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Radical Proximity

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The crisis of value is happening beyond the art-making sphere: the democratization of "expertise," the constant cry of the "death of art criticism," and the shift towards populist methods of value accumulation via networks: from Yahoo Answers to Yelp to Medium to art critic Jerry Saltz's open-forum review/prompts on his Facebook page. This is partly thanks to the so-called "democratizing" tools provided by the Internet but also is related to the impact of a globalized, networked system of labor on creative producers and a general cultural trend towards "horizontality." There has been a trend of populist, radically democratic exhibitions in recent years and more have surfaced; one recent example is Hans Ulrich Obrist and Simon Castanets' *89plus*, a utopian exploit which attempted to put forward a global, interdisciplinary zeitgeist of all artists born after the year 1989 through a massive open call.[1] Like Obrist, traditional gatekeepers such as critics, curators and galleries are making a show of what appears to be a dispersal of their agency. In terms of value production, the tally has largely replaced the weighted vote, the visible versus invisible over the plus versus minus, as theorist Boris Groys suggested in a roundtable in 2005 held at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago about the state of art criticism. He spoke of a change of codes in reaction to artworks. First there was a positive or negative code, but the digital age ushered in a new "digital code," where the option is either one or zero, either art is brought to exposure or withheld it (Elkins and Newman 2008:

154). But what is thinly veiled as some kind of populist paradigm shift in value accreditation that reaches towards consensus in art actually leaves art production exposed to the values of the market.

Globalization and the Euro accelerated the art world's international grip. Deregulation, the erasure of state-imposed bonds on corporations and big banks, privatization, austerity measures and the expansion of the free market post-2008 financial crisis in the US ushered in a new golden era in the art market. The so-called return of the Gilded Age—as Thomas Piketty proposed in his bestselling book, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*—resulted in auction prices flying their highest in the history of Christie's for any auction, a record-breaking gross of $852.9 million for contemporary art in 2014 (Duray 2014). According to data compiled by the European Fine Art Foundation, €47.4 billion, or about $64.6 billion, of art and antiques were sold by the world's auction houses and dealers, an increase of more than 150 percent over the last decade (Reyburn 2014). Speculative collectors inflated prices by young painters to reap the benefits of resale later.

Enabling this market recognition are a few high-powered gatekeepers, art collectors and hypermobile super-curators[2] who curate massive global biennials and in doing so, determine which artists will be propelled to stardom. This resultant fabric of validation is completely uprooted, unspecific to place or time, linked to abstract ideas of fractalized and monetized time-units of making, floating above everything, distinctly face-less and place-less, and bolstered by globalization and neoliberal capitalism. This new hierarchy of value for current art production is a flimsy, transient, mobile fabric, not unlike what Marx called "general intellect": a hazy combination of these few individual authors' consumerist relationships. Lamentably, this new criteria is well on its way to replacing what may have been called the old postmodern marker of

worthwhile art, *criticality*.

So what are the ways to create methodologies for evaluation of art outside of the market? One place where artists know for sure the reason to occupy their time making art is within the pedagogical setting. Part of what is useful about art schools is that they foster a limited, clear-cut language for the artist to define her work, a criterion established by her professors that is fairly straightforward and developed largely on a case-by-case basis. Critiques can be enormously significant evaluations of success in artwork, and may be attributed to a student's proximity to her peers within the university. In a critique setting, thoughts are fired around a room informally, and in the best instances, an *embedded* understanding develops *between* subjects in a room. When people feel comfortable, critiques can be some of the most helpful experiences for an artist: feedback is honest and, if even momentarily, *suspended outside the market* (even though the professors are getting paid and the students are paying).

