



Subversive Performance in the Age of Human Capital

Pil and Galia Kollektiv

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Pil Kollektiv
Royal College of Art
London, UK

Galia Kollektiv
University of the Arts
London, UK

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Dating at least back to the avant-garde, the demand for increasing equality has generated several models for the production and consumption of art. For several strands of modernism, a greater democratic reach was at the heart of the aesthetic pursuit of the artist, or, even more radically, an apotheosis that would supersede art as a differentiated human activity altogether. This demand reaches its apex in Joseph Beuys' declaration that "everyone is an artist". More recently, the equation of art and democracy has been disputed by a range of artists for whom the term has become an empty signifier, mobilised to assert legitimacy but never fulfilled.¹ Against the backdrop of rising anti-democratic sentiment and political organising, it seems more urgent than ever to ask what becomes of this demand today. A general disillusionment with party politics has spawned much writing about populism, but this discourse has been prevalent across discussions of authoritarian regimes in places like Poland and Turkey, as much as the democratic movements taking power in Chile and Colombia. As neo-reactionaries ask us to abandon liberal democracy in favour of a CEO-style monarch, it is worth asking what we mean by democracy today and what this means for artists who have inherited the vanguardist paradigm of art as a form of emancipation.

¹ Anthony Gardner provides a good account of this type of critical practice in the post-socialist context in: Gardner, Anthony. *Politically Unbecoming: Postsocialist Art against Democracy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2015.

If art is to become democratic, must everybody become an artist, as suggested by Raoul Vaneigem?² Does everyone need to participate in art, or buy it? Should everyone be able to? And once we have established these or other goals, would a constant revolutionary drive be necessary to keep them vital and relevant or will they just precipitate the end of art? Must utopia be deferred? In many ways, the democratisation of artistic production and the transformation of everyday life into creative work has already happened in the post-Fordist labour market, as Paolo Virno and the Italian post-Autonomists have claimed. Instead of repetitive, alienated manual labour, interrupted only by its inverse, consumption or leisure, work today relies on what Virno calls virtuosity—a specific performance of “intellectual labour”.³ As Boltanski and Chiapello’s *New Spirit of Capitalism* has shown, artistic critique has been instrumentalised by this re-organisation of work within late capitalism.⁴ Any attempt to rethink the parameters of a democratic art practice thus necessitates a re-evaluation of what critique art might continue to offer that is not immanent in this ironic realisation of the avant-garde dream of uniting everyday life and creativity for all. Critique’s primary mode of operation within contemporary art, exposing that which is concealed within culture to reveal the power structures that determine it, relies on a kind of ironic gap, a hierarchy of knowledge that needs to be eliminated between how things are and how they appear. What happens, then, when this gap is closed, when we all share the underlying assumptions of critique? The drive to democratise art has historically served as a critique of work and leisure divides outside the realm of art. How does it function in light of the new economy of the creative industry?

These were the questions that prompted us to investigate art’s relationship to the political theory of democracy. The democratic horizon that we address in this book extends beyond the institutions of liberal democracy that define the current system of governance in the West. Democracy is taken here to mean something both simpler and more elusive: a universal

² Vaneigem, Raoul. “Creativity, Spontaneity and Poetry”. In *The Revolution of Everyday Life*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. London: Rebel Press, 1994, 190–203.

³ Virno, Paolo. “Virtuosity and Revolution: The Political Theory of Exodus”. In *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, edited by Virno, Paolo and Hardt, Michael. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996, 188–208.

⁴ Boltanski, Luc and Chiapello, Ève. *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. Translated by Gregory Elliott. London: Verso, 2007, 346.

law of equality. This is not merely the limited equality available under the very unequal terms of a free market economy, nor is it the unending act of juggling the different needs and rights of the diverse identity groups that make up society. We make an important distinction between the universal principle of democracy and the universalism invoked by liberal humanist tradition. Crucially, this ground is social, defined by the relationship between individuals rather than inherent to them. By contrast, the liberal humanism that inflects current articulations of democratic politics proposes as its ground the essence of each individual, a talent, personality or voice that is unique to each and that is brought into the social sphere through the liberal institutions of debate, negotiation and persuasion. Equality, in this liberal formulation, is not a given and necessary ground, but something we might aspire to, a mechanism put in place to enable the co-existence of difference. This liberal concept of equality functions as a political theology, a metaphysical structure that underpins the social but is not included within it. As a consequence, society is defined by what is outside of it and cannot be touched by it; the human essence generates society without being contained by the social system.

