.com/portfolio-items/our-little-angel/> (accessed January 10, 2014).

Changing the Game: Towards an 'Internet of Praxis'

There is a new spectre haunting the art world. Not surprisingly, it has been put forward in recent articles, panel discussions and books as the 'ism' that could, possibly, best describe the current dispositions of contemporary art. The name of the spectre is "post-internet art."¹ Unlike, however, its counterpart that was released in the world by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in 1848,² this contemporary spectre has not arrived in order to axiomatically change the established order of things; conceivably, it has arrived in order to support it.

Post-internet art refers to the aesthetic qualities defining today's artistic production, which is often influenced by, mimics, or fully adopts elements of the Internet. At the same time, the term incorporates the communication tools and platforms through which contemporary artworks reach their intended (or non-intended) audiences. Notably, in his book *Post Internet* (2011), art writer Gene McHugh suggests that regardless of an artist's intentions, all artworks now find a space on the World Wide Web and, as a result, "[...] contemporary art, as a category, was/is forced, against its will, to deal with this new distribution context or at least acknowledge it."³ Quite naturally, this would seem like a strong oppositional force directed against the modus operandi of the mainstream art world. Yet, further down in the same page, McHugh characterizes this acknowledgement as a constituent part of the much larger "game" that is played by commercial galleries, biennials, museums and auction houses.

Thus, there are inevitable contradictions and challenges in the role that post-internet art is called to fulfil as a movement and/or as a status of cultural production. Firstly, there is an easily identifiable 'anxiety' to historicize a phenomenon that is very much in progress: the Internet is changing so rapidly, that if we think of the online landscape ten years ago, this would be radically different from our present experience of it. Furthermore, the post-internet theorization of contemporary art runs the danger of aestheticizing (or over-aestheticizing) a context that goes well beyond the borders of art: in the same way that we could talk about post-internet art, we could also talk about post-internet commerce, post-internet dating, post-internet travel, post-internet journalism, etc. Therefore, the role and the identity of the post-internet artist are not independent of a much wider set of conditions. This false notion of autonomy is quite easy to recognize if we think, for instance, of 'post-radio art' or 'post-television art' or, even, 'post-videogames art,' and the inherent structural and conceptual limitations of such approaches.⁴

Most importantly, however, any kind of aestheticization may readily become a very effective tool of depoliticization. The idea of distributing images, sounds and words that merely form part of a pre-existing system of power, inescapably eradicates the political significance of distribution. The subversive potentiality inherent in the characterisation of a network as 'distributed' was systematically undermined over the 1990s and the 2000s, due to the ideological perva-

siveness of neoliberalism during the same period. Distribution – not to mention, *equal* distribution – could have enjoyed a much more prominent role as a natural fundament of the Web and, accordingly, as a contributing factor in any investigation of digital art. Last but definitely not least, one cannot ignore the crucial fact that apolitical art is much easier to enter the art market and play the ‘game’ of institutionalization (and vice versa).

To the question: could the Internet and new media at large become true ‘game changers’ in the current historical conjuncture? What does ‘red art’ have to propose, and how does it relate to the previously described ‘post-internet condition’?

Interestingly, the term “post-internet art” was born and grew parallel to the global economic crisis and the Great Recession of 2009. One of the most important objectives of the social movements that were engendered by the crisis has been the effort to “reclaim” and “re-appropriate.” This aspiration referred not only to economic resources, but also to social roles, democratic functions, human rights, and – of course – urban spaces. Syntagma Square in Greece, Puerta del Sol in Madrid, Zuccotti Park in New York, as well as some of the most iconic public locations around the world saw diverse, or even ‘irreconcilable’ in some cases crowds demand change. Within the reality of Data Capitalism and its multiple self-generated crises, people increasingly felt that they have now been totally deprived of a place (“topos” in Greek).

It is worth remembering that the coiner of “utopia,” Thomas More, chose an island as the location where he placed his ideal society.⁵ Any island constitutes a geographic formation that privileges the development of individual traits through a natural process of ‘appropriation.’ This encompasses both the material and the immaterial environment as expressed in the landscape, the biology of the different organisms, and – most relevant to our case – culture. Notably, when it comes to connecting utopianism with the cultural paradigm of new media art, we should not focus merely on the lack of a physical space (as articulated, for instance,

through cyberspace); rather, we should address the juxtaposition of “topos” with a potentially ‘empty’ notion of “space.” The transcendence of space in a ‘digital utopia’ absolutely necessitates the existence of a ‘topos.’ In a similar way to the one that Marx sees capitalism as a stage towards a superior system of production (communism),⁶ the construction of a ‘topos’ is a prerequisite for the flourishing of utopianism.

‘Red Art’ can be understood as a tool for the creation of such ‘topoi.’ The lesson that new media artists can learn from the political osmoses catalyzed by the economic crisis is that, in order to be effective, cyberspace should become part of a strategy that combines physical and online spaces, practically and conceptually, whilst taking into account the individual traits of both. The necessity expressed through this combination constitutes (at least partly) a departure from the developing discourses around the ‘Internet of Things’ or the ‘Internet of Places.’⁷ Alternatively, or additionally, what is proposed here is the formulation of an ‘Internet of Praxis’ (including, of course, artistic praxis). This approach is vividly reflected in several of the projects examined in this publication, as well as in the theoretical frameworks that are outlined.

Digital art is today in a position to capitalize on the participatory potentialities that have been revealed by the socio-political events that defined the early 2010s. The reconceptualization of cyberspace as a ‘cybertopos’ is a constituent part of this new ground on which people are called to stand and build. Accordingly, the emergence of a culture of ‘post-net participation’ in which digital media transcend physical space by consolidating it (instead of ‘merely’ augmenting it), may allow us to explore “concrete utopias”⁸ to a greater extent than ever before in recent times. It is by actively pursuing this objective that we would expect to change the rules of the game. Artists are often the first to try.

