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THE RETOPIAN APPROACH TO ART

Since the early 2000s Utopia has made its return into the art world. Utopian thinking became an increasingly relevant theme which inspired a multitude of artworks which were reconsidering and reevaluating the utopian heritage and its contemporary relevance, its contents, forms and functions. Notably after the 2008 economic crisis an increase in the number of exhibitions indicated that the quest for utopia was seen by many curators and artists as a way to confront the dominant social order. Among the exhibitions were *Utopia Station* (2003), Venice Biennale; *Utopia Station Porto Allegre* (2005); *How to improve the world, 60 years of British Art* (2006), Hayward Gallery, London; *Thomas Hirschhorn: Utopia, Utopia* (2006), ICA Boston; *What Keeps Mankind Alive* (2009) Istanbul Biennial; *Utopie Gesamtkunstwerk*



(2012) 21er Haus Vienna; *News from Nowhere: Chicago Laboratory* (2013) Sullivan Galleries, Chicago; *The Spirit of Utopia* (2013), Whitechapel Gallery, London; *Anarchy and Beauty* (2014) National Portrait Gallery, London; *Utopia and Beyond* (2016), Castello Di Rivara Contemporary Art Centre, Turin; *Paths to Utopia* (2016), King's College, London.

The ubiquitous use of the term utopia in these exhibitions makes a clearer classification of the concept paramount. The actual role art can play in shaping political (and by extension utopian) discourse is defined by the ambition (whether or not to engage with the world outside), the scope (whether or not being confined to cordoned off areas of the traditional art circuit) the functions of utopia in the context of contemporary art (and contemporary society) and the scope of hope (whether the hope for eutopia is framed in individual/privatized or larger terms). The overall question is: what is the basic attitude towards utopia in terms of utopian mental pictures and concrete political agency?

The Function of Utopia and the Scope of Hope

Utopian thinking is per definition an active imaginative project on a better society with the implied understanding of implementing these ideas. So utopian ideas have consequences, as the history of utopian thought has shown, utopias can have an actual impact on society. Even though some utopians (like More) were articulating their alternative visions from the privileged stand-point of being part of the political elite, they ultimately developed mental images that inspired the political struggle. Visual art, at least theoretically, should be the key site for the articulation of mental images that

could inspire the political struggle and it could be the locus for the birth of new ideas.

If art actually wants to articulate utopian visions it has to enter in dialogue with the society and not just, be appalled by the displays of social injustice in the framework of international art-shows. The first finding would be: there is an outside. Engaging with the outside could provide the material for images that are different from the master narratives of the art circuit, a starting point for any utopian thinking that, per definition, is not reduced to a partial understanding of one segment of society (e.g. the art world) but about the complex interrelationships of all aspects of society. A full engagement with the complexities of society would provide a different perspective than the punctual and diffusely focused topical approaches which change according to the seasons and the new thematic fashions. This condition sine qua non, for any utopianism in contemporary art fulfilled, the artist's utopian function can then be analyzed in the framework of the functions of utopia as described by Ruth Levitas. Levitas defined three functions of utopia – compensation, critique and catalyst – and art has the potential to fulfill all three functions.¹ Whereas the compensative function is akin to escapist dreaming, the critical function reduced to the negation of the existing society arrangements, it is the catalyst function that can actually effect change.

Richard Noble² states that art has two utopian functions: diagnostic and programmatic. The diagnostic function is similar to Levitas' critical function

¹ Levitas, R. (2011). *The Concept of Utopia*. Witney: Peter Lang.

² Noble, R. (2009). *The Lure of Utopia*. Exhibition Catalogue. Ishøj, Denmark: ARKEN Museum of Modern Art. In: <<http://research.gold.ac.uk/4774>> [accessed 2017, Mar 25]

and the programmatic corresponds to Levitas' catalyst function. For Noble the question is whether the utopian proposals have an explicit or implicit prescriptive solution. Noble gives no further explanation of the programmatic (catalyst) function but sums up the basic diagnostic (critical function): "Utopian art asks us if we ask enough of ourselves, if we look beyond the pre-digested platter of clichés about the possible we are fed on, to something better and less safe."³ This definition leaves the question of concrete agency unsolved and reduces utopia to a self-interrogation device. In order to have a catalyst function, utopian thinking needs to identify a concrete political agency.