Supporters of the liberal democratic order often claim that a commitment to the former version of equality would reduce the plurality of forms of life, opinions, discourses and ethical systems that can be found in the world to a bare minimum, that instead of allowing potential to be nurtured and realised, it would enforce an impoverished form of sameness on all. They contend that the human world is too chaotic and unpredictable to be equal, and that forms of difference emerge spontaneously out of a chance arrangement of possibilities. But we would like to argue that we must invert this equation. We hope to show that those things that are supposedly found ‘in the world’, outside of or before human understanding, culture and the framing mechanism of civilisation are in themselves cultural constructs, the by-products of a liberal democratic narrative. The state of the world as a chaotic plurality that is ‘falsified’ or reduced by a demand for equality is, we believe, one of the important myths of liberal democracy, standing in direct contradiction to a different ideal of equality of which only traces can be found in the current democratic order. The tradition that sustains our current system of liberal democracy is founded on the inherently contradictory demands of equality and freedom, a paradox that political theorists from Alexis de

Tocqueville to Carl Schmitt predicted would result in its failure.⁵ Moreover, its political force relies on the sense of urgency that accompanies revolution. A stable democracy is therefore an unattainable romantic ideal, and, for post-foundationalist writers like Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, represents the end of the political.⁶

Transposed to art, this problematises the role of the artist and the way art functions within society and the market. In seeing art as a teleological process rather than a procedure, democratic discourses of art find themselves at a dead end. We explore this problem by examining specific calls for the democratisation of art in light of the debates surrounding democracy within post-foundational political theory and post-autonomist discussions of immaterial labour. The tensions that arise from these democratic aspirations pose a serious challenge to how contemporary art understands itself. On the one hand, it is evident that contemporary art still relies on the modernist ideal of widening democratic participation and still progresses through a critique of earlier forms of democratisation. Relational art, the internationalisation of contemporary art's institutions and the 'educational turn' have all been discussed and defended as democratic projects that aim to redefine both the production and the consumption of art.⁷ But beneath these diverse manifestations of the artistic democratic drive it is possible to locate a creeping crisis of critique. Many contemporary commentators have voiced a kind of critical ennui, a feeling that critical art is itself simply one of the vehicles of a liberal democratic status quo. Art institutions, like the liberal democratic state at large, are caught in a debilitating paradox. In order to sustain the democratic drive, art, like the state, must keep producing zones of exclusion. These are then added to an ever-expanding catalogue of shapes or

⁵ For De-Tocqueville, see: De Tocqueville, Alexis. "Of the Omnipotence of the Majority in the United States and Its Effects". In *Democracy in America*, 98–107. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 1998. For Schmitt, see: Schmitt, Carl. *The Concept of the Political*. Translated by Georg Schwab. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

⁶ Laclau, Ernesto and Mouffe, Chantal. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London: Verso, 2001, 171.

⁷ The links between relational art and democratic aspirations are expressed clearly in an interview with Grant Kester: Wilson, Mick. "Autonomy, Agonism and Activist Art: An Interview with Grant Kester", *College Art Association Art Journal*, Fall (2007): 107–118. For the 'educational turn' in art, see: O'Neill, Paul and Wilson, Mick, eds. *Curating and the Educational Turn*. London and Amsterdam: Open Editions and De Appel Arts Centre, 2010.

gestures (in the case of art) and ways of life or identities (in the case of Western liberalism). Democracy is experienced as a form of meta-stasis: nourished by temporary and resolvable outbreaks of contestation but ultimately supported by a dialectical structure of inclusion and exclusion. Since democracy is perceived as a revolutionary drive towards universal equality and simultaneously as a fluid, but stubborn, form of stability, critique is deemed ineffectual and inauthentic.

At the same time, the modern state, like the institutions of art, has been exposed to a different type of radical transformation in the guise of neoliberalism. In this socio-economic regime, the critical potential of both artists and workers in general has been seen as itself a zone for the production of value. Here, too, critique has found itself not outside dominant institutions but, on the contrary, at the heart of a neoliberal project of workers' exploitation. To make things even worse, some of these areas of exploitation have matched the demand of artistic democratisation to bring down the boundaries separating creativity and alienated work. Paradoxically, then, it would appear that while the democratic aspirations of critical art can never be fulfilled, they have, at the same time, been at least to some extent realised through neoliberal, post-Fordist work practices in the form of their own negative image. A self-deprecating irony, exposing and re-enacting this position of impotence is one of the few gestures left in the arsenal of critical art. It is our aim, however, to resist this erosion of the critical dimensions of contemporary art and to find new paths for critique that respond to the realities of neoliberalism.

