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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

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Red Art: New Utopias in Data Capitalism

BOOK SENIOR EDITORS
LANFRANCO ACETI, SUSANNE JASCHKO, JULIAN STALLABRASS

BOOK EDITOR
BILL BALASKAS

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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 in edulcorated forms) nor as the art of the left, but there is a need to analyze the complexity of the diversification and otherization of multiple geo-political 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' distinguo 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*

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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 aestheticization 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.

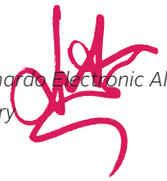
Red Art, therefore, if intended as Commonist Art becomes the sign of public revolts, in the physical squares or on the Internet. It is art that emerges without institutional 'approval' and in some cases in spite of institutional obstacles. Gramsci would perhaps say that Commonist Art is a redefinition 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 conflations 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 indentified 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).

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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-

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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 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.

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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 democratic 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 predefine 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

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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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7. On monopoly rent and art, see David Harvey, "The Art of Rent: Globalization, Monopoly and the Commodification of Culture," *Socialist Register* (2002): 93-110. Harvey uses Marx's example of vineyards as a prime example of monopoly rent: the wine from a particular vineyard is a unique product, like the products of a particular artist. The article is available here: http://thesocialistregister.com/index.php/srv/article/view/5778/2674 (accessed March 31, 2014).
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10. Remember Bataille: "Communist workers appear to the bourgeois to be as ugly and dirty as hairy sexual organs, or lower parts [...]" Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 8.

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FROM LITERAL TO METAPHORICAL UTOPIA

Interconnections Between the Inner Structure of the New Media Art and the Utopian Thought

by

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ABSTRACT

In its original meaning u-topia *means the lack of* topos*. This condition is inherent in the new media artwork. Due to its immaterial quality and non-object status, the new media art is not physically tied to a specific space unless displayed.*

This literally "u-topian" condition results from the utopian (in the sense of revolutionary) nature of the new media art that rises above questions of unique prototype, controlled reproducibility and object ownership. To speak in Marxist terms, it's the a priori negation of the commodity fetishism that imposes the literal, as well as the metaphorical, utopia. Thus, the new media, the pillar of the late capitalism public sphere, become the new field of revolutionary cultural practices. I will describe this paradoxical – or rather coherent, according to Frederic Jameson – condition by analyzing two major art forms of new media art, namely video art and internet art.

INTRODUCTION

When a term has different meanings, both literal and metaphorical, there is usually a common ground where all connotations intersect. Interestingly enough, the affinities between different meanings can go beyond the obvious, revealing historical interconnections and dialectical patterns.

Indeed, the term utopia [*outopia*] in its literal sense, refers to the absence [*ou*] of place [*topos*]. In its metaphorical sense, in which it is used today, utopia is a term that originates from Thomas More's inaugural text [1] and it seeks to describe the author's imaginary island country. According to Fredric Jameson's analysis, the notion of utopia basically refers to the systemic, revolutionary political practice, aiming at founding a whole new society. [2]

When it comes to new media, their literal lack of *topos* is intrinsically related to their profoundly utopian nature. In other words, the metaphorical is essentially linked to the literal on many levels. This paper attempts to explore how the literal *u-topian* [3] structure of new media is used to create artworks that convey utopian ideologies. The analysis of two major new media art forms, namely video art and Internet art, reveals recurring patterns that lead to broader historical interconnections.

LITERAL *U-TOPIAS*

One of the most fundamental characteristics of the new media image – a term that embraces digital or analogical moving image in all its imaginable forms – is its lack of *topos.* The moving image is a latent immaterial entity stocked in a device (digital or analogical) and thus deprived of actually occupying physical space. This absence of space or, more specifically, the lack of actual material volume derives from the lack of objects. Of course, going beyond the object is not an exclusively new media characteristic. Conceptual art has been practically based on that principle. And, even before that, the 'objet d'art' per se had already been through an important demystification since the ready-made.

Abolishing the material entity of the work of art has clear political connotations. Lucy Lippard introduced the term 'dematerialization' of art [4] in order to describe the urge of going beyond the official art by spreading it in all social layers. Art would, thus, become a common activity and consequently notions of property and reproduction of the work would be eliminated. Dematerialized art would, therefore, actively

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participate in the transformation of the society. Art would, then, disappear in the sense that it would be generalized throughout society as the very aestheticization of daily life. [5] The fusion of art with life, in a Marxist approach, would be the negation of the division of mental and manual labor, which is a prior condition for the separation of mankind in classes.