Bill Balaskas

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1. The term ‘post-internet art’ is attributed to artist Marisa Olson. See Gene McHugh, *Post Internet* (Brescia: LINK Editions), 5.
2. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels published *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* in London, on February 21, 1848.
3. Gene McHugh, *Post Internet*, 6.
4. The etymological comparison between the terms ‘post-internet art’ and ‘postmodern art’ could also highlight this context. Notably, in the case of this juxtaposition, ‘post-internet art’ puts a tool (the Internet) in the position of a movement (Modernism). If we were to consider the Internet as a movement, then, the natural historical link that would be established through the term ‘post-internet art’ would be with net art. Nevertheless, such a decision would assign net art to a status of ‘legitimization,’ towards which major museums, curators and art fairs have shown a rather consistent hostility. In this instance, historicization becomes a foe, since it would refute a ‘neutral’ relationship of the Web with art. This perspective is closely connected with the formation of an abstract notion of universalism, to which I refer further down (see endnote 8).
5. Thomas More’s *Utopia* was first published in 1516, in Belgium. There are several translations of the book.
6. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, with an introduction by David Harvey (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 51: “What the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable.”
7. The Internet of Things represents a vision in which physical items become ‘smart’ objects by being equipped with sensors that can be remotely controlled and connected through the Internet. The Internet of Places focuses on the spatial dimension of the capacities that Web 2.0 offers. For an account of the Internet of Things, see Mattern, Friedemann and Christian Floerkemeier, “From the Internet of Computers to the Internet of Things,” in *Informatik-Spektrum*, 33 (2010): 107–121, <http://www.vs.inf.ethz.ch/publ/papers/Internet-of-things.pdf> (accessed February 20, 2014). For an account of the Internet of Places, see Giuseppe Conti, Paul Watson, Nic Shape, Raffaele de Amicis and Federico Prandi, “Enabling the ‘Internet of Places’: a virtual structure of space-time-tasks to find and use Internet resources,” in *Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Computing for Geospatial Research & Applications* (New York: ACM, 2011), 9.
8. For more on the concept of ‘concrete utopias’ see Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, tr. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight, 3 vols (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986). Bloch differentiates between ‘abstract utopias’ and ‘concrete utopias,’ associating the latter with the possibility of producing real change in the present. ‘Concrete utopias’ should not be confused with seemingly similar theorizations such as Nicolas Bourriaud’s ‘microtopias,’ which structurally aim at preserving the existing status quo. Bourriaud asserts in *Relational Aesthetics* (2002) that “it seems more pressing to invent possible relations with our neighbours in the present than to bet on happier tomorrows.” Quite evidently, this approach stands far from the universalism that he advocates in his *Altermodern Manifesto* (2009) as a direct result of new technologies and globalization. At a time when neoliberal capitalism was entering its worst ever crisis, Bourriaud chose to largely ignore this context and build on a concept that – in the end – is apolitical and counter-utopian. ‘Post-internet art’ appears to follow a comparably dangerous trajectory.

Suggestions for Art That Could Be Called Red

What is Red Art? Or rather: what could Red Art be in today's post-communist, post-utopian world, a world shaken by conflicts engendered by contrary beliefs and ideologies which have little to do with communism? A world in which countries and societies are disrupted by territorial disputes, and by bloody fights about questions of religious identity, national identity, and ideology? Where communism has been overrun by capitalism with rare exception; where the European left movement is weak. Where the post-industrial era has produced an economic reality that is orders of magnitude more complex, transnational and therefore more difficult to control or change, than history has ever seen. In this situation, can there (still) be art that deals with ideas of communism constructively, or does contemporary art look at communist ideals only with nostalgia?

And let's be clear: is art that simply speaks out against capitalism, globalisation and neo-liberalism from a leftist position – is this kind of art 'red' per se? Do we expect Red Art to be 'red' in content, for instance, in directly addressing topics such as class struggle, the negatives of capitalism and a new neo-liberal world order? And if it does, is it enough to be descriptive or do we want art to be more than that, i.e., provoking, forward-thinking or even militant? In 1970, Jean-Luc Godard drafted a 39-point manifesto *Que faire? What is to be done?* that contrasted the antagonistic practices of making political films and making films 'politically.' It called unequivocally for art that actively takes up the position of the proletarian class and that

aims for nothing less than the transformation of the world. With his legacy, what kind of objectives do we request from Red Art? Do we really still think that art can change the world or is that another idea from the past that has been overwritten by something that we like to call reality? Can art that is for the most part commercialised and produced in a capitalist art market be 'red' at all, or does it have to reject the system established by galleries, fairs and museums in order to be truly 'red'?

Decades ago, when artists started to use new media such as video and the computer, their works were 'new' in the way they were produced and distributed, and changed the relationship between artists and their collaborators as well as between the artworks and their audiences and 'users' respectively. Most of this new-media-based art circulated outside the ordinary market and found other distribution channels. The majority of works were inspired by a quest for the 'new' and consistently broke with old aesthetic principles and functions. Much of it was also driven by a search for the 'better,' by overthrowing old hierarchies and introducing a more liberal and inclusive concept of the world, based on self-determination and active participation. Last but not least the emergence of the Internet brought us a fertile time for new and revisited utopias and artistic experiments dealing with collaboration, distribution of knowledge, shared authorship, and appropriation of technologies. Today we know that neither the Internet nor any other new technology has saved us, but that the hopes for a more demo-

cratic world and alternative economies sparked by it have come true, if only to a minor degree.

So how do artists respond to this post-communist, post-utopian condition? What can be discussed as Red Art in the recent past and present? In this issue of Leonardo we have gathered some answers to these questions in the form of papers, essays and artworks, the latter produced especially for this purpose. Bringing together and editing this issue was challenging because we decided from the start to keep the call for contributions as open as possible and to not pre-define too much. We were interested in what kind of responses our call would produce at a moment when the world is occupied with other, seemingly hotter topics, and it is fascinating to note that the resulting edition quite naturally spans decades of art production and the respective 'new' technologies as they related to ideas of social equality and empowerment – from video art to net art to bio art. This issue shows that the search for alternative ideas and perspectives, and an adherence to leftist ideals is neither futile nor simply nostalgic. But that this search is ever more relevant, particularly at a time when European politics is seemingly consolidating and wars around the world are establishing new regimes of social and economic inequality.

