

**TJ Demos**

University of California  
Santa Cruz, USA

## **IS ANOTHER WORLD POSSIBLE? THE POLITICS OF UTOPIA IN CONTEMPORARY ART EXHIBITIONS**

We live in a world where there is no alternative to the ruling politico-economic order—or so the reign of “capitalist realism” would have us think, a term that, for the late critic Mark Fisher, defines the world hegemony of the free market economy. Ever since the “New World Order” proclaimed by the chorus of world leaders after the fall of the USSR in the early 1990s, we have been led to believe that henceforth the united world of globalization would be one of liberal democracy and free market capitalism. Political economist Francis Fukuyama glimpsed the philosophical ramifications in 1989 when he wrote: “What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.”<sup>1</sup> The slogan of British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, “there is no

---

<sup>1</sup> Fukuyama, F. (Summer 1989). The End of History? *The National Interest*, 16, p. 3; see also by the same author (1992). *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: Free Press.



alternative,” would take on added significance in the post-socialist age, not only in that there would no longer be options to capitalism as such, but also in ostensibly necessitating the market reforms, cuts to social spending, and privatization that have defined neoliberalism ever since, and particularly following the 2007 financial crisis.<sup>2</sup> One additional consequence of the so-called post-historical era is what Susan Buck-Morss has called “the passing of mass utopia in East and West,” as there is no longer any need to think beyond the present system. Indeed, recent US elections in 2016 have shown capitalism’s triumphalist claims too have passed, and we now confront a cynical age where new modes of extreme wealth accumulation, driving a xenophobic and intolerant culture of resentment of popular struggles, accompanies illiberal, even increasingly authoritarian governance, as rightwing political movements gain ground internationally and democratic legitimacy exists as formal at best. Socialism, we’re reminded by rightwing ideologues, degenerated into totalitarianism, and has proved itself to be no more than modernity’s catastrophe, despite encouraging attempts to revive its political viability as well as reinvent the “idea of communism.”<sup>3</sup> Apparently there’s nothing more to do than let the free market run itself, for, as critics such as Jacques Rancière and Chantal Mouffe have pointed out (and importantly have contested), the system of post-political consensus necessitates only the technical attention of managers and experts for maintenance—and in times of crisis, of course, militarized police enforcement.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> See Harvey, D. (2005). *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>3</sup> Buck-Morss, S. (2000). *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. See also Mouffe, C. (2009). Politics and Artistic Practices in Post-Utopian Times. In Szewczyk, M. (ed.). *Meaning Liam Gillick*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. Of course, utopian thinking had already taken a beating in the 1970s and ‘80s by the neoliberal disciplining of the revolutionary hopes and energies of the 1960s, as explains Kristin Ross and Costas Douzinas. See Ross, K. (2002). *May ‘68 and its Afterlives*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 166-67 and Douzinas, C. and Žižek, S. (eds.) (2010). *The Idea of Communism*. London: Verso.

<sup>4</sup> See Mouffe, C. (2005). *On the Political*. London: Routledge; and Rancière, J. (2007). *On the Shores of Politics*. Liz Heron (trans.). London: Verso.

Against these developments, a diverse range of experimental and politically committed exhibition projects have proposed critical alternatives in the first decade of the twenty-first century to the triumphalist globalism following the fall of the Wall in the early 1990s—including the itinerant Utopia Station (2003-), organized by Hans Ulrich Obrist, Molly Nesbit, and Rirkrit Tiravanija; the Van Abbemuseum’s “Forms of Resistance” (2007), curated by Will Bradley, Phillip van den Bossche, and Charles Esche; and the 2009 Istanbul Biennial, organized by the Zagreb-based collective WHW (What, How and for Whom?<sup>5</sup>). Of course there have been additional exhibitions in recent years worth considering for their challenge to the West’s politics of neoliberalism, such as Catherine David’s critical engagement with globalization in Documenta 10, 1997, and her subsequent investigations of Middle East zones of conflict in “Contemporary Arab Representations”; or the arc of Okwui Enwezor’s projects, including Trade Routes (1997), The Short Century (2001), Documenta 11 (2002), and the Gwangju Biennial (2008), which have drawn on the postcolonial to destabilize the West’s legacy of imperialism.<sup>6</sup> But here I want to examine specifically how the endorsing of the utopian has operated in exhibitions that have transformed since the ‘90s into sites of research, experimental presentation, and the adoption of Leftist politics. This move in exhibition practice, at least during the early 2000s, may itself be indicative of a trend toward a form of curatorial utopianism, defined by bringing utopian thinking into the art institution in a desirous, perhaps paradoxical, attempt to escape that context’s grasp or transcend its control, as well as by attempting to transform political reality in a significant and

---

<sup>5</sup> The collective consists of curators Ivet Ćurlin, Ana Dević, Nataša Ilić, Sabina Sabolović, and designer Dejan Kršić.

<sup>6</sup> On the earlier precedents of exhibitions in 1989—Magiciens de la Terre, The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-war Britain, and the Havana Biennial—and their relation to art and culture of the Global South in the transition to the former West, see Sarat Maharaj’s presentation, “Small Change of the Universal,” at the 1<sup>st</sup> Former West Congress, 5-7 November, 2009, Ottone Utrecht (NL), online at:

<<http://www.formerwest.org/ResearchCongresses/1stFORMERWESTCongress/SaratMaharajSmallChangeoftheUniversal>>. Also worth considering are more experimental projects, such as Hickey, A. (2012). *A Guidebook of Alternative Nows*. Los Angeles: The Journal of Aesthetics & Protest.

immediate manner, to create alternatives in the here and now. Then again, such imaginative thinking is doubtlessly welcome in today's environment of cynicism and political fatigue.

