

# Introduction: a thousand contradictions

What can culture contribute to radical political practice in the age of global markets, neoliberal austerity, neo-imperial militarism and environmental end times? Advocates of socially engaged art and art activism want to do something to change the world and not passively contemplate all of life's contradictions. The keyword and the *modus operandi* of social change today is not the political party but the activist network, the ad hoc involvement of participants around a pressing social problem, who later recombine around other issues. Everything else in the world of museums, biennials, art fairs and auction houses seems to amount to little more than institutional and economic power affirming the status quo. But project work and activism is difficult to sustain without some kind of institutional support, least of all financial resources. A sign of the times is a June 2017 proposal by a New York state congresswoman to provide \$10,000 of student loan forgiveness to cultural workers who provide social services to children, adolescents and seniors. Another is a graduate programme in social practice art at a university in Indiana that teaches courses in 'social entrepreneurship.' If the neo-avant gardes were sublated by the culture industry, social aesthetics are embedded in neoliberalism's precarisation of life and labour. This process of recuperation is most evident in relational aesthetics, with its transformation of the relations between people into relations between people as art things. It is less obvious, however, in the case of art actions that are organised by leftist activists who know all too well what they are up against. The challenge for socially engaged art, as it vies with other kinds of art practice, is to be able to engage not only with social contexts but to challenge capitalist social relations. From a Marxist perspective, what, we might ask, is the class function of socially engaged art in today's global neoliberal regimes? The political imaginary of progressive academics and art institutions responds positively to new art practices that propose ameliorative solutions to local problems and empowerment for minority constituencies, especially as such practices correspond to the non-ideological, horizontalist

and participatory ethos of social movements. Moving away from big ideological struggles towards micropolitical social change, art activism threatens to supplement rather than challenge neoliberal governance. The neoliberal project emerged in the 1970s as a business-led effort to reorganise power around the interests of capital and at the expense of labour and the vestiges of the welfare state. While the rhetoric of neoliberalism promotes free markets and free trade, the corporate state subsidises capital and supports monopoly power.<sup>1</sup> Just as neoliberal government policy destroys social programmes and social safety nets by orienting these towards market calculation, and just as it undermines unionised work through privatisation, outsourcing, offshoring and flexibilisation, it calls on virtuous citizens and groups to fill in the cracks that it otherwise pushes more and more people into. In the context of the real subsumption of labour in advanced post-Fordist economies, the field of culture is today a paradoxical component of this system of lived domination. Whether one wishes to accelerate this process or slow it down, it seems inescapable.

*Vanguardia* makes the case for a renewed avant-garde praxis in the fields of both art and politics. In the relative absence of an organised, effective and democratically-based left, the task of the avant garde is to elucidate the contemporary workings of capital and to support the existing forms of progressive cultural and political expression, however weak and disoriented they may be. Vanguardism is work in leftist militancy. It is neither high theory, produced by the 'traditional' intellectual in their so-called ivory tower, nor is it simply 'organic' grassroots pragmatism, defined solely by fieldwork with people who are otherwise too busy with projects to question the broader effectiveness of their work. Socially engaged art and theory is autonomous in the sense that it is not always immediately useful, yet it constitutes engaged praxis by providing concepts and works with which to make sense of our predicament.

Written between the years 2010 and 2018, the texts assembled in this book are militant cultural research undertaken after the recent 'communist turn,' which is informed by such eventful broadsides as Alain Badiou's *The Return of History* and Slavoj Žižek's *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*.<sup>2</sup> The substance of such so-called 'post-Marxism,' and indeed, of the intellectual influence of Žižek and Badiou, is privileged in these pages over liberal-left, micropolitical, schizo-anarchist, identitarian and countercultural trends in contemporary art and politics. Addressing the political and cultural movements that coalesced around anti-globalisation protest and the 'movements of the squares' in Greece, Spain, Egypt, Brazil and the United States, *Vanguardia* detracts from a moribund 'end of ideology' postmodernism and relates the new contestatory forms of engaged culture to what Peter Bürger refers to as the unrealised extravagance of the avant garde.<sup>3</sup> The work of Žižek and Badiou in particular is singular in its rethinking of the main categories of the political left, especially as work that has been produced after post-structuralism became

the dominant trend in progressive academia. This work allows contemporary theory and practice to remain connected with the radical past while at the same time challenging the more deterministic aspects of today's new materialisms and theoretical immanentism. My political outlook is nevertheless committed to a left ecumenism. It is clear that in terms of most major struggles we are comrades, despite our myriad differences and social contexts. While the goal for us must be to increase our ranks, rather than fight one another, we must do so as leftists. The stakes of this book are therefore defined by the potential for a renewed vanguard militancy in both art and politics.

### **The ideology of the avant garde**

The countercultural spleen of the nineteenth-century bohemian avant garde has now become an integral aspect of today's administration of cultural markets and creative industries. In my essay titled 'Welcome to the Cultural Goodwill Revolution,' published in *Brave New Avant Garde*, I argued that what Pierre Bourdieu had defined as the dispositions, or class *habitus*, of the French petty bourgeoisie in the 1970s has today become the dominant class habitus.<sup>4</sup> The function of autonomous art and aesthetic disinterestedness, as defined by bourgeois ideology, shifts with the petty-bourgeois disposition to that of allodoxia, which is based on the anxious consumption of culture as a mark of distinction, which is then transposed to worry about class mobility and the obsession with lifestyling. For Bourdieu, the petty-bourgeois habitus emphasises the anti-hierarchical, anti-authority and anti-bourgeois motifs of the counterculture, with an emphasis on the euphemisation of avant-garde seriousness, psychological therapy, an imperative of sexual relation, the taste for the new, new media, the fun ethic and distance from market forces.<sup>5</sup> I combined Bourdieu's Marxist sociology of class dispositions with Bürger's historicised model of the development of the bourgeois ideology of aesthetic autonomy and added to it a new phase that might help us think about the class function of contemporary culture.<sup>6</sup> In the shift from the international bourgeois phase, or modernism, to today's global petty-bourgeois era, the function of art changes from the portrayal of individual self-understanding to that of social integration, much like the kind of subjectivity that is produced for a Reality TV show or an Instagram page. The mode of art production shifts from individual studio work to networked participation in projects, or from culture industry to creative industry; the mode of consumption changes from an individual and alienated critical reception to that of post-enlightenment enjoyment; and the status of the work shifts from autonomous avant-garde work to a vacillation between art as market value and biopolitical activism.