Susanne Jaschko

Why Digital Art is Red

The divide between the art shown in major museums and art fairs and that associated with the new media scene has been deep and durable.

Many critics have puzzled over it, particularly because there is much that the two realms share, including the desire to put people into unusual social situations.¹ Yet some of the reasons for the divide are plain enough, and they are about money, power and social distinction. The economic divide is across competing models of capitalist activity: the exclusive ownership of objects set against the release of reproducible symbols into networks with the ambition that they achieve maximum speed and ubiquity of circulation. The social divide is between a conservative club of super-rich collectors and patrons, and their attendant advisors, who buy their way into what they like to think of as a sophisticated cultural scene (Duchamp Land), against a realm which is closer to the mundane and more evidently compromised world of technological tools (Turing Land).² Power relations are where the divide appears starkest: in one world, special individuals known as artists make exceptional objects or events with clear boundaries that distinguish them from run-of-the-mill life; and through elite ownership and expert curation, these works are presented for the enlightenment of the rest of us. In the new media world, some 'artists' but also collectives and other shifting and anonymous producers offer up temporary creations onto a scene in which their works are open to copying, alteration and comment, and in which there is little possible control of context, frame or conversation.

This description of the divide has been put in extreme terms for the sake of clarity, and there are a few instances of the split appearing to erode.³ Yet its persistence remains one of the most striking features of the general fragmentation of the fast-growing and globalising art world. That persistence rests on solid material grounds, laid out by Marx: the clash of economic models is a clear case of the mode and relations of production coming into conflict, and is part of a much wider conflict over the legal, political and social aspects of digital culture, and its synthesis of production and reproduction.⁴ Copyright is one arena where the clash is very clear. Think of the efforts of museums to control the circulation of images and to levy copyright charges, while at the same time surrendering to the camera-phone as they abandon the attempt to forbid photography in their galleries.

So where is Red Art and the left in this scenario? Amidst the general gloom and lassitude that has beset much of the Left in Europe and the US, the development of the digital realm stands out as an extraordinary gain. It allows for the direct communication, without the intermediary of newspapers and TV, of masses of people globally – who turn out to be more egalitarian, more environmentally concerned and more seditious than the elite had bargained for. Alexander Cockburn, with his long career in activism and journalism, remarks:

*Thirty years ago, to find out what was happening in Gaza, you would have to have had a decent short-wave radio, a fax machine, or access to those great newsstands in Times Square and North Hollywood that carried the world's press. Not anymore. We can get a news story from [...] Gaza or Ramallah or Oaxaca or Vidarbha and have it out to a world audience in a matter of hours.*⁵

It is hard to ban social media, it has been claimed, because it entwines video fads, kittens and politics (and banning kittens looks bad). So the insight attributed by some to Lenin – that capitalists will sell us the rope with which to hang them – is still relevant.⁶

In an era in which the political and artistic avant-gardes have faded, the affiliation of the art world that is founded upon the sale and display of rare and unique objects made by a few exceptional individuals – in which high prices are driven by monopoly rent effects – tends to be with the conspicuous consumption of the state and the super-rich.⁷ Here, the slightest taint of the common desktop environment is enough to kill aesthetic feeling. The affiliation of at least some of new media art is rather to the kitsch, the populist, and to the egalitarian circulation of images and words, along with discourse and interaction. New media artists who push those attachments work against some of the deepest seated elements of the art world ethos: individualism, distinction, discreteness and preservation for posterity (and long-term investment

value). It should be no surprise that they are frequently and without qualification denied the status of 'artist.'

It is also clear why the death of leftist ideas in elite discourse does not hold in new media circles, where the revival of thinking about the Left, Marxism and Communism is very evident.⁸ The borders of art are blurred by putting works to explicit political use (in violation of the Kantian imperative still policed in the mainstream art world).⁹ Very large numbers of people are continually making cultural interventions online, and value lies not in any particular exceptional work but in the massive flow of interaction and exchange. In that world, as it never could in a gallery, the thought may creep in that there is nothing special about any one of us. And this may lead to the greatest scandal of all: think of the statements that artists who deal with politics in the mainstream art world are obliged to make as their ticket of admission – 'my art has no political effect.' They have to say it, even when it is patently absurd; and they have to say it, even as the art world itself becomes more exposed to social media, and is ever less able to protect its exclusive domain and regulate the effects of its displays. So at base, the divide is economic, but at the level of what causes the repulsion from digital art – that puts collectors and critics to flight – it is deeply and incontrovertibly political.¹⁰ They run headlong from the red.

Julian Stallabrass

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Dissent and Utopia: Rethinking Art and Technology in Latin America

by

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INTRO: REVOLUTIONARIES, CANNIBALS, HYBRIDS AND AVANT-GARDE

The proliferation and spread of new information technologies have redefined the way society organizes its political and cultural discourses. While the speed at which commercial corporations control and manipulate media and technology is unstoppable, a simultaneous response arises from the artistic field, from media spaces and from various technological and scientific projects, all of which articulate their proposals from a perspective of dissent and criticism of the system. This 'counter-proliferation' – which has become global through market means, just like the technology itself – acquires specific characteristics in developing countries at the periphery of centers of industrial development.

The ways in which new media and scientific-technological explorations have been incorporated in Latin America are, like everywhere else, uneven. It is possible, nonetheless, to classify a number of practices where the convergence of art, science and technology has been enriched and densified by its bond with political and social issues.