What if we took this method of value attribution and thought about how it might begin to apply to artistic production outside of a school? If we defined a value system *based on proximal relations between persons*, with whom we share, at the very least, a location and that location's history, might we create a system not dependent on capital *and* one that runs *against* the current of globalization?[3] This would require a tiny bit of solidarity on the part of the artists, some kind of allegiance at least to one another or at least the place they are living in, something artists are largely resistant against. In his essay "Exhaustion and Subjectivity," in *After the Future*, Franco "Bifo" Berardi suggests that through a process of "collective subjectivization"—or social recombination—it's possible to escape global capitalist flows (Berardi 2011: 100). He defines collective subjectivization as the development of "a common language-affection." But for Berardi it is impossible, as late capitalism has fermented to the point where artists are

freaking out about how they spend time; it is so implicated in a digital realm, fragmented by precarity, fractalized into little units: "abstract, depersonalized, fractal atoms of time available in the net-sphere." For Berardi, contemporary creative laborers "[have] become unrecomposable, unable to recognize itself as a community of sensible and sensitive beings who share the same social interests and cultural expectations" (Berardi 2011: 99). We can look to artists producing in non-commercial centers, for example.

Michelle Grabner, writer, artist, gallerist, and curator of the 2014 Whitney Biennial, wrote in the Brooklyn Rail in March of 2012 about Chicago: "Great amounts of creative energy are still being wasted on promoting and reinforcing outdated cultural hierarchies or on criteria of success adapted from New York. . . . To maintain a rigorous art practice here, artists need to set their own criteria, continuously measuring and contextualizing their work" (Schwabsky and Grabner 2012). It is useful to look to smaller arts ecologies, i.e. not New York or LA, to find examples of this system based on *proximal relations* actually taking place. It is not a coincidence that in these areas, artistic production, like in the art university, takes place without the presence of a virile market for art. Happening in Chicago, as my examples below will note, is the creation of a value system not based on the market-dependent mobile fabric, but instead based on *individualized nodes of individual- and community-specific knowledge* that are *inexchangeable* and therefore *incommensurable*: not measurable in quantitative terms.[4]

One example of this value cultivation (development, say, of a "common language-affectation") in practice in Chicago was the MDW Fair. The MDW (for Midwest, or Midway airport) Fair was co-founded by three of Chicago's influential arts organizers, both for- and non-profit, that took place in three iterations from 2011 to 2012. Despite the art fair epithet, the organizer's stated objective for the event deemphasized sales, even neglecting to mention them at

all; it aimed to be "a manifestation of the collective spirit behind the region's most innovative visual cultural organizers, focusing on the breadth of work done here by artists and arts-facilitators alike."[5] The MDW Fairs consisted of mainly Chicago exhibitors, with a few exceptions (St. Louis, Baltimore, and Milwaukee in 2011). The uniqueness of MDW was that its success, if it could be measured, wasn't how well its cultural output was *exported* (did New York pay attention?), *nor* how much work was sold. Rather, it pursued a new kind of criteria for evaluation, one not beholden to a market. To me—an exhibitor, attendee and volunteer—the platform allowed fairgoers the space to step back and get an overview of Chicago's artistic creation, from Bronzeville to Rogers Park, and to take a pause. James McAnally, himself a participant in the fair (and another triple-organizer: curator, writer, artist), hit the nail on the head in his essay for *Temporary Art Review* after the fair received negative press on a New York-based blog, writing: "The fact that dozens of artist-run and alternative spaces, curatorial projects, and independent publishers would converge in one place with several thousand attendees and essentially no competitive or commercial presence is remarkable for a zero profit startup venture" (McAnally 2012). Indeed, MDW seemed not to be about exporting Chicago's culture, but rather about celebrating and improving its own cultural activities. MDW, put on by the creative producers of Chicago for those producers and a general public, did not preempt the idea of criticality. Instead, it fostered a *new kind* of criticality, one that happened organically, at bars and in local weekly newspapers, in clucked tongues, and at intimate studio visits; in effect, it produced an environment not unlike that of the critique. In my view, MDW was in many ways an exercise in anti-commercial, locally produced value production.