Throughout this book, we argue that many of these problems result from the way artistic critique is constructed through dialectical thinking. We repeatedly show that this method produces states of meta-stasis, in which tensions and conflicts are neutralised and the horizon of revolutionary transformation is held at a utopian distance. Nevertheless, the critical method that we advocate is not entirely free of the dialectic. Rather, we explore the potential of inverted dialectical models in which fissures are found within a seeming unity. Instead of positioning critique at an impossible external point to the super-absorbent totality of late capitalism, we suggest a model of immanent critique that exploits the untenable contradictions on which this system is founded and which it continues to produce. In this we do not part with Marxist tradition altogether—indeed we are indebted to Karl Marx and devote many sections

to his writing and followers. However, working from within the framework of an anti-humanist Marxist critique, we hope to identify useful modes of operation for critical art today.

A key concept that we have drawn on is overidentification, defined by Slavoj Žižek as “to take the system more seriously than it takes itself seriously”.⁸ However, although Žižek’s presence can be felt throughout, and although he has come closest to providing a theory of overidentification, we want to expand the discussion beyond the associations of this strategy with particular practitioners, most notably the Slovenian group Neue Slowenische Kunst. It is because we do not think that a definitive, satisfactory account of overidentification has been written yet that we have used a broad tapestry of sources, from classical political philosophers to contemporary commentators on fine art, from post-Marxist critiques of labour to ethnographic studies of subcultures. While we acknowledge the important work of Žižek and NSK in this field, it is precisely because we recognise the specificity of the socio-political and historico-geographical context in which they developed this work that we would like to find a broader context in which to apply it. We focus in particular on the importance of genuine identification with the institutions of power as a starting point. The term overidentification is often used to describe stunts that quickly unravel when a more truthful disidentification is revealed behind the action. The practices we examine represent more sincere commitments that challenge existing systems through subversive performance. Instead of speaking from an impossible position outside power, they assume power performatively. This enables them to drag into the present and expose as empty the promises of a better future that underpin ideology, but which are never fulfilled.

Our eclectic methodology is also aimed at examining the dialectical relationship of art to the everyday. We want to avoid describing this as a hermetic process in which art captures moments of the everyday in its authoring and civilising web and is, in turn, captured by the commodification of the art market. We believe that cultural and political ideas exist in a more complex and nuanced relationship in which they each define, and occasionally contradict, each other. Just as much as art today, in the post-conceptual era, is often thought of as the expression of ideas,

⁸ Slavoj Žižek speaking in: Benson, Michael. *Predictions of Fire*. New York, NY: Kinetikon Pictures, 1996.

political thought shares the idealism of art (in using, for example, the elusive figure of the pre-societal human) and is far from being a field of cold pragmatism. In general, we believe that the arena of ideology today is comprised of aesthetic and ethical, artistic and political questions that cannot be separated. Just as art is no longer a distinct area of production but serves as a paradigm for a more general category of post-Fordist labour, so politics is constituted in the aesthetic and performative field of subjectivisation. Increasingly, political ideas are expressed and interrogated through an engagement with the performance of the self: politics is far from being the reasoned debate between subjects in the public sphere imagined by liberal writers, when it is, literally, inscribed in the body.

The lack of specialism in post-conceptual art and the more general erosion of labour categories in the workplace are reflected in our own collaborative practice. As artists, we have worked in film, performance and music, but without limiting ourselves to addressing medium-specific questions about the cinematic, the theatrical or the musicological. We also write, teach, curate and run a gallery but do not think of any of these preoccupations as dominant. Rather than perceiving this broad and diverse practice as a political solution, set against a lingering formalist tradition in art, we understand that it is nothing more than a reflection of the demands of the labour market. The freedom of the artist, like that of the contemporary worker in general, is no longer a desirable exception. The precarity of work has become a new instrument of oppression—and to a large extent, this book represents our attempt to find new ways to offer some resistance to these demands.

Alongside a parallel reading of political theory and art theory, the book is also organised through a historical or chronological narrative. Although in all the chapters we move back and forth between theoretical abstractions and specific historical examples and between contemporary authors and artists and older ones, we ultimately trace a movement from the modern to the postmodern. We start with the modernist paradigm, describing political and cultural systems that have operated through dialectical oppositions between areas of exclusion and inclusion. This then enables us to move towards the more recent developments that characterise the contemporary condition. From one perspective, once this economy of inclusion and exclusion is understood as exactly that, as a dialectical balancing of oppositions that constitute each other, we end up with a post-dialectical irony, a culture that experiences itself as incapable of change. On the other hand, through the re-organisation of work

under neoliberalism and the capturing of more areas of life in the capitalist procedures of surplus value production, these distinctions—between life and work, art and the everyday, the producer and the consumer—are collapsed from within. Our explicit mission here, to reiterate, is not just to describe these developments but also to identify new modes of resistance in relation to them. Rather than settle for the irony that brands critique impotent, we want to understand what critical tools might be available to us that do not follow the same trajectory and that open up new, (post-)dialectical possibilities. It is therefore the concept of overidentification that we propose as an alternative to the problematic ironic position that we end up rejecting.