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the various ways in which art and new technologies converge in Latin America from a political and social perspective. Through the analysis of a number of art works and projects produced in the last decade in Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico and Peru we observe different ways of responding to the dilemmas posed by recent history, poverty, exclusion, gender, migration and ecological problems. The paper will propose a systematization of these art works following three main lines: a) practices that denounce, b) practices that dismantle, and c) practices that propose alternatives. These categories help us to understand the transformations stemming from the interaction of art, science and technology, revealing the new role adopted by the artists within a 'post-autonomous' practice in the field of art. Ultimately, this systematization will help us to identify new patterns or trends among the dissident voices in Latin America under the conditions imposed by the Neoliberal logic.

While the concept of 'Latin America' is complex and continues to offer fertile ground for epistemological and geo-historical discussion, and such a nomenclature seemingly overlooks the vast idiosyncratic, economic and ethnic differences within this sub-continental area, it is also undeniable that we share a number of cultural and historical elements. The traumatic encounter between Europeans and Indians, characterized by the genocide of indigenous people, and the way rationalist modernity lies at the foundation of Latin American societies largely determine the complex history of our nations and their subsequent evolution.

Despite the widespread contempt for indigenous peoples during the nineteenth century, a certain circle

of European intellectuals configured an idealized image of the American Indian. Technology through photography, as well as visual arts and literature, all contributed to the construction of the stereotype of the 'noble savage' Rousseau had dreamt of. However, this romantic mythological figure was replaced during the twentieth century and early twenty-first by the image of the 'good revolutionary'.¹ From Pancho Villa, to Frida Kahlo and Che Guevara, from the farmers of the Landless Movement in Brazil to the figure of Salvador Allende in Chile or the Subcomandante Marcos in Chiapas, the Western standpoint conferred upon each of these characters, and upon their struggles, a halo of seduction and lyricism as powerful as the victimized self-image of Latin American people subject to the Yankee or the European.²

Beyond this kind of dichotomy, the Latin American ethos can be looked at under the lens of 'hybridity,' a concept largely developed by sociologist Nestor Garcia Canclini in his book *Culturas Híbridas*.³ Canclini's notion underlines the *mestizo* and syncretic character of Latin American societies. In modern terms we could compare it to the figure of a transgenic or, more precisely, a 'divergenic' product inasmuch as it implies the inclusion of foreign genes into an organism; new combinations, modifications and genomic and genetic mutations. Maybe that is why, as the artist Marta Minujín ironically puts it, the only option for artistic practices in Latin America is to join the avant-garde. "Our reality may not be cutting edge because we are Latin American and live a fragmented reality. We have presidents who are surpassed by reality, ministers that change every week, currencies devalued overnight, fictional employments, and so on. More than anywhere else in the world, we live a fluctuating and multidirectional reality. So, then, Latin Americans are doomed to be avant-garde."⁴

In this respect, the originality of our Latin American identity seems to lie in this very awareness of our lack of any fixed, circumscribed definition; our origins are promiscuous and unclear and so too is our fate. In this sense Latin America can still be seen as a place where one can test all kind of models and theories – Socialism, Keynesianism, Neoliberalism – as part of a tireless *Sehnsucht* under persistent conditions of insecurity, rebelliousness, and chaos that dominate our societies.

Moreover, for a long time the artistic and cultural development of Latin America was interpreted as a 'blurred copy' of Europe and the United States. Until recently, the theory of the 'cultural gap' was an established subject in our classrooms. Now, if we adjust the rearview mirror we can see to what extent many of the avant-garde currents since the 1960s were actually motivated by specific, local conditions which cannot be analyzed from a diachronic perspective.

For example, in the 1960s and 1970s the conceptualist movements in Latin America – despite being nurtured by the American and European legacy (Fluxus, happenings, the Situationist International) – in many cases produced a body of work in response to specific experiences at local level, reflecting social exclusion, military repression and other factors. A considerable part of this production attempted to circumvent the mechanisms of control and censorship imposed by the dictatorial apparatus, thus developing highly subtle conceptual strategies. Good examples of this type of production are CADA in Chile, Cildo Meireles in Brazil and Felipe Ehrenberg in Mexico. The message was, in all these cases, encrypted in order to facilitate its survival. The artistic work then became a complex strategy of camouflage and simulation designed to seep into the public sphere before being kidnapped or censored. The conjunction of politics and art in the 1960s and 1970s thus demonstrates specific characteristics that require consideration of the political not merely from a concrete or partisan standpoint: the political, in this case, reveals an attempt to break out from the hegemonic patterns of discourse inherited from the modernist European rationalism that conferred symbolic legitimacy to a capitalist model rooted in a rigidly segmented class society.

From the local perspective, the adoption of foreign discourses in Latin America could also be seen as an act of cannibalism. The concept of 'antropofagia' coined in 1928 by the Brazilian poet and philosopher Oswald de Andrade in his "Manifesto Antropófago"⁵ established a somatic metaphor connecting the practice of cannibalism of native tribes and the invaders in the social and artistic fields. The European cultural heritage has been undeniably incorporated to the symbolic DNA of cultural practices in Latin America, but only once metabolized by changing local contexts. For the subordinate, peripheral culture can be conceived as a platform of continuous reinterpretations

which, as a result of its devouring impulse, gobbles up the other and, at that very moment, incorporates a particular legacy, not through imitation or tribute, but as a specific concoction of hybrid nature and dynamics.

TOWARDS A SYSTEMATIZATION

Given this fragmentary condition and the slippage towards 'bastard' modes of operation in regard to the hegemonic spaces, how can we read the variety of artistic practices in Latin America? And more importantly, how can we carry out this analysis assuming technological lag as a key element? No doubt, the entanglement of art and technology can yield an illuminating perspective where the local Latin *ethos* is both reflected and potentiated.

We have established three possible categories in order to address a set of works despite the diversity in their format, thematic and aesthetic. All of them are, nonetheless, permeated by a critical perspective and an explicit intention of promoting participation in political and social issues. We have organized three distinct categories: (1) practices that denounce, (2) practices that dismantle, (3) practices that propose alternatives.

While these three divisions are not mutually exclusive – one can easily find works that can be placed in these three categories indistinctly or that, at times, intersect one each other – we consider them useful to analyze the strategies employed by Latin American artists to update a political discourse related to the old left and that today is voicing dissent from, and criticism of, the neoliberal system.

