

SUBVERSIVE FUNCTIONALITY

**Critiquing the Notion of Usefulness as a Strategy for Opposition
in Contemporary Artistic Practices**

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INTRODUCTION

Baudelaire foresaw that this destructive tolerance would one day be hailed as a form of 'progress': in this complacent receptacle, a friendly abyss, the anarchic energies of creation would be soaked up into nothing.

—Edgar Wind, *Art and Anarchy*¹

The arts have long been seen as the environment to cultivate idealistic or utopian socio-political paradigms. Throughout the twentieth century various movements attempted to bring about socio-political change through artistic production; from the modernist avant-garde, to the Situationists, to Joseph Beuys. Each sought to obscure the boundaries of art and life for their varying, emancipatory beliefs. However, the landscape has altered, the terrain shifted sometime in the mid-twentieth century. With a changing political environment and increasingly globalised world, such experiments in the alternative organisation of life seem quaint, if not laughable, and may even be alarmingly misguided to some. Whilst cynicism prevails, practices seeking a utopian dimension do still occur and although often appearing as nostalgic re-runs of past artistic endeavours, they exist nonetheless.

For some time now, this is where I have found myself; concerned with the practical application of artistic ideas I believe to be of some positive social value. Creating with the intent of directly improving something to a certain degree, be it ecological or social, for example. The process has been predominately led by an idealism and left-wing sentiment developed, almost by osmosis, through art and design education,

¹ Edgar Wind, *Art and Anarchy* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1985), p.88.

coupled with a logic of pragmatism.² Assessing a situation and attempting to find the best possible way to remedy any issues there might be. There is the desire to maintain a sense of conceptual idealism, a critical distance, whilst also having a practical immediacy. We might call this a form of socially engaged art practice, advocating the use of creativity as an agent for positive social and political change.³ Perhaps I am already assuming too much. It might be more worthwhile to instead question the very possibility that creativity can be an agent for actual and effective change. Here is where my unease with such a provocation becomes apparent. I have consistently felt compelled to investigate what this might mean, constantly beset with the anxiety of appearing naive and despairing at the prospect that such endeavours are ultimately doomed to both theoretical and practical failure. As philosopher Simon Critchley asserts, we now 'think we know better than to try to bring the heavens crashing down to earth and construct concrete utopias'.⁴ Nonetheless, I persevere, caught within this double bind of nihilism and enthusiasm. This is not undertaken alone though, as socially engaged practices seem to be currently flourishing, which offers an insight into the current state of art and design, if not culture as a whole. This may be indicative of a growing desire for social and political change, made manifest in the arts.

² Pragmatism, from pragmatic:

'Dealing with things sensibly and realistically in a way that is based on practical rather than theoretical considerations: "*a pragmatic approach to politics*". As defined by the Oxford Dictionary, and the definition which applies hereinafter — Oxforddictionaries.com, *pragmatic* [online] Available at: <<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/pragmatic>> [Accessed 23 August 2016].

³ 'Socially engaged art practice is an artistic practice that requires a meaningful interaction with communities of place and/or interest and with broader social or political intentions at its core. It includes collaborative, community based, process based, public and dialogic practices that rely on social intercourse and exchange'. As stated by the National College of Art and Design Dublin on their *MA in Socially Engaged Art* online prospectus, which provides an adequate description I shall also henceforth adopt. — Ncad.ie, *MA in Socially Engaged Art* [online] Available at: <<http://www.ncad.ie/postgraduate/school-of-education/ma-in-socially-engaged-art/>> [Accessed 18 August 2016].

⁴ European Graduate School Video Lectures, *Simon Critchley: The Faith of the Faithless. 2010*, YouTube, 16 May 2011, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8X9ruueLJqg>> [Accessed 26 September 2016].

Emblematic of this is the Assemble collective winning the 2015 Turner prize for their *Granby Four Streets* regeneration project. Comprising mostly of, as yet unqualified, architects; Assemble encompasses art, architecture and design, with their working practice seeking to 'address the typical disconnection between the public and the process by which places are made'.⁵ Interdependence and collaboration are cited as attributes championed by the collective. Working with locals of the Granby Street area of Liverpool, Assemble helped to develop a form of community land ownership, with the intention of regenerating the empty Victorian terraces into affordable housing. The project, and indeed Assemble's ethos, seems inherently practical and concerned with fostering cooperation in order to effectively apply their practice. The Turner prize they have subsequently received could therefore be seen to solidify the current interest in, or even need for, a more practical application of the arts.

Contrarily, it might be symptomatic of an underlying negation of the values and practicality upheld by such practices, whose good intentions become compromised. Socially engaged art practices may fall prey to that which they often seek to work against. This investigation seeks to critique the usefulness and pragmatism associated with socially engaged art practices, which in many respects advocate forms of sociability and models of being in opposition to the dominant socio-political and economic climate. Taking the context of neoliberalism as producing a fundamental shift in art and culture in both Britain and America, speculation will centre on whether or not this artistic pragmatism is blind to the very forces it attempts to negate. Perhaps being 'useful', in this context, is instead inadvertently adhering to the hegemony of the cultural dominant.

⁵ Assemblestudio.co.uk, (2016) *Info* [online] Available at: <http://assemblestudio.co.uk/?page_id=48> [Accessed 19 August 2016].

The discursive environment of socially engaged art can be taxing to navigate for the reason that such practices balance precariously between definitions, socio-political paradigms and artistic spheres of influence. The term itself accommodates an increasingly varied spectrum of practices and multidisciplinary approaches, ranging from art, design and architecture to psychology, sociology and ecology. Continuing the modernist call for an obfuscation of art and life, socially engaged practices often seem to dissolve into their surroundings, at times becoming akin to public relations exercises and at others, activist campaigns.

SUBVERSIVE FUNCTIONALITY

The common thread between my own practice and a recent overall contemporary tendency for social engagement is the desire for functionality. Evaluating the usefulness of art is an admittedly complicated and potentially redundant act, compounded by the indefinable and subjective nature of 'use'. It could also be argued that art, as with all culture, is useful in and of itself. 'Useful' is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as: 'Able to be used for a practical purpose or in several ways: "*aspirins are useful for headaches*".⁶ It is the practicality associated with usefulness which is of greatest importance, delineating a distinct purpose to the subject or object in question, a function. The notion of 'use' applied hereinafter corresponds to this practical application. The term I have arrived at to best describe an artistic practice seeking an application in this manner is 'subversive functionality'. Through functionality such practices seek to alter the socio-political environment they are employed in, much like the socially engaged arts from which they are derived.

⁶ Oxforddictionaries.com, *useful* [online] Available at: <<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/useful>> [Accessed 25 August 2016].

It must also be made clear that the practitioners of artistic usefulness discussed are all recognised within the contemporary art world. That is to say they have received a formal education in the arts, are sponsored by and represented in major galleries or have received validation of some form, like that of Assemble and the Turner Prize. Although themselves not necessarily comfortable with the title of 'artists', their success has nonetheless entered their practice into this discursive environment, irrespective of their own view. The reason for this distinction is to avoid the discussion slipping into a typical evaluation of what the implications of the continued convergence of the art and design worlds might mean. Instead it is used here to identify a current tendency in art which links utopian political ideals with practicality. The question it thus raises: is this subversive functionality an effective means of balancing idealism and pragmatism?