In Chapter 2, we begin by exploring two competing, yet complimentary, traditions of the European avant-garde: Dada and constructivism. In these two strands, the tension between equality and freedom, the individual and the collective, the autonomous and the everyday, is formulated differently, producing variants of the paradox that can be located at different points on the liberal democratic spectrum. But despite these differences, both traditions operate in a dialectical manner in relation to these dyads, both looking to establish a third, synthetic position to overcome the internal conflicts of their democratic drive. As a result, ultimately, both traditions collapse under the weight of the dialectical structure that defines them. Nevertheless, we attempt here to rebuff the postmodern narrative of the avant-garde as a chronicle of inevitable failure. Rather than seeing the essence of the democratic project as a logical impossibility, we advocate a position according to which the problem with these movements is located not in their democratic drive, but in the dialectical structure of their critique. By isolating several moments in both Dada and the Russian post-revolutionary avant-garde that do not follow the same dialectical trajectory, we claim that another history of the avant-garde is possible and that in it we can still discover an unexhausted critical tension, which we suggest is closer to our subsequent description of overidentification.

In the post-war era, the problematic dialectical structure of the avant-garde solidified into an ironic position towards the possibilities and aims of the democratic project. Art was deemed incapable of ever fulfilling its own democratic ambition to overcome the gap between its own language and institutions and the everyday. The democratic critique of art gradually shifted towards an ironic self-awareness and a critique of its own impotence. In the second section of this chapter we follow two versions

of this post-war manifestation of the paradox: Allan Kaprow's treatise, "The Education of the Un-artist" (1971–1974), and Boris Groys's *Art Power* (2008).⁹ In Kaprow's version, radical forms of artistic innovation are undone by their own preservation, whether through attempted sidestepping, affirmation or negation, of the conventions of art and its institutions. Their critique of established forms is inevitably absorbed into the canon: for example, the operation of the readymade, which Kaprow names 'non-art'—the removal of objects from 'life' and their placement in the sphere of art—becomes another acceptable form of art making, another known gesture in the vocabulary of art. Kaprow's resolution of the paradox arrives in his notion of 'art as play'. However, this solution is no less problematic since it relies explicitly on the dialectical dyad art/work which, as we argue in the next chapter, becomes uncritical in the wake of the changes to the nature of work under post-Fordism.

A similar trajectory is followed up in relation to Boris Groys' writing. Here, Groys recognises the fact that the artistic attempt to negate the space of the museum or of the canon of art is paradoxical. According to Groys, the expansion of the palate of artistic gestures against those already preserved in the museum cannot but be incorporated into the space of the institution. The museum itself, through its economy and ideology of archiving of differences, demands this variation on, or even negation of, older forms. Groys' solution is ironic: we are asked to continue believing in art, despite understanding the contradictions it relies on. Both the artist and the curator participate in this game, knowing that full equality and a real rejection of the old can never be achieved. Consequently, newness becomes an empty gesture divorced from a political project.¹⁰

Finally, using Guy Debord's writing on contemporary art, we propose that the Situationist formulation of the paradox represents a more complex and subtle dialectic that allows for more room for manoeuvring

⁹ For Kaprow: Kaprow, Allan. "Education of the Un-Artist, Part I". In *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, edited by Jeff Kelley. Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 2003. For Groys: Groys, Boris. *Art Power*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008.

¹⁰ Clement Greenberg makes a similar point in his 1934 essay, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" when he describes the temporary allegiance between a bohemian artistic vanguard and the revolutionary politics required to exit bourgeois society. This is then replaced with a disdain even for revolution as the function of the avant-garde is found to be a sense of keeping culture 'moving' through formal innovation rather than transforming society more broadly. Greenberg, Clement. "Avant-Garde and Kitsch". In *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1961, 5.

than Kaprow's identification of art with play or Groys' affirmation of institutional power.¹¹ Despite Debord's pessimistic view of art, the Situationist concept of *détournement* as a practice in a field of contradictions moves away from the paralysis of Kaprow and Groys.

In Chapter 3, we look at the consequences of the absorption of the avant-garde as described above. If artistic critical procedures are not only incorporated into the normative modes of capitalist production, but to an extent form its ideological core, then critique in the art can no longer be seen as oppositional. As manufacturing jobs gradually disappear from the developed world, workers are increasingly asked to incorporate skills and modes of production taken from the creative work previously pitted against the drudgery of capitalist work. This newly dominant organisation of labour has been variously described as post-Fordist or immaterial. Using the work of the Italian post-Autonomists to contextualise this problem, we survey in this chapter the literature surrounding the question of the proximity of this kind of work to the production of art, and in particular, attempts to find a formulation of critique that moves away from the cul-de-sac of the art/work dialectic. Following authors like Paulo Virno, Franco 'Bifo' Berrardi and Antonio Negri, we propose an anti-humanist critique of creative labour and suggests that art can no longer be posited as an outside to alienated work.

