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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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Leonardo Electronic Almanac

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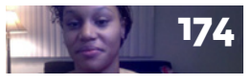

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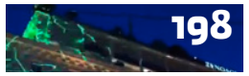

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Commonist Red Art: Blood, Bones, Utopia and Kittens

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.

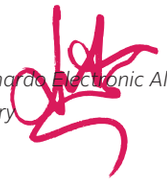
Red Art, therefore, if intended as Commonist Art becomes the sign of public revolts, in the physical squares or on the Internet. It is art that emerges without institutional 'approval' and in some cases in spite of institutional obstacles. Gramsci would perhaps say that Commonist Art is a redefinition 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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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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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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Figure 1. The word ΚΛΕΦΤΕΣ ('thieves') projected on the wall of the Greek Parliament building, Syntagma Square, July 22, 2011. MindTheGap Citizens' Media / Real Democracy GR Multimedia Team. Used with permission via the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License (pixilation intentional).

The Point Source: Blindness, Speech and Public Space

by

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ABSTRACT

One moving image, a video of events in Syntagma Square in 2011, shows a swarm of points of green light, created by laser pointers directed at the architecture surrounding the square from within the crowd, and a second still image with the word 'thieves,' constructed from an array of red dots, is again projected onto the wall of Parliament, the location of speech. The laser pointer, a device intended to trace the progress of speech, and reinforce the agency of the individual speaker in a static visual presentation, is repurposed in the context of civil disturbance to both blind the agents of dominance and stigmatize the architects of crisis. In doing so, an implement of visibility and authority, a straight line emanating from the space of the logos, becomes implicated in the delineation and representation of the space of the public.

This paper represents an attempt to explore and create continuities and discontinuities between the binding-together of individual lasers/pixels in an assemblage, the chaotic movement of the individual laser/pixel, and the concerted activity of people acting in solidarity or chaotic revolt. The paper is constructed in order to implicate the carrier signal – the page, the screen – in the network which founds and funds both order and its opposites, as itself an active agent and producer of its own collectivities.

PROLOGUE

In the early hours of June 22nd 2011, in Syntagma Square, Athens, during a demonstration to accompany a vote of no confidence in Prime Minister George Papandreou's government, photographers captured images and video of the word ΚΛΕΦΤΕΣ – *thieves* – projected onto the exterior wall of the parliament building from within the crowd. From amongst the restless swarm of green laser dots, images of which had been broadcast round the world as representative of the Greek protests, emerged a word in red light: an accusation, the projection of an identity. The 'thieves' identified were, of course, days away from signing into law a package of austerity measures which would include the forced privatization of large parts of Greece's public sector – the transfer to private ownership of assets held in common – and cuts in benefits and tax rises. Previously, on May 5th, the taunt had been verbally slung against politicians in an abortive attempt to storm the building: here it was projected – turning the building into a curious kind of

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placard. [1] Inside the building, people were speaking: parliament is of course the place of *parole*. On the walls, someone wrote. Suddenly a device which had previously been used in the context of protest to blind the forces of law and order was used for the opposite purpose: to render visible a word. According to the website redteamjournal.com, which represents an organization which "encourage(s) decision makers to consider alternative perspectives to national security issues," the first recorded use of lasers as a 'counter optical' device by protestors was during the 'Battle for Seattle' in 1999. [2] As ever inventive and responsive, the protestors seemed to have chosen to reverse the direction of this original act of détournement, in which a visual aid was converted to a counter-visual weapon.

The protests on the streets of Athens took place in the context of Europe-wide demonstrations against the paradoxical entrenchment of neoliberal economic structures following the crash of 2008. The online exchanges which took place between Spanish *Indignados* and Greek anti-austerity protestors were accompanied by the exchange of messages on placards: the famous '*be quiet, the Greeks are sleeping*' was issued from a distance as a provocation. Placards, posters and other protest materials were produced with a binary function: to crystallize and express the concerns or ideas of protestors in the moment, in the place of protest, but also in anticipation of their appropriation by global media – produced in order to be photographed. The audience for these placards was twofold: they were intended to be received by both non-participant and participant spectators. In the latter case, media channels were themselves appropriated to transmit a message which was received differently depending on the position of the reader.