The first section of this investigation will contextualise the emergence of subversive functionality; drawing on aspects of the recent political and economic history of western, in particular British, liberal democracy. The respective theories of philosopher Herbert Marcuse and cultural theorists Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van der Akker will further examine the relation between socially engaged artistic practice and contemporary culture. Drawing on a theoretical framework derived from philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, the second section will propose a methodology of critique and practice for artistic usefulness.

CONTEXT

NEOLIBERALISM AND THE ARTS

To contextualise the situation provoking this discussion, we must first look at the rise of neoliberal politics throughout Britain and America since the late 1970s until the present day. Neoliberalism is admittedly an amorphous and problematic term which has garnered a lot of attention in recent years. Reductively put, it is a particular strain of political and economic thought which has incorporated itself into what we might call the 'political deism' of western liberal democracy.⁷ In the preface to *Constructions of Neoliberal Reason*, Jamie Peck observes that such dominant political paradigms can become difficult to think *about* when they have become so commonplace to think *with*. It might even appear that 'neoliberalism has become practically indistinguishable from the "logic" of globalisation—it seems to be everywhere and it seems to be all that there is'.⁸ In many respects this ubiquity is echoed in the Thatcherite doctrine that there is no alternative, which makes it particularly intriguing to critique, even more complicated perhaps to act against.⁹ It would be counterproductive to argue for a singular definition of the term neoliberalism. It is arguably best understood as analogous to Professor James H. Mittelman's conceptualisation of globalisation, being 'not a singular, unified phenomenon, but a *syndrome* of processes and activities'.¹⁰ As propounded by Jamie Peck, Nik Theodore and Neil Brenner in *Neoliberalism Resurgent? Market Rule after the Great*

⁷ European Graduate School Video Lectures, *Simon Critchley*, [Accessed 26 September 2016].

⁸ Jamie Peck, *Constructions of Neoliberal Reason* (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 2013), preface p.xi.

⁹ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Chippenham: Zero Books, 2009), p.8.

¹⁰ James H. Mittelman, *The Globalization Syndrome: Transformation and Resistance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p.4.

Recession, neoliberalism, as it will be approached herein, will take this general form.

One among several tendencies of regulatory change that have been unleashed across the global capitalist system since the 1970s: it prioritizes market-oriented or market-disciplinary responses to regulatory problems; it strives to intensify commodification; and it often mobilizes speculative financial instruments to open up new arenas for capitalist profit making.¹¹

Underpinning this is the belief that everyone, acting in their own self interest, will ultimately create societal equilibrium. Therefore, individualism, competition and faith in free markets are prized above all else. Government intervention is deemed counterproductive and privatisation of state-owned assets is seen as necessary in order to create and maintain this market-orientated environment. The individualistic market logic of neoliberalism seems to have pervaded both public and private life, in many respects why it might be referred to as an ideology and why it almost appears to have become a form of common sense.

The Thatcher and Reagan administrations of Britain and America, elected in 1979 and 1982 respectively mark, as Chin Tao Wu puts it in *Privatising Culture: Corporate Art Intervention Since 1980*, a 'fundamental political transformation'. The powers of the state were 'rolled' back and economic markets deregulated, effectively 'substituting the market for government as the key economic social institution'.¹² In doing so an ethos of marketplace capitalism was propagated throughout most social and political institutions. This had a profound effect on the previously social democrat or liberal

¹¹ Jamie Peck, Nik Theodore and Neil Brenner, 'Neoliberalism Resurgent? Market Rule after the Great Recession', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 111 (2012), 265–288 (p.269).

¹² Chin-Tao Wu, *Privatising Culture: Corporate Art Intervention Since 1980* (London: Verso, 2003), p.3.

assumptions regarding the arts in Britain, that 'access to the arts, like that of any other public service provided by the state, is a fundamental right of every citizen'.¹³ This mentality had prevailed since 1945, as the British government had directly provided funding to the arts in the establishment of the British Arts Council. Wu uses this particular institution as representative of an overall cultural and political shift, describing such establishments as 'cultural gatekeepers'. This does not suggest a totalitarian enforcement, or monopolism over culture, but that 'by virtue of being part of the state bureaucracy, they are part of the state political system'.¹⁴ Subsequent reference to such institutions is used as emblematic of an overall cultural or political tendency. With the Thatcher administration however, public-funded arts institutions were henceforth forced to operate with the competitive spirit of the free enterprising marketplace. Creativity had effectively become corporatised.

The relation between art and economic worth has existed for far longer than the present neoliberal epoch. What is of concern, as Wu suggests, is that the arts has 'allowed itself to become a tool for business'. More is at stake than just rhetoric, as not only have 'sponsorship as a marketing exercise, and "altruistic" commitment to the arts become blurred, but also the symbolic power of state institutions such as the Arts Council has been mobilised to validate corporate power'.¹⁵ With market logic pervading creative and cultural institutions, the subsequent output is thus in some way related, or relatable to this rationalisation. If not necessarily entirely led by this factor, it has now become an integral part of the process. As a consequence, the competitive economic environment potentially reduces arts and culture to a quantifiable, or at least monetised landscape. Art must have a purpose, other than being an end in itself.

¹³ Wu, *Privatising Culture*, p.47.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.17.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.68.

Philosopher Herbert Marcuse describes this rationalisation as a fundamental means by which the validity of oppositional behaviour towards the established order is negated. He claims that if concepts such as 'the Good and the Beautiful, Peace and Justice' cannot be derived from scientific-rational conditions, they 'cannot logically claim universal validity and realization [sic]', remaining a matter of preference. Their critical content evaporates owing to their unscientific character, therefore 'fatally weakening the opposition to the established reality'.¹⁶ Furthermore, this form of rationalisation arguably produces patterns of mind and behaviour which justifies and absolves the destructive and oppressive features of what he refers to as advanced industrial society, which in this context, applies to the neoliberal enterprise. Although somewhat melodramatic, Marcuse does offer an important evaluation of the ideological parameters of neoliberalism and the possibility for an oppressive rationalisation.

In *The Murmuring of the Artistic Multitude* art sociologist Pascal Gielen discusses how the arts might preserve themselves against the economic exploitation he finds inherent within the global art scene, a market based on quintessentially neoliberal principles. Murmuring is prescribed with an importance in its relation to where language reaches its limits. In its mercuriality, such a murmuring is where creativity and new forms might emerge. Paraphrasing Michel De Certeau, Gielen suggests that creation is transient and therefore passes by fleetingly, being as it is in action.¹⁷ However, 'when an ideology of property catches up with it and turns it into an artistic object or product, the creative buzz evaporates'. The murmuring thus becomes 'solidified into meaning, in a comprehensible vocabulary which makes it recuperable, graspable, in economic, political, and above all perhaps, in mediagenic terms'.¹⁸ If market logic is applied to creativity, then the assumption

¹⁶ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (London: Routledge, revised 2013), p.151.

