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## “Revolutionary ferment” of art in the age of digital capitalism\*\*

**Abstract:** In this paper I analyzed the current state of capitalism and the social system(s) that are showing in many ways symptoms of disintegration. My argument is that the crisis can be very productive and the global capitalist system can mutate like a virus, regenerating and updating itself anew. Each economic disaster thus gives it a new momentum for different forms of accumulation and growth of the capital. I am focusing on the analysis of this constellation, i.e. of the recent interpretation of the “digital capitalism” and how it is reproduced in the art system, particularly on the case of e-flux journal and its project “Supercommunity”. I also analyzed the possibilities for learning from social and economic models beyond capitalism, to see if there is possibility to learn from their emancipatory potential that failed to be realized, and how the artists have correlated or responded to such systems. The case study for the analysis or possible alternative models would be the Workers Self-Management system in Yugoslavia and the artistic position within the so called New Art Practice that questioned from the radical left position their social environment and opted for even more radical and “revolutionary” artistic responses..

**Keywords:** Digital capitalism, Supercommunity, e-flux journal, Self-management, New Art Practice in Yugoslavia.

### Capitalism in a state of crisis

In his seminal book *Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre analysed the way social space is produced in different socio-political contexts. His materialist line of argumentation led him to conclude that every society – and hence every mode of production with its subvariants – produces its own social space. For him, the notion of space considered in isolation was just an empty abstraction and in analysing the mechanisms of capitalism, he

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\* The paper under this title was delivered at the Symposium “Art in Times of Collapsing Systems”, Luxembourg, November 4th to – 5th, 2019. Curated by Zofia Cielatkowska, Zoran Erić and Enrico Lunghi, and organized in the framework of Luxembourg Art Week in collaboration with University Luxembourg (IRMA). This is a revised version of the original unpublished paper.

made precise use of the term “abstract space” to explain how labour was disassociated from the process of social reproduction and became “abstract” (Lefebvre 1991, 48-49). With this analysis, Lefebvre departed from the basic principles Karl Marx laid down in his book *Das Kapital* and opened up a space for new interpretations of the way capitalism has been reproduced in the last decades.

Going back to a precise analysis of Marx’s founding principles and laws of capitalism such as a reserve army of the unemployed, a falling rate of profit, business crisis, increasing concentration of industry, etc. it is important to acknowledge his claim that labour is inherently free to be exploited in a market on which it must prove its value. In capitalism, this “freedom” of labour has surpassed limits and borders. Even though the type of labour has changed in many ways, the same figure of the worker, free of the possession of any capital or goods, with the only commodity he can offer on the market being his ability and willingness to toil, still remains. Nevertheless, the capitalist who uses this labour to produce surplus value and thus profit is the corresponding figure whose drive to accumulate wealth from the flow of capital keeps the system in permanent motion.

This continuous motion, production and reproduction were the pretexts for the proliferation of new definitions of capitalism’s current state such as pragmatic, asymmetric, cut-throat, disjunctive, and even predatory. However, they also point to the flexibility and potential of this form of social system to overcome the most severe economic crises or crashes of the stock exchange, and to reappear even stronger, as if there is really no alternative. In spite of the claim that present day capitalism is, in many ways, showing symptoms of disintegration (Bell & Sekine 2001, 37-55), as we have seen many times in recent history, crisis situations can be very productive, and the global capitalist system can mutate like a virus, regenerating and updating itself anew. Each economic disaster gives the different forms of accumulation and growth of capital a new momentum. This state of perpetual crisis that the system actually reproduces – such as the qualitative leaps in the process of evolution - gives it an “immunity” from which develop ever stronger and more resistant sub-variations of capitalism in the different contexts and societies of the globalized world.

The latest big crisis which started in 2007, and which has severely impacted many global economies and reduced profitability in many areas, is a perfect example of how capitalism responds to this type of situation. One solution was the privatisation and monetisation of everything that had until that point somehow evaded, or been overlooked by, the control mechanisms of the market (public services, biodiversity, knowledge, the human genome, etc.). The other option was financialisation, or where profit levels in the major economic sectors were in decline to invest in the finance sector itself in order to create “fictitious” profits.