The absence of a clear definition of the catalyst function of utopia (in art) poses the risk that utopia becomes a label for diffuse critical reflections or well-intended idealism without consequences. Without the identification of a concrete political agency and a utopian mental image" (that should not be confounded with a dogmatic view, but rather seen as dynamic ideal) utopian discourse risks being reduced to discourse about utopia. The absence (or the unwillingness of articulation of a utopian mental image can be explained by the fear of being ridiculed, by the dogmatic rejection of meta-narratives, by the incapacity to imagine a different future (the *There is No Alternative* doctrine) and possibly by the absence of hope for change or by a downsized scope of hope.

Russel Jacoby describes the current scope of utopianism: "Thomas More dreamed of a utopia without war, money, violence or inequality. Five centuries later the most imaginative futurists foresee a utopia with war,

³ Noble, R. *The Lure of Utopia*, [op. cit.], p. 1.

money, violence and inequality.”⁴ But not the only the political ambition but also the scope of hope is articulated more modestly than in the times of Ernst Bloch. Bolaños acknowledges that hope might be ungrounded “for it will not allow itself to be justified in terms of naïve conceptions of humanism, teleology, and divine providence.”⁵

This conception ignores Bloch’s idea that human agency has a transcendent potential in itself. Bolaños’ hope is at best a negative hope. “Nostalgia without content” and hope that is not grounded on any form of agency are concepts that lack the power to inspire political action. This defeatist utopianism has been summarized by Weiss:

Perhaps now we have truly lost our innocence with respect to utopia, but along with the lost confidence in the possibility to conjure a prodigal utopia there seems to stand a response grounded in an ethical insistence of art, imbued with and immersed in catastrophes of the utopias that we have already known. Utopia is not a means of countering disillusionment; rather, the interest in utopia lies in noticing that we do in fact continually counter disillusionment, that we do return again and again to the question of a good (read, ethical) life – that this is a struggle which, never completed, is also never abandoned. Utopian imagining comes from awareness on some level of this persistence. It is an imagining which leaves us determined to

⁴ Jacoby, R. (1999). *The End of Utopia: Politics and Culture in an Age of Apathy*. New York: Basic Books, p. 161.

⁵ Bolaños, P. A. (2007). The Critical Role of Art: Adorno between Utopia and Dystopia. *Kritike: Online Journal of Philosophy*, vol 1, no 1, p. 26. In: <http://www.kritike.org/journal/issue_1/bolanos_june2007.pdf>

pursue, yet perhaps even more frightened of, our own lingering impulse for utopia.⁶

Weiss narrows utopia to individual impulses and brings down ethics to the level of individual choice. By taking the reference to the collective out of utopia, it becomes a mere foil for individual projections. Peter Thompson⁷ diagnoses a privatization of hope, and ultimately a loss of hope (due to its privatization) and notes, that in the context of the work of Bloch, the present day “apparent loss of hope for change or improvement seems to have become a self-fulfilling and debilitating condition.” In this understanding utopia is just another ingredient in the excessive self-contemplation process and reduced to its basic compensatory function. As Levitas underlines: “In situations where there is no hope of changing the social and material circumstances, the function of utopia is purely compensatory.”⁸

In order to make any statements about society, any utopia with claim for a critical or even catalyst function has to have a reference to collective imagination and a however defined notion of agency. Even if utopia, like art, is action on the unknown, the driving ideal must transcend the narrow frame of the self. In order for art to have a utopian potential, the scope of hope has to be larger than the privatized and individualized perspective of self-improvement.

The Four Types of Utopianism

⁶ Weiss, R. (2007). *Utopiary*. In Rösen, J., Fehr, M. and Rieger, T. W. (eds.). *Thinking Utopia: Steps into Other Worlds*. New York: Berghahn Books, p. 204.

⁷ Thompson, P., & Žižek, S. (eds). (2013). *The Privatization of Hope: Ernst Bloch and the Future of Utopia*. Durham: Duke University Press, p. 3.

⁸ Levitas, R. (2011). *The Concept of Utopia*. Witney: Peter Lang, p. 22.