¹⁷ Pascal Gielen, *The Murmuring of the Artistic Multitude: Global Art, Politics and Post-Fordism* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2015), p.21.

¹⁸ Gielen, *The Murmuring of the Artistic Multitude*, p.21.

might be that it becomes a quantifiable and commodified property. Through this process there is an inevitable insistence on clearly definable outcomes and distinct benefits to creative output.

POST-CRASH POTENTIAL

In her article *The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents*, art historian Claire Bishop suggests it is tempting to date the rise in visibility of socially engaged practices (within the western artistic mainstream at least) to the early 1990s and the fall of Communism. Depriving 'the Left of the last vestiges of the revolution that had once linked political and aesthetic radicalism', it could be that many socially engaged practices yearn for the renewal of a political opposition to that which currently dominates.¹⁹ To elaborate on this tempting possibility is Nicolas Bourriaud's assertion that 'the role of artworks is no longer to form utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living, models of action within the existing real'.²⁰ This is taken from Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics*, which provides a politico-philosophical context to certain artistic practices throughout the 1990s where human interaction forms the theoretical and material substance of the work. His interpretation of the rise in artistic social engagement centres around a continued advocacy of modernist principles of emancipation. Human relations appear to Bourriaud to have taken on commodified and predictable forms, 'the social bond has turned into a standardised artefact'.²¹ Socially engaged art thus acquires an acutely political dimension in its supposedly emancipatory, or oppositional, stance toward the contemporary cultural dominant. With the failure of opposing twentieth century political projects to provide alternatives to neoliberalism, we might say that the artistic consequence is twofold:

¹⁹ Claire Bishop, *The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents* (February 2006), Artforum, [online] Available at: <https://www.gc.cuny.edu/CUNY_GC/media/CUNY-Graduate-Center/PDF/Art%20History/Claire%20Bishop/Social-Turn.pdf> [Accessed 12 September 2016].

²⁰ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les Presse Du Reel, 2002), p.13.

²¹ Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, p.9.

Firstly, socially engaged art harbours this political opposition and the desire for alternative modes of being. Secondly, as with Bourriaud's assertion, it becomes apparent why these practices move from proposition to practical application. No longer effective as just theory, the latter development is perhaps an expression of the yearning for this political opposition. Here is where forms of subversive functionality are, in part, arguably derived from.

A ONE-DIMENSIONAL PARADOX

Concurrently with the rise of social engagement, the British New Labour government, in power from 1997–2010, paradoxically adopted near-identical rhetoric to that proclaimed by practitioners of socially engaged art. Bishop asserts their aim was to justify public spending on culture by 'encouraging the arts to be socially *inclusive*', with the production and reception of the arts remodelled in a political logic which valued audience figures and marketing statistics.²² This policy was critiqued at the time from those on the left, primarily because it sought 'to conceal social inequality, rendering it cosmetic rather than structural'.²³ Commercialisation joins what might have been considered antagonistic spheres of life. To use a Marcusean interpretation, this union expresses itself in the 'smooth linguistic conjunction of conflicting parts of speech'.²⁴ Although originally with reference to specific linguistic uses of contradictory words, it can be analogously applied to the conjunction of conflicting parties, operating in different cultural spheres of influence. The politically oppositional sentiment of socially engaged practitioners is reconfigured within the dominant political discourse. This unification of opposites is one of the many ways the dominant discourse and communication makes itself 'immune against the expression of protest and refusal'.²⁵

²² Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012), p.13.

²³ *Ibid.*, p.13

²⁴ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, p.93.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.93.

This conjunction not only illustrates the rhetorical integration of social engagement to justify a neoliberal political agenda, it also highlights another aspect of the 'depth of capitalist integration' and the conditions which make 'qualitative difference of conflicting interests appear as quantitative difference within the established society'.²⁶ The abandonment of traditionally socialist principles associated with the British Labour party in favour of the more neoliberal 'third way' of New Labour is perhaps symptomatic of such an integration. Arguably a development of a populist logic in response to the transformations instigated by the Thatcher administration, this shift in the British political landscape emphasises the failure of the Left to provide an adequate alternative to neoliberalism.

The Marcusean notion of one-dimensionality reveals the pervasiveness of neoliberal politics and the flattening of discourse, not only toward a logic of competition and enterprise, but as a total domination of culture. The advance of neoliberalism might be said to have led to 'the triumph of one-dimensional reality over all contradiction'.²⁷ This perspective is a damning indictment of the ability to act outside of the pre-existing cultural boundaries. The discursive landscape is flattened into ineffectuality, like images on a screen which represent, but can never actually *be* what they show. We are able to see them, to familiarise ourselves with them, but always at several removes. The representation of opposition from within the established order may negate the realisation of, and desire for, truly alternative thought and action.

With the economic crisis of 2008, it seemed that neoliberalism and faith in this free market ideology had finally collapsed. Many socially engaged art practices and activist groups came to the fore as a consequence, expressing the disenfranchisement felt by a large number

²⁶ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, p.23.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.128.

of people, in societies effected by the global financial crisis. The Occupy movement would be the most obvious to mention, who's goal was primarily to use artistic and activist means to fight against what they perceived as the corrosive powers of global corporations and financial institutions over the democratic process.²⁸ Here we encounter one of the precarious points concerning socially engaged art, the distinction between an artistic practice and political activism. Although they can blur and are to some, interchangeable, there is arguably an important division that must be made. To best illustrate this we must briefly turn our attention to the Situationists. The vehemently left-wing artistic-turned-political movement of the mid-twentieth century, championing a complete convergence of art and life as a prerequisite for social and political emancipation. Philosopher Paolo Virno posits that the Situationists were important when they became a political movement, however at that point they were no longer practitioners of avant-garde art. Virno suggests it is about two modes of existence, and that political activism can in this sense lead to a dissolution of artistic validity.²⁹ For socially engaged art to concern itself overtly with politics, as indeed any aspect of life, it must do so up to a point. To overstep this is to lose the critical perspective that an artistic practice gives. For art to entirely dissolve into society is to lose the potential for proposition and alternatives to emerge. Although such alternative thought is of course possible outside of the confines of art, the cultivation of utopian idealism is arguably most suited to the artistic realm. As with Gielen's notion of murmuring, it may appear that creativity requires this freedom from association in order to avoid recuperation and capture.

It is now almost a decade after the financial crisis, and neoliberalism is still the dominant political paradigm, if a little shaken. The opposing political movements and activist groups have seemingly been unable to

²⁸ Occupywallst.org, *About* (2016) [online] Available at: <<http://occupywallst.org/about/>> [Accessed 30 August 2016].