Another crisis that was generated particularly by capitalism in the mode of social production fostered by the industrial revolution is the environmental crisis exemplified by pollution, emissions of CO<sub>2</sub> and other toxic gases, waste management, the effect of extractivism, etc. The environmental crisis, as Razmig Keucheyan has noted, cannot be solved by the entire human species adopting a universalist position that shares the objective of preserving the planet while at the same time being ignorant of the social tensions around us. On the contrary, Keucheyan sees the only solution in a yet more radical critique of capitalism that finds ways to make a profit even from the non-overexploitation of nature. Nature itself henceforth becomes the object of an accumulation strategy implemented by the new modalities of capitalism.<sup>1</sup> The productive force of the ecological crisis was thus harnessed so as to help new types of environmental finances to flourish, and one of the most dramatic cases was that of the new policies and techniques introduced by insurance and reinsurance companies to benefit from this period of instability in capitalism. To put it very explicitly, the greater the risk, the bigger the insurance premium, which can be seen in the case of the “securitization of climatic risks” that opened up new avenues of profit for capitalism in the period of its biggest crisis (Keucheyan 2016, 59-60).

Finally, the digital shift has affected the global economy and thus created a new pretext by which to describe one of the latest versions of capitalism, i.e., *digital capitalism* which had already been elaborated on by Daniel Schiller in the book of the same title. Digital capitalism has a number of possible mechanisms which it can use to accumulate, sustain and even enlarge its wealth in spite of the perpetuated state of crisis mentioned above. This is easy to trace back to and compare with other similar models of production and economic system and the shift from Fordism to Post-Fordism which is known as Flexible or Lean production, and Toyotism, with the later focussing on the service economy and immaterial labour. The sharp division between service and product(ion) has been replaced by a more complex interrelation in which providing a service is of utmost importance in the placement of any product. Digital capitalism is not just characterised by an expansion of the service sector, but even more so, by relations of service. The relation of production and consumption has been changed in such a way that the consumer is now actively participating in the composition of the product. Maurizio Lazzarato has argued that these processes reflect the shift from a Taylorist organization of services to a situation where the product service becomes a social construction and a social process of conception and innovation (Lazzarato 2001). The result is that the predominantly immaterial product the service sector is dealing with

becomes distanced from the industrial organization of the relationship between production and consumption.

Maurizio Lazzarato, Paulo Virno, Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, are amongst the theorists who acknowledge that immaterial labour is the main aspect of the post-Fordist economy. This term summarizes many of the changes taking place in the field of labour and which produce immaterial goods such as services, cultural products, or relationships. According to Lazzarato, the term immaterial labour refers to two different aspects of this type of labour. The first is related to the “informational content” of the commodity and refers explicitly to the labour process of the workers in big companies, where the most desired skills of the workers are those of cybernetics and computer control. The second concerns the activity that produces the “cultural content” of the commodity, where immaterial labour involves a series of activities that are commonly not perceived to be “work.” These activities are fundamental in the setting up of cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, and consumer norms, thus generating public opinion (Keucheyan 2014, 4). The notion of immaterial labour challenges the old economic division between production and reproduction. In the context of the communication and production of affects, this binary opposition of production and reproduction totally collapses. Michael Hardt has therefore rightly noted that what is at stake is actually the production of social relationships or, even more broadly, the production of social life itself. The bottom-line is that these “products” are not objects that are created forever, but exactly the opposite, they are being produced and reproduced in a continuous flow of activity (Hardt 2001).

The outcome of this shift to immaterial labour and a service economy in digital capitalism is overtly exemplified by the speed at which capital is accumulated as can be seen from the Forbes list of wealthiest people in the world. For some time, Jeff Bezos, the paradigmatic figure of digital capitalism and the founder of Amazon, has been first on the list of billionaires ([www.forbes.com](http://www.forbes.com), 2021). In second place is Bill Gates, the pioneer of Microsoft which he founded in 1975, who has now sold almost all his shares in the company. In 2016 he announced the establishment of a one-billion-dollar Breakthrough Energy investment fund (<http://www.b-t.energy/>, 2021). With the exhaustion of fossil fuels no longer such a distant perspective, the race for profit in this new field has already begun with new companies and start-ups being created to develop a carbon-neutral economy and stimulate the use of alternative and renewable energy sources.