1. Practices that Denounce: Scopic Perturbation

A first group of works operate to provide visibility to events, situations, state of affairs that are supposed to remain obscured, misrepresented or omitted by

several factors: PTB, hegemonic discourses, economic interests, and social alienation. Within this category we distinguish between those works that attempt to expose, denounce or raise public awareness about issues of social and economic order from an ethical perspective, and another group of works that attempt to underline practices, traditions, events or situations that have been excluded from the public enunciation of the official accounts of history and removed from traditional art circuits.

The first category relates to those works that follow a didactic regime to alert or to denounce sensitive issues at social or political level. This kind of resource is assuredly the most widely used in the history of artistic representation. True, much ink has been used to criticize or to question its persuasive strategy which, as Jacques Rancière notes, could be understood as a "political efficacy art" based on mediation.⁶ This model could be comprehensively reviewed in genre painting from the seventeenth century to the halls of photojournalism of the World Press Award, with its baroque rhetoric evidencing the excesses of war, the poverty of famine-afflicted countries or the impact of natural disasters. Hence, a certain exhaustion can be discerned both in the repetitive representation of those aesthetics, and in the actual reception of the works, which eventually seem to play against their stated intentions (true or not), numbing our sensibilities instead of awakening them, pleasing our moral or masochists instincts without really moving us. In Rancière's words, it seems that the problem is not in the moral and political validity of the message transmitted by the representative device. It lies rather in the device itself.⁷

Video art emerged in Latin American in the 1970s and 1980s, seeking to question the unilateral relationship that turned viewers into submissive recipients of moving images already encoded by the dominant

aesthetics of films and television. At the same time, video art offered an opportunity to approach critically many of the problems that mass media omitted. Thus, employing dislocated, parodic, or lyrical aesthetics, experimental filmmakers and video artists addressed the realities of marginalized sectors of society as well as the complex social and political problems of the region, reflecting on recent history, gender conflicts, censorship and control mechanisms. ⁸ With a high sense of self-criticism, works like *Agarrando pueblo. Los vampiros de la miseria* (Colombia, 1978), by Luis Ospina and Carlos Mayolo, became a parody of the manipulation of poverty and misery by artists wanting to gain access to the exhibition circuits of Europe and North America.

The use of media technology operates not just as a replacement of a manual, mechanical or analog resource by a digital or electronic resource. Instead it generates a new arrangement in which technology triggers or creates an immediacy to certain realities (whether painful, unfair, or humiliating) not only at visual level, but also understanding the media structures underlying social conditions. The scopic drive and its consequent cathartic emotion, either in its pious, altruistic or morbid expression, is enriched or altered by a challenge to the viewer to reveal its complicity with what the work or art project hints at in thematic terms. The project *Exposiciones transitorias (Transitory Exhibitions)* by the Chilean artist Máximo Corvalán is a good example. As part of the V Biennial of Young Art entitled *Utopías de bolsillo (Pocket Utopias)*, ⁹ Corvalán placed a cubicle in the public space, right next to the entrance of the Fine Arts Museum in Santiago. Inside he located a diorama that emulated the traditional didactic museographic display, representing a landscape from the Atacama desert. Also inside the cabin he placed a mattress, bedding, and personal items belonging to a homeless couple – Hugo and Carmen – who were invited by the artist to occupy the space to

sleep at night. At the same time, inside the museum, a monitor set up as a hole in the wall allowed visitors to see what was happening inside the diorama in real time. A second monitor showed the viewers watching. According to the artist, this work surpassed what he had anticipated as media attention grew out of control. In the end Hugo and Carmen were so pleased to be observed that the original idea – that they would sleep in the diorama at night and only their meager belongings were to be observed by the viewers during the day – was amended. The couple would spend the whole day in the cubicle. In this sense, Hugo and Carmen appropriated the artist's proposal, creating a social phenomenon that transcended into television and public discussion. Therefore, the critics, the neighbors, the diorama, museum visitors, viewers, the museum, the press and the artist – who was required to give permanent testimony on television – became part of a rolling device that appeared as a critical apparatus in itself. If Corvalán's intentions initially aimed at making visible what is kept invisible in the face of society – precisely due to the social analgesia inoculated through the media – the actual implementation exposed the seams that hold together social subjectivity as an articulating spectacle.

Working on a similar theme, but with different resources, Alfredo Jaar organized *Lights in the City* (Montreal, 1999). Inside four homeless shelters, Jaar installed devices that were activated every time a guest entered the premises, switching a red light at the top of a landmark building in the city. Unlike Corvalán, Jaar installed a data visualization display. In semiotic terms, the lights that switched on at the tower of Montreal, referring also to the various fires suffered by the building throughout the years, were both metaphor and index of each homeless person who, for a moment, ceased to be a statistical figure, a spectral glow in the anonymity of their social exclusion and opacity.

Also under the category of denunciation of, and challenge to, the historical, in search of social justice and reparation – an endemic claim in post-dictatorial societies – we could highlight one of the many works that have called upon online interactivity. *Búsqueda en Proceso (Search in Progress)* by Fabian Taranto was conducted in 2006 to commemorate the military dictatorship in Argentina between 1976 and 1983. A video 'loop' shows a few seconds of the first manifestation of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. The screen then begins to fill with green and blue pixels. When the user clicks on any green dot, the screen displays a text with data about a political repressor, while each blue dot contains data from a file of a person missing or murdered by the military dictatorship. On March 24, each click on a dot generated a request to different email addresses from the State Departments (Ministry of Defense, Supreme Court, Army, Navy, Air Force, Allegations of corruption in the security forces and General Secretariat of the Presidency). The emails were sent under the name of the missing person consulted in the database, including his/her file and claiming memory and justice. The result: 906 queries sent to 12 different inboxes – a total of 10872 emails.