²⁹ Pascal Gielen and Sonja Lavaert, *The Dismasure of Art: An Interview with Paolo Virno* (November 1 2009), Open!, Available at: <<https://www.onlineopen.org/the-dismasure-of-art>> [Accessed 12 September 2016].

instigate a viable alternative. The Thatcherite doctrine still appears to hold true. It does not seem to have impeded the rise in popularity of socially engaged art practices. Indicative of this is the development of university courses in the socially engaged field, beginning with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Community Arts at the California College of Arts in 2005. According to Daniel Grant of the New York Times, at least ten other institutions have followed suit, with the aforementioned NCAD Dublin establishing theirs as recently as 2013.³⁰ Socially engaged art practices and projects appear to have entered the artistic and pedagogic mainstream, so to speak. Following on from Bishop's tempting suggestion, it might be that these courses are symptomatic of the desire for socio-political alternatives to the current dominant. Such courses, as set within recognised educational institutions, provide a legitimate gauge of contemporary popularity within the arts, at least pedagogically.

THE METAMODERN TURN

Inasmuch as the struggle for truth 'saves' reality from destruction, truth commits and engages human existence. It is the essential human project. If man has learned to see and know what really is, he will act in accordance with truth.

—Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*³¹

The continued endeavour to provide alternative modes of being through socially engaged artistic production seems to be emblematic of a developing cultural sensibility with a reinvigorated, but wary, idealism and cautious sense of positivity. This emerging feeling is best

³⁰ Daniel Grant, *Nytimes.com*, *Social Practice Degrees Take Art to a New Level* (February 5 2016), [online] Available at: <<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/07/education/edlife/social-practice-degrees-take-art-to-a-communal-level.html>> [Accessed 30 August 2016].

³¹ Marcuse, *One-dimensional man*, p.129.

articulated in the cultural theory of metamodernism, proposed by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van der Akker. They describe this structure of feeling arising from modernist and subsequently postmodernist cultural theory. According to Vermeulen and Akker, the modernist period was based on values such as utopianism, a linear sense of progress, grand narratives, rationalism and functionalism.³² A modernist sensibility could rather reductively be described as one of enthusiastic commitment. Postmodernism is harder to define, if it is indeed anything at all. It can be simplistically understood as a 'buzzword for a plurality of incoherent sensibilities' a catch-all for a 'multiplicity of contradictory tendencies'.³³ As Fredric Jameson asserts in *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, the term itself implies the 'waning or extinction of the hundred-year-old modern movement'. Its emergence can generally be 'traced back to the end of the 1950s or the early 1960s'.³⁴ Reductively put, postmodernism is an opposition to the modernist values which came before it. Favouring deconstruction of grand narratives, it refutes linearity, truth and progress. Characterised by a sense of ironic detachment, the postmodern sensibility often seems to be one of cynicism.³⁵ As can be inferred from Jameson, postmodernism seems to have developed contemporaneously with the emergence of late capitalism, or advanced industrial society as Marcuse would put it. One-dimensionality and neoliberal pervasiveness may have been partly responsible for the development of certain postmodern tendencies. It might be said that the lack of alternative to this cultural logic plays into the postmodern sense of apathy and scepticism.

³² Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van der Akker, 'Notes on Metamodernism', in *Supplanting the Postmodern: An Anthology of Writings on the Arts and Culture of the Early 21st Century*, ed. by David Rudrum and Nicholas Stavris (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp.309–329 (p.314).

³³ Vermeulen and Akker, 'Notes on Metamodernism', in *Supplanting the Postmodern*, ed. by Rudrum and Stavris, pp.309–329 (p.313).

³⁴ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p.1.

³⁵ Vermeulen and Akker, 'Notes on Metamodernism', in *Supplanting the Postmodern*, ed. by Rudrum and Stavris, pp.309–329 (p. 314).

Metamodernism is a paradigm arising from postmodernity, not necessarily its successor, but instead a 'recalibration of postmodernist assumptions about the contemporary world', placed in dialogue 'with a resurgence of interest in modernism'.³⁶ Vermeulen and Akker cite the recent financial crises, restructuring of political discourse owing to the disintegration of a political centre, and climate change as catalysts for the re-evaluation of postmodernist cynicism.³⁷ They see such occurrences as inciting a new desire for positive progression, most notably in the cultural industry, where they claim an abandonment of 'tactics such as pastiche and parataxis for strategies like myth and metaxis, melancholy for hope, and exhibitionism for engagement'. Metamodernism seems to be a reaction to the cumulatively negative effects of recent social, political, economic and ecological developments in which a postmodern apathy and scepticism has become unfavourable. This emerging sensibility can be conceived of as an 'informed naivety, a pragmatic idealism', attempting to act, in spite of inevitable failure and seeking a truth which is never expected to be found.³⁸ Vermeulen and Akker prescribe a sense of unbalanced oscillation to the metamodern paradigm, as if it were a pendulum, swinging between multiple aspects of modernism and postmodernism.

Each time the metamodern enthusiasm swings towards fanaticism, gravity pulls it back toward irony; the moment its irony sways toward apathy, gravity pulls it back toward enthusiasm.³⁹

The theory of metamodernism contextualises the rise of socially engaged art practices, whilst also forming the impetus for this very discussion. Socially engaged practices arguably typify a metamodern sensibility within the arts, exhibiting a re-emergence of hope and

³⁶ Vermeulen and Akker, 'Notes on Metamodernism', in *Supplanting the Postmodern*, ed. by Rudrum and Stavris, pp.309–329 (p. 308).

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.309–329 (p. 315).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.309–329 (p.315).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.309–329 (p.316).

engagement. Furthermore, the metamodern "'both-neither" dynamic' of always being 'between', corresponds to the precariousness of socially engaged practices, occupying the fringes of both art and life.⁴⁰

With regards to the Marcusean perspective of one-dimensionality the metamodern sensibility seems to acknowledge a perceived lack of alternative to the established order, but it could be argued advocates a continuation of positively oppositional practices even if they are ultimately unable to escape the triumph of one-dimensionality. There are inevitably issues with metamodernist cultural theory, particularly a reliance on assumed distinctions between modernism and postmodernism, two already loose terms. This subsequently might be seen as a reductive theory, which is admittedly reduced even further for the purposes of this particular investigation. It nevertheless appears to be of gradually increasing relevance and is certainly useful to the discussion at hand.

'Pragmatic idealism' paradoxically merges the acknowledgement, as discussed by Marcuse, of the societal adherence to rationality, whilst attempting to maintain the integrity of idealised oppositional values and narratives. It might be said that, as a sort of wishful proposition, idealistic alternatives might become apparent through a heightened pragmatism and practical application, as with a subversive functionality. In many respects a useful art contains this very same paradox, balancing conceptual validity with 'real world' utility in order to hopefully be of greater successful implementation than practices conforming to only one side of the duality. Metamodernism characterises a positive doublethink which is arguably useful when considering the application and critique of subversive functionality.

⁴⁰ Vermeulen and Akker, 'Notes on Metamodernism', in *Supplanting the Postmodern*, ed. by Rudrum and Stavris, pp.309–329 (p.316).

METHODOLOGY

BECOMING MINOR

It is blind to the very ontological force that exists prior to that which it seeks to negate. Such critiques, although important as an entry point, can become caught in what we might call a melancholic echo chamber of negative critique. They remain reactive rather than creative.