The internet, which at its beginning was naively considered to be a new open space for its users, a direct form of democracy, which according to Schiller had been created as a government, military and educational tool, soon enough took on a new role as an agent of digital capitalism and was

fully subsumed by the logic of the market (Schiller 1999, 17). Primarily serving transnational corporations, it has empowered and made them richer while on the other hand intensifying social inequalities. Cyberspace, as the main realm of digital capitalism, fostered a consumerist ideology by implementing within itself the logic of the market. It took over the educational potential of the Internet and subjected this to its various proprietary models. In summary, Schiller concluded that the Internet became the central production and control apparatus of an increasingly supranational market system (Schiller 1999, 14).

### **Digital capitalism in the art world**

If we shift this line of argumentation to the art system and the world of art, the only section of this particular system that is still flourishing on all geographic levels, even in the times of the pandemic, is that of commerce, i.e., the global art market and the art fairs that are taking advantage of the digital paradigm in their promotional activities and sales.

Furthermore, one is able to detect and identify which phenomena in the art world are using the mechanisms of digital capitalism, reproducing its matrix and are finally representative of the paradigmatic position which is consistent and aligned with its model. One paradigmatic example and case study of this model is seen in e-flux, an online advertising company for art events, or as they describe themselves in the introduction on their website: “e-flux is a publishing platform and archive, artist project, curatorial platform, and enterprise which was founded in 1998” (<https://www.e-flux.com/about>, 2021) by the artist and curator Anton Vidokle. Following the lead of many digital capitalists from other sectors of the service economy, this online advertising company transformed itself over a period of years, and especially through the establishment of an online art journal, into what is arguably a new “elite” of socially aware, critical and engaged art practitioners who in turn founded their own platforms for raising various issues. The culmination of such a set of attitudes was the launch of the project “Supercommunity” on the invitation of e-flux to participate in the 56<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennial (<http://supercommunity.e-flux.com/topics/supercommunity/>, 2021). On this occasion, *e-flux journal* produced one single issue which ran over a period of four months and comprised an article per day, published both on the Internet and produced on site in Venice.

The immediate question this raises is what does the project “Supercommunity” represent from a performative perspective? Is it merely another product of the advertising corporation charging very steep prices and with high revenues, typical of the mode of digital capitalism we are living in? Or have things like philanthropy, social awareness, criticality and

political correctness become a form of “compensation” for the relevant protagonists or even corporations, just the sugar coating of entrepreneurial content?

The statement from Antonio Negri introducing the term “Supercommunity” is worth quoting at length:

*Supercommunity traverses every experience, every struggle. It gives voice to art as it does to social critique, to the critique of science in the same way as the syndicalism of the old and new labour-power, to the struggle of artists as precarious (workers) and the precarious (workers) as artists (Negri 2017, 6).*

The irony that statements like this have been appropriated by a digital capitalist platform instead of precarious workers, could be compared to Naomi Klein’s proposition that it is not the product that is any longer being sold on the market but a certain lifestyle. The hegemonic struggle to create a “monopoly” and a “brand” of socially engaged and active art scene protagonists could be one of the main points or outcomes that concur with the matrix and methodology of how global capitalism works. Distant, singular, or collective critical voices are now given a proper platform in the arena of cyberspace to express their outrage and are validated by the revolutionary voices of philosophers with the integrity of Antonio Negri and the like.

### **Learning from old social models and revolutionary artistic practices**

Whether an alternative to such a system exists is the question that has been lingering on for years now in social studies, as well as in artistic practice. In that context, it was useful to learn from the experimental social systems of the period of the Cold War and bipolar world order, such as the system of Workers Self-Management in Yugoslavia (Erić 2009, 135-150). The latter was a social construct that was of the utmost importance in defining Yugoslav society and its relation to the concept of contemporaneity.