Certainly the notion of utopia lends itself to the posing of alternatives to reality: Thomas Moore's original sixteenth-century conceptualization of a beautiful non-place implies the rejection of the present, which suggests a critical logic for theorists like Louis Marin, for whom, writing at a much later stage of historical development in the 1970s and 1980s, it works precisely against present political arrangements. As a negative shadow of reality, utopic practice criticizes society and its laws, and, for Marin, lashes back on the real world in initiating "the beginning of revolutionary practice."<sup>7</sup> Of course the turn to utopia in the early 2000s is by no means simple or uncontested, and many were opposed to it for legitimate reasons. Interviewed by curators of "Utopia Station," Rancière warned about "misguided utopian metaphysics," and Étienne Balibar explained that owing to its disastrous history "we need a vacation from utopia, while at the same time freeing the powers of the imagination."<sup>8</sup> According to Michael Hardt and Tony Negri, "One primary effect of globalization... is the creation of a common world, a world that, for better or worse, we all share, a world that has no 'outside'."<sup>9</sup> With such scepticism in mind, it is nonetheless worthwhile taking seriously—and critically—the recent mobilizations of utopia, and to study them in their singularity, for these projects insist on posing alternatives to the political status quo, even if each engagement does so in specific and complex ways. In approaching this material, one overarching question for me is the following: might the distancing from reality occasioned by utopian thinking represent a further instance of the postpolitical, even coming to parallel, by virtue of

---

<sup>7</sup> Marin, L. (1984). *Utopics: Spatial Play*. Robert A. Vollrath (trans.). NJ: Humanities Press, pp. 81–82.

<sup>8</sup> See Nesbit, M.; Obrist, H. U. and Tiravanija, R. What is a Station? In Bonami, F. (2003). *Dreams and Conflicts: The Dictatorship of the Viewer*. Venice, Italy: La Biennale di Venezia, 2003, pp. 355 and 375.

<sup>9</sup> Hardt, M. and Negri, T. (2009). *Commonwealth*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard, vii.

an unintended consequent, capitalism's own utopian imaginary? Or, conversely, might the commitment to the utopian represent a crucial and necessary counter-hegemonic political-aesthetic project—one that has also deeply informed radical social movements, such as those participating in the 2011 Arab Springs, the international Occupy formation, and the movement of the squares—in constructing the basis of real alternatives to neoliberalism and thus a challenge to its postpolitical degeneration?<sup>10</sup>

\*

“Forms of Resistance—Artists and the Desire for Social Change from 1871 to the Present” focused on various moments of Western modernity when revolutionary politics intertwined with radical artistic practice. Organized around key revolutionary flashpoints—the Paris Commune in 1871, the Russian Revolution in 1917, the Popular Front in the early 1930s, the May Revolts of 1968, and the fall of the Wall in 1989—it gathered examples of Leftist artistic engagements that corresponded to each moment, including the Arts and Crafts wallpaper of William Morris, the socialist textile designs of Liubov Popova, the Proun Room of El Lissitzky, the Workers' Club of Aleksandr Rodchenko, the posters of the Atelier Populaire from the events of May '68, and a mini-survey of post-'89 activist works and anti-corporate globalization interventions in the video-based “Disobedience Archive” curated by Marco Scotini.<sup>11</sup>

On the whole, the show was not explicitly concerned with the utopian, although that tendency entered prominently with certain inclusions, particularly the Soviet avant-

---

<sup>10</sup> See Mouffe (2005) [*op. cit.*].

<sup>11</sup> See <<http://www.disobediencearchive.com/>> Forms of Resistance thus follows an organizational method similar to Gerald Raunig's book (Raunig, G. (2007). *Art and Revolution: Transversal Activism in the Long Twentieth Century* Aileen Derieg (trans.). Cambridge, Mass.: Semiotext(e)), with chapters dedicated to the Paris Commune, Courbet, German “Activism” in the 1910s, the Situationists, Viennese Actionism in 1968, and post-9/11 interventions.

garde, redolent of the hopes of joining aesthetics and politics in the expression of a post-capitalist culture, one founded on revolutionary perceptual experience and subjective and collective participation. But by virtue of its breadth, the survey worked to highlight the significant differences between art at different historical junctures:<sup>12</sup> Morris' decorative objects looking back to pre-modern modes of communal production that resisted industrialized forms of exploitation, for instance, strongly contrasted the Soviet's futurist-oriented commitment to modernization and modernist functionality. As well, the optimistic political posters of May '68 differed significantly from the doomsday anti-Nazi photomontages of John Heartfield. Such diverse approaches offered significantly varied political affects from room to room—from the utopian to the critically desperate—proposing both a comparative methodology of art-historical investigation and an engaged, activist mode of contemporary politicization.

While the installation presented custom designed galleries in order to individualize the presentations, one setback was that the exhibition nonetheless tended to reinforce the museological dimensions of its show, in that the work lost some of its interactive dynamism, social engagement, and dialogue with the present. Ultimately more research exhibition than activist engagement, the project also included an important reader, *Art and Social Change*, to supplement the artistic presentation with radical offerings of important political and artistic texts covering the same period; yet while the reader will certainly be useful for future research, the visitor's experience of the work remained contained under the museum's roof, which existed in tension with many of the original intentions of the pieces to break down the division between art and life exemplified by the museum institution.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Hal Foster makes several related points in his review of *Forms of Resistance* in *Artforum* (January 2008), p. 272.

<sup>13</sup> See Bradley, W. and Esche, C. (eds.) (2007). *Art and Social Change: A Critical Reader*. London: Tate Publishing and Afterall Press.