The hegemonic status of the petty-bourgeois habitus among university-trained cadres underscores the 'allodoxic' evasion of class identifications and



Adam Turl, *Ares Coffee Riot (Red Mars)*, 2016. Acrylic, coffee, sharpie meteorite dust, glitter stickers, photocopies and wheatpaste on canvas, 121.92 x 91.44 cm. *Red Mars* is part of the *13 Baristas* project, a series of works about a group of fictional coffee shop workers and artists living in a socially precarious not-too-distant future. Courtesy of Adam Turl.

emphasises instead a 'middle' and 'non-ideological' position vis-à-vis the means and forces of production. Today's global petty-bourgeois class compositions are not only comprised of redundant, proto-proletarian 'dark matter,' as Gregory Sholette argues, but also include the rank and file of those individuals who have gallery, museum and university jobs, not to mention all of those people in fields like advertising and software development, which Richard Florida refers to as the creative class.<sup>7</sup> From a cultural point of view, class struggle is difficult to fathom when unemployed graduates with low-wage jobs share more or less the same culture as middle and upper-class professionals.<sup>8</sup>

A simple schematic model can help to elucidate some of the standard political orientations of progressive art practice. My goal with this chart is to make some use of class analysis that would allow contemporary art theory to interact with class analysis and radical politics. The left section of the chart represents the category of *anti-art*, which is concerned primarily with the heteronomy of social content and seeks to dissolve art into life, escaping the protocols of aesthetic discourse through various kinds of immanentism and also through an 'exodus' from the cultural authority and conservatism of art institutions. On the right is *anti-art art*, which describes the various efforts to defend aesthetic theory as a critical discourse and as a means to secure the historically defined and hard-won field of autonomy. Whereas academic cultural production is for the most part no longer concerned with modernist aesthetic reduction and partakes of contemporary art's condition as art in the expanded field, it is also concerned to philosophically salvage and reproduce the separation of art from other categories of experience. We could consider tactical media interventions and transversal aesthetics as examples of the former and participatory relational aesthetics as well as various forms of the politics of representation, new institutionalism and neo-conceptualism as examples of the latter. As John Roberts puts it in *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde*, one seeks to escape aesthetics into politics and the other to escape politics into aesthetics.<sup>9</sup> A dialectical *anti-anti-art* would be avant-garde in the sense of maintaining a relation to both art and politics, effecting less a distribution of the sensible, as Jacques Rancière has it, than a communism of the senses in which living labour frees itself materially and ideologically from the forms of exploitation that structure today's biocapitalist creative industries.<sup>10</sup> Only the avant-garde model radicalises the theory of autonomy as part of revolutionary class struggle.

In the introduction to my 2015 book on film, *Drive in Cinema*, I remarked that this schema corresponds neatly enough to Gene Ray's distinction between critically affirmative art, avant-garde practices and nomadic practices.<sup>11</sup> While all three models respond to the capitalist art system and its tendency to treat art as an ahistorical category, only the latter two, Ray argues, are committed to anti-capitalism. The makers of *critically affirmative art* are invested in the reproduction of the art system. While such artists may break certain cultural

ANTI-ART	ANTI-ANTI-ART	ANTI-ART ART
Negation	Negation of the negation	Affirmation
Anarchism	Socialism	Capitalism
Petty bourgeoisie	Proletariat	Bourgeoisie
Counterculture	Revolutionary art	Academic art
Transgression	Dialectics	Formalism
Atheism	Atheism as belief	Belief
Bohemian avant garde	Historical avant garde	Neo-avant garde
Collapse base/super	Dialectics of base/super	Separate base/super
<i>Nomadic</i>	<i>Avant-garde</i>	<i>Critically affirmative</i>
<i>Discourse of the Hysteric</i>	<i>Discourse of the Analyst</i>	<i>Discourse of the University</i>

conventions, they are indulged by the status quo as symbols of its relative freedom. The art departments of the neoliberal university now advertise artistic rebellion as a conventional attitude. The *avant gardes*, in contrast, seek to radicalise culture so as to bring about political change. The avant gardes, according to Ray, seek to overcome aesthetic autonomy insofar as it proscribes giving equal importance to politics. The avant-garde model is a renewable vector, he argues, and necessary to anti-capitalist practices. Lastly, the model of *nomadic practices* is wary of both of these strategies and so more consciously refuses to invest in autonomy and the institutions of art. The purpose of this third model is to operate in undefined border zones and trigger catalytic processes within social as well as state formations. Such anti-systemic struggles cut transversally across sites, situations and events, taking advantage of the art system and looking for openings and connections on the terrain of struggle. For Ray, only nomadic practices, along with avant-garde breakouts, have the potential to function as anti-capitalist forces.

In today's post-Fordist societies, artists are increasingly blackmailed into forms of self-exploitation. There is no solution to the contradictions of progressive art in its affective, networked and activist forms insofar as these are part of neoliberal biocapitalism. The ethical turn, as Rancière calls it, with its post-traumatic witnessing of twentieth-century fiascos becomes insidious insofar as revolutionary politics disappears into consensus politics, with its cautious, self-censoring pragmatism. Embodiment, empowerment, sexual politics, victim politics, multiculturalism – all of these are today part of the ambient milieu of the neoliberal creative city and the hegemony of a global petty bourgeoisie for which the revolutionary left is either a matter of nostalgia or nightmare. In this context, socially engaged art tends towards a culturalisation of politics rather than a politicisation of culture. Žižek argues that when we are blackmailed by neoliberal capitalism we should resist acting out in anger and should instead ask what kind of society makes this kind of blackmail possible.<sup>12</sup> In other words, what

possibilities have not been recognised by socially engaged artists in a situation that calls for more democratic participation, social networking and free labour, along with more socially responsible capitalism? Why has the working class not constituted itself into a revolutionary subject? Some answers, Žižek proposes, can be found in unconscious libidinal mechanisms. In terms of ideological fantasy, reality cannot be seen in the same way by both the ruling capitalist class and the working masses, whether we define the latter as a blue-collar proletariat or a no-collar precariat. Class struggle is therefore concerned with the form and not only the content of reality. The form of thought, in terms of Hegelian absolute knowing, relates to a class consciousness that is historically contingent and that allows the class subject to understand his or her place in society from the perspective of imaginary capture and fantasy. For real change to occur, a change must take place in the objective conditions of one's existence. However, the predominant perspectives on power fail to divest themselves from their fantasmatic attachment to subjection and therefore their own ontological form of thought. While revolutionary theory 'lays bare' the 'contents' of domination, the 'form' of the existing relations of production and social relations within everyday life obscures the basis of exploitation. Psychoanalysis, however, does not consider the function of ideology at the level of objective conditions, but at the level of subjectivity. Even Karl Marx addressed the 'metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties' of the commodity.

In *Brave New Avant Garde* I made a case for what I refer to as *sinthomeopathic practices* – projects that rely on contradictory forms of identification with the symptoms and institutions of art under contemporary capitalism. The works by Andrea Fraser, Komar & Melamid, Janez Janša, Janez Janša, Janez Janša, Jakob Boeskov, Neue Slowenische Kunst and the Yes Men that I described sometimes seem to lack a progressive stance but not a progressive aim. As a way to develop this theory I referred to the work of the Dutch collective BAVO, whose texts *Cultural Activism Today: The Art of Over-Identification* and 'The Spectre of the Avant-Garde,' criticise today's NGO-style practices as a new form of official art.<sup>13</sup> The avant-garde tactics of some artists differ from the more pedagogical and collaborative methods of 'NGO artists,' even if the two can potentially overlap, as I argued was the case with Komar & Melamid's *Asian Elephant Project*. In order to develop the notion of an art sinthome, I drew on Žižek's hypothesis that the deepest identifications that hold a community together are not the official written laws, but the identification with the transgression or suspension of the law itself as an obscene secret code. I argued in this sense that part of what structures the logic of the field of community, relational and dialogical art, the official (progressive) art of our time, is an identification with the prohibition of avant-garde radicality.<sup>14</sup>