BINDING & BLINDING

Notions of vision and visuality are deeply embedded in the practice of contemporary protest. Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* would seem to have been required reading for the movement as a whole – but academic commentators have widely deployed the tools of visual critique to analyze recent events. An example of the effectiveness of this approach can be seen in Marinos Pourgouris' [3] rich and deep analysis of the agency of the *hood* in the 2008 protests which marked the beginning of the Greek unrest: masks and hoods served, in the context of the spectacle of protest, as a sign of "apocalyptic violence," just as they served to conceal the identity of both protestors and cops – any 'counter-optical' device is itself a visual signifier.

Pourgouris' act of writing represents an attempt to re-unite the 'intellectual and material activity,' closing the gap between 'aesthetics and praxis' identified by Marx in his formulation of the division of labor. [4] Her paper begins with an apology for the incursion of literary criticism upon the political or sociological realm, yet the productive tension between 'visibility' and 'invisibility' which this critique engages requires the tools of visual or aesthetic criticism in order to pick apart the role of a specific politics of *visuality* in the context of civil disorder. Porgouris explores the links between the blinding effects of tear gas, the concealing effect of the hoods, masks and bandanas worn by the protagonists, and the spectacle of the riot as a broadcast event:

> *...those who were watching the protesters (policemen, journalists, the public) were always seeing them through a lens or a filter: television screens, camera lenses, or helmets. The protesters were being watched from a distance, as it were, and they came "face to face," not with people's faces, but with the always already objectified State Law or technological apparatuses.* [5]

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In this paper, which is itself the product of certain *apparatuses*, I intend to centre an object-oriented *critique* – and I use the word in full acknowledgement of the heretical nature of such a formulation for Actor Network Theory (ANT) and its various Object Oriented Offspring – on an object which sits in an indeterminate space similar to the one Pourgouris describes. [6] Deployed differently in parliament, boardroom or on the street, the laser pointer both reveals *and* conceals. One can imagine such a device in the context of a stock market deal, as much as a protest. Investigation of the differing roles of this object opens up a paradoxical space between society, locality and representation by performing the simple operation of drawing a line and making a point – it is a double agent, both productive and spectacular: the origin of a *rogue pixel*.

PRACTICAL MECHANICS

I can only imagine the *body* of the device that made the word, but I have worked through several versions of what this machine – the formally bound, materially delimited, part of this assemblage – must look like. On first seeing images of this projection, the machine was of less importance than the act. As an enthusiastic collector of such *things* I related it to early projection work by Krzystof Wodiczko, who in 1985 famously projected a swastika onto the entablature of another neoclassical building – South Africa House, on the West side of Trafalgar Square. [7] Both events represented the re-labeling of a classical architectural container. Projection rendered the building transparent, revealing the identity of its contents by cancelling out the architectural sign of state power – this building contains 'Nazis,' this one contains 'thieves' – applying a stamp, a unified identity to the building's contents. The purchaser of a given commodity imagines that the named contents are singular, monadic, even though they may be, as the small print says, 'the produce of more than one country.' Homogeneity, collectivity, becomes an accusation – 'though you appear to be different, you are all the same' – in opposition to which a key strand of contemporary protest energetically resists appropriation by conventional political collectivities.

If the machine was not important to me at first, it was because I was engaged by the swarm of laser pointers trained on the architecture. The dots seemed an analogue of the crowd: stochastic, energetic, entropic.

Figure 2. Screengrab from the video *Laser Dance*, Real Democracy Group, Athens (2009), MindTheGap Citizens' Media / Real Democracy GR Multimedia Team. Used with permission via the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.

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They seemed to be an autonomous, self-generated representation of fractured, chaotic commonality, and representative of a truly public space. Viewed as spectacle, such function amplified by the organizing function of my laptop screen, the dots were both ordered *and* chaotic: they activated the framed pixels, like a restless, accelerated screensaver – though rather than the usual spinning Mandelbrots they appeared to testify to either a disrupted, absent or indescribably complex geometrical order: as such, this stochastic activity served as a sign of human subjectivities as yet undescribed by algorithms or modeling. Yet as they arrived in front of me, it was as if they were expected – the screen traced them, welcomed them, ordered them.