That situation too characterized the Disobedience archive, which reflected on the art and politics of the post-‘89 context. Comprising an ongoing, multi-phase project, its diverse and constantly changing selection of videos presented instances of artistic activism surrounding events including the fall of the Berlin Wall, the financial collapse in Argentina in 2001, the ongoing conflict in Israel-Palestine, and the formation of anti-globalisation protests in post-9/11 America. In Eindhoven, the “rhizomatic” assemblage of videos, in the curator’s words, was built of fluctuating material in order to engender unexpected connections between engagements by artists, activists, film producers, philosophers and political groups, such as Dario Azzellini, Canal 6 de Julio, Guerrillavision, Huit Facettes, PILOT TV (Experimental Media for Feminist Trespass), Oliver Ressler, Dmitry Vilensky, Paolo Virno, and Peter Watkins. Presented in a large gallery on white tables and pedestals, forming a somewhat daunting labyrinth of time-based works, the sheer mass of material far surpassed the time allowance of the exhibition’s typical day visitor.

While there was clearly much valuable material presented, the framing of the archive had several weaknesses, beginning with its conceptualization. For Scotini, the project was meant to resist the temptation of “the reterritorialisation of the classic Left as a possible response to the advancing neo-capitalistic cultural barbarism,” by aiming instead “to provide an alternative model of thought and action.”<sup>14</sup> What matters “is not so much an ‘alliance’ between activist demands and artistic practices in order to achieve common goals,” we are told, but rather the “common space or a common base that is emerging,” wherein it is “impossible to draw a precise line between forces and signs, between language and labour, between intellectual production and political action.”<sup>15</sup> It is far from clear, however, what that means, although the intended rupture from party politics and union-based collective mobilization clearly adopts the lessons of Italian autonomists like Antonio Negri and

---

<sup>14</sup> See Marco Scotini, “Disobedience, an Ongoing Video Archive,” online at: <http://www.ravenrow.org/exhibition/irritatedmaterial/>

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

Paolo Virno. However, the danger remained that what Scotini termed “a polyfocal approach that is not immediately directed, channelled, and disciplined” would end up instead presenting itself as a directionless dispersion of diverse but unrelated positions, articulations, and historical and cultural references, which was not saved by the structureless installation. Nor was it clear in the end how the archive’s conceptual framing identified a new political configuration, or how its embrace of the abandonment of the classic Left escaped from a depoliticizing evacuation of political engagements with the state and its corporate masters—a still unresolved challenge for promoters of the ‘micropolitical’ and those who have retreated from governmental politics.<sup>16</sup>

\*

Utopia Station shared Scotini’s commitment to building a mutating research-exhibition over several years, one with a significantly expanded magnitude of possibilities, even while it dispensed with Disobedience’s and Forms of Resistance’s explicit radical political commitment. Utopia Station comprised various manifestations since its inauguration in 2003, including an expansive poster project in collaboration with roughly 150 artists disseminated by *e-flux*, various art exhibitions, and educational seminars and social gatherings in multiple cities, such as Paris, Venice, Frankfurt, Poughkeepsie, and Berlin. For the curators, these activities functioned without hierarchy of importance, as, for them, “there is no desire to formalize the Stations into an institution of any kind.”<sup>17</sup> In their catalogue essay for Venice—the clearest formulation of their project—the curators introduced the subject of utopia by referencing the well-known 1964 discussion between Frankfurt School philosophers Theodor Adorno and Ernst Bloch. Whereas for

---

<sup>16</sup> See Raunig, G. [*op. cit.*]; this issue was also discussed at the panel I moderated at the 2nd Former West Research Congress on “Horizons: Art and Political Imagination,” in Istanbul, 6 November 2010, with Gerald Raunig, Hito Steyerl, and Ernesto Laclau.

<sup>17</sup> Nesbit, M.; Obrist, H.U. and Tiravanija, R. (2003), “What is a Station? In Bonami [*op. cit.*], p. 330.



Adorno, utopian thinking means fundamentally to imagine “the transformation of the totality”<sup>18</sup>—for which he had in mind social, political, and economic realities as an integrated system—for Bloch, utopia issues from the realization, as Brecht put it, that “Something’s missing.”<sup>19</sup> What is this something? To find out, the curators met with various philosophers—among them Rancière, Immanuel Wallerstein, and Édouard Glissant—to discuss the topic, which typifies the Station’s interrogative approach to utopia.

Whereas Rancière stressed the importance of dissensus, Wallerstein, the need to build non-hierarchical, decentralized non-profit institutions, and Glissant, the “poetic” heart of utopia, the curators “use utopia as a catalyst, a concept so much useful as fuel” and “leave the complete definition of utopia to others.”<sup>20</sup> And so Utopia Station’s contribution to the 2003 Venice Biennial followed the same logic of non-partisan curatorial promotion. Situated in the final room of the Arsenale and on the lawn outside, the Venice instalment presented the work of sixty artists, architects and groups, along with the poster project. A large plywood structure created a series of small rooms containing installations and video screenings, and an assembly of circular benches and tables placed in front of a large platform equipped the space with a performance-meeting-lecture area, the Station completed by a program of performances, concerts, lectures, readings, film programs, and parties. Among the various pieces were Atelier van Lieshout’s *Total Faecal Solution, The Technocrat*, 2003, a series of biomorphic toilets equipped with video surveillance, which proposed to transform human waste into biogas and purified drinking water over a 21-day cycle, thereby joining ecological recycling, scatological systems, and voyeuristic control; and Elmgreen & Dragset’s *U-T-O-P-I-A* (2003), a number of

---

<sup>18</sup> Adorno cited in *Ibid.*, p. 327. The reference is to Bloch, E. and Adorno, T. W. (1964). *Something’s Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing*. In Ernst Bloch. *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature*. Jack Zipes and Frank Meckleburg (trans.). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988, pp. 1-17.

<sup>19</sup> Bloch cited in Nesbit, Obrist, and Tiravanija. *What is a Station?* In Bonami [*op. cit.*], p. 327.