Even if the fusion of life and art is a highly utopian, and thus an unattainable desire, [6] the detachment from the object of art is a fact. And non-object art a priori cannot be distributed, sold and collected. To speak in Marxist terms, non-object art materializes the negation of commodity fetishism.

The new media image per se does not have a material entity. Nevertheless, art objects do exist in new media art even if their status is peculiar. Focusing on the example of video art – a major historical new media art form – it is easy to realize that the material part of the work consists of the tools used to present the image (monitor or projector) as well as the physical container of the image such as the videotape (replaced nowadays with DVD, USB, etc). If the projecting or broadcasting apparatus is an auxiliary part, in the sense that it is not connected to the work, the videotape is intrinsically linked to the image itself: it is the medium containing the message that is conserved in a latent form. The question that is naturally raised is whether this storage apparatus is capable of counterbalancing the object's absence, thus, rendering the work susceptible to being integrated into the art distribution circuit.

This specific status of the object is intrinsically related to the fundamental characteristic of the new media artwork: its reproducibility. Every tangible format of conserved moving image is in fact a copy that can be further reproduced without any limit. In everyday life, for every work there are several exhibition copies, screening copies, not to mention conservation copies in different media following the evolution of the technology. Hence, there is not such thing as authentic or unique videotape, or DVD, or even worse, as authentic computer file. All these *simulacra* prove that the new media artwork naturally resists commercialization since we can happily (and legally) reproduce any work without any consequences to its nature or status.

However, if new media art cannot be easily integrated into the commercial art circuit unless it is transformed into installations or other concrete plastic forms, it can be transmitted through the mass media networks. Since the beginning of the video art, the possibility of reaching larger audiences has opened up a wide range of opportunities to communicate and share art. The new media image distribution through both mainstream and alternative mass media soon became a synonym of political engagement.

NEW MEDIA AS THE NEW UTOPIA: TWO MAJOR HISTORICAL ART FORMS

Video Art and the Utopia of an Alternative Television

Driven by genuine fascination for new media technologies, Nam June Paik, the neo-romantic artist, who wore Wellington boots in his studio for fear of being electrocuted, visualized a whole new world; new media technology would create a new visual culture resulting from the fusion of electronic music, performing arts and video images. In a state of totally utopian delirium, Paik went far enough to foresee medical implementations of the new media image. He believed that in the near future the new media image would cure blindness or that it would be used as an electro-visual tranquilizer [*sic*]. [7] It is from this very same spirit that emerges his legendary video *Global Groove* (1973), the manifesto of the new video culture willing to become the melting pot of all different cultures and beliefs. Video was perceived by Paik as the new Esperanto. In his most famous installations *Moon is the Oldest TV* (1965), where he recreates the moon phases onto monitors and *TV Cross* (1966), where nine monitors form a cross, Paik translates major icons and symbols of humanity into electronic images, thereby creating a new universal visual vocabulary.

Along with Paik's vision of a new world transformed by the power of the new media image, other video artists decided to question, confront and subvert the dominant mass medium, namely television. Sharing a common political engagement, several groups of artists both in the United States (Videofreex, Raindance, Ant Farm or Global Village, to name just a few) and in Europe (the French collectives Video Out and Vidéo 00, or the groups formed by well known filmmakers like Jean Luc Godard and Chris Marker) [8] aimed at creating an alternative television that would eventually awaken, rather than manipulate, the masses. Blurring the boundaries between political activism, performance and visual arts, such video artists often defended specific social causes like the anti-war movement or feminism. Their deeply utopian aim has been to create an alternative flow of information through realist video documentaries, which could encompass a political analysis of subjective experiences and support a position of political advocacy that the mass media would never allow. [9]

Sharing their video recording know-how, these independent collectives created content and tried to transmit it in various ways. Early collectives strategies for distribution include tape libraries, tape exchanges, interactive screenings as well as transmission via cable television, public broadcast television or low power pirate TV stations. Yet, artists often invented more subversive methods. In December 1973, Chris Burden bought TV commercial time slots during prime time on a television channel in California to broadcast his performance video documentation.