Later, in the context of a seminar dealing with the history of public art and 'new' media, I projected the word 'ΚΛΕΦΤΕΣ' from my desktop. Ad libbing, it struck me as I spoke that the dots that made up the word could have been projected by individual members of the crowd: "look," I said to my 25 students (who in this text are now reproduced as a collectivity), "in this instance, the projection is produced by a group of individuals standing together and training their laser pointers onto the building. In the absence of sophisticated technology, the simple collective action of a number of heterogeneous individuals has produced a word." Energized by the poetic potential of this conceit, I repeated it a couple more times in different contexts, then realized that, as I often do, I was making things up. It was me, not the members of the crowd, who was binding together disparities, in this case ideas – that of the collective, the word and production. Led by a desire to dwell on the phenomena of collective action, encouraged by the signs projected by the machine, spontaneous social improvisation seemed the most obvious explanation for the message I was tuned in to – the idea of a rig or assemblage did not fit so well. There is a world of difference between a large group of individuals coming together in public space to spontaneously associate and invent, and an individual or smaller group hacking together cheap apparatus in a space away from the crowd.

What proved the existence of a *rig* was the trace of mechanical reproduction. Across multiple images of the same event, the pattern of the word was replicated, almost identically, pixel mapped onto pixel almost perfectly, the only interruption being the irregularity of the projection surface.

Figure 3. Thirteen points, and an interloper: the 'E' in 'THIEVES,' enlargement of figure 1. MindTheGap Citizens' Media / Real Democracy GR Multimedia Team. Used with permission via the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License (pixilation intentional).

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From the perspective of current philosophical and critical trends, who cares anyway whether people stood together in solidarity as a human projector, or whether the image was the product of a machinic assemblage? We who *write* and *read* should be used by now to the agency of objects. After ANT, the conversion of human agency into machine function is a mere act of *translation*. The black box can be both an assemblage of technical and non-technical components or a mixture of both.

> *The more that compromises on wider fronts have to be made, the more human and non-human elements have to be stitched together and the more obscure the mechanisms become. It is not because it escapes 'society' that 'technology' has become complex. The complexity of the sociotechnical mixture is proportionate to the number of new ties, bonds and knots, it is designed to hold together.* [8]

So, truly, my romantic conceit may still hold firm. But seeking a way of articulating this, back in the seminar, in front of my PowerPoint, my re-projection of a projection, it would seem impossible to explain without doubling back on myself. I would have to begin this line of thought with an explanation of an error. And that would seem to be the most *productive* way to proceed.

READING, RIOTING AND ARITHMETIC

A laser pointer projects light. But to project a word is, amongst other things, to send it forth into space. An actor, (in the theatrical sense) can be said to 'project' their voice. One imagines the words filling space, emanating from the presence, the body. A projection would appear to require a projector, but is a singular machine a necessary precondition for the production of a projected text? In a conventional projection mechanism, a lens array gathers the rays of light emitted by a bulb and funnels them through a nodal point – I have hacked many – but in the case of the rig under interrogation here, each individual laser represents a *point source:* light emanating from an absolutely precise, identifiable spatial origin. The rig under investigation seems to have been produced by binding together over 100 lasers: to make a word, it seems necessary to bind, to adhere, to assemble. Just as the text you are reading now – if you are reading the electronic version – is composed of an assemblage of dots, each with its individual x and y value, luminosity, hue and saturation.