For Yugoslav communists, the concept of self-management, as had already been promoted in the 1950s, meant the same thing as the concept of democracy for Western European liberal countries. True democracy could be only embodied in the concept that human beings themselves control the products and conditions of their work. For a society in which the workers are the most important subjects, true democracy could be thus attained only when the workers decided on the products of their labour through self-management. Successful reforms and economic prosperity led Edvard Kardelj, the mastermind of the reforms, to claim, “Self-management had

not only demonstrated the economic effectiveness” but also allowed Yugoslavia to “solve democratically most of the contradictions and conflicts that cropped up in society” (Jović 2003, 121). Kardelj, as the main ideologist of the concept, conceived of an ideocratic society and tried to push “social reality” towards an ideological concept. He thus followed Marx's recommendation expressed in the 11<sup>th</sup> thesis on Feuerbach, that it is not enough to interpret the world in a new way, but one must also change the world in a way so that reality becomes closer to your interpretation of it.

For workers' self-management socialism, society was much more important than the state, which was supposed to *wither away* according to the concept of Friedrich Engels. However, this withering away of the state was necessarily a very long process and in the first years of workers' self-management the role of the state and the Communist Party was of the utmost importance. The network of basic pillars that supported the social development of self-management socialism was very complex and, therefore, the political system had to regulate the relations between these pillars in order to foster their synchronous actions and prevent them from becoming monopolistic. These social pillars were seen to be in the socio-political interest of the producers, in working collectives as the carriers of production, in communes, in socialist associations, and in the state. The state therefore had the task of making a path between the broad initiatives of the immediate producers and the working people, thus transforming itself from an instrument of rule over the people to an organisational instrument of self-managed workers who aimed to be self-governing. Similarly, the Communist Party, whose avant-garde role was crucial in the first phase of socialist development, had to relinquish and hand over its ruling position to the free producers and their associations. All kinds of social associations such as working councils, civil society unions, etc. flourished in the new society and created a broad network in the self-management system of Yugoslavia.

The ideological basis for a society of workers' self-management was soon translated into all spheres of social life. The property regime was a good example. Namely, after the nationalization of all big private companies and industry in the post-war period, and with the introduction of self-management, state property was declared to be “social property” belonging to society as a whole. However, ruptures in this overall concept and discrepancies between its theoretical elaborations and actual implementation in all social strata soon started to occur. The first critical voices which attacked the bureaucratisation of the self-management system could already be heard in the 1960s, coming from a group of leftist, Hegelian-Marxist philosophers whose platform was the magazine *Praxis* which was published from 1964 to 1974. They claimed that the main problem and cause of the

unsuccessful development of a proper self-management socialist system was the prevalence of “statist bureaucratic” groups in Yugoslav society. They advocated for a more effective and less bureaucratized system of self-management.

Dissatisfaction and protests against the distortion of the expected processes of social developments and bureaucratisation peaked in the revolutionary year of 1968. After the political turbulence, student demonstrations and the creation of the “Red University Karl Marx” in the capital city of Belgrade, the cultural climate became radicalized and critical art practices gained a momentum and also a new political context on which to reflect. In criticising the political and cultural establishment for how its bureaucratisation and nationalisation stood in the way of artistic freedom, the artists who had started to question their social context were on the same line of radical Marxist criticism, that of the “diversion” in the social transformation of Yugoslavia, as that which had been started by the different social groups made up of amongst others the students and philosophers around the *Praxis* magazine. In the post-1968 political and social climate, when President Tito, albeit in a demagogic way, had publically supported the students’ requests, the broader institutional space had opened up for the young artists of the *New Art Practice* which flourished in a number of Yugoslav art centres in the 1970s (Erić 2017, 100-111).

Raša Todosijević thought that the role of art in such a context is that it should be an “integral part of the critique of social practice, therefore a revolutionary mechanism aimed at its improvement and change” (Todosijević 1975, 1-9) as he put it in the text *Art and Revolution*. Todosijević argued that art cannot just fit mechanically into social relations, it is also a dialectical revolutionary process.

Zoran Popović made the even more radical demand in the text titled *For the Self-managing Art* to opt for a political art that would oppose the bureaucratization of the country and its apparatus which becomes the “class enemy of the proletariat” (Popović 1975, 1-3).

*The power of artistic bureaucracy... is consolidated owing to the artists' lack of awareness of the revolution, divisions among artists and the public being ill-informed. In the name of “universal” values, engaged art boils down to the aesthetics of politics. Thus, instead of a politicisation of art we have the aesthetics of politics. ... Art as the aesthetics of politics is a projection of state administrative and technocratic-liberal conformism. Contrary to this, the Marxist notion of art presupposes a politicisation of art* (Popović 1975, 1-3).