<sup>20</sup> Nesbit, Obrist, and Tiravanija. *What is a Station?* In Bonami [*op. cit.*], p. 333.

sculptural blocks inscribed with letters out of which two chimps, during the opening weekend, tried to form the word ‘utopia’ (their failure to do so elicited the concept’s elusive nature). In addition, Superflex served bottles of Guaraná Power, a soft drink they produced in collaboration with Brazilian farmers, encouraging the reclaiming of local resources from multinational corporations’ monopoly on raw materials, including guaraná seeds, in the Amazon.

Any one of the many works in Venice could be considered at length for the way it specifically engaged utopia, and considering these few examples it is clear that no shared program—aesthetically, politically, conceptually—unified the Station’s inclusions, resulting in what some (including myself) have seen as a chaotic presentation.<sup>21</sup> Yet this elusiveness was also the point; for the curators, utopia necessarily “resists capture and summary as a single image,” and suggests “the image of open possibility.”<sup>22</sup> While the Station’s gatherings and discursive basis recalls past exhibition projects, such as the geographically dispersed, discursive “platforms” of Documenta 11, its manifestation pushed the transformative dynamism and non-finite flexibility to the extreme. In this regard, the curators’ version of utopia as “open possibility” recalls as well the development of relational aesthetics during the ‘90s, which similarly emphasized the “space of human relations” as a “social interstice” within the capitalist economic field, and it is not surprising that several of its key participants and organizers—Tiravanija, Gillick, Huyghe, Gonzalez-Foerster—were affiliated with that earlier formation.<sup>23</sup> More theoretically, Utopia Station’s peripatetic machine of social connectivity and

---

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Jürgensen, J.D. 50th Venice Biennale. In *Frieze* 77 (September 2003): “There is a danger that the overload becomes just too much, causing a communication breakdown and thus jeopardizing the social relations that it is trying to facilitate. But then again, this simultaneous construction and wrecking might be the point.” This report accords with my own experience visiting the Station in October of 2005.

<sup>22</sup> Nesbit, Obrist, and Tiravanija. What is a Station? In Bonami [*op. cit.*], p. 334 (my italics).

<sup>23</sup> Bourriaud, N. (2004, orig. publ. 1998). *Relational Aesthetics*. Paris: Les presses du reel, p. 16.

knowledge production proposes a Deleuzian nomadology,<sup>24</sup> one with shades of Hardt and Negri's elaboration of the multitude mixed in—but notably without these philosophers' explicit political ovations, as exemplified in the famous last line of *Empire* where the authors' confessed their "irrepressible lightness and joy of being communist."<sup>25</sup> And here the Station's risk becomes manifold: by resisting conceptual definition in an effort to defy ideological dogmatism, the project courted a paradoxical convergence between its pledge to flexibility and capitalism's post-industrial directions, defined similarly by the indeterminacy of work and life, creative cooperation and individual freedom (itself a lasting critique of relational aesthetics, where indeterminacy "inverts [its] anti-capitalist impulse," as Stewart Martin has argued<sup>26</sup>).

But before dismissing Utopia Station, though, one should consider what might be taken as its most radical move: to exit the cosy familiarity of its art world framework and join the anti-capitalist left at the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre in January 2005. Operating under the slogan "Another World is Possible"—a longstanding mantra of the anti-corporate globalization movement—the WSF has served over recent years as a platform for international members of civil society, including the radical voices of Arundhati Roy, Mustapha Bargouti, Shirin Ebadi, and Gilberto Gil, and a multitude of environmentalists, human rights advocates, labour organizers, and antiwar activists, all allied in opposition to neoliberalism and in support of an

---

<sup>24</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari were explicit politically too, and they write: "to say the revolution is itself utopia of immanence is not to say that it is a dream, something that is not realized or that is only realized by betraying itself. On the contrary, it is to posit revolution as plane of immanence, infinite movement and absolute survey, but to the extent that these features connect up with what is real here and now in the struggle against capitalism, relaunching new struggles whenever the earlier one is betrayed." Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1994). *What is Philosophy?* London: Verso, p. 100.

<sup>25</sup> Hardt, M. and Negri, A. (2000). *Empire*. Cambridge: Harvard, p. 413. See Harren, N. (2007). *Utopia Station: Manufacturing the Multitude. Part, 12*, at:

<<http://web.gc.cuny.edu/dept/arthi/part/>>

<sup>26</sup> See Martin, S. Being Liam Gillick. In:

<[http://www.metamute.org/en/content/being\\_liam\\_gillick](http://www.metamute.org/en/content/being_liam_gillick)>; and Stewart, M (2007). Critique of Relational Aesthetics. *Third Text* 21, no. 4, pp. 369-386.

equitable distribution of wealth, resources, and political participation worldwide.<sup>27</sup> The 2005 meeting in Porto Alegre was unique in that the Forum placed “the role of culture” in emancipatory politics on its agenda. Utopia Station/Porto Alegre would be “a Station without Walls,” diffused and informal, comprising several appearances and interventions, including six ninety-minute video programs broadcast on late-night TV (with works such as Philippe Parreno’s *The Boy from Mars*, 2003; Allan Sekula’s *Tsukiji*, 2002; Pierre Huyghe’s *Streamside Day Follies*; and Paul Chan’s *Now Promise, Now Threat*, 2005); a bi-lingual radio show, hosted by experimental musician Arto Lindsay, on Radio Ipanema; and a presentation of the Utopia Station poster project on the city’s walls.<sup>28</sup>

The Station’s Porto Alegre edition was significant in that it brought experimental artistic practice to the centre of the global justice movement, a place where visual presentations are commonly politically instrumentalized and often “folkloric or just plain stiff,” as curator Molly Nesbit reportedly said of the offerings at such gatherings, probably referring to the political posters, ad hoc installations, and home-made media interventions of participants.<sup>29</sup> In this regard, the Station attempted to enact what Rancière terms a “rupture” in the distribution of the sensible—meaning, as the curators summarized it, “the inevitable relation between the arts and the rest of social activity... that together distribute value and give hierarchy, that govern,

---

<sup>27</sup> The World Social Forum Charter of Principles (2002) explains: “the World Social Forum is an open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences and interlinking for effective action, by groups and movements of civil society that are opposed to neoliberalism and to domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism, and are committed to building a planetary society directed towards fruitful relationships among Humankind and between it and the Earth.”