The point of the pointer is to follow the voice. It has its origins in technologies which assist commercial and bureaucratic operations. The presenter accompanies the text, the diagram, the chart, with the pointer, which indicates the focus of attention. Compared to the apparently linear and sequential process of reading – which recent empirical studies have revealed to be discontinuous, non-linear, the association of fragments [9] – the laser pointer / projection / speaker assemblage resembles a form of conceptual and rhetorical Karaoke, to which the audience must sing along. The information design critic Edward Tufte considers the role of the projection – specifically Microsoft's *PowerPoint* – as more to render the audience mute and receive the message of the speaker than to encourage "a thoughtful exchange of information, a mutual interplay between speaker and audience." [10]

In this light, the laser pointer in the context of the business presentation or lecture is almost like a baton to the head: as the speaker navigates his or her linear sequence of bullet points, the pointer parses the text to signify and communicate a presence: *this is my point, here I am in this text, now*. Drawing members of the audience to synchronously follow the speaker's content, the intention to clarify a line of thought also

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serves to close down tangents, diversions, asides and interjections. The random, dispersed, chaotic act of information exchange itself is – with the aid of multiple presentation technologies – redrawn as a linear process. For Tufte, the 'cognitive style' of such technologies represents a huge, flashing sign that insists on the primacy of one-directional information flow over and above all others. What is elided in the current insistence on presentation tech is the spatial and interactive context of knowledge exchange – considerations of how people associate in space, or how the event may flow in time. The ordering of events on screen is prioritized over creating space for audience feedback or contributions, or more open forms of exchange. The ideal presentation would, for Tufte, include both printed matter in the form of handouts, which would allow participants a degree of ownership over the material delivered, accompanied by a visual presentation serving to support the sharing of knowledge, rather than its 'banking,' to use Friere's famous formulation. [11] The use of handouts returns the information to the crowd in the form of a material substrate. Tufte hereby opposes the projected to the printed in a formulation which insists on the qualities of the material object to return autonomy to the bearer.

READING, WRITING AND 'POLICE FUTURISM' [12]

It is possible to question whether the unification of many separate individual light sources indicates the production of a voice of one or many. Interestingly, the above image foregrounds both the trace of the movement of individual actors, in the stochastic dance of moving points of green light, and the formation of sense – the word produced by binding. The restless points could seem far more indicative of the collective than the single instance of the projected word, which can be assumed to be the product of individual action. Furthermore, the rig produces the crowd as a community of readers. However, it does so in full awareness of how such reading takes place in a distributed context – such a reading is self-consciously part of the same continuum which bounces placards back and forth across Europe, appropriating media networks as a host for a distributed conversation. But then *all writing is like this* – the written word is the site of a double inflection. Writing is, as the poet David Jones claimed, "trying to make a shape out of the very things of which one is oneself made." [13] Such a position is describable from the position of the poet, the producer or the astute critic. It requires embodied knowledge of how the act of writing is, even at its very origin – the author – a binding together of fragments.

Considering violence, Laclau writes using metaphors that recall the geometry of projections:

> *The existence of violence and antagonisms is the very condition of a free society. The reason for this is that antagonism results from the fact that the social is not a plurality of effects radiating from a pre-given centre, but is pragmatically constructed from many starting points.* [14]

The social, for Laclau as much as for Latour, is generated by the formation of local bonds, in the context of politicized situations. These 'many starting points' converge in the form of allegiances which develop between heterogeneous individuals, in this instance in a multifarious crowd. The notion of the social emerging from the local is echoed by the protestors themselves: in the context of the crowds, bonds were formed, supervening those imposed by the "separated identities and roles imposed on them by capitalist society... they met not as workers, university or school students or immigrants but as rebels." [15] In this context,

> *The rebellious experience, the material community of struggle against normalization – when one deviant individual became the mediator of another deviant individual, a real social being – mediated emotions and thought and created a proletarian public sphere.* [16]

Laclau's formulation, which opposes 'radiation' from a 'centre' to a dispersed and diverse field of 'starting points,' is visible in the spectacle of the lasered-up masses, but it is again possible to question whether the binding-together of pointers does not to some extent start on the path towards the kind of centralization to which Laclau opposes his notion of antagonistic politics, especially given the issue of *reproducibility*. The above is an echo of Latour's conceptualization of the how the social bond is produced by "stabilizing the links between bodies by acting on other bodies." [17] I do not wish to attack the agency or intentions of the individual maker of the rig here – merely to oppose two types of political sign – one which is spontaneously generated, and another which appears comprehensible, sensible – the naming of Parliament, the house of speakers, as the house of thieves: this particular formulation – a reduction of a complexity to a simple identity – is productive of both reactionary and revolutionary extremes. In the light of this act of writing, the other signs seem chaotic: writing produces them as *non-signs*. This difference may well be a function of representation: it is emerges from the gap between spectacle and street. Pourgouris makes a similar point in her cautious treatment of 'the transposition of the Act to Logos' [18] represented by the appropriation of the voice of the protestors by academia: a reduction of the immediate experience of the protest to a construction of language.