If the clash with mainstream television is eloquently depicted in Ant Farm's *Media Burn* (1975), a video evoking an explosive collusion of two basic symbols of the American culture (the car and the television), other artists confront television using less violent means. On the last eight evenings of December 1969, WDR 3 television ended its daily transmission by broadcasting Jan Dibbets *TV as a Fireplace*. The image of a burning fire transformed the television into a fireplace evoking the archetypical gathering of people around the fire. In 1983, WGBH (Boston) broadcasted Bill Viola's *Reverse Television: Portraits of Viewers* during commercial time slots. The image evokes a television viewer sat on his sofa. Television is, thus, transformed into a mirror. Along with the critical point of view towards the television culture, these works of art share the desire to create and distribute art for the masses by transforming domestic space into the space of a video installation.

Internet: The New Media, the New Utopia

A few decades later, the fascination towards the capacity of broadcasting new media content in a large audience switched medium, from television to the Internet. The Internet is the new utopia par excellence. The ability of crossing the borders of time and space reinforced the development of a strong political framework. The contemporary rhetoric based on the perception of the Internet as an immense collectivity is evocative of that political context; 'digital revolution' or 'virtual community' has become everyday language, whereas the famous McLuhian term "global village" has been literally concretized in the Internet era.

The socio-political background of television and the explosion of the mass media in the 1960s and the 1970s have been reflected in video art. Likewise, the

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political aspect of the (virtual) new land of promise has been crystallized in Internet art. The guerrilla television and the video works related to political activism that have marked the highly utopian era of video art, have been reproduced online three decades later. Tactical media, various forms of activism and openly political works denouncing the commercial use of the Internet have been at the core of Internet art creation (at least at the beginning). The collective ®TMark used the structure of a company in order to promote the sabotage of corporate products and fund cultural projects. On the other hand, etoys, a Swiss group that parodied dotcom brands, organized a search engine hack that redirected thousands of users to their webpage. Their artistic status is quite ambiguous since, as Julian Stallabrass points out, "on the internet the border between political activism and cultural creation has been particularly porous." [10] The artists of the early days of Internet art have aimed at subverting the Web, criticizing its commercial logic and proposing a different economic and political model.

CONCLUSION

Utopia turns out to be the leit-motif of new media art. This historical analysis proves that the more *ou-topian* a medium is, the more utopian its content can get. In the 1960s and the 1970s television has provided the means for the counter culture to flourish. In the era of the cloud technology, which epitomizes the absolute lack of space, internet concretizes the utopian ideology by setting off social unrest and globalizing its impact. At the same time, however, new media constitute the key for the expansion of late capitalism. That profound endemic antinomy is embedded in "globalization itself, which can indeed pass effortlessly from a dystopian vision of world control to the celebration of world multiculturalism with the mere changing of a valence." [11] Seen from another perspective, this major contradiction embodies the new media prophecy that has been poetically illustrated by Nam June Paik. In effect, new media has formed a huge melting pot where everything is possible, where antithetical patterns can evolve side-by-side creating a multi-layered universe. While Paik celebrated the bright side of this new world, other video artists and the net artists have mostly criticized its darker side. The common ground of all the new media artworks discussed in this paper is that the artistic application of mass media can subvert their mainstream use. In other words, artists strongly believed that art can change the world. ■

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2. Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London and New York: Verso, 2005), 3. The author adds a second line of descent, more obscure, which refers to the omnipresent utopian impulse related to "the deceptive yet tempting swindles of here and now, where Utopia serves as the mere lure and bait for ideology." This paper focuses on the first, purely political notion of utopia.
3. In order to make that distinction clear, a different spelling has been applied: *utopia* refers to the current metaphorical use of the term whereas the neologism *u-topia* refers to its primary literal sense. By separating the two components of the word, its etymology becomes more obvious.
4. The term was introduced in the article Lucy Lippard and John Chandler's article, "The Dematerialization of Art," *Art International* 12, no. 2 (February 1968): 31-36; and further developed in Lucy Lippard, *Six Years* (London: Studio Vista, 1973).
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6. Lucy Lippard and John Chandler, "The Dematerialization of Art," 32. The phrase "one day maybe" in Lippard's article, concerning the dematerialization of art, evokes her lucidity towards the utopian character of her approach.
7. Untitled text by Nam June Paik with the following description: "The following essay was written in winter and copies were sent to Max Mathews, Mike Noll, James Tenney and Lejaren Hiller Jr. It was printed in the Flykingen Bulletin (Stockholm) in 1967." Published in *Nam June Paik,Video n Videology*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Everson Museum of Art, 1974), n.p.
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