2. Practices that Dismantle: The Secret of Machines

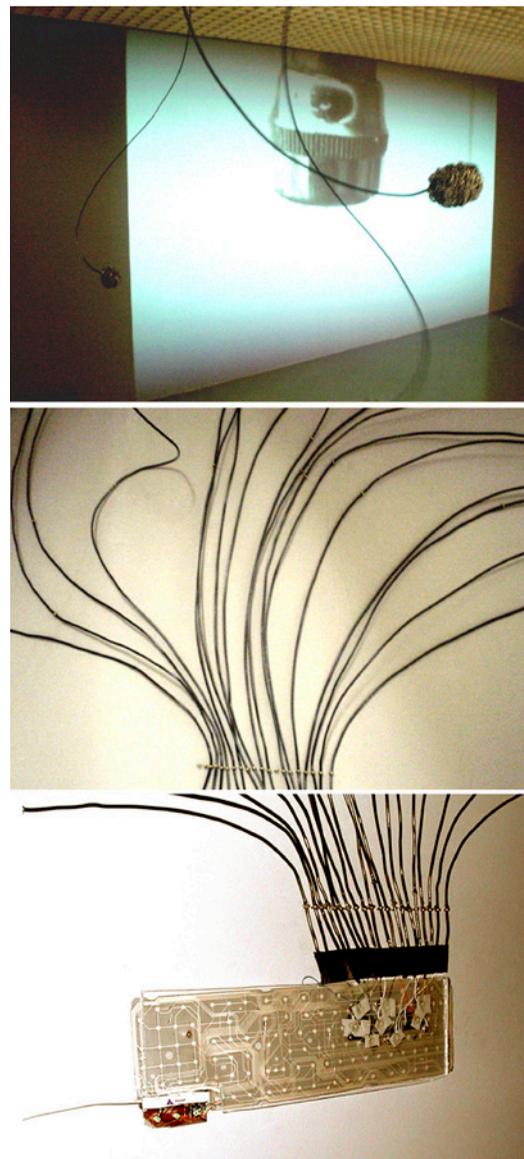
A second group of works and practices deploys a deconstructive perspective, seeking to dismantle technological artifacts seen as a semiotic-cultural apparatus, that is, devices whose ideology is inherent to their existence, design and function. In 2009, as part of the Biennale of Video & Media Art in Santiago de Chile, the Brazilian artist Fernando Rabelo presented *Contacto Qwerty*. Rabelo hacked a keyboard and connected each of its keys to cable extensions hanging in the room. At the end of each cable he placed a metal dish-scrub (which are commonly used to amplify electrical signals in the *favelas* where Rabelo had participated in children's workshops). When visitors took two sponges with their hands, their own bodies worked as 'conductors,' thus activating the keys. This resulted in a projection display under the model of basic operations – on / off, open / closed – allowing a simple understanding of the foundations of computing.



Figure 1. *Exposiciones Transitorias (Transitory Exhibitions)*, Máximo Corvalán, 2006. Hugo and Carmen in the diorama. Photograph by the artist. © Máximo Corvalán Pincheira, 2006. Used with permission.

Dismantling a technological device involves simultaneous operations that can be read from a political and critical perspective.¹⁰ On one hand, we face the possibility of understanding the secret of the machines gaining access to the program which operates in the 'black box' (following the concept used by Vilem Flusser.¹¹ This possibility of overcoming the inherent fetishistic logic of production technology that the market has naturalized is in open contrast with Žižek's warning of technology as increasingly opaque and incomprehensible: "modernist technology is 'transparent' in the sense of retaining the illusion of the insight into 'how the machine works' (...) the price for this illusion of the continuity with our everyday environs is that the user becomes 'accustomed to opaque technology' – the digital machinery 'behind the screen' retreats into total impenetrability, even invisibility."¹² A wide range of current media studies such as media-archeology and neomaterialism not only insist in analyzing the content of the works, but also tackling how the machine is built in itself.¹³ In this sense, the appropriation of technology, disobeying the factory settings, allows the production of new meanings at local, personal, arbitrary and poetic level. Dismantling a technological device grants the user an opportunity to subvert economic determinations implicit in the design of technological devices, such as their rapid obsolescence.

Latin America displays an extended tradition of recycling consumer objects. More than a statement of ecologist politics, or fashionable trend, precarious economic conditions have forced its implementation as a standard practice: re-using technology, fixing broken appliances and DIY is a means of subsistence. The invention of witty solutions to repair or to respond to a technical problem is widely practiced in Latin American countries, especially in low-income groups. 'Gambiarra' in Brazil, 'chamullo' in Chile, 'chapuza' in Spain: all these practices find their resonance within the pop-



ular folklore. A number of artists have 'recycled' them to find alternative sources of knowledge through practices such as DIY, circuit bending, hackmeetings.¹⁴ Moreover, the ways in which this knowledge is generated or updated involves different ways of horizontal and collaborative learning already latent in alternative educational currents which emerged in the sixties.

Popular education, promoted by educators like Paulo Freire, advocated a horizontal method of teaching in which knowledge was shared by a community and where the educator facilitated the processes of self-empowerment, instead of delivering knowledge unilaterally, as in the classical educational model. "Teaching



Figures 2 & 3. *Contacto Qwerty*, Fernando Rabelo, 2009. Photographs by the artist. © Fernando Rabelo, 2009. Used with permission.

is not to transfer knowledge but to create possibilities for production or construction."¹⁵ In this respect, we can mention the project B & S, a sexual DIY experience lead by Carla Peirano and Orit Kruglansky. The project consisted of conducting a series of workshops for women from different socio-economic strata, who were taught how to hack domestic appliances (blenders, electric toothbrushes, etc.) and various skills such as welding, wiring and electronic manufacturing, in order to make sex toys. The latter were personalized through the use of natural and synthetic fibers and techniques such as sewing, pottery and embroidery. The project addressed several aspects of the relationship between art, gender and technology, trying to overcome prejudice, gender and digital divides as well as the stereotypes relating to sexual pleasure and the collective imaginary.¹⁶ Participants shared their knowledge of basic electronics and circuitry while they tried to rescue various crafts (sewing, knitting, embroidery, casting) displaced by industrial production. Although undervalued, these skills have survived linked to the feminine or to the subordinate (indigenous crafts, therapeutic work with physically or mentally disabled, prisoners' remedial work) and within the social micro space (family, friends) are negatively associated with the female historical role that reiterates the image of women unable to achieve emancipation. This created the possibility to "reactivate socially constructed knowledge in community practice to set a new knowledge."¹⁷

3. New Alternatives: Close Utopias and New Weapons

A third line of work involves processes rather than finished works or specific actions. These processes want to produce research and test practical solutions that modify the environment or, at least, contribute to the installation of new imaginaries and forms of subjectivity [it is worth pointing out that we assume the idea of subjectivity as a sociological rather than psychological concept; we talk about ways of perceiving the social world and shaping consensus].