<[http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/main.php?id\\_menu=4&cd\\_language=2](http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/main.php?id_menu=4&cd_language=2)>

<sup>28</sup> E-flux announcement, 01/27/05, in: <<http://www.e-flux.com/shows/view/1765>>, and the “Utopia Station—Letter to Artists.” (4 December, 2004). Thanks to Molly Nesbit for discussing the Station with me and for providing records of its Porto Alegre edition.

<sup>29</sup> Reported in Lee, P. M. (April, 2006). The revolution may be televised: Pamela M. Lee on the World Social Forum. *Artforum*. In

<[http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m0268/is\\_8\\_44/ai\\_n18764234/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0268/is_8_44/ai_n18764234/)>

[and] that both materially and conceptually establish their politics.”<sup>30</sup> By disrupting the political orthodoxy of ideological positions and their visual manifestations in favour of open-ended speculative process and collective creativity, the Station meant to destabilize the politically directed representations of the Forum. But what did it mean to insert Matthew Barney’s *De Lama Lâmina*, 2004, or Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla, *Returning a Sound*, 2004, on late-night Brazilian TV during the Forum, the latter characterized by panels dedicated to “Organic Agriculture, Biodiversity and Climate Change” and “Speak-out on Fight for U.N. Treaty on Right to Water”? With little trace of the Station’s presence registered in the art media and political press, it is impossible to say, which is one cost of operating outside of the familiar channels of artistic dissemination.

Ironically, the Station’s commitment to “open possibility” mirrored the WSF’s own definition as an “open meeting space,” one constitutionally forbidden by its charter from making shared political declarations, for which the Forum has been criticized.<sup>31</sup> As Heikki Patomäki and Teivo Teivainen, of the Network Institute for Global Democratization based in Finland, wrote of the 2005 meeting: “is it possible to do anything else than merely organise a pluralist space for meetings, discussions and festivities? Can transnational civil society organisations and movements accomplish anything efficacious to bring about ‘another world’?”<sup>32</sup> These questions should also be addressed to Utopia Station. One wonders, in other words, whether the Station’s

---

<sup>30</sup> Rancière and his book *Le partage du sensible* is cited in Nesbit, Obrist, and Tiravanija. What is a Station? In Bonami [*op. cit.*], p. 330.

<sup>31</sup> According to the WSF Charter of Principles: “The participants in the Forum shall not be called on to take decisions as a body, whether by vote or acclamation, on declarations or proposals for action that would commit all, or the majority, of them and that propose to be taken as establishing positions of the Forum as a body.”

<sup>32</sup> Patomäki, H. and Teivainen, T. (March 20, 2005). The Post-Porto Alegre World Social Forum: An Open Space or a Movement of Movements? In

<[http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/dinamic.php?pagina=bal\\_teivo\\_fsm2005\\_in](http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/dinamic.php?pagina=bal_teivo_fsm2005_in)>

For further criticism, see: Callinicos, A. and Nineham, C. (March 20, 2005). Critical Reflection on the Fifth World Social Forum. In

<[http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/dinamic.php?pagina=bl\\_Callinicos\\_vfsm\\_i](http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/dinamic.php?pagina=bl_Callinicos_vfsm_i)>; and Wainwright, H. (February 20, 2005). WSF on Trial. In

<[http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/dinamic.php?pagina=wsf\\_trial](http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/dinamic.php?pagina=wsf_trial)>

implicit challenge to activist visual culture resulted in merely an art world gesture, drawing attention to its own representational complexity, aesthetic play, and experimental form, but defusing the pointed messages of the Forum's own politicization of aesthetics. The Station's very openness, directed against political orthodoxy and institutionalized positions, risked diluting the directed, pragmatic energies of the Forum, especially given the Station's decision not to organize any collaborative intersections between itself and the Forum's events. As confirmed by some of the participants, Utopia Station was ultimately lost in the Forum's overwhelming environment, with its Woodstock-like carnival of meetings, parties, and panels (often in Portuguese without adequate translation).<sup>33</sup> With little reciprocal interest by Forum-goers in the presentations of Station artists, a frustration resulted regarding the perceived alienation of art from politics amidst the Station's desires for renewed synergy. Still, Utopia Station deserves credit for attempting to link its micropolitical artistic projects to broader social and political movements, even if the results may have been ultimately invisible and disappointing.

\*

Utopia Station's non-committal position appears as the converse of the 2009 Istanbul Biennial, which put utopia to task politically from an explicitly articulated leftist curatorial position. It did so by drawing on Brecht's "belief in the utopian potential and [the] open political engagement of art" as inspiration for the show. WHW contended that if art's utopian political potential seems "dated, historically irrelevant, in dissonance with this time of the crumbling of the institutional Left and the rise of neoliberal hegemony," then this is "symptomatic" of the fact that

---

<sup>33</sup> Anton Vidokle in conversation with the author, 17 September, 2010. The late Allan Sekula explained to me that "The whole affair was for me something more akin to unplanned research for a not-very-flattering novel about the follies of the art world" (email message, 26 September, 2010). Others, such as Immanuel Wallerstein, writes that he dedicated his time in Porto Alegre to the Forum, rather than spent it with Utopia Station, a project he otherwise supports (email message, 19 September, 2010).