—Simon O'Sullivan, *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari*⁴¹

The notions of the 'minor' and 'becoming', proposed by philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, provide a theoretical framework through which to further address the relationship subversive functionality has to neoliberal one-dimensionality. Professor of Art Theory and Practice at Goldsmiths University, Simon O'Sullivan, applies these Deleuzoguattarian concepts to socio-politically engaged artistic production in his book *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari: Thought Beyond Representation*. Similar to Gielen's murmuring, the minor offers an account of the struggle for what we might call a continued avant-gardism, which ultimately becomes linked to a socio-political effectiveness. O'Sullivan's observations are a counterpoint to the neoliberal context, a theoretical framework of possibility for artistic production which is in opposition to dominant socio-political and artistic models, or modes of being. Advocating a socio-politically effective practice, the theory of the minor introduces a strategy of dissenting motion which arguably compliments the oscillations of a supposedly metamodern sensibility. It evokes a perpetual game of

⁴¹ Simon O'Sullivan, *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari: Thought Beyond Representation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p.77.

evasion and capture similar to the *détournement* and recuperation played out by the Situationists.

The minor can be understood as a political or artistic stuttering or stammering, a break from the habitual formations and dominant signifying regimes of what we might call the major.⁴² These two terms function to define a dominant socio-political or cultural majority and that of a marginalised minority, to an extent; however it should be stressed that their definition is not due to size, as in the case of an electoral majority, for example. Instead O'Sullivan defines the major as models of conformity whereas the minor is a process of opposition, of becoming, without a model.⁴³ In this respect we might see the minor as akin to the avant-garde, operating at the periphery of the culturally accepted and understood, whilst the major is in this context, the rationalising market logic of neoliberalism. Originally proposed by Deleuze and Guattari with regards to a minor literature, there are three defining characteristics which O'Sullivan subsequently applies to contemporary artistic practice.

DETERRITORIALIZATION

The first characteristic of the minor is the 'deterritorialization' of the major language. Deterritorialization is defined by Deleuze and Guattari as 'the movement by which one leaves a territory'.⁴⁴ It almost seems to describe process of de-contextualisation. The aforementioned stuttering and stammering is particularly apt, or perhaps a reappropriation, an interruption in the exercise of power through a major language. Deterritorialization occurs from within the major, as O'Sullivan suggests, using the same elements but in a different manner.⁴⁵ Operating in this way, one can imagine that to

⁴² O'Sullivan, *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari*, p.69.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.76.

⁴⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p.508.

⁴⁵ O'Sullivan, *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari*, p.70–1.

deterritorialize is to scramble expectation and add an internal catalytic friction. The operation of such artistic activity from within the existing order confirms the Marcusean notion of one-dimensionality, however, also compliments the discursive position of metamodernism.

Paolo Cirio's *Gift Finance* project is an interruption of the existing economic structure and business vernacular, proposing an alternative financial model based on a Peer-to-Peer social architecture. By issuing forged VISA credit cards with counterfeit virtual money Cirio's intention was to instigate a monetary model based on free universal income. It functions as a conceptualisation of the democratic creation of money for the redistribution of wealth in society. Physical plastic P2P Gift Credit Cards are distributed by the artist on request, via mail, in art exhibitions and through public interventions. As is stated by Cirio, *Gift Finance* 'is an experiment and a visionary provocation. Art with potential practical outcomes'.⁴⁶ Not only does *Gift Finance* introduce oppositional potential from within the existing economic structure, but visually and linguistically P2P Credit Cards incorporate the pre-existing aesthetic and language associated with financial schemes. Proclaiming to be 'the fastest way to get and make money', the credit card incorporates incentivising rhetoric, exclaiming 'you will receive more awesome rewards!'.⁴⁷ Cirio's *Gift Finance* explicitly places itself within the paradigm of subversively functional art. Its imitative aesthetic and rhetoric, verging on the sarcastic, seem to adhere to a postmodern tendency for irony and pastiche, however the practicality and sincerity with which the scheme is implemented arguably give it a metamodern tone.

⁴⁶ Paolo Cirio, Paolocirio.net, *P2P Gift Credit Card - Gift Finance* (2010) [online] Available at: <<http://paolocirio.net/work/p2p-gift-credit-card/>> [Accessed 17 September 2016].

⁴⁷ Ibid., [Accessed 17 September 2016].

IMPOTENT FICTION

One of the aspects of contention is that of fictional impotence. This issue arises from the perspective of functionality. For all the well-intentioned desire for political credibility, real political claims get lost in what Gielen calls 'an impotent world of fiction'.⁴⁸ Due to the propositional nature of the artistic context, the actual application and reception of such ideas become caught in their own contextual apparatus and are consequently stifled. It could be that a shift toward useful art may be a development of one-dimensionality whereby the representation of oppositional alternatives is made safely manifest in the realm of fiction. Possibilities can be acted out and engaged with from the confines of art, as a consequence the potential energies and desires for change become expended within this friendly abyss. This seems to be one of the most significant peculiarities of subversively functional art. Caught between a desire for propositional integrity and artistic validity, thus at one remove from the world. At the same time, actually seeking to apply what it proposes, therefore requiring an immediacy.

Critchley suggests in his lecture *The Faith of the Faithless*, the problem lies within the artistic context for two reasons. First, and most blatantly, is the problem that such projects are enabled through the cultural institutions of the artworld, and are therefore 'utterly enmeshed in the circuits of commodification and spectacle they seek to subvert'.⁴⁹ This reiterates the Marcusean assertion of a triumphant one-dimensionality. The second issue Critchley identifies is re-enactment, in that such politically oppositional practices seem caught in a strategy of re-enacting. Subversive politics and action are staged rather than put into practice. Critchley wryly points out that 'one doesn't engage in a

⁴⁸ Gielen, *The Murmuring of the Artistic Multitude*, p.225.

⁴⁹ European Graduate School Video Lectures, *Simon Critchley* [Accessed 26 September 2016].

bank robbery', but instead re-enacts it 'in a warehouse in Brooklyn'.⁵⁰ He describes this as a 'mannerist Situationism', where re-enactment becomes the primary way of considering the relationship between art and politics. Again, as with Gielen, this implies the fictionalisation of political intent. Ultimately it might seem that a recuperation of oppositional behaviour doesn't even apply, because 'art is completely co-opted by the socio-economic system that provides its life-blood'.⁵¹

POLITICAL IMMEDIACY

The second characteristic associated with Deleuze and Guattari's 'minor' is that such works are ever-political, connected to a 'political immediacy' in the sense that the disruption of the dominant systems of signification will always be explicitly political.⁵² The relationship between 'asignification [sic] and signification, and between literary-linguistic systems in general is itself a "political situation"', expressing 'relations of power (relations of domination and resistance)'.⁵³ This is not to say that the creation of subversively functional work involves itself in the overtly political, however it implies an inherent politicisation in its encounter with the major structure.