In order to frame the approach of contemporary artists, a more concrete examination of the possible reality-transcending concepts and their articulation in utopian mental pictures as well as the conceptualization of political agency are at the key criteria. Utopian approaches can be defined by their intent, their scope and their political effectiveness. In this context, the focus is on the artists Thomas Hirschhorn, Liam Gillick, WochenKlausur and the art-scene in post-industrial Detroit which serve as archetypes for four different types of utopianism in contemporary art. The research is in the archeological mode which Levitas defines as an “archaeological exercise, in that it involves digging around in speeches and policy documents, and piecing together actions, statements and silences...”⁹ The aim of the archeological mode is to “lay the underpinning model of the good society open to scrutiny and to public critique”. Thus the discourse of the artists on utopia will be the criterion for the evaluation of the attitude toward utopia. Henceforth the following classification is proposed:

01) contemporary outopia (Thomas Hirschhorn)

the attitude towards social alternatives is critical because the contemporary outopia is implicitly based on the premise that social change is not possible in an all-englobing system. The world is more likely to change for worse, become a non-place, an outopia and the political imagination is forever locked in the present framework

⁹ Levitas, R. (2005). *The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society or Why Sociologist and Others Should Take Utopia More Seriously*. Inaugural Lecture. University of Bristol, Bristol, United Kingdom. 24.10.2005, pp. 15-16. In: <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/medialibrary/sites/spais/migrated/documents/inaugural.pdf>

02) contemplative utopia (Liam Gillick)

the attitude towards social alternatives is generally positive, the need for utopian transformation is recognized and social change is considered to be theoretically possible however, no concrete agency is articulated or even identified. The general positive function of Utopia as a reality transcending political concept is recognized however often with an ambiguous angle because of the historical failures of certain utopian concepts.

03) activism without utopian mental picture (WochenKlausur)

the attitude towards social alternatives is positive, activism is recognized as a way of changing the framework of society, theory is important but action is primordial. The reality transcending concepts generally do not contain a concrete image of utopian futures but are more ideological orientation points, which conceptually frame the political struggle.

4) retopia (contemporary art in Detroit)

The fourth archetype the “retopia” can be preliminarily defined as “reconstructive utopia”, based on a critical return to definition of Mumford as “a reconstituted environment that is better adapted to the nature and aims of the human beings who dwell within it than the actual one”.¹⁰ Unlike Mumford’s reconstructive utopia the retopia is a eutopia (so the explicit aim is to improve the social arrangements) that does not make any claim on human nature and explicitly grounds the utopian on the local environment and not in

¹⁰ Mumford, L. (2008, originally, 1922). *The Story of Utopias*. New York: Boni and Liveright, p. 14.

abstract universals. Retopia is a utopia with the claim to be put into practice through social experimentation on the ground (with an open outcome).

Contemporary Outopia

The Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn is famous for his oversize-installations made out of cheap and recycled materials and often displayed in environments other than museums, one of his influential works was the “Gramsci Monument” (2013) in which he pays tribute to the famous Italian philosopher. Hirschhorn likes to coquet with his past communist affiliation. In an interview with Okwui Enwezor, Hirschhorn gives his definition of utopia:

A utopia is something to aim for, a project, a projection. It is an idea, an ideal. It is right; it is wrong. Art and making artwork are utopian. But a utopia never works. It is not supposed to. When it works, it is a utopia no longer...

In this definition utopia is a formal strategy for art-making in general. This reduction of utopia to a project (among projects) gives no specific primacy to a lasting outcome and reflects the common understanding of seeing art as a sequence of projects that are abandoned once their final stage, the show, is reached. The fragmentary nature of the organization of the international art circuit is making such a perception a pragmatic attitude towards the ever-shifting scenes in which artworks are shown.

Hirschhorn had an exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art Boston with the title “Utopia, Utopia = One World, One War, One Army, One Dress” in 2006 and the curators, Nicholas Baume and Ralph Rugoff were framing Hirschhorn’s utopianism with the words:

...this exhibition stands in opposition to the fashionable invocation of utopia that has flourished over the past decade in the fields of urbanism and architecture, as well as in certain corners of the art world. Concerned with proposing hypothetical social models rather than dealing with the world as it is, that discourse has often been naively idealistic. In contrast, Hirschhorn’s project directly engages the dystopian realities of our time in order to relocate our conception of utopia.¹¹

In addition, the curators underline that the exhibition does “not advance a particular political position or comprehensive social theory.” This is at least a curious position for the premise of “relocating the conception of utopia”. It excludes, without further explanation, the very essence of utopian thinking, hypothetical social models and a political position, from the concept of utopia. Hirschhorn himself asserts that utopia “is not coming from reflection on society and theoretical thinking” but from “headlessness”, “practice” and from art. His driving force is not illusion but hope, which he understands as “the principle of taking action”. As the philosopher Marcus Steinweg writes in catalogue to the exhibition:

¹¹ Hirschhorn, T. (2005). *Utopia. Utopia = One World, One War, One Army, One Dress*. Exhibiton brochure. Boston, MA: Institute of Contemporary Art; San Francisco, CA: CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, p. 5.