“something has gone wrong with contemporary society, and with the role of art within it.”<sup>34</sup> But here, this “something” was specified, as WHW titled its biennial after Brecht’s devastating *Threepenny Opera* finale, “What Keeps Mankind Alive?”, whose refrain answers the blunt question in the harshest of terms—“The fact that millions are daily tortured, stifled, punished, silenced, oppressed.”<sup>35</sup> That contention—foretelling Germany’s dark future at the time of its writing in 1928—was adopted by WHW as an analogy for our present, in the grip of global changes with disastrous effects including the growing inequality of wealth and poverty, political corruption, gender oppression, and increasing totalitarian domination worldwide (indeed, from today’s perspective it’s doubtful that an exhibition like this could take place in current Istanbul, given its repressive political climate). Against our dystopian present, the curators turned Brecht’s call to politicize art into a rallying call in their effort to re-situate aesthetics in renewed solidarity with socialist modernity. As they contended in their catalogue essay, “communism,” with its “basic values” of “social equality, solidarity, [and] social justice,” remains unique as an emancipatory politics capable of challenging the global hegemony of neoliberalism, which, in an environment of increasing political authoritarianism and military domination is leading, they claim, toward fascist tendencies.

Reanimating communism is a risky venture—what of the catastrophic totalitarianism of its lived experience?—and raising the spectre of fascism may be potentially hyperbolic, if not irresponsible, especially if it cheapens our appreciation for the uniqueness of its mid-twentieth century formation. Yet WHW articulated its goals guardedly, seeking to avoid a nostalgic return to the past in their effort to

---

<sup>34</sup> What, How and for Whom / WHW (May 21, 2009). *What Keeps Mankind Alive?* *e-flux announcement*, at: <<http://www.e-flux.com/shows/view/6800>>

<sup>35</sup> The full refrain, reprinted in the catalogue, runs as follows: “What keeps mankind alive? The fact that millions are daily tortured, stifled, punished, silenced, oppressed. Mankind can keep alive, thanks to its brilliance in keeping its humanity repressed. For once, you must try not to shirk the facts: Mankind is kept alive by bestial acts.” WHW (ed.) (2009). *11th International Istanbul Biennial: What Keeps Mankind Alive? The Texts*. Istanbul: Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts, p. 477.



extract the current potential of socialism; and they defined fascism today as any system that promotes extreme economic disparity, political disenfranchisement, unjust warfare, and environmental destruction (in fact such conditions appear to be growing still, and the term fascism, not surprisingly, continues to be invoked in political discourse). While WHW's proposals may not ultimately satisfy the most contrary of critics, they do warrant serious consideration. Whereas all analogies, one could argue, are monstrous—because they eliminate historical singularity in creating superficial continuities—such comparisons may nevertheless be valuable, for on a strategic level they grant foresight and raise warnings of disastrous potential futures, warnings from the past capable of inspiring the energies of resistance now. In addition, historical juxtapositions allow instructive differences as well as useful parallels to emerge: Brecht's time, as WHW acknowledges, was one of socialist struggle clearly posed against a mounting German National Socialism, whereas today's post-socialist era leaves sympathizers without existing Leftist options to contest the intensification of neoliberalism, even while recent waves of financial crisis recalls the disastrous years after the 1929 economic collapse—hence the need to rejuvenate a project of emancipatory politics.

Set in three post-industrial buildings in Istanbul's nineteenth-century European Beyoğlu district, the biennial's inclusions focused largely on practices from the immediate region of Eastern Europe and the Middle East, exemplifying areas of post-socialism and postcolonialism now enthralled to so-called free-market democracy. Presenting work by a high proportion of lesser-known and underrepresented artists (only 22 of the show's 70 artists are represented by commercial galleries, we learned from the show's publicized statistics), the exhibition's spaces were visually united by constructivist-red wall texts and signage. The biennial, however, was not so much a matter of forcing Brechtian aesthetics onto contemporary art, although certainly the use of defamiliarization, reflexive theatricality, and pedagogical experimentation—Brecht's signature devices—surely appeared to inspire certain of the selected works, as did the playwright's positioning



of art as a means of popular education and political agitation. Rather, WHW made selections that dramatized the erosion of liberal democracy and offered a political imagination that was inventive rather than doctrinaire. Advancing the curators' intention to politicize aesthetics, the biennial included numerous historical works that retrieved former engagements with anti-capitalist and socialist art, such as Mohammed Ossama's documentary film *Step by Step*, 1977, portraying nation-building in socialist Syria; Uzbekistani artist Vyacheslav Akhunov's reuse of socialist propaganda imagery in his cycle of collages, *Leninania*, 1977-82; and Turkish artist Yüksel Arslan's allegorical paintings from his 1973-74 series *Capital*. Such pieces, oscillating between '70s socialist realism and post-constructivist agit-prop, granted the show historical depth, operating much like the archive of revolutionary practices in "Forms of Resistance," but here more regionally and historically focused. Revealing the earlier hopes for a socialist future now largely forgotten, the display reanimated an alien prehistory to our own environment of depoliticized consensus, but all the more inspiring as a result.

That depoliticization was most powerfully—and depressingly—captured in Polish artist Artur Żmijewski's multi-channel video installation, *Democracies*, 2009, which presents a row of some 20 flat-screened monitors depicting various street rallies and public protests that had occurred recently across Europe, including the funeral of Austrian right-wing leader Jörg Haider, an Irish Loyalist march in Belfast, and Palestinian demonstrations against the Israeli occupation along with Israeli counter-protests against the Palestinians. Playing simultaneously without commentary, the cacophonous display of videos reveals the ominous transformation of public space into an arena of mob spectacle, one of fanatical nationalism, ethnic and religious exclusionism, and neo-fascist intolerance—precisely the kinds of impassioned and collective acting-out that Mouffe's theory envisages as becoming characteristic of the post-political environment today.