This anti-humanist tradition is central to our critique of the conditions of labour under neoliberalism in their relationship to creativity and artistic production and consumption. It is distinct from, but not oblivious to, a decolonial or ecological critique of humanism. Rather than decentering humans from the history of the planet or asking who has been excluded from the category of 'humans', we focus on the inhuman force of capital to challenge a common conception of art as a humanising coping mechanism in the face of the harshness of life. This is because humanist ideas about creativity as an essential human trait feed into the myth of the individual that underpins the foundation of society according to the liberal fantasy of its construction. In this mythology, self-contained subjects, fully fledged with their own expressive beings, come together in the wild to form a fragile alliance of mutual benefit. We contend that it is only by questioning this model that we can begin to unravel the binds

¹¹ Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York: Zone Books, 1997.

that leave the emancipatory aspirations of art so easily subsumed within late capitalism.

Ultimately, however, we locate the problem in a reliance on dialectical critical models, whose positing of an inside and an outside fail in the face of the totality of this regime. We therefore follow the discussion of immaterial labour with an analysis of the limits of a dialectical critical model in resolving some of the difficulties arising from these new conditions of work. In this new terrain of labour, when art can no longer be seen as the negation of work, it becomes important to rethink the tools offered to us by the operation of dialectics and to try and find new openings or new possibilities where old dichotomies have collapsed. The dialectical gap between these two modes has become untenable as a platform from which critique can emerge, and the two types of work have turned out to inhabit the same world, subject to the same logic of commodification. Using a second strand of thought that stems from a Maoist critique of dialectics, we propose here that the rejection of this dialectical relationship can lead to a more effective utilisation of the weakness and inherent contractions of neoliberal ideology.¹²

In Chapter 4, we look at the problem of infinite expansion from a different angle. So far, we have been contending that contemporary art is caught between a modernist drive to democratise the field and an ironic realisation of this demand through the recuperation of creative labour. To better understand this problem structurally, we set up the terms of an enquiry into the inherent tensions and contradictions within the concept of democracy in political theory. As we have already explained, the current formulation of liberal democracy is an untenable synthesis of two conflicting traditions, one in which individual rights take precedence over collectivity, the other in which equality is paramount. It is this democratic paradox that underlies the current crisis of art as a political field. We would like to identify this duality at the heart of democracy and trace the problematic conflation of democracy as a revolutionary project and democracy as a political system through several permutations. Rather than viewing democracy as always historically contingent or as a pure, universal

¹² This Maoist tradition is taken from Alain Badiou's writing, but we trace its origins back to Althusser and Mao himself. Badiou, Alain. "One Divides itself into Two". In *Lenin Reloaded: Toward a Politics of Truth*, edited by Sebastian Budgen, Eustache Kouvélakis and Slavoj Žižek. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007.

philosophical ideal, we are interested in the tension that the mixture of both generates in the texts under discussion.

A particular strand of the critique of the democratic paradox focuses on the early twentieth-century debate around the origin of state power within democracy. Carl Schmitt famously posited this power as existing outside the framework of the laws of the state, a repressed theological construction underlying the secularised forms of modernity.¹³ For Schmitt, liberal democracy is not a political system in its own right, but simply the temporary suspension of the realm of the political. For him, the excluded political must always return to haunt the liberal democratic state and indeed even today it is still fraught with a sense of anxiety about its status. It is still possible to find accounts of democracy as both a coherent and stable political system and a negative suspension of the political, as a system built on perpetual expansion and a spent form of citizenship that has exhausted its historical, modern, form. Democracy seems to be always occupying two contradictory positions.

More recently, writers like Giorgio Agamben, Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou have been returning to Schmitt's discussion of political theology to address the current crisis of democracy and find alternatives to the neoliberal consensus. Throughout the chapter, we follow several historical configurations of the paradox as a series of tensions between freedom and equality; between competing narratives of the foundations of society; between individual decision and collective action as political engines and between abstract concepts and situated historical narratives of democratic transformations. Some of the writers we deal with in Chapter 1 resolve these tensions by seeing this state of constant change, a system in which the borders between the excluded and the included are always questioned, as a form of stability in itself. The idea of a 'meta-stability' that encloses tensions and conflicts in a universal frame receives a positive expression in the work of authors like Mouffe and a negative expression in the work of others like Agamben.¹⁴ But both accounts create a new set of problems.

¹³ Particularly useful in this context is: Schmitt, Carl. *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*. Translated by Georg Schwab. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985. We provide a detailed survey of the critical responses to Schmitt's ideas in the third chapter.

¹⁴ For Mouffe, see: Mouffe, Chantal. *The Democratic Paradox*. London: Verso, 2000. For Agamben: Agamben, Giorgio. *State of Exception*. Translated by Kevin Attell. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

Both ask political agents to act without belief, to engage in debate and contestation and to defend positions, but always with the knowledge that these positions are not ends in their own right, not final goals, but only temporary sides in an argument that can never be settled. Since the liberal democratic order is defined by its instability, by its movement, without commitment, between positions, any definite belief in one solution or another is impossible. Our survey of the field therefore ends with an interrogation of the tenability of this ironic mode of political subjectivity.

Finally, in our Chapter 5, we move on to discuss the relationship between irony and overidentification. In each of our previous chapters, we identify voices and strategies that diverge from the dialectical methodology that stands at the heart of the democratic paradox and have attempted to establish a competing tradition of thinking about critique through a different approach to setting up oppositions and conflicts. We detect such moments in the avant-garde, as well as in the writings of Marx, Debord, Louis Althusser and Badiou, for example. Here we propose a grouping of these moments under the term overidentification. However, we also aim to present our own very specific interpretation of this term and to measure this interpretation against certain definitions of irony. Several theoreticians and artists have adopted the term overidentification to describe a kind of practice that could easily fall under the remit of something like irony, parody or satire. We would like to propose a different definition of overidentification that would reject such practices and expose them as contiguous with the culture that they attempt to critique. However, rather than disown any ironic dimension to this concept, we think we need to suggest a more nuanced understanding of irony that would differentiate the way we understand overidentification from what we would say are its less persuasive articulations. To do this, we analyse the conceptions of irony elaborated by Kierkegaard, Lefebvre and Rorty, wherein we attempt to identify ironic forms closer to our understanding of overidentification.¹⁵

If, as we have claimed, there is a version of democracy that reaches a dead end around the impossibility of asserting a universal project while

¹⁵ The Main texts used are: for Rorty—Rorty, Richard. *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989; for Lefebvre—Lefebvre, Henri. “On Irony, Maieutic and History”. In *Introduction to Modernity*. London: Verso, 1995; for Kierkegaard—Kierkegaard, Søren. *The Concept of Irony*. Translated by Lee M. Capel. Bloomington, IA: Indiana University Press, 1965.

embracing pluralism, holding on to that idea of democracy requires an ironic subject. In the absence of a *telos*, this democracy seems hollow, since it asks that we both maintain our belief in a political project of 'the social good' and remain ironic about our ability to achieve it. However, by considering a broad spectrum of ironic stances, some of which are more productive than others, we would like to further investigate the role of irony in generating and addressing the democratic paradox. Although related to irony, overidentification has important features that set it apart from other phenomena that fit in this category and make it a potentially useful tool in overcoming the impasse of infinite democratisation. We apply this term, which Žižek uses only in passing, to a series of projects and case studies extending beyond the boundaries of professional art practice.

We develop our concept of overidentification in particular in relation to post-colonialism, with reference to certain cultural practices, like the *Hauka* rituals documented in Jean Rouch's film *The Mad Masters*, or the subculture of the Congolese *Sapeurs*. We argue that these examples can be seen as critical forms of overidentification with European colonial power. But we also choose to focus on them because they seem to operate at the same site of subjectivity that post-Fordism relies on for its operation. In bringing together the political and the performative, consumerism and subjectivisation, these examples respond particularly well to the contradictory demands of neoliberalism. On the one hand, this system is still built around a modernist notion of exclusion (national, cultural and racial borders), and on the other, it requires a kind of maximal inclusion (of new forms of labour and value). Our case studies do not share the ironic melancholy that we described earlier. They embrace the power operating on them, and yet this embrace exceeds the bounds of what this power can tolerate: if they resist the colonial or post-colonial order, it is through a positive identification with its power.

An important problem, however, arises from our use of these examples: if these are not instances of practice authored as artwork, do they then require our appropriation to function critically? What is the role of the anthropologist or researcher in notifying us of these modes of behaviour and where does this role sit in relation to that of the artist? Can overidentification only 'work' when it is lived but not theorised or understood by its agents? If overidentification does not resolve itself like irony by being understood on a 'higher' plane, the idea of deliberately instigating it strategically runs the risk of an ironic resolution that elevates the artist

above the institution or system under investigation. How can these situations be understood as convincing gestures of belief, when they later simply contribute to the accumulation of value as cultural capital for the artist? It is in order to deal with these issues that our conclusion turns to the question of authorship. This question is also central to us for another reason. Since the construction of the author in contemporary art is tied to the more general category of the neoliberal individual, it is important to consider the relationship between the two paradigms. If the neoliberal individual is caught between opposing forces and is both a utopian horizon for liberalism and a commodity inside its markets, we would like to understand how this conflict takes place within the field of contemporary art and its discourse. To answer the question of art's compatibility with a democratic project, we must rethink the modernist paradigm of art as self-emancipation and consider the institutional structures and conditions under which art can exist as a collective endeavour.