It is worth noting political theorist Chantal Mouffe's distinction between 'the political' and 'politics' made in *The Democratic Paradox*. Mouffe states the political is in reference to the 'dimension of antagonism that is inherent in human relations', which can 'take many forms and emerge in different social relations'. Politics, on the other hand, is an indication of the 'ensemble practices, discourses and institutions' seeking to establish a certain order and 'organize coexistence in conditions that are always potentially conflictual' as they

⁵⁰ European Graduate School Video Lectures, *Simon Critchley*, [Accessed 29 September 2016].

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, [Accessed 29 September 2016].

⁵² Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1986), p.18.

⁵³ O'Sullivan, *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari*, p.71.

are 'affected by the dimension of "the political"'.⁵⁴ In this context then, it could be argued that socially engaged, subversively functional practices are inevitably political to an extent, whilst not necessarily engaging with politics. The instigation of a socially engaged project will always acquire a political dimension, regardless of any desired neutrality. Inasmuch as a practice is within a societal context and therefore relational (which Gielen suggests is arguably a prerequisite for all artistic endeavours) then there will inevitably be a political dimension.⁵⁵ Work proclaimed to be apolitical is therefore arguably a falsehood, as not only does it fail to recognise this point, but it fails to take into account the inherently political quality of what is considered the normal, often falsely considered the apolitical. As with Peck's aforementioned observation about the all-encompassing nature of neoliberalism, the false assumption of an apolitical normality becomes easier to understand.

The Arte Útil initiative is perhaps the quintessential example of, and indeed advocate for, subversively functional art. Cuban performance and installation artist Tania Bruguera initiated Arte Útil with the intention of using art to 'imagine, develop, and implement something that, produced in artistic practice, offers people a clearly beneficial result'.⁵⁶ The position taken by Bruguera and those involved with Arte Útil sets an interesting tone within the contentions of usefulness and socio-political artistic endeavour. According to Bruguera, purely propositional art is not enough, and a practical application is crucial. In *Reflexions on Arte Útil* Bruguera asserts that art must leave the sphere of the unattainable, the 'desired impossibility', and be part of the existing, functional sphere, a 'feasible utopia'.⁵⁷ Although not strictly related, but of the same genealogy, is Bourriaud's aforementioned claim that the role of artworks must now actually be 'models of action

⁵⁴ Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2009, reprint), p.101.

⁵⁵ 'Art is *de facto* relational or it is not art'. — Gielen, *The Murmuring of the Artistic Multitude*, p.225.

⁵⁶ Tania Bruguera, *Reflexions on Arte Útil* (Madrid: Centro de Art de Mayo, 2012), par.2.

⁵⁷ Bruguera, *Reflexions on Arte Útil*, par.3.

within the existing real'.⁵⁸ The initiative is an affront to the larger artworld and its 'correct' behaviour of which Bruguera believes is of politically low-standards. The desire to, as she puts it, transform 'affection into effectiveness' is inherently political, suggesting that both art and life require a re-evaluation, and that socially engaged artists can facilitate this through teaching, negotiation, building and social structures.⁵⁹

Arte Útil would suggest that usefulness is a prerequisite for the transformational potential of art in society. Functionality appears to be a vital aspect in attempting to achieve socio-political change, indicating that solely propositional art has become redundant in this respect. Pragmatism within artistic practice therefore could be seen as providing an alternative to neoliberalism where artistic proposition has lost its effectiveness. This also implies that clear, easily definable results are perhaps necessary in order to galvanise response and participation. Use is thus considered subversive and as Bruguera points out the Spanish word 'útil' not only means 'useful', but also 'tool', therefore reiterating the notion of art as a social tool.⁶⁰

A sense of pragmatic idealism is evident and the initiative seems to bear a metamodernist sensibility, as can be found in an interview with Kathy Noble for Frieze magazine. Bruguera is asked about the fear of failure and in response states 'this project has 99.9999999% possibility of being a disaster' but that 'works in the social sphere have to navigate instability'.⁶¹ Action for its own sake, in the face of a negative inevitability. According to the Museum of Arte Útil's website, 'to be useful', projects must follow this criteria:

⁵⁸ Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, p.13.

⁵⁹ Bruguera, *Reflexions on Arte Útil*, par.5.

⁶⁰ Kathy Noble, Frieze.com, *Useful Art*, (01 January 2010) [online], Available at: <<https://frieze.com/article/useful-art>> [Accessed 29 August 2016], par.24.

⁶¹ Noble, *Useful Art* [Accessed 29 August 2016], par.25.

- 1 Propose new uses for art within society.
- 2 Challenge the field within which it operates.
- 3 Be 'timing-specific', responding to current urgencies.
- 4 Be implemented and function in real situations.
- 5 Replace authors with initiators and spectators with users.
- 6 Have practical beneficial outcomes for its users.
- 7 Pursue sustainability whilst adapting to changing conditions.
- 8 Re-establish aesthetics as a system of transformation.⁶²

As a methodology we can see Bruguera's initiative clearly states the importance placed upon the notion of practicality, if it weren't already obvious. Use, and by extension users, are linked to social responsibility and action. Spectatorship takes on a pacifying nature of subjugation, whereas the user becomes related to participation and thus emancipation. The substitution of author in favour of initiators rhetorically signifies the desire to escape the possessive individualism associated with authorship, which is seen to inhibit the free circulation of knowledge and skills. By regulating the use of something by way of authorship, argued to be a means of commodification, it is 'as if it owed nothing to the contributive usership [sic] of society'.⁶³ As an accompaniment to the methodology and a means of elaborating the intentions of Arte Útil is *Towards a Lexicon of Usership*, by Stephen Wright. It argues for a linguistic retooling in order to even begin to bring about change through artistic practices. It is apparent that Arte Útil recognise the politicised nature of literary-linguistic systems and that societal alternatives cannot be conceived of if they lack the fundamental language to be expressed through.

As well as *Towards a Lexicon of Usership*, Arte Útil has an online archive cataloguing initiatives which fulfil their criteria. The first entry is the *Cincinnati Time Store*, established by Josiah Warren between

⁶² Museumartutil.net, *What Is Arte Útil?* (2015) [online] Available at: <<http://museumartutil.net/about/>> [Accessed 29 August 2016].

⁶³ Stephen Wright, *Towards a Lexicon of Usership* (Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum, 2013), p.10.

1827–1830.⁶⁴ Not included here with any discursive comparison to the contemporary artistic examples, it is of significance for its age, elaborating Arte Útil's intent. Along with the *Museum of Arte Útil* 2013–2014 exhibition at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, it seems there is an attempt to establish an entire lexical and historical foundation to the movement. Perhaps this is an indication of a development from the fictionalised realm of artistic re-enactment, to something with a greater claim to action of its own.

AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

Although Arte Útil, as with the other subversively functional work discussed, clearly seeks a utopian dimension through practicality, there are a number of problems which arise from this. Primarily, the idea that instead of action being emancipatory, it may actually be 'action that imprisons us, rather than passivity'.⁶⁵ Through action the critical distance has a tendency to slip, activity is not necessarily conducive to critical thought. Analogous links can be made to a subjugating activity conveyed in Alan Kirby's theorisation of pseudo-modernism in his 2006 article *The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond*. Owing to the advance and proliferation of technology throughout the past two decades, Kirby proposes we are in an era where the typical emotional state is that of the trance. 'The state of being swallowed up by your activity', as he sees it, pervades society.⁶⁶ In the place of modernist neurosis and postmodernist narcissism, the world is apparently 'taken away', as 'you click, you punch the keys, you are "involved", engulfed, deciding'.⁶⁷ Functionality might therefore be seen as an adherence to

⁶⁴ Arte Útil Archive, 'Josiah Warren: Cincinnati Time Store' (1827–1830) <<http://www.arte-util.org/projects/cincinnati-time-store/>> [Accessed 29 September 2016].

⁶⁵ European Graduate School Video Lectures, *Simon Critchley* [Accessed 26 September 2016].

⁶⁶ Alan Kirby, *Philosophynow.org*, *The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond* (2006), par.21 [online] Available at: <https://philosophynow.org/issues/58/The_Death_of_Postmodernism_And_Beyond> [Accessed 26 September 2016].

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, par.21 [Accessed 26 September 2016].

the contemporary obsession with engagement and action, but at the expense of thought and meaning.

If the issue is to be considered with regards to aesthetic experience, we see that a problem arises with functionality, in that it disregards the potential power of the aesthetic. In an interview with Thom Donovan for Art 21 Magazine, Bruguera rejects the notion of art's autonomy, claiming that 'ethics emotionally affects' her 'more than any artwork'.⁶⁸ A rejection of the impact of aesthetic experience seems to be symptomatic of a waning of affect to the point at which it is almost entirely non-existent. The problem may be that by rejecting aesthetic experience in favour of utilitarian effectiveness, the possibility for idealism and otherness is denied, which is arguably what allows alternative thought to flourish. It becomes a question of art's autonomy, which has long been a contentious idea. Autonomous art proposes that art operates according to its own laws, devoid of external influence, in order for truly alternative ideas to flourish. In many respects this was an effective means to cultivate the principles of modern art. However, as is pointed out in *Towards a Lexicon of Usership*, the issue for many is the 'invisible parentheses' which brackets art off 'from being taken seriously as a proposition having consequences beyond the aesthetic realm'.⁶⁹ Arte Útil's proposition of new uses for art *within* society is a reflection of this suggesting that instead of art proposing a new society, it operates pragmatically, within already established boundaries. A rejection of the autonomous sphere of art, and therefore aesthetic affectivity, whilst at the same time the desire to retain propositional qualities seems to be problematic.

As Peter Bürger explains in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, the autonomy status of art must be understood as an 'apartness from the purposive,

⁶⁸ Thom Donovan, Art21.org, *5 Questions (for Contemporary Practice) with Tania Bruguera* (April 14 2011) [online] Available at: <<http://blog.art21.org/2011/04/14/5-questions-for-contemporary-practice-with-tania-bruguera/>> [Accessed 21 September 2016], par.11.

⁶⁹ Wright, *Towards a Lexicon of Usership*, p.12.

rational organisation of bourgeois society'.⁷⁰ This detachment is important, historically at least, for the reason that it provides a space for the pure development of artistic ideas. The downside, as we know, is the lack of social function. What Bürger makes evident is that the European avant-garde's intention was 'the attempt to direct toward the practical the aesthetic experience', so that what 'most strongly conflicts with the means-end rationality of bourgeois society is to become life's organizing principles'.⁷¹ He goes further to say that 'only an art who's individual works is wholly distinct from the (bad) praxis of the existing society', can be the centre from which the organisation of 'a new life praxis' can emerge.⁷² Although the modernist avant-garde has been proven ineffectual, what Bürger points out is that the notion of autonomy has the importance of being detached from rationalisation by the cultural dominant. As initially discussed, neoliberalism has arguably subsumed the arts into its means-end rationality. It may be that instead of a subversive functionalism, there needs to be a reappraisal of the autonomy of art, or at the very least, its guiding principles. The paradox of autonomous art, being inextricably bound to the promise of a better world for the very reason of its autonomy should not be dismissed. As Critchley suggests, 'to abandon the utopian impulse' is to 'imprison ourselves within the world as it is, and to give up once and for all the prospect that another world is possible'.⁷³

Although the rhetoric of both the minor and Arte Útil attempts to convey utopian aspects to the functional application of art within society, it still arguably entraps itself in the process. This is where Arte Útil fundamentally differs from the European avant-garde and why its rejection of previous notions of autonomy and aesthetic experience render its claims problematic. By proposing new uses for art *within* society, it might therefore be argued that the rationalisation of

⁷⁰ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* trans. by Michael Shaw (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p.25.

⁷¹ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* trans. by Michael Shaw, p.34.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p.50.

⁷³ European Graduate School Video Lectures, *Simon Critchley*, [Accessed 26 September 2016].

neoliberalism is never negated. This variant of useful art might still perpetuate the logic, and therefore dominance of, the culture it seeks to alter.

From this reasoning, and a historical understanding of the attempted rejection of the dominant means-end rationality, it might be argued that, in their functionality, artworks which fulfil this useful paradigm fail to recognise their own subjection to contemporary forms of rationalisation. Although unrealistically utopian, the modernist avant-garde conception of a new life praxis from art is perhaps theoretically of greater merit than were it the other way.

CONTINUED POSSIBILITY

'That a minor literature is always collective', is the final characterisation of the minor, which O'Sullivan suggests focusses on a 'collective enunciation' and production of work as a means of calling forth a new community.⁷⁴ It seems as though this account of the minor constitutes a rallying cry, inasmuch as 'we might say that [the] minor no longer designates specific literatures but the revolutionary conditions for every literature'.⁷⁵ What this implies is the amorphous becoming of such a minor practice is precisely concerned with the creation of the continued possibility for an alternative way to look at things. 'Becoming' is defined by Deleuze and Guattari as 'the movement by which the line frees itself from the point', further articulating the state in which such a practice exists in opposition to an established form.⁷⁶ It acknowledges an attachment to the pre-existing, but again, it is the production of movement that is of importance. As with metamodernism, once again there is the continued desire to 'move for the sake of moving'.⁷⁷ A continuous becoming also reflects the political

⁷⁴ O'Sullivan, *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari*, p.70.

⁷⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, p.18.

⁷⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. by Massumi, p.294.