WHW also called on art to invent a socialist aesthetic that would “set pleasure free” so that society can regain the “revolutionary role of enjoyment,” rather than submit to the mechanisms of social regulation and repressive control, suggesting an important attempt to join utopian imaginings to political desire and aesthetic affect.<sup>36</sup> Coming closest to answering this imperative was the St. Petersburg-based artistic and political collective Chto delat/What is to be Done?, whose *Songspielen* presented a series of videos documenting and re-enacting the last days of Gorbachev’s USSR under Perestroika. Video footage of energized street discussions, a form of spontaneous grassroots socialist democracy, corresponded to the group’s graphic timeline of political history ending with the Soviet Union’s dissolution, while another of the installation’s videos, a kind of contemporary *Lehrstück*, showcased an allegory of the descent of post-communist Russia into the hands of greedy entrepreneurs, as the wall text posed the question “what might have been?”—which in the present context reads as one apt retort to the diktat that “there is no alternative.” Alluding to the potential of a reconstructed socialism—one of democratic participation, economic equality, and social justice—that was lost in the fragile last days of the USSR, Chto Delat’s project inspires political desires to imagine a future beyond the horizon of the capitalist-realist present.<sup>37</sup>

While the exact relation of many of its contemporary inclusions to socialist utopia was often tenuous, the curators argued “that a just world order and distribution of economic goods and services is viable and absolutely vital—and that communism is still the only name for that desirable project,” making its position clear, even if all questions were not answered.<sup>38</sup> And while the biennial could have integrated a greater awareness of actually-lived communism’s history of oppression into its

---

<sup>36</sup> What, How and for Whom / WHW (2009). *What Keeps Mankind Alive? e-flux announcement*. [op. cit.].

<sup>37</sup> Chto Delat was also included in the “Disobedience Archive” at “Forms of Resistance,” although their presentation at Istanbul was significantly larger in the context of the expansive biennial.

<sup>38</sup> WHW (ed.) (2009) [op. cit.], p. 101.

program, in order to advance its attempted re-invention with greater credibility, WHW's was an ambitious paradigm-shifting agenda, moving away from the neoliberal consensus in the former-Soviet bloc countries and in the Middle East. Nonetheless, critics took WHW to task for playing along with the Istanbul Biennial institution and its corporate sponsors (particularly the industrial conglomerate Koc Holding), ostensibly rendering the curators' radical rhetoric hollow, if not hypocritical. Pointing out that the biennial would run during Istanbul's hosting of the annual meeting of the IMF and World Bank, yet was doing nothing about it, Resistanbul, a formation of several leftist activist groups involved in the planned protests, sarcastically asked "What [does] enthusiastically clapping [after] the speeches of the CEO of Koc Holding and the Minister of Culture [mean], right after shouting out 'every bourgeois is a criminal'" —as WHW quoted Brecht during the biennial's opening—"if not a symptom of cynicism?"<sup>39</sup> In an *Afterall* discussion of the biennial, editor Pablo Lafuente added additional charges, namely that "The exhibition was—in terms of its display, of its mechanisms of discourse production and distribution and its relation to funding and supporting institutions, private and public—business as usual," which, in his view, "allows Resistanbul to dismiss it easily, as it's not apparent how this format may contribute to changing anything."<sup>40</sup>

However, even though the exhibition was indeed conventional in format (particularly compared with Utopia Station's experimental approach) in that it presented objects, installations, and videos in post-industrial spaces according to a standard art gallery display, and was also instrumentalized by corporations for

---

<sup>39</sup> Posted September 21, 2009, on Brian Holmes' weblog, "Continental Drift: the other side of neoliberal globalization". In <<http://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2009/09/01/istanbul-biennial/>> They continue: "13.000 robbers under the name of the IMF and the WB will be in Istanbul on 6-7 October... the streets of Istanbul will be shut down for them. Let the carnival of our resistance be their nightmare!" For further criticism, see Goodfield, E., Harutyunyan, A. and Ozgun, A. (2011). Spectacle and Counter-Spectacle: The Political Economy of the 2009 Istanbul Biennial. *Rethinking Marxism. A Journal of Economics, Culture & Society*. 23: 4, pp. 478-495.

<sup>40</sup> Lafuente, P., Muhle, M. and Day, P. (December 2009). The 11th Istanbul Biennial. *Afterall*. In: <<http://www.afterall.org/online/istanbul.biennial>>

cultural capital (typical of most contemporary biennials today), the above criticisms strike me as problematically determinist and facile—as if sponsorship automatically overrides an exhibition’s content, as if modernist installations cannot yield critical engagements today. In fact, WHW entered the fray aware of the risks, writing explicitly about how mega-exhibitions subject art to “cultural tourism” and serve as vehicles of self-promotion for cities in a globalised world, yet they nevertheless tried to “functionalize” the biennial as a revolutionary form, precisely to counter the reduction of art to global spectacle and crass entertainment.<sup>41</sup> And their exhibition, in my view, did so quite compellingly. In this regard I would agree with those such as Brian Holmes who responded to Resistanbul’s critique by arguing that the counter-globalization movement should enter and change institutions, not merely criticize and ignore them. To form strategic alliances with projects such as WHW’s would diversify activists’ social base, expand the sites of its desired political transformations, and connect aesthetic practices to pressing social concerns on a local, regional, and international scale.<sup>42</sup>

In fact, WHW’s biennial parallels recent developments in Europe geared toward rethinking the political possibilities beyond capitalism. While it is impossible to identify all such formations, the biennial brings to mind, for me, not only Chto Delat’s wider political activities in St. Petersburg, but also educational initiatives such as the EIPCP Transform project in Austria that investigates art’s relation to radical politics and emancipatory policies and institutions, and the series of public discussions “On The Idea of Communism” led by Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou at