Art and philosophy only exist as this breakthrough, as the violence of transgressing the horizon, as the violence of assertion of a subject of decision, of a decision which breaks through the horizon of the possible to the dimension of the impossible which is the dimension of truth.¹²

While the discourse in exhibition catalogues in most cases is nothing more than the bubbles which make the fluid visual universe consumable, Steinweg's claim about the impossibility of truth is a reflection seen through the postmodern rear-view mirror. And Hirschhorn's diffuse utopianism, in which any utopian ideal is absent, is a manifestation of contemporary outopia, which cannot make any claims to counter-hegemonic positions (even if he pays tribute to Gramsci). The TINA premise is manifested by an absence of a utopian mental image. The agency (of art) is reduced to a self-appraisal without any foundations. Through the absence of any political imagination or agency, Hirschhorn's contemporary outopia is locked in the present framework.

Contemplative Utopia

Liam Gillick already pointed out the problem of the undefined use of utopia in 2003 when he co-conceived one of the early manifestations of a return to utopia, the *Utopia Station*, at the Venice Biennale. Gillick underlines that the problem is "linked to the wide-ranging use of the term utopia – the literally

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 5.

no place – in our current language. It is a common enough word so we don't think twice about using it.”¹³

For Gillick “the situation is effectively post-utopian in terms of the absence of functional alternative visions” and utopia has effectively become a “flawed dysfunctional accusational tool”. In the context of the Utopia Station at the Venice Biennale, Gillick asks:

...how to proceed when you are not convinced by current conditions. Working in a relativist, parallel fashion appears to be sufficient at various moments, yet with a continuing proliferation and appropriation of models of radicality by others, it becomes more and more difficult to divine the differences between one named structure and another. It is possible that there is some kind of irony at the heart of its use here. An acknowledgment that the activities of the artists concerned has reached a point of perfect irrelevance.¹⁴

For Gillick, the best strategy to counter the irrelevance of art and to re-conceptualize Utopia, in the context of the exhibition is to present Utopia as a “free-floating non-defined sequence of propositions that wander in and out of focus and avoid being lodged within the consumable world of the concept.”¹⁵ The question is if a free-floating non-defined sequence of propositions with a diffuse focus might not become irrelevant in itself. For

¹³ Gillick, L. (2003). *For a Functional Utopia*. Published as part of Utopia Station, Venice Biennale. Retrieved October 12th, 2014, from:

<<http://www.liamgillick.info/home/texts/for-a-functionalutopia>>

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

the fear of being co-opted, Gillick wants to sacrifice coherence. The contradiction here is evident: how is it possible to present a functional utopia without conceptualizing the possible alternative politico-economic arrangements?

As a re-conceptualization, Gillick offers a ‘post utopian’ approach, “an attempt to break free from the application of the word utopia to any old alternative structure that happens to have existed.” The term ‘post utopian’ is an attempt to disconnect the word from its history, a history that Gillick sees as irrelevant, as his remarks about Thomas More’s inaugural work indicate. For Gillick utopia is “a word that was originally used to title a book that was intended as a localized critique of a particular historical circumstance has no relation to its original meaning.”¹⁶ This maximum downsizing of the contemporary relevance of utopian concepts indicates a genuine disinterest in the reality-transcending potential of utopian visions. In addition, Gillick’s speculation about Thomas More’s original intentions to write *Utopia* are unfounded and lack any historic evidence. Gillick’s understanding of the book as a localized critique shows a lack of knowledge about *Utopia*’s actual historical influence.

In the very end, Gillick is inconclusive on whether the functional utopia is an appropriate tool to counter the dominant system. He writes:

So one question might be – is it necessary to resurrect the notion of a functional utopia in order to provide a set of rhetorical tools that might

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

help us out of the currently reactive situation we find on the progressive left, or should we keep with a relativist form of multiple interest development that remains mutable, fluctuating, responsive and inclusive.¹⁷

The implication here is that utopia is immutable, irresponsive and exclusive shows that Gillick (involuntarily) echoes the neo-liberal critique of utopian thinking. Gillick's reflections about utopia show all the characteristics of a contemplative utopia.

His attitude towards social alternatives is generally positive, the need for a conceptualization of utopia is recognized but his overall attitude shows an ambiguity towards the concept of utopia because of historical failures of certain utopian concepts. There is no articulation of agency in Gillick's writing. His utopian mental image can be described as vaguely free-floating, an abstract utopian becomingness. What Gillick fails to recognize is that the free flow is actually the metaphor for the global markets, and thereby of the neo-liberal order that he attempts to criticize.

Activism Without Utopian Mental Picture

The Austrian group WochenKlausur has a fundamentally different approach to art than Gillick. Instead of finding theoretical foundations for the articulation of social alternatives through art, the group, founded in 1992 by

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

Wolfgang Zingg, attempts to find new forms for social interventions. In their first project “Medical Care for Homeless People” (1993) they designed an artwork, an ambulance car, that was not presented in the institution that commissioned it, the Vienna Secession, but used for practical, free of charge, healthcare for homeless people in Vienna. After the exhibition project was over, the social organization Caritas took the project over and the medical care in the mini-bus is continues until the present day. The group, since then, on the invitation of art institutions, is practicing social interventions in a variety of fields such as city development, integration of immigrants, community development, education, the treatment of drug addicts, civic engagement...

WochenKlausur (2003) explicitly claims that one of the functions of art “has always been the transformation of living conditions” but, in contrast to Beuys or the Russian Constructivists, contemporary interventionist art is no longer “mercilessly implementing an ideological line”. The position the group articulates is more pragmatic:

Activist art no longer overestimates its capabilities. But it does not underestimate them either. It makes modest contributions. And yet, in the proper dose art can change more than is assumed. Art must devote itself to very concrete strategies of effecting change.

In contrast to 1980s Krzysztof Wodiczko’s *Homeless Vehicle* (1988-89), they do not aim at creating valuable exhibition pieces that transport street flavor into the museums but see social renewal as an important function of artistic

production. For WochenKlausur, art has the “ability to offer the community something that also achieves an effect.” The group wants to use the artists’ competence in finding creative solutions and the skill to shape materials also in relation to problems that arise in society. Through intensive actions that are limited in time they want to use the infrastructural framework and the cultural capital of art institutions for their interventionist art. The space for art, as WochenKlausur states, is not the museum:

The demand has been coming up again and again for a long time now: Art should no longer be venerated in specially designated spaces. Art should not form a parallel quasi-world. Art should not act as if it could exist on itself and for itself. Art should deal with reality, grapple with political circumstances, and work out proposals for improving human coexistence.¹⁸

While the approach is situated in a longer tradition of interventionist art, the Austrian group is more modest in its scope than comparable 1960s movements, the artists acknowledge that “it would be wrong in a society in which every discussion of basic principles has been lost, to expect that something like art can make decisive changes.” As the focus of WochenKlausur is on intervention, a contribution to the discussion of utopian visions is largely absent in this artist group. WochenKlausur uses the word utopia more in the colloquial sense as something impractical, as their description of Wodiczko’s work indicates: “Wodiczko’s approach – he looks

¹⁸ Wochenklausur (2009). *Art and Sociopolitical Intervention*. In R. Noble (ed.). *Utopias*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, p. 79.

for solutions within the realm of existing possibilities, even if they do seem a little utopian – is certainly worthy of mention.”

WochenKlausur’s approach can be described as activism without a utopian mental picture. Their attitude towards social alternatives is positive, activism is seen as a way of improving society, but there are no coherent reality transcending concepts, which the group denounces as “ideological lines”, the conceptual framework is intervention but there is no clear utopian image that motivates the intervention. The attempt to reconstruct society is not locally rooted but happens selectively, depending on which art institution invites the group, and is limited in time. The hegemonic structure that might be at the root of the social problems is largely left unchallenged, the group is rather trying to soften the social impact on a punctual level.

Retopia

Perhaps utopia is difficult to locate in the still relatively prosperous centers of Western world. It could be that the most fertile ground for reality-transcending concepts are the places that were left behind by the global markets, or, to remind the comments of Mumford¹⁹ it would be possible “if the foundations for eutopia were established in ruined countries; that is, in countries where metropolitan civilization has collapsed and where all its paper prestige is no longer accepted at paper value.” Following the media

¹⁹ Mumford, L. *The Story of Utopias*. [op. cit.], p. 14.

reporting of the last few years, one of these ruined places in a non-war zone where metropolitan civilization has at least partially collapsed is Detroit.