In our work as artists, we do not try to 'lead by example', nor do we offer solutions or describe utopian ideals. However, both the content of the work and the way we approach it are permeated with our thinking around the problems described in this book. Early on, we changed our surname to *Kollektiv* to carve a collaborative identity for ourselves. That this name implied a larger group of people was originally intended as a bit of a joke. Our collaboration initially emerged as a pragmatic tactic for working in a provincial context in the absence of contemporary art institutions rather than a deliberate critique of singular authorship. As we later began to collaborate with performers, musicians and other artists, we found that people were indeed confused by the name and assumed there were more people involved in our activities than there actually were. To an extent, we have welcomed this misapprehension. The name itself forms a kind of overidentification with an institutional structure that at present must remain a fiction. As already noted, we expand on our interest in the displacements of the author's function towards the end of this book. However, collaboration is never presented as a solution in the work, nor does it comprise a kind of post-individual identity politics. Rather it is foregrounded as a problem that underpins post-Fordist labour.

Although art is always to some degree the result of a collaborative process, art history continues to focus on the biographical notion of the individual, even when this individual is constructed through autofiction. Artist collectives have often worked collaboratively and refused or complicated notions of authorship. But the resultant identity is frequently

treated as a kind of brand rather than a radical break with individual authorship. It is unsurprising that many reviewers of the 2021 Turner Prize singled out individual contributions from collective presentations. As Morgan Quaintance has correctly identified, the rhetoric of care that pervades contemporary institutional art discourse belies the structural competition between individual artists that is built into the sector.¹⁶ The drive towards a singular identity is contiguous with contemporary user authentication processes that increasingly presume one person equating to one device, one account and one identity. Attempts to thwart this are heavily policed by a neoliberal regime that prefers to deal with ‘dividual’ as Deleuze called them—not an integrated self, but rather a disembodied code.¹⁷ Our own experience of struggling against systems of individuation, from university degrees to apps, has led us to consider the ways in which our minor collectivity can prefigure and very occasionally perform the minor interventions that may yet allow us to tell the story of a collective ascent.

Sections of this book were written by one of us, others by the other. We have not divided these systematically and there were varying degrees of intervention in different parts, sometimes a paragraph each, sometimes longer and at other times working much more closely together sentence by sentence and rewriting each others’ parts. All these ways of writing have been the outcome of conversations and planning, where the execution of the work is in service of decisions made earlier. This way of working runs through our practice, where we do not differentiate between distinct contributions to specific aspects of production, which can range from sewing, building, printing, video editing and performing to choreographing, liaising with other collaborators and sourcing ready-made props and materials. Although our collaborative work is unusual in an academic context, we do not view collaboration as radical in and of itself. To an extent, collaboration still offers some resistance to the forces of the art market premised on singularity and individual authorship. But recent decades have also given birth to a growing number of art groups, some working within and some outside of the mainstream art market: from long-term art collectives that reject individual work

¹⁶ Quaintance, Morgan. “Care V. Competition”, *Art Monthly*, No. 464, March (2023): 5–9.

¹⁷ Deleuze, Gilles. “Postscript on the Societies of Control”. *October*, Issue 59, Winter (1992): 3–7.

completely to more contingent and fluid ‘one-off’ collaborations between various artists. With the transition to post-Fordism and its emphasis on the communicative and social aspects of work, collaboration fits comfortably into a cultural landscape of brands with personality and corporations with human rights.¹⁸ As we demonstrate in our text, the performance and branding of the self intersect uncomfortably with the social networks that produce and reproduce that self.