However, what this paper attempts to open up is the potential for the immediate experience of the *objects* of representation to be the site of action or protest. With regard to images, convention dictates that their collective production is the site of action, and their reception the site of passive reception on the part of an individual. Latour himself remarks that the distillation of spatio-temporal experience into the space of the diagram, lab report or photograph is an immensely powerful act:

> *By working on papers alone, on fragile inscriptions which are immensely less than the things from which they are extracted, it is still possible to dominate all things and all people.* [19]

However, if the site of reading is re-imagined as a space in which collectivities act on objects, it is materially no different from the street. It could therefore be misguided to think that those reading in seclusion occupy a different kind of space than those in the moment of protest. As capital territorializes public space, the space of the private can, by an act of imagination, be turned back into public space. Returning to the context of my lecture, I can claim to have experienced an event of reading, in which the reception of a text, on screen, in a social context, was changed by the intervention of objects. What material events locate or disrupt the reception of *this* text?

There is a difference between the binary oppositions of *on/off* or *blind/possessed of sight*. The former is a function of the projector (human or non-human) and the latter is a quality of the reader, the receiver. For this to become an opposition, a line has to be drawn and crossed. This *critical* operation – one of the most significant gains of the critical practices Latour disavows – locates the origin of meaning in the space of the reader, not the author. [20] The laser pointer which is targeted to blind does not transmit its function from one to the other side of the chasm separating an event from its representation. The mass of points – which for the crowd indicate a sign of their collectivity and the extent of their threat they pose – do not physically threaten the viewer of the photograph.

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However the word 'thieves' will be reproduced on the page as it is on the square, ironically via the function of photography to trace what is in front of the lens. But just because the visual data is transmitted through the nodal point of the lens, funneled through the camera of one individual, the photographer, the message it carries need not be rendered indivisible, monovocal – the reader does not have to become complicit with the construction of the technological assemblage of the *screen*. Though the textual *device* covers far vaster distances than the laser, it is crucial to bear in mind the power of writing and reading to articulate the multiple, the heterogeneous, and to be appropriated differently by different collectivities. In which case, contesting the operation and location of *reading* retains a potent political charge. And that is a critical operation.

Following the protests of 2008, a book was produced by Kastaniotis Editions entitled ***Ανησυχία*** (disquiet), collating visuals, street art and texts produced in the heat of protest. On publication, copies were stolen in bulk by groups of anarchists, who claimed that the book appropriated intellectual property which belonged in the street. [21] In response, the publishers made the contents available online – making the content free for those who can afford a computer. [22] What they chose not to do was to make the physical product available gratis – this would have been prohibitively expensive. The only way in which the same, identical visual material could be broadly experienced for free, for those either in possession of a computer or not, would have been on the walls of Athens, at that point in time – dispersed, stochastic, public. However, this would have limited readership to those with the physical access to the space at that point in time. The difference between catching a glimpse of a poster out of the corner of one's eye as one runs for shelter and encountering it online would appear to be reading in the context of action. However, by locating reading in a space apparently distant from sites of action, an opposition is generated between those kinds of space where action is productive (the agora) and where action is not happening or does not happen (the library, the bookshop, in front of the screen.) Pourgouris refers to Žižek's opposition of objective to subjective violence – objective violence representing a kind of inaudible background noise which habit accustoms us not to hear. [23] Maybe reframing the object as

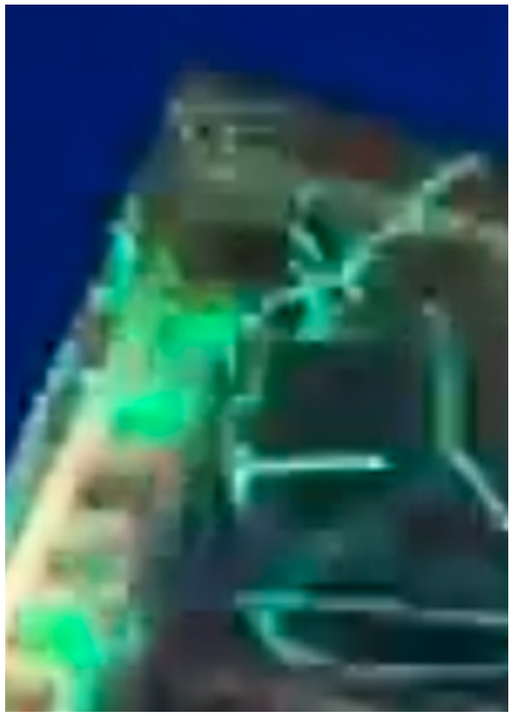

Figure 4. Enlargement of screen grab from *Dance of the Lasers*, laser light, stone, JPEG artefacts (from *Laser Dance*, Real Democracy Group, Athens.) Crop and enlargement by the author. Image by MindTheGap Citizens' Media / Real Democracy GR Multimedia Team. Used with permission via the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License (artefacts and pixilation intentional).

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political makes it possible to become attuned to the level of objective violence in the act of reading. *Here is your screen, on which you read this – it is made of the same things – pixels – which make deals and blind cops.*

PRODUCING A MESS WITH METHOD [24]

The location of production is multiple. There are key aspects of this paper which will be most significant if you read them on a screen, as opposed to on paper – it is entirely my intention to place in front of you something which will be read differently for two differently equipped readers. With regard to the relationship between printing and the electronic page, Derrida admits that the digitally reproduced text always carries within itself the desire to become paper [25] – but then it would not *glow*, it would not *shine*. It may be that the text in front of you is an assemblage of points of light. These particles, bound by the machine in a fixed array, are illuminated from behind by a sheet of electroluminescent film, overlaid on which is a shifting transparency. Maybe you will be reading on a technology yet unimagined, in which case my argument evolves – upgrades? On the Guardian website this morning, a day after revisiting Derrida's *Paper Machines,* I read about the revelation of a prototype device which behaves like a tablet, but resembles a sheet of paper – the PaperTab. [26] Coincidence or chaos?

The question of production is paramount: what is produced here – on the streets and on the screen – is manifold, as is its base ('support, substratum, matter, virtuality, power.' [27] There are many relationships of base to inscription in this text: the writing on the wall, words on a screen, architecture as the location of speech, the street as the location of political energy. Considering the notion of social space and its production, Lefebvre finds it necessary to problematize the notion of production and its organizing, rational principles:

> *[..] first of all, it organizes a sequence of actions with a certain objective (i.e. the object to be produced) in view. It imposes a temporal and spatial order upon related operations whose results are co-extensive. From the start of an activity so oriented towards an objective, spatial elements – the body, limbs, eyes – are mobilized, including both materials (stone, wood, bone, leather etc.) and materiel (tools, arms, language, instructions and agendas) Relations based on an order to be followed – that is to say on simultaneity and synchronicity – are thus set up, by means of intellectual activity, between the component elements of the action undertaken on the physical plane. [..] the formal relationships which allow separate actions to form a coherent whole cannot be detached from the material preconditions of individual and collective activity; and this holds true whether the aim is to move a rock, to hunt game, or to make a simple or complex object.* [28]

The page is a physical plane as much as is the street – as long as it retains its physicality, its body.

Focusing on Lefebvre's opposition between *moving a rock* and *making a complex object* we return to the space of Syntagma Square. In the context of protests, rocks become *projectiles*. Neni Panourgia's fascinating analysis of the agency of stones in the events of December 2008 explores how

> *[..] the making and self-making of political subjects is a process that presupposes an engagement with both intellectual and tactile materials. One of these intellectual materials is ideology, which stains tactile objects, such as stones and paper, with the heft of its own meanings.* [29]

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In a wide-ranging and poetic exploration of the 'agency' of stone, Panourgia draws a critical thread through the use of stone in the concentration camps of the Greek Civil War – in which prisoners of conscience were required to build analogues of Greek architecture, as part of a process of 'humanization' which would secure their release – to Syntagma Square, and the rock-throwing high-school students. Stones can be thrown in a way that frustrates the neat arrays and rehearsed tactics of the forces of order – much as lasers can be projected from the randomly dispersed positions of members of a shifting crowd. The movement of stones through the air, the debris of stones on the street – an index of disorder – can be compared to an entropic process by which the very fabric of architecture becomes a target – not the fabric of the building, (we are not considering anything like an updated version of the *trebuchet* – it is vital for the effect of these weapons that they are *small, dispersed and fast*) – but the ideas which hold the architecture together – the consensus, the power which architecture reifies. Words, paper, stones, speech and power engage in a dance which is only visible to those with the critical acuity *or* lens to be able to make imaginative associations between what *remains in place*. Panourgia opposes stones to paper, the paper of 'university degrees, state decrees, newspapers,' all of which are rendered valueless by global neoliberalism. However, if stone – thrown or piled – retains its power to produce and activate the public, then so does paper. Looking at images of the event, two significant categories of objects litter the street: stones and paper – in the form of flyers, and receipts.

The thrown stone is a coincidence of object and effect: when it strikes, it makes its point. The laser pointer, however, possesses both an immateriality and a materiality, from its object status – in opposition to the text, which for Panourgia is closer to something immaterial. It has a binary nature, in more ways than one: as an object in and of itself – a commodity sold on the streets of the capital, by itinerant street sellers (who do not give receipts, strictly a cash transaction), and a dot, a mere point of illumination. Its operation is inseparably optical *and* spatial. From within the crowd, light is thrown from a distance onto stone, producing a coincidence of effect and sign. Though Panourgia, in her text, produces the stone-as-sign through her deft interrogation of its historical trajectory, the laser, as tool, is already productive of both violence and signification. Lasers *en masse* are performative in a way that singular lasers are not, in Austin's sense of a speech act which also performs an action – such as 'I hereby declare allegiance,' or 'I decree.' [30] When, from within the chaos of the crowd, disunited / heterogeneous protestors aim their shifting points of light at a building, producing a spectacular, energetic, restless field, a collectivity is announced regardless of organization or structure.

A poster displayed on the streets of Athens in 2008 – collected in ***Ανησυχία*** [31] – shows a cartoon of a riot policeman dispersing a crowd of random stick-figure protestors, in contrast to a 'body' composed of red individuals, which looms over the cop, causing him to flee. Such a Leviathan is conventional – this is how solidarity is conventionally represented, and yet it is the upper picture which is more representative of the actual, chaotic spatial dispersion of a strong body politic.

DATA IN THE PLAZA

It is possible to view the display on the Hotel as a form of 'data visualization,' in the sense intended by Dave Colangelo & Patricio Davila in a previous edition of LEA. [32] However, the mechanism here is not produced, but autonomously generated. Yes, the buzzing lights truly represent 'a fluid, digital layer that perme-

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Figure 5 Protest posters, Athens, 2008. Collected in ***Ανησυχία***, Kastaniotis Editions, Athens, 2009. Photograph by Efthimios Gourgouris. © Efthimious Gorgouris. Used with permission.

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ates the city' and a 'mix of technology and urban space which creates an increasingly conflated real and virtual space,' [33] but as to whether these, in Lefebvre's terms, are unified by a human productive rationality, is a moot point. The assemblage almost makes itself, it comes together via the presentation of attitudes, objects and opportunities – like reading.