In accordance with Nicholas Bourriaud's enunciation – "art was intended to prepare and announce a future world: today it is modelling possible universes"¹⁸ – we have observed a trend in artistic-scientific-technological production that reanimates the spirit of the avant-garde of the twentieth century, but in the absence of a unifying and totalizing narrative. Paraphrasing Borges, to the effect that the aesthetic would be "the imminence of a revelation which does not occur,"¹⁹ Néstor García Canclini states that "...art is the place of imminence. Its appeal stems partly from announcing something that can happen, as it promises or modifies meaning with innuendo. It does not fatally compromise with hard facts. It leaves what it says on hold."²⁰

Taking into account Canclini's words, we can see that the projects and practices that are currently

emerging from the convergence of art, science, technology, design, and new media all point towards a micro-social level, not necessarily responding to any specific aesthetic or poetic. Instead they present the technological-artistic work as a ground of exception characterized by inter-disciplinarity, experimentation and collaboration. From this perspective we can also identify a moment that Canclini has called 'post-autonomy.' This concept refers to the increased displacement of object-based art practices to practices based on contexts and the inclusion of works and artists in the media, urban spaces, digital networks. For Canclini, the power of these new practices lies in the fact that "these new locations are removing what we call art from its paradoxical condition of encapsulation-transgression."²¹ When we assume this post-auton-

omy it is possible to see the projects that link social movements, scientific research and technological subversion as heterotopic exercises. Foucault coined the term heterotopia in 1966 in an effort to describe an instance that sought to juxtapose "in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible."²² Different layers of meaning alter usual relationships between form and function. From this post-autonomous heterotopia, the opportunity of modeling possible worlds emerges from different fields of social and political action.

Under this category, environmental concerns have taken an unprecedented leading role. In Colombia, an interdisciplinary group led by Hamilton Mestizo performs a series of actions in which scientific research

methods are collectively assumed to development projects that aim to empower people through science and technology, trying to achieve new ways of thinking about sustainable living.²³ One of his projects in process – *Algas verdes (Green Algae)*– looks for alternative and clean, self-sustaining energy sources. Similarly in Chile, the collective Chimbalab (Constanza Piña y Claudia González) uses potatoes to generate energy for a portable radio station that broadcasts at the Vega Central: the central market of fruits and vegetables.²⁴ The project was conceived right after the earthquake that struck Chile in 2010, and showed the fragility of the new communication systems (standard telephonic and cellular systems) and the force of radio as a more stable and accessible media of communication.

In a similar connexion, Gilberto Esparza (Mexico) has developed a series of quasi-robotic artifacts, built from technological waste (industrial and domestic appliances and communication devices). His *Parásitos urbanos (Urban Parasites)* (2008)²⁵ are able to feed off from the surrounding energy (electrical sources, sunlight) and act upon the environment through sound alerts or through physical actions, like, for instance, removing the garbage. A more poetic, and practical, venture was developed through the project *Plantas nómadas (Nomadic Plants)*²⁶ which consisted in creating bio-technological robots that can intervene in polluted eco-systems, reversing the effects of contamination.

PLACES IN BETWEEN

Artistic activism or 'artivism' has entailed the development of a number of practices that, through the re-appropriation of everyday technological appliances, create conditions for civil rebellion.

With the popularization of communication technologies and the resulting low cost, increasing numbers of artists have adopted the enormous potential of mobile devices to strengthen local identities, creating or recreating alternative narratives in the medial space. Contrary to many technophobic apocalyptic visions that predicted an incurable disconnection with material reality, digital media have allowed interaction and citizen participation, from the digital space to the territorial space, the real neighborhood. Beiguelman has called this phenomenon 'cybridism'; a way of living between networks 'on and off line.'²⁷ This perspective was widely substantiated in 2011 in the movements of the Arab Spring or at the mobilizations of Chilean students in the same year. These mass demonstrations in public spaces (rallies, flashmobs, performances) were organized and escalated in cyberspace via social networks (YouTube, FaceBook, Twitter). Although information and communication technologies are controlled by economic and political interests, it is still possible to produce, share and distribute content with relative freedom, thus encouraging transversal citizen participation in virtual and physical space.

The extension of the perceptual field in the artistic and cultural world – alongside the sensation of ubiquity, portability and horizontal transfer of information at collective level allowed by portable digital technologies and GPS – has encouraged the development of projects that engage social realities. Numerous initiatives are now building alternative cartographies through locative media such as *AirCity: Arte#Ocupa SM* held in Vila Belga (Brazil) or *ID Barrio (ID Neighborhood)* organized by artists and researchers from Mexico, Brazil, and Spain. Through geolocated audio and audiovisual register produced by the local community, these projects try to account for imaginary territories and heritage in constant mutation, or encourage citizen participation in urban design for initiatives such as the Combi Project carried out in Lima, Peru, in 2008.