It might be difficult to judge from the distance whether the ex-boomtown, having just recently recovered from bankruptcy, is becoming what Carl Swanson²⁰ called “another twee urban utopia”. The city infrastructure of Detroit was designed for 1.8 million people (1950) but is currently inhabited by less than 700.000 people. Thus the question arises, once (and if) the city is recovering from the aftermath of the neoliberal shock therapy, can the problem of the scarcity gap be solved in an innovative way. Does the abundance of space provide the topos for the creation of a new place? Or to formulate the question differently: is Detroit becoming what Bolaños²¹ called a “nostalgia without content”, a “Soho in the 1970s” as Swanson described it, or can the ruins of capitalism give birth to different social arrangements?

In any case the metropole in decline is attracting a number of artists with two fundamentally different motivations: revitalization of urban communities or continuation of artistic practice under cheaper living conditions. The latter case is exemplified by the move of the former New York based Galapagos Art Space. The group bought nine buildings with the total size of more than 180.000 square meters for the price, as the Galapagos website²² boasts “of a

²⁰ Swanson, C. (2015, Jan 2). *Is Soho in the '70s Just a Two-Hour Flight Away? 9 Artists on Why They Live in Detroit*. In: <<http://www.vulture.com/2015/01/9-artists-on-why-they-live-in-detroit.html>>

²¹ Bolaños, P. A. (2007). *The Critical Role of Art: Adorno between Utopia and Dystopia*. *Kritike: Online Journal of Philosophy*, vol 1, no 1 (June 2007). In: <http://www.kritike.org/journal/issue_1/bolanos_june2007.pdf>

²² Galapagos (2014). *Galapagos Art Space, New York/Detroit*. In: <<http://www.galapagosartspace.com>>

small apartment in New York City”. Galapagos²³ claims that Detroit has the three ingredients that any city needs:

To flourish, a well-functioning creative ecosystem needs three things in abundance; time, space and people. Arguably, New York City has people but they no longer have time or space. Detroit has time and space and is gaining its critical third component - artists - at an astonishing rate.

Arguably the implication that only artists are the critical third component (people) is betraying a certain sense of disinvolvement with the local Detroit community and hints at the abuse of the Detroit city space for cheap living costs.

The relocation will show, if the art space is just looking for another, a cheaper, New York City in which the 1970s nostalgia can be projected. If this motivation to move to Detroit becomes the predominant tendency, then (a part of) the city will recover along the global lines of gentrification, individualist (pseudo-)bohemian life styles and cosy artistic escape at the edge of the status quo.

The Return of the Commons?

However, the current situation, has at least the potential to find genuine links to the post-break down symptoms of capitalism and develop social

²³ Galapagos (2017). Website of Galapagos Art Space, New York/Detroit. In: <<http://www.galapagosartspace>>

alternatives. As it seems, the urban dismantling left space in abundance in Detroit, the question would be if the space, at the moment dominated by the phenomenon of social disintegration, can be transformed into a place, a eutopia. Reports that indicate that there are 1300 community farms in Detroit that produce enough fruit and vegetables to supply 20% of the city are encouraging signs of a positive transformation.

So, will Detroit be the place that shows what happens after the enclosed space (the critique of which motivated Thomas More's *Utopia*) is opened up again? Can the city be a model for the reestablishment of the commons?

One of the negative societal developments that led Thomas More to write *Utopia* was a profound transformation process society that started already in the 12th century and gradually accelerated in the early 16th century: the local gentry paved the way for excluding a significant part of the rural population of their livelihood by enclosing land. Previously common lands (the Commons), which were at the disposition of the rural community, were privatized and the act of theft was later legitimized by the British legislation through the so-called Enclosure Acts. These acts drove a significant part of the country-side population into abject poverty which partly also resulted in the rise of criminality. In his world-systems theory Immanuel Wallerstein²⁴ sees the 16th century as the starting point of the capitalist world system (which he predicts to come to an end in the first decades of the 21st century). So the question arises: is Detroit prefiguring developments that might at a later point become global tendencies?

²⁴ Wallerstein, I. (1998). *Utopistics. Or, Historical Choices of the Twenty-first Century*. New York: The New Press.