What I emphasised in my comparison of collaborative community art and avant-garde strategies of subversive affirmation is the importance of the notion

of the Lacanian split law in contrast to the Foucauldian view that law produces its self-sustaining forms of transgression. I made use of Jacques Lacan's Discourse of the Analyst as a way to model avant-garde fantasy away from questions of knowledge, and closer to the problems of belief and ideological enjoyment, which provide new methods and concepts with which to understand cultural production in the context of biopolitical creative industries and networked activism. As it happens, Ray's distinction between critically affirmative, nomadic and avant-garde practices corresponds not only to Bourdieu's breakdown of bourgeois disinterestedness, petty-bourgeois allodoxia and working-class necessity, but also to Lacan's schema of the 'four discourses,' which Lacan developed during his seminars XVI–XVIII from 1968 to 1972. Nomadic practices correspond to Lacan's Discourse of the Hysteric (anti-art), the avant garde brings into effect a Discourse of the Analyst (anti-anti-art), and critical art reflects the milieu of the Discourse of the University (anti-art art). What was left out of Ray's schema as well as my own in earlier texts is the category of art as such, which Lacan's four discourses provides a solution to as an 'extra-class' enigma. An unreconstructed approach to art *qua* art runs the risks associated with naive forms of romantic and neo-aristocratic pretentiousness. Such a Discourse of the Master, however, subtends the 'titles of nobility' and 'marks of infamy' that Bourdieu associated with the aesthetic disposition. Perhaps more than ever before, the category of art now has the superannuated characteristics of exemplariness, sovereign will, absolutism, aristocracy and heredity.

To better appreciate how Lacan's theory can inform the theory of the avant garde, it is necessary to outline the basic structure of the four discourses. Lacan's 'discourse theory' is his means to account for the ways in which language makes the social link operative. Because we are dealing with structures of the unconscious, it is necessary to understand that the subject is typically and in some ways necessarily unaware of the structures of discourse. Lacan's four different mathemes offer variable placements for four elements that refer to subjectivity in terms of the unconscious structured like a language. The symbol \$ refers to the split subject or subject of the unconscious. The symbol 'a' refers to Lacan's concept of the *objet petit a*, otherwise referred to as the object-cause of desire. The *objet a* also stands for the unconscious or the bar of difference that makes all social meaning unstable. S1 stands for the master signifier, the pure or phallic signifier that is a signifier without a signified. S2 refers to the chain of signifiers or knowledge. In each case the top left quadrant refers to the space of the agent of a communication or a command. The top right refers to the Other or addressee. What concerns Lacan is that the structure of communication always in some way fails or is incomplete. This impossibility is explained through recourse to the bottom level of these formulas. The bottom left quadrant refers to the hidden symptom of the agent. It is the function of



$\frac{a}{S_2}$	$\frac{\$}{S_1}$	$\frac{S_2}{S_1}$	$\frac{a}{\$}$	$\frac{S_1}{\$}$	$\frac{S_2}{a}$	$\frac{\$}{a}$	$\frac{S_1}{S_2}$
analyst		university		master		hysteric	
anti-anti-art		anti-art art		art <i>qua</i> art		anti-art	
avant-garde		critically affirmative art		autonomous art		nomadic practices	

truth that the agent is unaware of. The bottom right refers to the product of the communication, its surplus *jouissance* and the function of loss.

In the Discourse of the Master, the master signifier addresses knowledge – the know-how of the slave – and produces desire as a function of loss. While the Master appears absolute in his or her authority, he is unaware of what conditions his existence as the castrated father. In the Discourse of the Analyst, desire occupies the place of the analyst who compels transference from the analysand. This discourse results in the symptom as the master signifier and is underwritten by psychoanalysis as the system of knowledge. The Discourse of the Hysteric finds the split subject in the position of an agent who addresses the master signifier and seeks knowledge of his or her condition as a function of loss. Lastly, the Discourse of the University finds that the system of knowledge is in the role of agent and that this knowledge is addressed to a desire that produces the subject. The Discourse of the University is underwritten by the master signifier, which makes the Discourse of the University one of the most vehement of discourses since it is unaware of the question of power. In a lecture delivered in 1972 Lacan added to his schema a *matheme* for the Discourse of the Capitalist, whose structure explains the conundrum of anti-capitalist movements today. In this discourse, the split subject is the agent who addresses knowledge and produces his or her own desire as loss. Like the University, the Capitalist is underwritten by the master signifier and so is equally unaware of relations of domination.<sup>15</sup>

In today’s world of social networks, cybernetic surveillance and security regimes, as well as in the context of the rise to hegemonic status of the petty-bourgeois habitus, it appears that what is most readily available and encouraged are practices that correspond to the discourses of the activist Hysteric and the academic University. In comparison, the art Master seems to belong to an earlier, bourgeois epoch, with its corresponding utopian and scientific socialist party Analysts. The correspondence of art *qua* art with the status of the Master finds its most uncanny appearance in a shrewd text by Dave Beech, whose purpose it is to identify art’s exceptionalism in classical, neoclassical as well as Marxist economic theory.<sup>16</sup> From the perspective of radical art theory, Beech’s work seems somewhat *apropos* since Marx not only defined art as unproductive labour, he also considered art to be superstructural,

and so the traditions of Western Marxism and the Frankfurt School that address culture from the perspective of political struggle against capitalism cannot be opposed to the study of capital or of economics as a specialised field. In some ways, Beech could have saved himself a great deal of trouble by starting with Bourdieu's field theory of art, which explains the class determinations of the art world's ideological self-conception as the 'economic world turned upside down,' even if today, and for various reasons, it seems increasingly less the case that artists can be defined as 'the dominated sector' of the 'dominant class.' Beech's point, nevertheless, is that this self-perception is not only falsely ideological but also material, since the value of artworks does not conform to the labour theory of value, as argued in classical, neoclassical and Marxist traditions. For example, the journalist who argued that the sale in 2017 of a rare copy of Marx's *Das Kapital* for \$40,000 US undermines Marx's theory of capital simply does not understand the economic relevance of the price of rare objects – or for that matter of any object or commodity – to the corresponding concept of value, measured in socially necessary labour time. What becomes interesting for us, then – if we agree to ignore for the time being all of the questions having to do with reification, commodification, culture industry, spectacle, the subsumption of labour and post-Fordist immaterial labour – is the way in which art's ostensible separation from economic determination corresponds to the Discourse of the Master, in which the art Master addresses the know-how of the economist while at the same time being unaware of his hidden symptom: the artist-theorist finds himself at a loss insofar as he becomes his slave's slave.