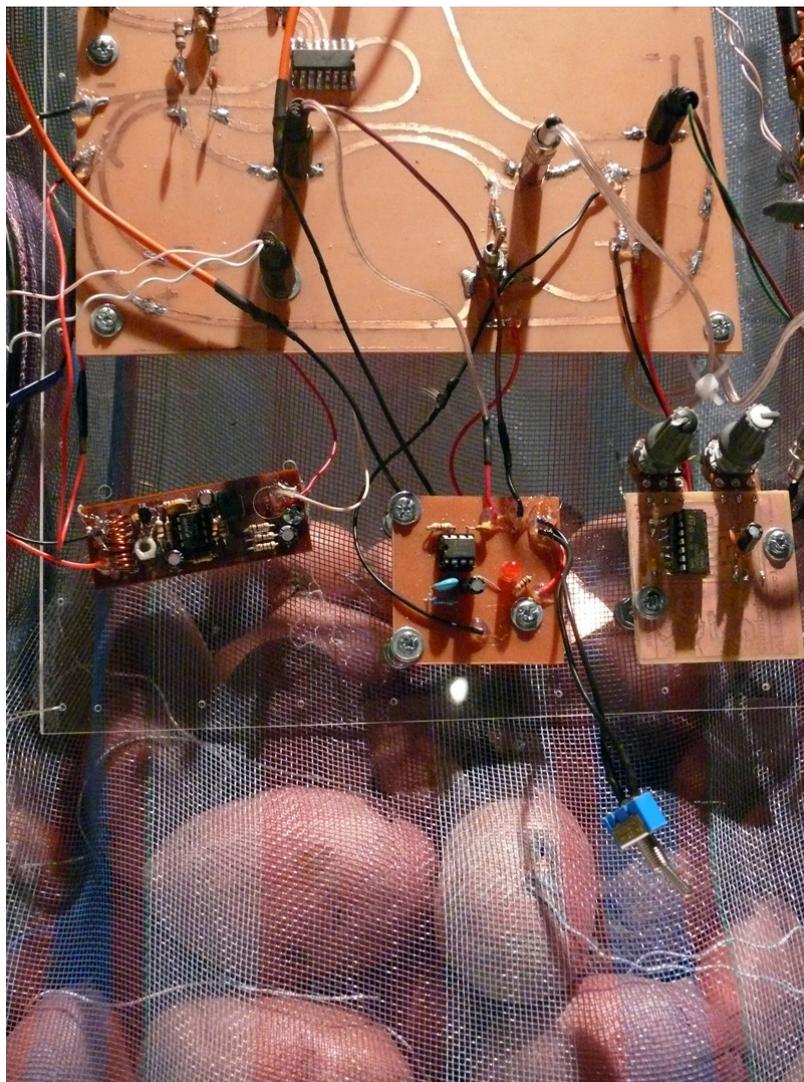


Figure 4. *Proyecto Emisora (Radio Station Project)*, Chimbalab (Claudia González y Constanza Piña), 2010. Photograph by the artists. © Chimbalab, 2010. Used with permission.

CONCLUSION

In 2009 the Mexican artist Marcela Armas produced an installation consisting of a metal incandescent filament that drew the border separating Mexico and the United States. The title of the work, *Resistencia*, was a reference to the device that dissipates electric power as heat. The work was presented in a gallery environment, generating a real limit, an insurmountable barrier, incandescent and therefore dangerous; a hot metaphor of the socio-political tension that exists in the geographical border. Similarly, Ricardo Dominguez,²⁸ together with the B.A.N.G. Lab, headed the project Transborder Immigrant Tool which consisted of the implementation of a geo-location system to assist (illegal) migrants from Mexico to the United States to cross the Mexico-US border.²⁹ The system used a low-cost cellphone with a free GPS applet, which was cracked to offer a simple navigation system that incorporated surveillance applications predicting movement patterns, and was able to deliver information about where to find drinking water, healthcare centers and legal guidance. Furthermore, the Transborder Immigrant Tool could send out poems and messages of encouragement to migrants to help them through the hardest moments of their trip. The project was not only harshly criticized by many U.S. media, but actually resulted in Dominguez becoming the subject of a federal investigation and the temporary suspension of his professorship at the University of San Diego.

Similarly drawing on mobile telephony, the work of Eugenio Tiselli *Ojo Voz (Eye Voice)* consists of an application for Android 2.2 + phones based on open source tools, which allows interaction, participation and empowerment of the population. From this work emerged the project *Ojos de la Milpa (Milpa's Eyes)* in Tlahuitoltepec, Oaxaca, Mexico (2012), and in Tanzania (2011). Both projects consist of a software implementation of a mobile network built on open source tools that simplify the handling of the smartphone for its use in local communities. The software is designed with specific functions that allow local farmers to document their farming practices and problems associated with climate change and industrial agriculture. Farmers, mostly indigenous, interview others, make videos, thus nurturing mutual knowledge rooted in their reality.³⁰

The variety of assemblages where science, technology and art converge enable the development of future imaginaries that are realized in the present. Many of the developments described here can be understood as 'science fiction' heterotopic exercises seeking to provoke changes at local level in actual time and space. These projects and practices have been conceived within the field of art, but cannot be ratified through the traditional categories of the artistic world, since they do not follow the traditional rules of the market. Rather, they are set up as examples of experimental art that escape the collectible order of objects. The exhibition circuit where they can be found is not necessarily the galleries and museums. Moreover, they are often based on research processes in direct connection with society and its problems.

From this perspective, utopia is no longer drawn from a unifying and hegemonic narrative, but from the changing conditions of life in the hands of collective groups that operate at micro-social level. As such, the borders between art, science and technology are inevitably blurred, as are the boundaries between aesthetics, creativity, politics and society. Perhaps because, in the most basic sense, they have never been separated realities. On the contrary, the great illusion has been to believe that these were separate fields, that the arts operated under the autonomy inherent to the hyper-specialized logic of human activities promoted by a modern capitalist definition.

The characteristics of Latin America as a region, the outstanding disparities in wealth distribution, and in access to culture and education, as well as the historical resistance exercised by the most violated strata of society (farmers, workers, indigenous, and low-income sectors today a growing middle class vulnerable) offers a favorable scenario for this type of crossover between disciplines: the rising flux between art, science and technology begets a new vanguard. ■

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