⁷⁷ Vermeulen and Akker, 'Notes on Metamodernism', in *Supplanting the Postmodern*, ed. by Rudrum and Stavris, pp.309–329, (p.315).

process itself. Politics is described by Critchley as 'a constant and concrete process of mediation' and we begin to see perhaps how the concept of 'becoming' effectively embodies this principle.⁷⁸

The subversive functionality of Trevor Paglen and Jacob Appelbaum's 2014 *Autonomy Cube* is directly inserted into the context of the traditional art institution, as when shown in the *Electronic Superhighway (2016–1966)* exhibition in the Whitechapel Gallery, January 2016. It offers a compelling angle on art with practical applications, particularly for its combination of the aesthetic and the practical. As the name suggests, *Autonomy Cube* explicitly addresses the issue of autonomy, playing with its connotations in both the artistic and online contexts. Referencing Hans Haacke's 1963–1965 *Condensation Cube*, Paglen and Appelbaum's work has striking formal qualities which draw the viewer in. The sculpture has a gravitas to suit the institutional context it was 'designed to be housed in'.⁷⁹ The element of subversive functionality is not immediately apparent. *Autonomy Cube* is a Wi-Fi hotspot for the Tor network, providing anonymous internet connection for anyone to join. As is explained by the artists, the Tor network is comprised of 'volunteer-run servers, relays and services designed to help anonymize data'.⁸⁰ Not only does the *Autonomy Cube* provide anonymous internet access, but it also functions as a relay for the Tor network, making the sculpture, institution in which it is installed and user 'part of a privacy-oriented, volunteer run internet infrastructure'.⁸¹ The subversive functionality of the piece operates from within the heart of the art institution, implementing it in its use. The Tor network is itself a subversive tool, attempting to combat the commodification of the internet through collective and collaborative means. It creates an interesting counteraction to the enmeshment of art within neoliberalism.

⁷⁸ European Graduate School Video Lectures, *Simon Critchley*, [Accessed 26 September 2016].

⁷⁹ Trevor Paglen, Paglen.com, *Autonomy Cube (2014)*, Available at: <<http://paglen.com/index.php?l=work&s=cube>> [Accessed 26 September 2016].

⁸⁰ Ibid., [Accessed 26 September 2016].

⁸¹ Ibid., [Accessed 26 September 2016].

Operating from within the major structure, deterritorializing the visual language of art, *Autonomy Cube* perhaps acts as a Trojan horse, if you'll excuse the tired analogy. This piece in some small way manages to negotiate its complete co-option, ironically by existing from within the confines of major galleries. With its function as a facilitator of an anonymized connectivity it is instilled with the continued possibility for alternative perspectives.

CRITIQUING FUNCTION

Artists and other creative intermediaries are taking an increasingly pragmatic and 'constructive' approach [...] in order to create a win-win situation in which social problems are expertly and therapeutically rubbed with ointment, but not fundamentally remedied.

—Pascal Gielen, *The Murmuring of the Artistic Multitude*⁸²

The use of an artistic practice has, thus far, been related to its socio-political effectiveness in a way that evokes an emancipatory positivity. Usefulness and a sense of pragmatic idealism seem to prevail through a number of practices and have helped to identify a possible emerging cultural sensibility. However, this insistence on functionalism has, nonetheless, been shown to be problematic.

O'Sullivan critiques a reactionary practice concerned with dissent and refusal, as being caught in a 'melancholic echo chamber of negative critique'.⁸³ This assertion might also be true for a practice which is instead caught in a melancholic echo chamber of *positive* critique. Instead of refusal it is the practical engagement with a situation which is blinding. As has previously been discussed with Critchley and the notion of action leading to imprisonment, this prospect is here

⁸² Gielen, *The Murmuring of the Artistic Multitude*, p.212.

⁸³ O'Sullivan, *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari*, p.77.

extended. Not only can action imprison through a lack of criticality, but through this pragmatism, functionality can obscure the fundamental basis on which it was initially instigated. The positive critique, if it could even be called that, can inadvertently perpetuate the socio-political issues it had initially sought to overcome. What such artistic endeavours may create is a 'euphoria in unhappiness'.⁸⁴

From a Marcusean perspective, the discussed examples of subversive functionality may imply a rationalisation of artistic proposition. Utility becomes an attempt to reassert idealism through engagement. The problem here may be that, once again, such artistic endeavours cannot escape integration and thus just prove this even further. Effectiveness in utilitarian terms becomes easier to quantify and assess, which in many respects reflects the continuing one-dimensionality of neoliberalism. It might be that although such useful artistic practices are indeed of some and varying positive social effect, they remain a product of a dominant cultural logic which over-valorises pragmatism. As has been seen with Bürger, for something to be of use it arguably limits the truly utopian and imaginative potential art can have, relegating it instead to not much more than a problem in need of a solution. Naive enthusiasm has the danger of fostering a sense of progress when in actuality there is none. The desire for practicality may swallow the impact and radical possibility of art, replacing it with an illusion of effectiveness.

Although this may seem like a damning critique of subversive functionality, it should by no means be completely dismissed. O'Sullivan's application of the Deleuzoguattarian minor helps to highlight particular points of departure, so to speak, that offer the potential for subversive action. It seems to be a strategy rooted in an acceptance of a dominant structure, the key being the creation of internal catalytic friction. This appears as a recurring theme within the

⁸⁴ Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, p.7.

minor methodology and the metamodern sensibility, wherein accepting a current lack of alternatives to the cultural dominant does not preclude perseverance.

It is entirely understandable why such forms of subversive functionality occur, as historically, idealistic and theoretical attempts have succumbed to a 'politics of abstraction'.⁸⁵ In their denial of reality, owing to an over-attachment to ideas, they too have become doomed to theoretical and practical failure.

⁸⁵ European Graduate School Video Lectures, *Simon Critchley*, [Accessed 26 September 2016].

REFLECTION

WAS THIS USEFUL?

Rife with paradox and contradiction, the investigation undertaken may have seemed at times hopeless, but I've nonetheless felt compelled to write it. This is reflective of the elements discussed throughout, from metamodernism, to the political process, to 'becoming' and the 'minor'. It is the perseverance that is of importance, regardless of impending failure. As with the constant process of mediation that constitutes politics and the oscillation between modern and postmodern tendencies, the process has no resolution, as indeed it shouldn't. Subversively functional practices are perhaps representative of a re-emerging tendency resulting from a continued negotiation between the idealised and the immediately possible, the utopian and the pragmatic.

Practicality can be blinding, potentially resulting in complicity with what was initially opposed. Although equally flawed, the autonomy of art may still provide some theoretical grounds for the exploration of the utopian impulse, however unlikely that may be. The minor as a methodological framework has its merits. More than anything I have found it incites a passion for subversion, representing a pragmatic idealism although inflected with rose-tinted revolutionary nostalgia. Neither autonomous or indeed utilitarian artistic practices are able to provide suitable alternatives to the one-dimensionality of the cultural dominant. Although this was always going to be the case, the point has perhaps been to develop a motion or a becoming of ones own. Certainly an investigation such as this furnishes the initiator and, to a lesser extent the user, with the theoretical potential.

Art should imagine that which isn't, propose alternatives to what already is and introduce a dismeasure into the established order. Subversively functional art does have the potential to do so, to an extent. Although we have seen how such artistic functionality can

compromise radical potential, if nothing else it presents a compelling paradigm of oppositional artistic production. It does indeed seem that the vestiges of radical utopianism and alternative political theory are acted out through artistic practices. To renounce such endeavours would be to entrap ourselves once and for all in the way things are. It might even appear that art is one of the only places in which effective oppositional change can be enacted, at the very least considered. Ultimately it appears as a commitment to an impossible possibility.

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