No wonder then that artists like Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst, whose work is based on speculation, have almost no impact on the University Discourse or on the hearts and minds of the Hysterical multitude. Nor, for example, are we convinced that Jean-Michel Basquiat deserves as much recognition as Pablo Picasso just because certain art collectors are driving up the prices of his work at auction. The flipside to this, from the perspective of a Marxist critique of exploitation, are the kinds of precarious jobs that one finds in today's hyper-connected world of 'bio-economic totalitarianism,' to borrow of phrase from Franco Berardi.<sup>17</sup> For example, in March 2007 the Art Gallery of Ontario posted an employment opportunity that provides a detailed picture of the new model of the creative employee. The museum required that its candidate for the position of community arts facilitator have experience in the 'design and delivery of workshops, projects, special events and other experiences that encourage people to explore local identities as well as institutional collections.' The projects were to evolve with community members working in schools, community centres, public spaces and community festivals. The prospective employee was to facilitate the creation of 'legacy projects' that 'reflect issues of concern and that propose mechanisms for sustainable creative engagement

at the local level.’ The facilitator was to develop content and delivery of web-based initiatives, mediating the presentation of collections with public constituencies. The facilitator was expected to demonstrate experience working collaboratively with other artists as well as diverse communities, to have a degree in fine art or art history with two years of experience working as an artist/facilitator ‘within a variety of community-based situations,’ to have experience developing curricula, experience working in museums and/or other cultural institutions. She or he was also to have technical proficiency in digital photography and video production as well as skills in image manipulation and video editing. The clincher is that the position was part-time and temporary.<sup>18</sup>

But the AGO is something of a conservative institution. Another job posting, this time by the Media Co-op, a cross-Canada grassroots independent media organisation, was announced in April of 2014. This was an employment opportunity for a Publisher, someone, they said, who should be an energetic person, able to work independently, who would spread out across the country with the rest of the editorial collective and find the best in radical media for the Media Co-op’s flagship magazine *The Dominion*. The publisher would oversee the ‘administration and overall direction of the co-op, serve as financial co-ordinator (working closely with the bookkeeper) and carry out various design and editorial tasks.’ They would be expected to work with the membership co-ordinator on fundraising and grant writing, should be bilingual, highly organised, with knowledge of desktop publishing software (InDesign and Photoshop, Open Office, Drupal), web-publishing and social media. Experience working in social justice and community-based movements was required, as well as experience working with budgets, financial forecasting, non-profit administration and journalism. The job, however, was minimum wage and only ten hours per week. Further, it was a virtual position – the prospective employee was to have their own computer equipment, Internet connection and preferably live in Montreal. And the Media Co-op is all about equity, the ad said, giving an unintended picture of equal opportunity exploitation: ‘People from marginalized communities, including women, Indigenous people, visible minorities, people with disabilities, deaf people, gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, two-spirited people, transgendered and transsexual people, and working-class people are especially encouraged to apply.’ According to Gene Ray, the ideological command from the creative industries sector is ‘enjoy your precarity!’ Autonomy, creativity and even criticality become hip libidinal investments that allow us to misperceive the real potential for resistance and the extent to which strategic social transformation is blocked by the violence of capitalist reproduction.<sup>19</sup>

Avant-garde art continues to be in conflict with the value form as well as capitalist relations. The ideology of vanguardism, I argue, is not easily dispensed with. One could say the same thing about Marxist cultural theory.

In terms of evaluating art that takes a progressive stance but lacks aesthetic interest, Marx in his day gave us the concept of *tendenzkunst*, or politically correct art. The notion that art is superstructural and therefore dialectically separable from the social system from which it emerges is derived mostly from Marx's 1859 Preface to the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, in which he asserts that the art of the ancient Greeks can continue to have artistic value even if it is the product of a slave-owning society and pre-capitalist mode of production. One finds similar contradictions between the economic base and the ideological superstructure in Stalinist cultural policy. Despite the strictures of Zhdanovist Socialist Realism, Stalinism nevertheless allowed artists and intellectuals to study and appreciate what was progressive in previous eras, providing that such histories were understood in terms of class analysis. This was consistent with Marx's argument that art need not offer solutions to capitalism nor even take a correct political stance in order to be considered realist.<sup>20</sup> Along these lines, the Hungarian theorist Georg Lukács gave the example of the writer Honoré de Balzac.<sup>21</sup> Although Balzac did not support the most progressive social forces in his day, he was nevertheless an exceptional realist. Despite his conservative social attitude, he perceived the changing reality around him better than most other authors. The problem of class reductionism came to a head in the Soviet Union during the Lyssenko debates concerning whether or not hybrid wheats constituted a form of 'bourgeois science,' which, because it was the product of the West, should be rejected. More recently, debates among autonomist theorists like Raniero Panzieri and Mario Tronti, including more contemporary scholars like Antonio Negri and Félix Guattari, have sought to determine whether post-Fordist capitalist modes of production can be recuperated for communist purposes. Certainly, the so-called 'formalism' of Badiou's truth procedures of art, science, politics and love causes many to seek a more 'grounded' approach informed by political economy or some other kind of materialism. There are nevertheless two principles that are useful here. One is that there is no 'axiomorphic' correspondence between artworks and the people who make them. The other is that there is no absolute homology between the level of the superstructure, which includes ideas, philosophy, law, religion and culture, and the economic base, which in Marxian analysis includes the mode of production, the social relations of production and the technical means of production.

The well-known lesson from Marxist theory is that works of art have a relative autonomy from the social circumstances in which they are embedded. This includes the ideology of art as such. Without this relative autonomy the social space would be thoroughly saturated and neither artworks nor any other kind of social mediation would have the ability to affect social change. Contradictions and meaningful change could therefore be located only at the level of so-called 'material' processes. One possible limitation of Marxist

theory for socially engaged art is that it does not provide practical instructions for cultural practice. The benefit of Marxism is that it addresses the problem of bourgeois humanist ideology as an invariable norm. The aesthetic, as Roberts argues, undergoes change as a historical category. The 'end of art,' understood in Hegelian terms as an ontology of conceptualisation, explains art's emancipation from mimesis and from artisanal skill into generalised social technique.<sup>22</sup> Roberts' theory of 'post-art' makes the case for socially engaged art as a model of contemporary avant-garde art. In this regard, however, it is not enough for artists to be anti-art anti-capitalists. Culture needs to be revolutionised against the autonomy principle of bourgeois ideology, but this does not automatically imply that art must be instrumentalised and directly linked to such expedients as contribution to GDP, philanthropic reform, job creation, regional development, and other such expedients within a neoliberal risk society.<sup>23</sup> For Roberts, art is a non-identitary, adisciplinary, prefigurative and emancipatory force. Art's condition as an always unfinished site of struggle is a reflexive and experimental project that does not abolish itself as art and that is based in theoretical investments, defined in its 'suspensive' form as irreducible to the heteronomy of non-art and as a dialectically and historically open research programme. The avant garde is therefore hardly a matter of nostalgia. As Roberts puts it:

This obsession with that which is no longer as that which can be no longer ... is regularly called upon by art history and cultural theory to discipline what is held to be the unobtainable and hubristic claims of art on the extra-artistic real. This is why the most assiduous writing on the avant-garde since the 1980s has insisted on the avant-garde as an open-temporal experience rather than a failed event.<sup>24</sup>

If the avant garde is a failed concept, this is in part due to the perception that communism is an outmoded ideology and so we need to be able to address the status of communism in contemporary culture. The level of class struggle within radical art theory relates very specifically to what Badiou has referred to as the 'communist hypothesis.' The communist hypothesis, he says, is a 'space of possible failures' that invites us to revisit its histories and think of new possibilities in new circumstances in which 'we are now forbidden to fail.'<sup>25</sup> There is no reason for us to retain the earlier forms of the artistic avant gardes and political vanguards. However, there is every reason to reinvent these for ourselves today.

My claim is that it is as difficult today to conceive of a communist Master-Analyst as it is to for us to approach art as either avant-garde or autonomous. The question of allodoxia applies equally to politics insofar as leftists have to a great extent abandoned the political party in favour of social protest movements and micropolitical collectives. In the US, the 2016 Bernie Sanders election campaign provided some indication of what social energies could

be mobilised with a semi-socialist programme. After Sanders was betrayed by his own party, the vestiges of his campaign failed to materialise through the Green Party, while some momentum was later directed into the #movementforbernie headed by the Seattle socialist Kashma Sawant, and more recently, through a sizeable membership increase in the Democratic Socialists of America, which includes high-profile members like Cornel West, Barbara Ehrenreich and Medea Benjamin. With the hegemony of the petty-bourgeois habitus, however, the effects of allodoxia are radically transformed. It is no longer the case that anxiety about class status causes people to pretentiously identify with formal culture, but rather that there is no longer the perception of a need or an incentive to do so. The very terms of cultural authority, including political authority, are now conditioned by transformations to the relations and modes of production, with prosumer, precarious and flex workers feeling more empowered by YouTube and Facebook than by elected officials or a visit to the museum. There is at the same time what Žižek refers to as the weakening of symbolic efficiency. The value of art is not simply relative, but it is nevertheless sustained by the interpassivity of belief. We believe in the social value of art because the institutions of art believe for us. As institutions become both more communicational and decentralised through education as well as through neoliberalisation, their class function changes accordingly. The status of culture and politics in today's petty-bourgeois hegemony corresponds to a new social imaginary of networked self-organisation that connects infrastructural platforms with communities of interest. The result is a de-aestheticisation and depoliticisation of practices and meanings.

### **All tomorrow's parties**

If there is a stereotype of the militant avant-garde artist and vanguard communist party, there is also a stereotype of the spontaneous, non-representative, rhizomatic, molecular, horizontalist, leaderless and activist multitude. According to Žižek, the activist model is the deepest of today's illusions and the most difficult to renounce.<sup>26</sup> If art and politics were grounded immediately in political economy, as activists and autonomist theorists propose, we would likely have gotten rid of capitalism a long time ago. The question then is how to change people's attitudes and ideas rather than compromise with the predominant democratic ideology.

Among some of the keywords that are routinely used in the socially engaged art world and that carry a great deal of significance as ideology, we find an emphasis on such concepts as undecidability, ambiguity, permeability, decentralisation, nomadism, performativity, dialogue, non-mastery, affect, etc. These terms correspond indirectly to what Badiou, in his lecture 'Does the Notion of Activist Art Still Have Meaning?', argues about the possibility of

a militant art today.<sup>27</sup> ‘In a militant art,’ he says, ‘the place of ideology is the place of the contradiction and of the dubious results of the struggle. And so we have, in some sense, an art of the dubious struggle as opposed to an art of the glorious victory.’<sup>28</sup> ‘Militant art,’ Badiou argues, ‘is an art of what has not yet been completely decided. It’s an art of the situation, and not an art of the state of the situation. And so militant art cannot be the image of something which exists, but must be the pure existence of what is becoming.’<sup>29</sup> Militant art would seem therefore to correspond to these keywords of contemporary society. However, Badiou adds,

Today there is no common ideology and we must observe that democracy is the clear example of a weak ideology, and not a strong ideology. It is too consensual; it is too much in complete equivocation between the reactionary camp and the revolutionary camp, between progressives and conservatives, and so on. In fact, everybody is a democrat today. But when everybody is a democrat, we can see that the ideology is certainly weak.<sup>30</sup>

Vanguard art is therefore what Badiou would consider to be an art that is in a concrete relationship with local political experiences and that creates a common space based on the existence of a strong ideology and strong organisations.

If we are to in some way challenge the activist model as a fantasy of integration with biocapitalism, we require what Badiou proposes as the fidelity to the truth procedures of a universal, generic event and the organisation of life around new master signifiers. The ability to change people’s attitudes is the characteristic of what Žižek calls a Master. Žižek makes use of the psychoanalytic concept of transference to suggest that the analysand’s identification with the analyst is similar to the identification with the Master as ‘the subject supposed to know.’ The purpose of analysis, however, is not subjection to the Master as the path to liberation, but rather the traversal of the fantasy in a move beyond identification. Communism, Žižek argues, cannot be based on the pragmatic ameliorism of today’s social movements. A Master is therefore needed as a figure of transference. In this regard, Žižek claims, ‘we should shamelessly reassert the idea of “vanguard,” when one part of a progressive movement assumes leadership and mobilises other parts’ and should therefore ‘reject the ideology of “anarchic horizontalism”.’<sup>31</sup> The actions of vanguards, who are always a minority and never a mass subject, contribute to ‘a higher revolutionary unity.’<sup>32</sup>

Although Žižek and Badiou reject anarchist horizontalism as an adequate organisational form and theoretical outlook, they are not indifferent to the efforts of social movements. Regardless, what they say about social movements provides us with useful concepts with which to assess what is and is not a vanguard. In an essay titled ‘Answers Without Questions,’ Žižek

credits the Occupy Wall Street protests with having opened up the space for a new political content and a new political subjectivity.<sup>33</sup> Notwithstanding the movement's rejection of political representation, Žižek wonders how many of the 99% would be willing to accept the protesters as their voice. All who protest claim the right to employment and to affordable housing, health care, education, and so on. The political establishment is denounced as corrupt and so there is no one to whom one can adequately address one's demands. Intellectuals and artists cannot operationalise these demands and with the fall of communism, he says, 'they forever forfeited their role as a vanguard which understands the laws of history and can guide the innocents along its path.'<sup>34</sup> The problem for Žižek is that 'the people' do not know either. The ignorance of the former is not equal to the ignorance of the latter, however, and it is only the people who can have the answers, if only they knew the questions. Žižek says that the OWS protests are answers to questions that we do not know and so we as intellectuals should not provide clear answers but should propose the questions to which they are answers. For our purposes, the question is not only whether socially engaged art is a symptom of the political economy of global capitalism, but beyond this, what is an adequate, progressive contemporary avant-garde art and vanguard politics? What kinds of practices allow a new model of the avant garde hypothesis to be deployed?

What is apparent in today's biocapitalist security regimes is that we are all to a lesser or greater degree in the proletarian position of the excluded. The forms of oppression based on gender, race and sexuality are ideological components of the class struggle and means through which capitalist hegemony now functions. It could be that just as Marxists once looked to peasants and students, the revolution this time will call on all of those who have been mobilised by identity issues to take up the class struggle and reassert the communist hypothesis. In this they could join all of those self-organised and socially critical artists who have already recognised art's ideological construction. The quest for revolutionary unity, however, has its readymade objections, either as part of the liberal-democratic objection to 'totalitarianism' and revolutionary violence, or as part of anarchist objections to constituted forms of state power. In his 1993 text *Spectres of Marx*, Jacques Derrida addressed the political consensus that the fall of Soviet communism represents the end to any viable political alternatives to free-market capitalism.<sup>35</sup> The book came as a response to the 1990 declaration by George H.W. Bush of a New World Order to be led unilaterally by the United States, with as its first missions the invasion of Iraq and the NATO bombing of ex-Yugoslavia. Francis Fukuyama, then deputy director of the State Department policy planning staff, responded to the disintegration of political regimes in Eastern Europe with the Alexandre Kojève doctrine of the 'end of history.' Fukuyama celebrated technology as the solution to the limitless accumulation of wealth and satisfaction of human desires, noting



that economic modernisation and cultural homogenisation would replace all traditional forms with centralised planning. This process was to be facilitated by global markets and the spread of consumer culture, a teleological evolution directed by capitalist social relations.<sup>36</sup>

Somewhat less sanguine, Derrida criticised ‘end of history’ teleology for its premature embrace of actually-existing democracy. He listed in *Spectres of Marx* the ten most pressing problems of the New World Order, which, in his words, make the ‘euphoria of liberal-democratic capitalism resemble the blindest and most delirious of hallucinations.’<sup>37</sup> These are: structural unemployment, homelessness and deportations, economic war, the inability to control the contradictions of the free market, foreign debt, the arms industry and trade, nuclear proliferation, interethnic wars, the mafia and drug cartels, and finally, the present state of international law.<sup>38</sup> Derrida’s book was a slight departure from the kind of post-Marxism that was championed by postmodern theorists, including Derrida himself. In his ironic revision of Hegel and Marx, he refuted the possibility of an end to new ideological formations, writing:

At a time when a new world disorder is attempting to install its ... neo-liberalism, no disavowal has managed to rid itself of all of Marx’s ghosts. Hegemony still organizes the repression and thus the confirmation of a haunting ... [This] spectre is the future, it is always to come, it represents itself only as that which is to come or come back.<sup>39</sup>

As long as capitalism is the dominant horizon of our thinking and mode of production, it is bound to give rise to a return of the repressed: the meaning of Marx today. This is particularly significant since the problems that Derrida enumerates have only deepened. Not only has offshoring by transnational corporations exacerbated unemployment and starvation wages, but geopolitical standoffs continue unflaggingly, with NATO presently engaged in a new Cold War with Russia and China – a phenomenon that even Henry Kissinger denounces as reckless. Drone strikes, kill lists, torture, extraordinary rendition and indefinite detention characterise today’s distorted constitutional law, supported and sanctioned by all major western governments. Foreign debt has shaken both the US economy as well as the Eurozone, where now even the IMF has conceded to Greece that its austerity policies are inoperative. Nuclear proliferation continues unabated as the White House declared in September 2014 that the US would spend more than \$1 trillion over the next decade to upgrade its nuclear weapons capability, and this as the US and its willing executioners are operating in more than 120 countries and deeply involved in military conflicts in more than six regions of the globe, from Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, to Yemen, Jordan, the Gulf monarchies, Egypt, Libya, Somalia, Niger, Chad, Congo, Liberia, Korea, Ukraine, Armenia, Georgia, and across the Pacific. Meanwhile, on the domestic front, the Donald Trump administration

passed a bill to cut \$1 trillion from Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security over the next decade. This war on the working class represents the overall global trend, in which ten percent of the world's population controls ninety percent of global wealth, one percent controls fifty percent of global wealth, and fifty percent of the world's population owns less than nothing. Not mentioned by Derrida is the ecological crisis, in relation to which economic wars over the control of energy sources have led to spiralling CO<sub>2</sub> emissions that are now beyond the 400 parts per million 'safe path' for global surface temperatures and are expected to climb to 550 ppm in this century.

Little wonder then that following the 2008 banking crisis, which cost the US government \$22 trillion (and which has mostly padded the pocketbooks of the wealthy), and after the \$4.4 trillion spent by the US on wars since 9/11, sales of books by Marx increased 100 percent from 1990.<sup>40</sup> Marxist theory continues to be relevant in these neoliberal times. Private property regimes and neoliberal free trade are oriented towards innovation through competition, with a focus on new technologies and new organisational forms that seek to deliver more efficient labour processes for the sake of higher profits.<sup>41</sup> Competition, however, leads to declining rates of profit. Innovation becomes an impetus to the kinds of monopoly control that destroy innovation, as seen for instance in the energy sector. The quest for superior military power, with its now unparalleled surveillance capacities, has directed innovation in the quest for global economic advantage. Innovation, however, as David Harvey argues, is also destructive of value and capital itself, relying on the perpetual reorganisation of labour and the destabilisation of social relations through chronic job insecurity, deskilling and reskilling.<sup>42</sup> Displacing labour, he argues further, tends in the long run towards internal contradictions to capitalism that can be counteracted through various forms of creative destruction: increasing exploitation, increasing unemployment and precarity, reducing production costs, encouraging foreign trade in order to lower production costs, product innovation, automation, the devaluation of capital, the absorption of capital through the production of physical infrastructures, and lastly, monopolisation, as in the Walmart and Amazon phenomena. According to István Mészáros, the contradictions of capitalism, to which even capitalists must submit, represents the necessity of the renewal of Marxist concepts. Although Marx could not have foreseen how capitalism would renew itself through Keynesianism, monetarism and financialisation, he did predict how at every historical stage capitalism would be pitted against the interests of workers.<sup>43</sup>

Today's global political and economic crises call on leftists to renew the communist project that animates the critique of political economy of Marxists like Harvey. In the words of Bruno Bosteels in his contribution to *The Idea of Communism*, this is 'communism as a common horizon for thinking and acting in the twenty-first century.'<sup>44</sup> On average, Bosteels says, 'the left'

serves mainstream journalism as the mirror image of the extreme right, both of them to be rejected as political curiosities. What concerns Bosteels is the strife between leftism and ultra-leftism, the latter referring to those groups that reject parliamentary politics, unions and party discipline – variously described as ‘petty-bourgeois revolutionism,’ ‘adventurism,’ ‘pure communism’ and ‘massism’ – and for whom the vacillation between exuberant fanaticism and melancholy dejection replaces the patient work of party organisation.<sup>45</sup> The first line of contradiction to be mediated, he argues, is the simplistic one, perpetuated by today’s anarchist left as well as the post-1968 *nouveaux philosophes*, which would pit the masses en bloc against the state. As the *Communist Manifesto* teaches, ‘the people’ are themselves split into competing classes. Such anti-dialectical, generic anti-capitalism, a target of Marx and Engels, supplements the defence of liberal democracy, with its humanitarian interventions and promotion of popular resistance.<sup>46</sup>

Perhaps the most optimistic theoretical approach to ultra-left communism is that put forward by Italian workerist and post-operaist Marxists, whose most well-known protagonists are Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. Hardt and Negri contend that the new forms of immaterial symbolic production in the contemporary post-Fordist digital economy – the stage of advanced capitalism that has moved from industrial wage labour to a service and creative economy – represent a novel kind of biopolitical production, the most advanced form of capitalist social relations, which, despite their updated mechanisms of exploitation and control, provide labour with new means of self-valorisation. For Hardt and Negri, contemporary digital capitalism contains in *statu nascendi* the potential for communism. As Hardt puts it in his essay ‘The Common in Communism,’ the current composition of capital and class demonstrates the importance of the commons and the ‘affirmation of open and autonomous biopolitical production, the self-governed continuous creation of new humanity.’<sup>47</sup> For Hardt, the more that capitalism comes to rely on the biopolitical commons, the closer we get to communism. Does this, however, not imply a certain teleology and faith in historical necessity that is comparable in some ways with the Soviet hubris that the transition to communist society had been achieved sometime in the 1950s? While it is true that Marx and Engels addressed the radical potential of capitalism’s productive powers, it would be nothing but fatalistic to think that capitalism’s latest round of self-revolutionising will be emancipatory.

In ‘Communism as Commitment, Imagination, and Politics,’ Étienne Balibar makes the useful observation that Badiou’s and Žižek’s instigation of the debate on the ‘new communism’ compels us to ask: who are the communists, what are we communists thinking of and what are we doing and/or fighting for?<sup>48</sup> All communists, Balibar says, have been idealists dreaming of another world and not post-humans in a fully rationalised order. This means that the

communist's commitment is autonomous and not fully part of the existing state of affairs.<sup>49</sup> Communism is not premised on an objective description of the reality we already know, but on an overcoming of the contradictions of existing material conditions. The idea of communism and the idea of the avant garde are master signifiers through which subjects are constituted negatively and collectively as those who wish to radically change the complex of social relations. Because it is based on solidarity and universality, the class struggle that is implicit in the idea of communism is therefore both more intense *and* more disinterested, Balibar says, than any imagined community such as the nation or other form of organic community. The communist 'we' is fundamentally emancipatory and therefore different from the substantive 'we' of nation, identity group and ethnic community.

In terms of how to achieve this ideal, communists have diverse interpretations that are based on different understandings of the crises of capitalism.<sup>50</sup> Reflection requires the supplement of political projection or anticipation, however, with the future conceived, in Žižek's terms, as an ontological rupture in the present.<sup>51</sup> On this, Balibar remarks that Badiou's and Žižek's views are opposed to those of Hardt and Negri, who consider that many of Marx's presuppositions are no longer tenable. Whereas Hardt and Negri focus on the economic base, Žižek focuses on materialist dialectics and ideology critique, understood in relation to the Lacanian approach to the virtuality of the split subject and the *objet petit a*. Change from above, directed by a revolutionary force, is reconceived in Žižek's analysis as the presence of the Real in the space of ideology and less a matter of the organicity of the productive forces.<sup>52</sup> In contrast to the tendency to think in terms of networks and assemblages, Žižek emphasises ontological incompleteness and the impossible character of reality itself. His theoretical challenge is to break with transcendental idealism without regressing to naive materialism. In Lacanian terms, the Real is not simply a Void that precedes the Symbolic, and which symbolic regimes attempt to control, but is rather a negativity at the core of subjectivity and the symbolic order as such.<sup>53</sup>

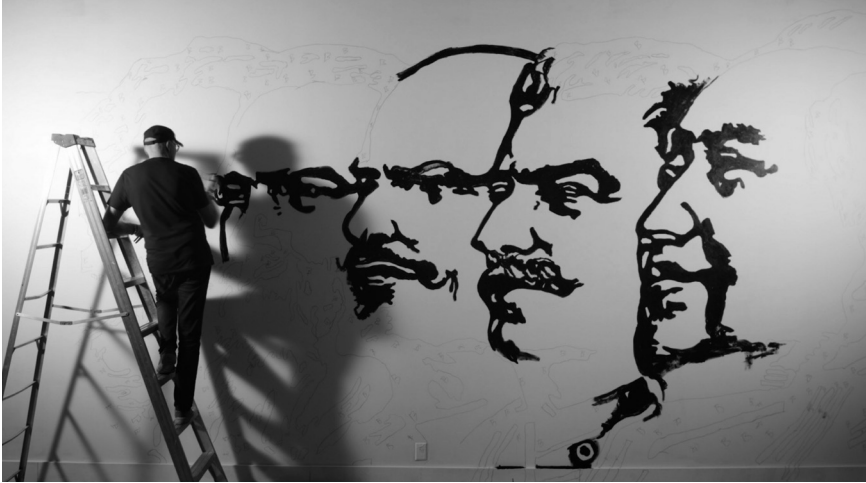
Communism seems impossible today. What is the *juste milieu*, Balibar asks, between Žižek's notion of revolutionary 'divine violence,' defined against the neoliberal impasse, and Hardt and Negri's emphasis on labour processes? What is it, he asks, that self-avowed communists are fighting for? The state of the 'post-traumatic' left, as I call it, accounts in some ways for the paradoxical popularity of Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony, or domination through consent, among postmodern and post-political activists.<sup>54</sup> Are today's hegemony contests – identity struggles that seek to give voice to what is repressed by the dominant consensus and that question the dominant hegemony – not a kind of Clintonian wink? 'I smoked the Gramscian notion of hegemonic contestation but I didn't inhale the noxious communist orthodoxy.' Chantal

Mouffe, for example, argues that the idea of the avant garde must be abandoned in favour of the multiplicity of social movements who oppose all programmes of ‘total social mobilization.’<sup>55</sup> Ernesto Laclau and Mouffe’s notion of radical democracy combines difference with contingency.<sup>56</sup> It does not, as Žižek argues, combine contingency with struggle. Žižek’s argument, in contrast, is that the empty place of power is always barred or uncannily fetishised rather than only temporarily hegemonised.

The specific terms that Laclau and Mouffe bring into play in their theory of radical democracy are *contingency* (as a necessary correlate of the universal), *equivalence* (of the forms of struggle based on race, class, gender and sexuality) and *antagonism* (as all of the latter vie for the space of power). It is the structuralist overlap of contingency and equivalence, derived from Saussure, that Žižek rejects with the concept of displaced and vanishing mediation: the place of overlap of genus and species, the particular element in the series that stands for all of the others. For Žižek, the emphasis on difference mostly avoids the problem of struggle, especially as the function of capitalism as the concrete universal is precisely to transform problems of economic inequality into problems of diversity and the recognition of multicultural differences.<sup>57</sup>

In his well-known essay, ‘Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes Please!’, Žižek refuses the blackmail of the current predicament – defend liberal capitalism or else support totalitarianism – without renouncing class struggle as a universal project.<sup>58</sup> The problem with class struggle, however, is that it does not exist without the remainder of an excluded third element. Today the contradiction of labour and capital is sustained not so much by the exclusion of a ‘foreign element,’ but by the exclusion of the idea and the actuality of leftist vanguards. In *The Courage of Hopelessness*, Žižek argues against decentralised collaborative networks and calls on leftists to organise forms of power that are external to the commons and that can regulate its functioning.<sup>59</sup> Dreaming of alternatives prevents us from thinking through to the end the limits of our condition. Such wishful thinking leads us to waste time and effort on pseudo-conflicts such as yes or no on Brexit, voting for the military or for Erdogan in Turkey, favouring Putin or right-wing nationalists in the Ukraine, hedonism versus Muslim rights in France, or Assad versus Daesh in Syria. Such pseudo-conflicts, as between Clinton and Trump in the US, or LePen and Macron in France, prevent the appearance of the true conflicts, in relation to which we would see emerge new leftist organisations that would replace populist rage against global capitalism with articulated programmes that would allow for the building of a new society that can function at the level of world government. Only such programmes, after the failures of state socialism, are according to him worthy of the name communism.

There is an ontological-epistemological gap, however, that remains untouched in the background of political programmes and choices, a



pre-transcendent mediation that transposes the failure of knowledge into the structure of the subject before and after political interpellation. Such a 'spectral entity' as the Lacanian *objet a* mediates the fantasy of the subject in ideology, and indeed, of the subject of difference. The subject of 'castration,' to put it in Freudian terms, displaces facile readings of Hegelian Marxism, according to which a premature synthesis presumes a positive starting point. In some ways artistic avant gardes, especially in current circumstances, are more easily able to embody the Hegelian modalities of negation that define the mediations of split subject and *objet a* than are political vanguards. This perhaps explains why political practices and not only labour practices are increasingly informed by the artistic mode of critique. In the age of the withering of symbolic efficiency,



Bruce Barber, [Performance] of *Spectres of Marx* for video documentation, 2015. The ten-minute time-lapse video documentation is displayed continuously for the duration of the exhibition alongside its end result. Presented by the Global Art Affairs Foundation in conjunction with the Venice Biennale. Courtesy of Bruce Barber.

it is not so much that 'God is dead' and there is no big Other who knows, but rather that 'God is unconscious,' which implies that something is nevertheless registered in the space of the big Other, in the 'quantum oscillations' of the 'God-systems' of art and politics. The real vanguards were never those who, as Badiou says, proposed the glorious victory, but those who organised the struggle and who made provisions for their eventual disappearance, their

self-sublation. They have always been aware of what Žižek refers to as symbolic castration: the ‘loss of something one never possessed.’<sup>60</sup> Insofar as the symbolic order conditions *jouissance*, the only way for the subject to enjoy is to conceal the fact of (non-)possession from the big Other. It is therefore symptomatic that today’s vanguards rarely refer to themselves as such, leading to the many different expressions of socially engaged art and end-of-ideology post-politics. I refer to such engaged artistic practices and social movements as a ‘vanguardia’ of cultural and political expression, more or less aware of the demands of neoliberal biocapitalism for means to reproduce the existing social order.

## Vanguardia

The essays that comprise this book were written largely in the context of discussions on socially engaged art, art activism and social movement politics, and not in the context of discussions on the avant garde and revolutionary politics. Regardless, it is my purpose here to sound the possibilities for the rethinking of an avant-garde programme in relation to today’s anti-capitalist social forces. I begin with a consideration of anti-globalisation protest and Occupy Wall Street. In both cases I address the limitations of decentralised antagonism and workerist post-politics. I propose in relation to Henri Lefevre’s 1970s writings on the state mode of production that biopolitical protest is not merely opposed to the state but is also a feature of its self-revolutionising.

With respect to the shift away from the postmodern end of history and towards the resurgence of emancipatory leftist praxis, the chapter ‘Vanguardia’ examines the growing body of engaged literature on social practice art. Through reviews of books by Gerald Raunig, BAVO, Gregory Sholette, Oliver Ressler, Grant Kester, Critical Art Ensemble, Nato Thompson, Yates McKee, Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen and Rebecca Gordon-Nesbitt, I explore various strands of contemporary leftist culture. Today’s globalisation obliges us to understand culture in relation to capital circulation, a process of emptying out and de-substantialisation that post-structuralist cultural studies tend to avoid. I am concerned therefore with theories of radical culture that address the totality of the world system.

Emancipatory struggle has to start somewhere. In the context of Montreal, where I live, one important event allowed me to consider the prospects for revolutionary culture today. The chapter ‘Psychoprotect: dérives of the Quebec Maple Spring,’ co-authored with Cayley Sorochan, describes our participation in the student strike demonstrations of 2012 in terms of Lettrist and Situationist theories of psychogeography, the *dérive* and broader critical frameworks. The article was written with the understanding that real cultural transformation can occur only when there is coordination among militant



intellectuals, artists and the working masses. Insofar as the revolt of the masses is typically appropriated by dominant forces, emancipatory movements are caught between civil society and the coercive machinery of the state. Against a pure leftist reason, only a dialectical rethinking of class and political organisation can go beyond polemics. The seeds of such radical collective organisation were evident in the Maple Spring where the combative syndicalism of the student groups allowed for the combination of both political programme and democratic radicalisation over an extended period of time.

Another book review, this time of *Test Dept: Total State Machine* (2015), examines the theoretical issues that are raised in this eclectic retrospective of one of most activist of British industrial music groups. From the South London of Thatcherite England and the context of the struggles of the early 1980s – the Miners’ Strike, the Poll Tax strike and the Polish Solidarity movement – Test Dept developed an original approach to music performance and materials based on the Stakhanovite model of the industrial worker. The eclipse of industrial work at the moment of the group’s emergence allows us to ask questions about contemporary social practice art in the context of contemporary post-Fordism. In contrast to what was still imaginable to early Test Dept, today’s state of precarity and shift from class politics to nomadic anarchism bring into view some of the effects of the postmodern theory of the 1980s that were otherwise occluded in Test Dept’s Bolshevik classicism.

‘No strawman for the revolution’ addresses new possibilities for thinking about avant-garde art and vanguard politics through a review of recent debates between Žižek and McKenzie Wark, and further, through an examination of the limits of cultural revolution as we have known it since the late 1960s. The impasse of Occupy Wall Street and similar protest movements has led Žižek to shift from a view of the party in terms of the Lacanian Discourse of the Analyst towards reflections on the Discourse of the Master. The consequent critiques of Žižek that are examined are shown to have evaded his ideas and fail to adequately address his Hegelian-Lacanian approach to dialectical materialism. On the other hand, one finds that Žižek’s renewal of radical politics is challenging others on the progressive left to do the same. The following chapter, ‘Beyond socially enraged art,’ proposes that the task of cultural revolution is to redefine today’s political struggle in class terms. Through Badiou’s study of the Chinese Cultural Revolution as well as Régis Debray’s analysis of guerrilla struggle in Cuba, I address the effort to unite socially engaged artists at the January 2015 symposium of Artist Organisations International.

A concluding chapter, ‘The only game in town,’ poses the now acute problem of class struggle in relation to identity politics. Contemporary political campaigns like Black Lives Matter and MeToo transform the experience of victimisation directly into demands for accountability, a process that tends to reproduce the political and structural frameworks within which structural

violence takes place. Against 'victim politics,' I argue for a democracy without guarantees that rejects various solutions to the rise of the political right: masochistic self-culpabilisation, appeals to civil society, scapegoating and nihilistic destruction. I explore Marxist literature for concepts with which to break with the postmodern pluralism that prevents the emergence of a radical left universalism.

If biocapitalist protest typifies the strategy of leftist cultural work in an age of post-enlightenment enjoyment, how can we possibly confront the limitations of micropolitical, identitarian and horizontalist post-politics? One might begin by understanding how it is that politics does not determine every aspect of human existence, which includes questions of art, culture and social values. My argument in these pages is that the rejection of vanguardism is a major symptom of today's neoliberal hegemony that must be dissolved.<sup>61</sup> *Vanguardia* reads such symptoms like so many bumps on the head, some of them produced by police batons, but most of them bits of data in a biometric matrix to which we are every day contributing as the product of the general intellect. It is a challenge for us in these times to reflect on what aspects of cultural and political praxis have not worked and what progressive political practices on the left will be able to win the day.