In small arts ecologies there is a lot of overlap; in Chicago, many creative people are artists, critics, curators, collectors, and even donors, all at once. This is another form of

proximity that begins to develop a local methodology for critical understanding and production. It may be time to banish the whole "critical distance" thing all together; sometimes rather than resulting in a form of cheerleading, the lack of distance between these roles actually results in devastating and tenacious critique. Perhaps in response, Chicago art critic and artist Lori Waxman, has proposed a form of art criticism she called "embedded." This form provocatively borrows the term from journalists working with a military unit during wartime. She argued that despite its negative and colonizing connotations, one positive aspect of the practice is the privileged level of access it affords, allowing for unique opportunities for in-depth analysis and criticality. Embedded units, though controversial, are arguably able to access indelible reports from the war front. She cited a personal example: she is married to the artist Michael Rakowitz, and thus is "the best possible critic of his work" but of course, could never write about it, due to the constraints of traditional criticism (Chicago Artist Writers 2013). Were Waxman to write about his work, however, it may begin to develop a kind of incommensurable, intensely proximal measure for his work that is not dependent on global gatekeepers or capital flows.

One might argue that this closeness could work to negatively impact creative production, in that instead of advancing criticality, it would rely on nepotistic aims, or, the reverse, devolve into interpersonal squabbles. This is certainly a perspective relevant to a smaller arts ecology like that of Chicago. In "On Leaving the Building: Thoughts of the Outside," Dieter Roelstraete discussed what he calls the "everpresence" of the artist's uncritical position, "always-inside" the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Roelstraete suggests, though, that this inside/outside does not have to be a binary; the artist instead locates herself "at an open door," where she can still maintain a "critical distance" (Roelstraete 2011). Perhaps this is a position we can attempt to occupy.

Chicago is not unique in this sense. In a panel discussion about Baltimore's art criticism

in 2015 organized by the artist-run *Post-Office Arts Journal*, art writer Marcus Civin proposed a kind of "searchlight approach" to criticism, a kind that is "place-based." Since many of the artist-run activities in Baltimore take place in domestic spaces, Baltimore art is "personal—or interpersonal." One panelist related that rather than writing with an objective distance, in writing about friends he might pen a love letter or a poem instead. They questioned whether criticism could function to generate discourse and self-reflection within a community, or whether it was always entangled in a market context, and asked why art needed to speak beyond a small network (Post-Office Arts Journal 2015).

It seems that it might be useful for artists to use their unique subjective position, rather than stubbornly continue to pretend a position of "objective" critical distance. The role that criticism plays in a community is crucial in determining the post-critical agenda of current art (if we think about it as not entirely subsumed into capitalist market hierarchies and the discretion of globetrotting, nomadic curators). Proximal, embedded, regional criticism developed ground-up within communities is uniquely positioned to address and unearth that agenda. And perhaps most importantly, the kind of valuation structure that is produced in places like Chicago and Baltimore cannot be exchanged for its use value elsewhere; it does not play into a flimsy hyper-global higher value system of art, one that continues to enable a tiny number of individuals to triumph over the many.

Notes

[1] See http://89plus.com/about/. From 2013 to the present, 89plus is "a long-term, international, multi-platform research project co-founded by Simon Castets and Hans Ulrich Obrist, investigating the generation of innovators born in or after 1989."

[2] If some agency has left the critic, it certainly finds itself in the curator. Like critics, curators are purposefully and sometimes awkwardly dispersing their power—like *documenta 13* curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev's massive artist-led curatorial team.

[3] While this essay focuses specifically on North American examples, there has been a strong current of anti-globalist activities on this topic, largely reacting against massive biennials and triennials that have no relationship to place. See *The Ghetto Biennale* and the general negative reception of *documenta 11*.

[4] This is not to suggest that this kind of "collective subjectivization" cannot happen outside of those with a shared location—say, within intimate communities on the Web—but face-to-face interaction is a yet-to-be-explored x-factor.

[5] See http://mdwfair.org. Compare this to the mission of Art Basel, on their website: "showing work of the highest merit, and attracting the world's leading gallerists and collectors, [making] Art Basel the place where the art world meets."

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