Our age is frequently described as post-ideological. It is our aim to use our work not to present an ideological dimension that is missing from art practice, but to articulate the ideology that governs the present regime and highlight that it is in fact, counter to its naturalist pretensions, an ideology. There is a strand of Western art that has long sought to avoid didacticism in the name of freedom of expression, particularly in its modern configuration as antithetical to socialist realism. In light of our research, both textual and artistic, we have come to realise that this too functions as a kind of Greenbergian didacticism in art.¹⁹ Consequently, we believe the problem with ‘bad’ political art is not that it is too like propaganda, but that it propagandises that which is already agreed, preaching to the converted. Instead of opposing art’s capacity to operate to a more direct form of action, we strive to articulate the ideas that are all too often naturalised in our culture’s understanding of the political. We are interested in what it means to make art politically, but we reject the distinction between representation and action that often underpins this discussion. Rather than posit a false opposition of art and theory, we

¹⁸ A recent scandal in relation to the European Court of Human Rights focused on its definition of these rights that could also be enjoyed by corporations. See: Višekruna, Alexandra. “Protection of Rights of Companies Before the European Court of Human Rights”, *EU and Comparative Law Issues and Challenges Series (ECLIC)*, Vol. 1 (2018): 111–126.

¹⁹ This hypothesis is discussed extensively in Cockroft, Eva. “Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War”, *Artforum*, June (1974): 39–41. While some of Cockroft’s claims have been contested since the essay’s publication, similar points about the ideology and narrative, representational qualities of supposedly non-didactic abstraction have been made from a more philosophical perspective by both Jacques Rancière in “Painting in the Text” (Rancière, Jacques. *The Future of the Image*. Translated by Gregory Elliott. London: Verso, 2007) and Art and Language in “Painting By Mouth” (first published in the exhibition catalogue *Art and Language*. “Painting By Mouth”. In *Index: The Studio at 3 Wesley Place Painted by Mouth*. Middelburg: De Vleeshal, 1982).

propose writing as a practice that intersects with other artistic media in the hope of generating new ideas and participating in a discussion about the political that also reframes the boundaries of political action and political thought.



CHAPTER 2

Art for All

A 2008 editorial in *Art Monthly* asked, “[w]hat arts organisation would not want to widen access—in every sense—to develop new audiences, reflect contemporary society in all its diversity, contribute to the local community and, where possible, raise more money from the private sector to supplement its funding?”¹ The rhetorical question is followed by an insistence that such aims should not come before the intrinsic value of art to society. But what it demonstrates is not only the extent to which the ideas of the avant-garde about expanding art’s reach beyond the confines of elite institutions have been assimilated by the art world, but also the internal contradictions inherited from the absorption of conflicting discourses. The private and the public are conflated here not just in fiscal terms, but in the aspiration to reflect diversity and widen access to new audiences. Art institutions seem increasingly unable to negotiate their contradictory role: on the one hand to protect the privileged position of artistic production in the name of a universal good, and at the same time to reflect and manage the already existing democratic structure of society as a whole. This tension is systemic and arises from the categories established by art in its modernity.

¹ Bickers, Patricia. “Editorial”, *Art Monthly*, London, no. 314, March (2008): 14.

A persistent strand of the discourse of the early twentieth-century avant-garde expresses a demand to democratise art and overcome its separation from everyday life. In 1921, Rodchenko proclaimed:

Down with art as a beautiful patch on the squalid life of the rich! Down with art as a precious stone in the midst of the dismal and dirty life of the poor! Down with art as a means of escaping from a life that is not worth living!²

In that same year, Tristan Tzara declared:

Dada belongs to everybody. Like the idea of God or of the toothbrush. There are people who are very dada, more dada; there are dadas everywhere all over and in every individual. Like God and the toothbrush.³

This idea has continued to pervade discussions of art. Writing about the avant-garde art of the late 60s and early 70s, Alex Farquharson states that if there was a paradigm for the disparate forms it took, it was “the endeavour to draw what had been the mutually exclusive realms of ‘Art’ and ‘Life’ much closer together; to break out of the physical, social and ideological confines of the museum and merge the avant-garde with the progressive politics and the everyday social flow of the contemporaneous counter-culture”.⁴ Of course, paradoxically, the attainment of this ideal would mean the dissolution of art as a differentiated field. So can or should the artist be understood as a special case, removed from the general conditions of work and the everyday? And, if artists refuse this transcendental position outside of ‘everyday’ culture, if contemporary art is not special, how does it transcend the prevailing conditions of production under capitalism? On what ground can it claim any criticality?

In this chapter, we would like to examine the demand to democratise art in all these senses, from the point in the twentieth century where

² Rodchenko, Alexander. “Slogans”. In *Art in Theory, 1900–2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, edited by Harrison, Charles and Wood, Paul. London: Blackwell, 2003, 340.

³ Dachy, Marc. “Dada, A Transparent Transformation: An Essay on Tristan Tzara”. In *Dada—Constructivism: The Janus Face of the Twenties*, edited by Dawn Ades et al. London: Annely Juda Fine Art, 1984, 76.

⁴ Farquharson, Alex. “The Avant-garde, Again”. In *Carey Young, Incorporated*. London: Film & Video Umbrella, 2002. <http://www.careyyoung.com/the-avant-garde-again>.