Colangelo and Davila write:

> *Traditionally, visualizations have been treated as surfaces for a sole user to view. With architectural projections, these visualizations can be viewed simultaneously by a group of users. Shared experiences within large visualization environments can harness the cognitive and communicative capacity in a group of viewers.* [34]

The recruitment of the bureaucratic function of the machine in the service of artistic production is not necessarily benign – the difference between Syntagma and the projections described above is that the spectacle represents the creation of a social event and its simultaneous representation: the funneling through a 'surface for a sole user to view' happens after the representation is generated (before it hits the plane of the spectacle – the screen). The spectacle of the lights of Syntagma spontaneously and autonomously achieves such sharing of experience and cognitive / communicative bonding (in a sense it is already that, it is a sign of itself), but avoiding the channeling through a nodal point of power which would render such collectivity comprehensible, controllable, manageable.

Of course, this was another key message which I was attempting to get across to my students: do not assume that the best solution to a problem is to increase the complexity of the mechanical assemblage: electronic art is almost always a hybrid of human and non-human elements. One of the most valuable insights ANT has contributed to thinking through human interaction is that the division between passive objects and active humans is constructed and conventional. [35] In acts of communication the relationship between human and non-human is complex – if technological artefacts give rise to the power to communicate at a distance, acknowledgement of this agency should not give rise to a binary opposition between a material, violent, participatory public space on the one hand (the space where the spectacle is produced), and a passive, immaterial, abstracted realm of reception. Both are potential sites of action. By focusing on the laser pointer in my lecture, I stumbled across an object which could directly communicate between both spaces – as a door *communicates* between rooms. Suddenly the lecture became the street: the *détournement* of projection equipment for the purposes of protest meant that the very technology of my presentation became a potential agent of the flows or movements I was attempting to describe. This distant action had the effect of ensuring that no-one participating in the lecture could consider their role and as passive and presentation technologies as merely conductive. Some*thing* entered the room through the open door.

DRAWING TO A CONCLUSION

Focusing on the agency of objects is fast becoming a key trope of contemporary discourse, but the rewriting of Syntagma Square as the site of the play of objects, as opposed to people, is deployed by myself and the others I have chosen to recruit in support of my argument because by doing so, it is possible to draw together, on the same plane, a series of apparently disparate events, actors and ideas. In all such contested spaces, the agency of non-humans intersects with that of humans in a way that requires that politics be factored into the equation – no matter whether one believes that politics itself is *produced*, in the case of Latour, [36] or is *productive*, in the case of Marx. However, in the site of action represented by Syntagma Square, Latour's notion that *critique can never be productive* can be challenged by his own formulations. In claiming that 'it is no more possible to compose with the paraphernalia of critique than it is to cook with a seesaw' – Latour [37] opposes production to critique, and yet in a strange move which contradicts his earlier statement regarding the power of inscriptions, he delimits the 'paraphernalia' of critique to specifically discursive tools – words, speech, concepts – neglecting non-human paraphernalia entirely, and entirely glossing over the role(s) of the carrier medium, which figures large in Derrida's thinking. Furthermore, in attacking the 'critical,' Latour conjures up an imaginary beast similar to 'capitalism' and 'society' which, of course for ANT, do not exist. As Larval Subjects writes: "the ANT worry is that we treat *concepts* like 'society' or 'capitalism' as themselves, being entities that *do* things, thereby becoming blind to how societies and modes of production like capitalism are put together." [38] But 'critique' is as able to come together at the level of the local, the intersubjective and the placed, as any of the intersubjective, local, micro-level networks which Latour pits against constructions of the 'macro.'

Evidently, critical activity *can* also be extended into the realm of the material, a point which Kafka understood when describing a mechanism of punishment which inscribes a legal *sentence*, letter by letter, on the body of the accused. [39] With a more powerful device than the rig described here, the word 'thieves' could have been permanently inscribed on the wall of parliament.

Indeed, it could be Derrida who seems more open to the compositional potential of critique by his recognition of the productive agency of the *material* of language: much of his output represents a specific call to creativity, to poetic action, to the re-binding of labor with imagination and pleasure which the division of labor itself divorces. [40] Writing is also a form of hacking. And there is, of course, the notion of play, of *jouissance*. Strapping lasers together and projecting them on public buildings is *fun*. We must never lose sight of the power of fun. ■

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