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Theses on Cultural Production

written by

The Union of Industry and Leisure

*The recuperators are among us. Annihilate forever
anything that could one day destroy your work.*

The recuperators are among us. Annihilate forever anything that could one day destroy your work.

The recuperators have become us. There is no state of exception¹.

All forms of dissent, critique and resistance, are an inextricably internal to the structures they oppose. Any attempt to formulate a critical analysis of the totality of social and discursive relations must realize the tactics and goals they endorse are already implicated within the relations of power they resist.

Radical gestures are vulnerable to integration. Dissenting voices add a crackle of authenticity to the democratic process. They may even be fostered for such a purpose. The entitlement to dissent makes stooges of us all. It is no longer a matter of neutralization, of co-option, or even tolerance. The process of recuperation is a process of inversion². It transforms critical gestures into the affirmative prerogatives of continuity.

“Autonomy.”

“Freedom from bureaucracy.”

“Change.”

Critique is acknowledged, repackaged as a gift, and returned to sender as an object of contemplation in itself. We ought to be grateful. Aren't we dependent on the process of unwrapping it, again, and again, and again—addicted to the cause of salvation through intellectual pre-occupation? Whilst the content is essentially unchanged in the course of this cycle, the mutated forms it is forced to assume remove from it all intrinsic value³. This process refracts any understanding of the problem as a whole into contingent and isolated parts. What remains are fragmentary oppositions, meaningless contradictions that act so effectively to conceal the absence of debate.

Some of our choices make themselves. Specifically, those involving in

Notes:

1. Giorgio Agamben used the phrase “state of exception” to refer to situations when governments or other sovereign powers use crises and times of panic to extend its power further than before. “In every case, the state of exception marks a threshold at which logic and praxis blur with each other and a pure violence without logos claims to realize an enunciation without any real reference.” *State of Exception* (2005).
2. The process of recuperation is described in *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) by Guy Debord.
3. In *Mirror of Production* (1973), Jean Baudrillard rejects the “labor theory of value” used by Adam Smith and Karl Marx and reinterprets with the “object value system.” In the spectacle-commodity economy, also referred to as late capitalism, objects are valued by their commodity relationship in a system of signs, in which value is represented only by other representations.
4. “I am what I am” - the text of a popular Reebok advertisement and a reference to a literary motif in the Invisible Committee’s *The Coming Insurrection* (2007) pamphlet.
5. The “principle of equivalence” is an ideological device used to establish the validity social status, Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello write in *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2007).
6. The “Untergehen of the Übermensch” is a Nietzschean concept, specifically that the Übermensch must fall before rising, phoenix-like. In *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1885), Zarathustra is described as descending from the mountaintop into the village below, hence the *Untergehen* - the “going down” - of the Übermensch. The downward motion is a necessary prelude to the establishment of living values in a supernaturally meaningless universe.
7. “The ecstasy of doomed youth” is a possible reference to *Anthem for Doomed Youth* (1917), Wilfred Owen.
8. A work is called “pastiche” if it is cobbled together in imitation of several original works. The *Oxford English Dictionary* says pastiche is “a medley of various ingredients; a hotchpotch, farrago, jumble.” This meaning accords with the etymology: pastiche is the French version of the greco-Roman dish pastitsio or pasticcio, which designated a kind of pie made of many different ingredients.
9. Détournement is a concept of the *Situationiste Internationale*. Their magazine (1957 - 1972) defined this concept as the “integration of present or past artistic productions into a superior construction of a milieu,” adding there can be “no situationist painting or music, but only a situationist use of those means.” The phrase is short for “détournement of preexisting aesthetic elements.” It is a “method which reveals the wearing out and loss of importance of [the old cultural] spheres.”
10. In *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol* (1975), Andy Warhol wrote, “Business art is the step that comes after Art. I started as a commercial artist, and I want to finish as a business artist.”
11. Walter Benjamin, in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Production* (1936), defines the “aestheticization of politics” as a key component of Fascist regimes. For Benjamin, the politicization of art should be the goal of communism; in contrast to Fascism which aestheticized politics for the purpose of social control.

Plagiarism is necessary; progress depends on it. Good art despises democracy to the same measure as bad democracy covets art. Bad democracy's administrators covert art inasmuch as they demand of it, that it package and promote their core propaganda motifs: "inclusiveness," "accessibility," "good citizenship," "public dialogue," "creative entrepreneurship," etc., etc. Art is about none of these things.