There are several notable examples of artistic positions in the post-1968 climate in Yugoslavia and throughout the 1970s that radically stood up



to the bureaucratisation of the art system, and this was not merely related to the local context: the actions and texts of the members of the group KÓD (1971), *The Edinburgh Statement* (1975) by Raša Todosijević, or the call for *International Strike of Artists* (1979) by “former artist” Goran Djordjević are such cases. The standpoint of the artists from the USA and Western Europe who responded negatively to the appeal for the Strike of Artists is best exemplified by the answer from Hans Haacke:

*...Museums and commercial galleries will go on functioning very well without the cooperation of socially concerned artists, and these of course would be the only ones to possibly join such a strike. Rather than withholding socially critical works from the art-system every trick in the book should be employed to inject such works into the mainstream art world, particularly since they are normally not well received there. (Vesić, 2009, 147).*

Another example of a radical position was that of Ilija Šoškić who left the country after the protests of 1968 and settled in the city of Bologna which was run by the Communist Party of Italy, joining the left-wing circles and their battles across different social contexts. By 1978 and the end of the *Years of Lead*, Šoškić with a number of other artists and theorists realized that all their illusions about changing the socio-political system, about the emancipatory potential of art, the creation of an alternative system of thought and value, and finally confronting the formation of the global system in which the logic of capital and its reproduction in all spheres of society dominates, had been shattered.

Each of these above-mentioned artists had to find their own niche where their resolute ethical position would not be compromised, or to withdraw and give up and try to find new parallel realities where they could still work as artists. Šoškić at first decided on “abstention” — forbearance — for which he received the support of the intellectual circles in which he moved in Italy, especially Oresto Scalzone, one of the leading communist intellectuals. Abstention for Šoškić meant “withdrawal into a revolutionary ferment”, the aim of which is that “the entire space is left for the bourgeoisie to show their (true) nature” (Erić 2018, 163-179).

An analysis of possible alternative social models to digital capitalism, as Michael Watts has reminded us, points to the fact that “there is a danger of not learning from history” when discussing the different aspects of modernity and development. That danger is, in fact, one of “losing touch with the roots of our own modernity, of not recognizing that modernity cannot be unproblematically located in the West, and of not seeing development and its alternatives as oppositions that contain the other.” (Watts 2003, 441). By learning from the unfinished modernizations and social systems which exist(ed) beyond capitalism, one could explore further

the unrealized emancipatory potential of that social system that once produced specific dynamics in the relations of artists and the society they lived in; in a country that was part of different supranational networks such as was the Non-Aligned Movement. There is still a lot of value in analysing the pros and cons and potential of such a system in a time when proper alternatives are lacking and the idea which was derived from it, namely that of self-organization, has been widely explored in a different context.

The global art system of today is constituted amongst other things by the numerous positions of practitioners that have assumed modalities or work and solidarity models of collaboration which lean conceptually on the model of self-management, albeit from a bottom-up perspective. These art practitioners identify with and live according to the principles of Commons, social, spatial and environmental justice. However, the core question is still do these voices which criticize the weak spots in each society have any potential or the capacity to trigger actual social changes, even on a micro level, not to mention to offer alternative social systems? The artists and cultural workers that advocate social change are not excluded from the market. Eventually, they are bought and sold on the market of ideas and services, and the question remains how this differs today from the market of commodities including the art market? How one can function differently within such a system and can one function at all beyond it? Perhaps it is good to go back to the Edinburgh statement of Raša Todosijević who asked in 1975 “who profits from art and who gains from it honestly?” (<https://agora8.org/RasaTodosijevic/> 2021)

In conclusion, the “revolutionary ferment” that was put into a state of “hibernation” by the radical left-wing artistic practices of the end of 1960s and 1970s in Yugoslavia on realising that the local self-management system, and bureaucratisation even more so, had reached a crisis point and that global capitalism could not be altered, might still serve as a source of inspiration and a reference point for those artists who strive for social change and have opted for new radical or revolutionary gestures.

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