In his blog, Vince Carducci²⁵, sees tendencies that could indicate a partial return to the idea of “the commons” He writes:

The first iteration has been to think in terms of something I call the art of the commons. This lens reveals a significant (though certainly not exclusive) tendency within contemporary Detroit art that has emerged in those spaces where the distinctions between public and private seems to have dissipated as part of the process of demassification of the city’s core, which has taken place over the last four decades.

Carducci describes the situation referring to the concept “real utopias” by Eric Olin Wright. Wright²⁶ argues:

The idea of “real utopias” embraces this tension between dreams and practice. It is grounded in the belief that what is pragmatically possible is not fixed independently of our imaginations, but is itself shaped by our visions. Self-fulfilling prophecies are powerful forces in history, and while it may be naively optimistic to say “where there is a will there is a way”, it is certainly true that without a “will” many “ways” will become impossible.

²⁵ Carducci, V. (2015, January). *On Art and Gentrification*. Infinite Mile. In: <http://infinitemiledetroit.com/On_Art_and_Gentrification.html>

²⁶ Wright, E. O. (2010). *Envisioning Real Utopias*. London: Verso.

Based on Wrights optimistic claim, Carducci sees the potential of artistic interstitial strategies to create social alternatives outside of the modern state. The “withering away” of capitalism in Detroit thus provides space for *art of the commons* which for Carducci is a return to the medieval (pre-capitalist) roots of defining property. Carducci writes:

Referring back to the medieval commons (land left open for grazing, farming, and other uses by anyone without requiring individual ownership – the term “commoner,” i.e., one without hereditary title, comes from it), the art of commons trespasses the boundaries of conventional property relations of the modern capitalism.²⁷

By pointing at the property relations, Carducci (without even referencing Thomas More), returns to the roots of utopian dissatisfaction with the economic system. The decisive question for the future development will be whether the Galapagos Art Space understanding (dislocate to Detroit, because it is possible to acquire cheap property) or the *art of the common* (ignoring property relations and create open spaces) will dominate the cityscape.

New relations of solidarity could be created through the *art of the common* approach while the “Galapagos” solution might turn Detroit into the new Berlin (another trend city in the globalized lifestyle circuit). (Eastern) Berlin was showing what happens to the open spaces after the breakdown of communism: a short period of freedom followed by a long, and still ongoing, period of Disneyfication of freedom in the form of lifestyle. Ironically, with

²⁷ Carducci, V. (2012, February 1). Envisioning Real Utopias in Detroit. *Motown Review of Art*. In: <<http://motownreviewofart.blogspot.com>>

the rise of the techno-subculture in the end of the 1980s some people used to say “Berlin is the new Detroit”, the transformation of Detroit into a cheap lifestyle oasis might result in the sentence “Detroit is the new Berlin”. The fashion city cycle has then enclosed another city in transformation.

The success of the art of the commons approach is difficult to judge from the distance. Art projects like Detroit Beautification Project, Grand River Creative Corridor, Object Orange have actively used the city as a canvas. The Heidelberg project led by Tyree Guyton has created open-air art environments to revitalize urban communities (although recent developments hint at a closing down/commercialization of the project). But the idea of the commons can be pictured, it can be demonstrated, it can be artistically stimulated (not in pseudo-manifestations of communality such as relational aesthetics) and it can be located.

The “commons” can have a place and the commitment is not just limited in time (at least not in short time). As Carducci clarifies:

...the art of the common proposes alternatives for inhabiting and nurturing the urban landscape by using values other than those based on the logic of pure economic exchange, such as concern for environmental sustainability, social equity and respect for community as a site of human interaction ²⁸

Will Detroit be the ground for new social relations, based on the absence of scarcity of urban space, will artistic and civic agency reconstitute the city and

²⁸ *Ibid.*

create a eutopian environment? Will the “commons” find their image in successful projects that are realized and will the image of the “commons” become a utopian mind picture? The outcome is open, as the social experiment is ongoing. But the retopian approach to contemporary art (and politics) has the potential to reintroduce reality transcending political concepts that do not replicate the authoritarian cul de sacs of past utopias while at the same time reaffirm the catalyst function of utopian thinking. The options for Detroit (or as matter of fact any city abandoned by capitalism) are limited: either dystopia (in the form of a gentrification mixed with extreme levels inequality) or retopia.

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