Art, which sets itself the task of promoting democratic principles, branding itself as oppositional to globalization, worker repression, and so on, is invariably banal and insidiously reactionary. Good art cannot be a space in which individual rights to freedom, to expression, etc., are asserted; for the reason that in good art, the very subject who might enjoy such privileges is abjected and annihilated

Good art cannot assume a position because it is predicated on the destruction of every position, every point of origin.

If fascism is taken to be the aestheticization of political life¹⁰, then it is hard to think of a good artist who could not be called a fascist. Left totalitarian systems serve art in more roundabout but equally constructive ways: censorship and its addiction should be welcomed as "enabling."

Stalin's policy of arresting and eradicating artists and writers was inspired, as it placed them in a zone of silence and impossibility from which all good art stands.

Good artists should be quiet, invisible, or dead.

Do we contradict ourselves?

"It is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption."

1 Corinthians 15: 42

the total identification with oneself around moral values and technical power. Other choices we have the privilege to make for ourselves. We can do so because we are individuals, because we have the right to choose what we consume, to choose whom we really are.

I am what I am.⁴

"A revolutionary."

Here, finally, the modern dream of authenticity is realized. The injunction everywhere to "be someone" maintains the pathological state that makes the society necessary. Never has domination mutilated such an innocent slogan. Its image is a bonding agent, a sign of the network-based society, a network-dependent society. Participation is assumed. Abstinence illogical.

Under the principle of equivalence⁵ enforced by capital, everything becomes commutable, reversible, exchangeable. It is this general exchangeability that has gradually abolished all differences and boundaries, and imposed an uneasy sense of indetermination throughout society. What the honest slave is, more than anything, is that he might be suspected of being behind the times.

The dictum of inclusivity that adds a moral sheen to such expansive spaces of encounter is a regulatory ideology, and should be acknowledged as such.

What was political in friendship is neutralized. Engaged in quantitative relationships without consequence, human existence is debased to a supply of custom and strategem. One cannot reform the most trifling detail without taking the whole thing apart: all cults of authenticity must be abandoned.

“What is called “philosophy of art” usually lacks one of two things: either the philosophy or the art.”

Friedrich von Schlegel

This statement of 1797 is more than a witticism. It expresses the fundamental separation of the overcoming of art and the realization of philosophy. The reconciliation of the two is at once the *Untergehen of the Übermensch*⁶ and the ecstasy of doomed youth⁷—the blood of the chronically bored spilled in the streets like champagne.

Art’s attempts to coincide with reality are always undone by the material mark of an event, by repulsive matter. In its dealings with reality, it justifies itself by claiming profundity of content. Profundity has been systematically eradicated. Any attempt to reflect this in art necessarily utilizes irony, the practice which becomes its solace.

Irony is reactionary. It relegates commitment to pastiche⁸. Political art is instrumental inasmuch as it needs to instrumentalize its own materiality, a fictional space or point beyond itself toward external objectives.

The other instrumental art form is that of advertising. The implication is formalist: the suggestion that politics has located its content, and that forms are somehow neutral. The practice of art is apolitical; it only waits for the artist to become politicized. Critical theory must communicate itself in its own language, the language of contradiction, which must be dialectic in both form and content.

Détournement⁸ is the opposite of quotation. It is the flexible language of anti-ideology. Its materials are those which already appear within the spectacle. It is language that cannot and need not be confirmed by any previous or supra-critical reference. On the contrary, its own internal coherence and practical effectiveness are what validate the previous kernels of truth it has brought back into play.

“Do not look for the meaning, look for the use.”

Ludwig Wittgenstein

Art and politics shed potential for emancipation in terms of redistribution: an alteration of what can be perceptible in society. This is enacted through a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and invisible, of speech and noise that simultaneously determines the place and stakes of politics as a form of experience.

The abolition, and realization, of art are inseparable aspects of the single transcendence of art. “Bourgeois art” is the consequence and experience of failed transcendence. It produces icons of that failure. An icon is not an original, but a copy—the copy of another icon. Art is not about originality, but about the repetition of the copy.

Plagiarism in late capitalist society articulates a semi-conscious cultural condition. Namely, that there is nothing left to say. The practitioners of much postmodern theory have tended to proclaim this rather smugly: if there is nothing to say, they have demonstrated there will always be something to sell⁹.

The integration of all possibilities into the art market makes it difficult to imagine anything that could be excluded from it. It has expanded to envelope the entire society, consuming along the way anything that could be useful to its purpose: recycling rubbish, forging communities, investigating political issues and perfumes. Art has finally embedded itself into life, negating both.

Is disillusion the best we can hope for? Should we feel ashamed that we failed to realize the initiative ourselves?

Avant-gardes promise too much.