---

<sup>41</sup> See WHW’s statement in the Istanbul Biennial catalogue, where they write: “Is it possible, instead, to follow Brecht as a kind of (red) thread that leads the way in a search for a form and format for the exhibition, which would be, so to speak, ‘beyond looking,’ and could transform a viewer into a more productive participant—even accomplice?” In:

<[http://www.iksv.org/bienal11/icsayfa\\_en.asp?cid=6&k1=content&k2=conceptual](http://www.iksv.org/bienal11/icsayfa_en.asp?cid=6&k1=content&k2=conceptual)>

<sup>42</sup> Brian Holmes: “For that we need many events like What Keeps Mankind Alive, better ones, stronger ones, more deeply connected to active social forces which cannot only be protesters but must go much further into the whole cultural, professional and class structure of the contemporary societies.”

<<http://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2009/09/01/istanbul-biennial/>>

London's Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities and Berlin's Volksbühne during 2009-10. The latter included philosophers such as Jean-Luc Nancy, Toni Negri, Jacques Rancière, and Terry Eagleton, who have been involved in rethinking “the question of what could be today a positive meaning of the word ‘Communism’,” twenty years after the fall of socialist regimes, that is, in defiance of the notion that “society organised above all around the rules of competition and maximum profit-making [is] really the only option left nowadays,” as conference organizers put it.<sup>43</sup> The question for WHW is how it could have done more to connect its biennial with social movements beyond the art world, expanding the ambition of their project and the scope of its political and aesthetic aims and dissemination—something about which they could have learned from the ambitions and mistakes of Utopia Station/Porto Alegre.

\*

Rather than conclude by arguing for or against any one of the models considered above, in my view more discussion is needed to assess the strengths and weaknesses of such initiatives. All three projects, as we have seen, creatively challenged the imprisonment of aesthetic and political imagination by the enforced conviction that “there is no alternative” to present reality; what is needed are more, even stronger engagements. To review the lessons, it appears that one risk of curating the utopian is to end up in the non-place of its institutional and discursive invisibility (as in the case of Utopia Station/Porto Alegre)—but that is not to say that such activity is inconsequential, only unreported. Conversely, to bring the utopian into a dominant institutional location courts charges of complicity that may polarize stakeholders who might otherwise form political alliances. Perhaps owing to its very flexibility, Utopia Station held the promise of building bridges to independent voices and

---

<sup>43</sup> See “On the Idea of Communism,” the Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities, University of London, March, 2009, and at the Volksbühne in Berlin during June 2010, both organized by Slavoj Žižek. Also, see Badiou, A. (2010). *The Communist Hypothesis*. London: Verso.

disparate social movements, creating political solidarities beyond clearly delineated sectarian positions—even if that promise was not fully realized or articulated. Conversely, the politically entrenched Istanbul Biennial, and the militant Disobedience archive may have drawn lines that exclude the non-committed, narrowing its range of supporters to the already ideologically sympathetic. Then again, desperate times call for desperate measures, and here declarations of Leftist solidarity defy the post-political flexibility that mirrors third-way consensus and non-agonistic pluralist agendas. In this regard, the Istanbul Biennial represents a compelling counter-hegemonic proposal that does not merely offer a platform for thinking beyond the horizon (beyond freedom without responsibility, and speculative process without commitment), but does so with a clear political alternative, venturing a real rupture in the system of capitalism, even if its site of presentation is deeply contradictory—but where today is not?

## References

Badiou, A. (2010). *The Communist Hypothesis*. London: Verso.

Bloch, E. and Adorno, T. W. (1964). Something's Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing. In Ernst Bloch. *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature*. Jack Zipes and Frank Meckleburg (trans.). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988, pp. 1-17.

Bradley, W. and Esche, C. (eds.) (2007). *Art and Social Change: A Critical Reader*. London: Tate Publishing and Afterall Press.

Buck-Morss, S. (2000). *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1994). *What is Philosophy?* London: Verso.

Douzinas, C. and Žižek, S. (eds.) (2010). *The Idea of Communism*. London: Verso.

Fukuyama, F. (Summer 1989). The End of History? *The National Interest*, 16.

Fukuyama, F. (1992). *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: Free Press.

Hardt, M. and Negri, A. (2000). *Empire*. Cambridge: Harvard.

Hardt, M. and Negri, T. (2009). *Commonwealth*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard.

Harvey, D. (2005). *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hickey, A. (2012). *A Guidebook of Alternative Nows*. Los Angeles: The Journal of Aesthetics & Protest.

Marin, L. (1984). *Utopics: Spatial Play*. Robert A. Vollrath (trans.). NJ: Humanities Press

Mouffe, C. (2005). *On the Political*. London: Routledge.

Mouffe, C. (2009). Politics and Artistic Practices in Post-Utopian Times. In Szewczyk, M. (ed.). *Meaning Liam Gillick*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Nesbit, M.; Obrist, H. U. and Tiravanija, R. What is a Station? In Bonami, F. (2003). *Dreams and Conflicts: The Dictatorship of the Viewer*. Venice, Italy: La Biennale di Venezia, 2003.

Rancière, J. (2007). *On the Shores of Politics*. Liz Heron (trans.). London: Verso.

Raunig, G. (2007). *Art and Revolution: Transversal Activism in the Long Twentieth Century* Aileen Derieg (trans.). Cambridge, Mass.: Semiotext(e).

Ross, K. (2002). *May '68 and its Afterlives*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

WHW (ed.) (2009). *11<sup>th</sup> International Istanbul Biennial: What Keeps Mankind Alive? The Texts*. Istanbul: Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts.