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VOL 20 NO 1 BOOK SENIOR EDITORS LANFRANCO ACETI, SUSANNE JASCHKO,  
JULIAN STALLABRASS / BOOK EDITOR BILL BALASKAS

The Leonardo Electronic Almanac is proud to announce the publication of its first LEA book, titled "Red Art: New Utopias in Data Capitalism." The publication investigates the relevance of socialist utopianism to the current dispositions of New Media Art, through the contributions of renowned and emerging academic researchers, critical theorists, curators and artists.



# RED ART

New Utopias in Data Capitalism

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LEONARDO ELECTRONIC ALMANAC BOOK, VOLUME 20 ISSUE 1

# Red Art: New Utopias in Data Capitalism

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## Leonardo Electronic Almanac

### Volume 20 Issue 1

#### 8 COMMONIST RED ART: BLOOD, BONES, UTOPIA AND KITTENS

Lanfranco Aceti

#### 13 CHANGING THE GAME: TOWARDS AN 'INTERNET OF PRAXIS'

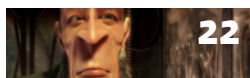
Bill Balaskas

#### 16 SUGGESTIONS FOR ART THAT COULD BE CALLED RED

Susanne Jaschko

#### 18 WHY DIGITAL ART IS RED

Julian Stallabrass



#### 22 GROUNDS FOR THE POLITICAL AESTHETICS OF CULTURAL COMMONS IN THE POST-MEDIUM CONDITION: THE OPEN SOURCE CULTURAL OBJECT

Boris Čučković

#### 44 POWERED BY GOOGLE: WIDENING ACCESS AND TIGHTENING CORPORATE CONTROL

Dan Schiller & Shinjoung Yeo



#### 58 HACKTERIA: AN EXAMPLE OF NEOMODERN ACTIVISM

Boris Magrini

#### 72 COMMUNISM OF CAPITAL AND CANNIBALISM OF THE COMMON: NOTES ON THE ART OF OVER-IDENTIFICATION

Matteo Pasquinelli

#### 82 MATERIAL CONDITIONS OF PRODUCTION AND HIDDEN ROMANTIC DISCOURSES IN NEW MEDIA ARTISTIC AND CREATIVE PRACTICES

Ruth Pagès & Gemma San Cornelio

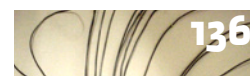


#### 94 GAMSUTL

Taus Makhacheva

#### 124 FROM TACTICAL MEDIA TO THE NEO-PRAGMATISTS OF THE WEB

David Garcia



136

#### DISSENT AND UTOPIA: RETHINKING ART AND TECHNOLOGY IN LATIN AMERICA

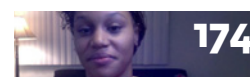
Valentina Montero Peña & Pedro Donoso

#### 148 THE THING HAMBURG: A TEMPORARY DEMOCRATIZATION OF THE LOCAL ART FIELD

Cornelia Sollfrank, Rahel Puffert & Michel Chevalier

#### 164 ARTISTS AS THE NEW PRODUCERS OF THE COMMON (?)

Daphne Dragona



174

#### LONG STORY SHORT

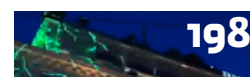
Natalie Bookchin

#### 182 THE DESIRES OF THE CROWD: SCENARIO FOR A FUTURE SOCIAL SYSTEM

Karin Hansson

#### 192 FROM LITERAL TO METAPHORICAL UTOPIA: INTERCONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE INNER STRUCTURE OF THE NEW MEDIA ART AND THE UTOPIAN THOUGHT

Christina Vatsella



198

#### THE POINT SOURCE: BLINDNESS, SPEECH AND PUBLIC SPACE

Adam Brown

#### 214 INVISIBLE HISTORIES, THE GRIEVING WORK OF COMMUNISM, AND THE BODY AS DISRUPTION: A TALK ABOUT ART AND POLITICS

Elske Rosenfeld

#### 224 TAKEN SQUARE: ON THE HYBRID INFRASTRUCTURES OF THE #15M MOVEMENT

José Luis de Vicente



232

#### WHEN AESTHETIC IS NOT JUST A PRETTY PICTURE: PAOLO CIRIO'S SOCIAL ACTIONS

Lanfranco Aceti

#### 251 »IN EIGENER SACHE« (SPEAKING FOR OURSELVES) MAGAZINES, GDR, OCTOBER 1989 - JUNE 1990

Elske Rosenfeld

#### 266 ART WORK / DREAM WORK IN NEW MEDIA DOCUMENTARY

Karen O'Rourke

# Commonist Red Art: Blood, Bones, Utopia and Kittens

**Does Red Art exist? And if so, who creates it and where can we find it?** This special issue of the Leonardo Electronic Almanac addresses these questions and collates a series of perspectives and visual essays that analyze the role, if any, that Red Art plays in the contemporary art world.

Red Art, these are two simple words that can generate complex discussions and verbal feuds since they align the artist to a vision of the world that is 'Red' or 'Communist.'

Nevertheless, even if the two little words when placed together are controversial and filled with *animus*, they are necessary, if not indispensable, to understand contemporary aesthetic issues that are affecting art and how art operates in the context of social versus political power relations within an increasingly technological and socially-mediated world.

Red Art could be translated – within the contemporary hierarchical structures – as the art of the powerless versus the art of the powerful, as the art of the masses versus the art of the few, as the art of the young versus the old, as the art of the technological democrats versus the technological conservatives, as the art of the poor versus the art of the rich... Or it could be described as the art of the revolutionary versus the status quo. In the multitude of the various possible definitions, one appears to stand out for contemporary art and it is the definition of art as bottom-up participation versus art as top-down

prepackaged aesthetic knowledge. And yet, what does Red Art stand for and can it be only restricted to Communist Art?

The contemporary meaning of Red Art is different from what it may have been for example in Italy in the 1970s, since so much has changed in terms of politics, ideology and technology. It is no longer possible to directly identify Red Art with Communist Art (as the art of the ex Union of Soviet Socialist Republics or of its satellite states and globalized Communist political parties which were and continue to be present in the West – albeit inedulcorated forms) nor as the art of the left, but there is a need to analyze the complexity of the diversification and otherization of multiple geopolitical perspectives. <sup>1</sup>

If today's Red Art has to redefine its structures and constructs it becomes necessary to understand who is encompassed within the label of Red Artists and what their common characteristics are. Red Artists – if we wanted to use this category – and their aesthetic production cannot be reduced to the word 'Communist,' borrowing passé ideological constructs. An alternative to the impasse and the ideological collapse of communism is the redefinition of Red Art as the art of the commons: **Commonist Art.** <sup>2</sup> If Red Art were to be defined as the art of the commons, Commonist Art, thereby entrenching it clearly within technoutopias and neoliberalist crowd sourcing approaches for collective participation, this would provide a contradictory but functional framework for the realization of

common practices, socially engaged frameworks, short terms goals and 'loose/open' commitments that could be defined in technological terms as *liquid digital utopias* or as a new form of permanent dystopia. <sup>3</sup>

The XXIst century appears to be presenting us, then, with the entrenched digitized construct of the common versus the idea of the Paris Commune of 1871, thereby offering a new interpretation of the social space and an alternative to traditional leftist/neoliberal constructs. The idea of the common – as an open access revolving door, is opposed to the concept of the commune – as a highly regulated and hierarchical structure.

The 'semantic' distingo between commons and communes becomes important since both terms are reflections of constructions and terminological frameworks for an understanding of both society and art that is based on 'likes,' actions and commitments for a common or a commune. The commitment, even when disparagingly used to define some of the participants as click-activists and armchair revolutionaries, <sup>4</sup> is partial and leaves the subject able to express other likes often in contradiction with one another: e.g. I like the protests against Berlusconi's government and I like the programs on his private TVs.

I find the idea of the commons (knowledge, art, creativity, health and education) liberating, empowering and revolutionary, if only it was not expressed within its own economic corporative structures, creating further layers of contradiction and operational complexities.

The contradictions of contemporary Red Art and contemporary social interactions may be located in the difference between the interpretations of common and commune – the commune upon which the Italian Communist Party, for example, based its foundations in order to build a new 'church.'

The relationships in the commune of the Italian communists (oxymoronically defined Cattocomunisti or Catholic-communist) rests in faith and in compelled actions, in beliefs so rooted that are as blinding as blinding is the light of God in the painting *The Conversion of Saint Paul on the Road to Damascus* by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio.

*[...] and from the leadership an aggressive unwillingness to allow any dissent or deviation. 'That time produced one of the sharpest mental frosts I can remember on the Left,' the historian E. P. Thompson would recall from personal knowledge of the CP... <sup>5</sup>*

It is this blind faith that has generated the martyrs of communism and heretical intellectuals, accusations from which not even Antonio Gramsci was able to escape. The vertical hierarchical structure of the commune and of the Communist Party produced heretics and immolations, but also supported artists, intellectuals, academics and writers that operated consonantly with the party's ideals: people that sang from the same preapproved institutional hymn sheet.

**Stefania:** *This young generation horrifies me. Having been kept for years by this state, as soon as they discover to have two neurons they pack and go to study, to work in the US and London, without giving a damn for who supported them. Oh well, they do not have any civic vocation. When I was young at the occupied faculty of literature, I oozed civic vocation. [...] I have written eleven novels on civic duty and the book on the official history of the Party.*

**Jep Gambardella:** *How many certainties you have, Stefania. I do not know if I envy you or feel a sensation of disgust. [...] Nobody remembers your civic vocation during your University years. Many instead*

*remember, personally, another vocation of yours that was expressed at the time; but was consumed in the bathrooms of the University. You have written the official history of the Party because for years you have been the mistress of the head of the Party. Your eleven novels published by a small publishing house kept by the Party and reviewed by small newspapers close to the Party are irrelevant novels [...] the education of the children that you conduct with sacrifice every minute of your life ... Your children are always without you [...] then you have - to be precise - a butler, a waiter, a cook, a driver that accompanies the boys to school, three babysitters. In short, how and when is your sacrifice manifested? [...] These are your lies and your fragilities.* <sup>6</sup>

To the question, then, if Red Art exists I would have to answer: YES! I have seen Red Art in Italy (as well as abroad), as the Communist Art produced in the name of the party, with party money and for party propaganda, not at all different from the same art produced in the name of right-wing parties with state or corporate money – having both adopted and co-opted the same systems and frameworks of malfeasance shared with sycophantic artists and intellectuals.

In order to understand the misery of this kind of Red Art one would have to look at the Italian aesthetization of failure – which successfully celebrates failure in the *Great Beauty* by Paolo Sorrentino when the character of Stefania, and her ‘oozing civic duty,’ is ripped apart. It is a civic responsibility that is deprived and devoid of any ethics and morals. <sup>7</sup>

This is but one of the multiple meanings of the concept of Red Art – the definition of Red Art as Communist Art, is the one that can only lead to sterile definitions and autocelebratory constructs based on the ‘aesthetic obfuscation of the lack of meaning’ as a

tool for the obscurity of the aesthetic to act as a producer of meaning when the artist producing it is inept at creating meaning. <sup>8</sup> Even more tragically, Red Art leads to the molding of the artist as spokesperson of the party and to the reduction of the artwork, whenever successful, to advertising and propaganda.

Commonist Art, founded on the whim of the ‘like’ and ‘trend,’ on the common that springs from the aggregation around an image, a phrase, a meme or a video, is able to construct something different, a convergence of opinions and actions that can be counted and weighed and that cannot be taken for granted. Could this be a Gramscian utopia of re-construction and re-fashioning of aesthetics according to ‘lower commons’ instead of high and rich ‘exclusivity,’ which as such is unattainable and can only be celebrated through diamond skulls and gold toilets?

Commonist Art – the art that emerges from a common – is a celebration of a personal judgment, partially knowledgeable and mostly instinctive, perhaps manipulated – since every ‘other’ opinion is either manipulated by the media or the result of international lobby’s conspiracies or it can be no more than a reinforcement of the society of the simulacra. Conversely, it may also be that the image and its dissemination online is the representation of a personal diffidence towards systems of hierarchical power and endorsement that can only support ‘their own images and meanings’ in opposition to images that are consumed and exhausted through infinite possibilities of interpretation and re-dissemination. <sup>9</sup>

If Commonist Art offers the most populist minimum common denominator in an evolutionary framework determined by whims, it is not at all different from the minimum common denominator of inspirational/aspirational codified aesthetics that are defined by the higher echelons of contemporary oligarchies that

have increasingly blurred the boundaries of financial and aesthetic realms.

Commonist Art – if the current trends of protest will continue to affirm themselves even more strongly – will continue to defy power and will increasingly seek within global trends and its own common base viable operational structures that hierarchies will have to recognize, at one point or the other, by subsuming Commonist Art within pre-approved structures.

Red Art, therefore, if intended as Commonist Art becomes the sign of public revolts, in the physical squares or on the Internet. It is art that emerges without institutional ‘approval’ and in some cases in spite of institutional obstacles. Gramsci would perhaps say that Commonist Art is a redefinition of symbolic culture, folk art and traditional imageries that processed and blended through digital media and disseminated via the Internet enable Red Art to build up its own languages and its own aesthetics without having to be institutionally re-processed and receive hierarchical stamps of approval.

Red Art can also be the expression of people whose blood and tears – literally – mark the post-democracies of the first part of the XXIst century. Non-political, non-party, non-believers, <sup>10</sup> the crowds of the Internet rally around an argument, a sense of justice, a feeling of the future not dominated by carcinogenic politicians, intellectuals and curators, that present themselves every time, according to geographical and cultural spaces, as Sultans, Envoys of God, or even Gods.

Red Art, the Commonist Art that perhaps is worth considering as art, is the one that is self-elevated, built on the blood and bones of people still fighting in the XXIst century for justice, freedom and for a piece of bread. Art that rallies crowds’ likes and dislikes based

on the whims of a liquid Internet structure where people support within their timelines an idea, a utopia, a dream or the image of a kitten. <sup>11</sup>

This piece of writing and this whole volume is dedicated to the victims of the economic and political violence since the beginning of the Great Recession and to my father; and to the hope, hard to die off, that some utopia may still be possible.

**Lanfranco Aceti**

*Editor in Chief, Leonardo Electronic Almanac  
Director, Kasa Gallery*



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3. "For one thing, utopia has now been appropriated by the entertainment industry and popular culture – what is termed the contemporary liquid utopia – as a kind of dystopia." Anthony Elliott, *The Contemporary Bauman* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 17.
4. The blurred lines between real and virtual do not exempt click-activists or armchair revolutionaries from the persecutions and abuses of the state police. The sitting room within one's home becomes the public space for conflict and revolts. One example of many around the globe: Alexander Abad-Santos, "Turkey Is Now Arresting Dozens for Using Twitter," *The Wire*, June 5, 2013, <http://www.thewire.com/global/2013/06/turkey-twitter-arrests/65908/> (accessed January 10, 2014).
5. David Kynaston, *Austerity Britain, 1945-1951* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 342.
6. The English translation from the Italian is from the author. *La Grande Bellezza*, DVD, directed by Paolo Sorrentino (Artificial Eye, 2014).
7. "Anti-communism was never accepted as the moral equivalent of anti-fascism, not only by my parents but also by the overwhelming majority of liberal-minded people. The Left was still morally superior." Nick Cohen, *What's Left?: How the Left Lost its Way* (London: Harper Perennial, 2007), 3. La questione morale or the 'moral issue' in English is the problem identified by Enrico Berlinguer and that questioned the role of the Communist party and the Left in general in Italy. The moral issue has not been resolved to this day and is at the core of the current impossibility to distinguish between the ideological frameworks of Left and Right – since both political areas are perceived as equally and intrinsically corrupt as well as tools for an oligarchic occupation of democracy. For the original interview in Italian of Enrico Berlinguer see: Eugenio Scalfari, "Intervista a Enrico Berlinguer," *La Repubblica*, July 28, 1981 available in "La questione morale di Enrico Berlinguer," *Rifondazione Comunista's website*, <http://web.rifondazione.it/home/index.php/12-home-page/8766-la-questione-morale-di-enrico-berlinguer> (accessed March 20, 2014).
8. "Under the surface of images, one invests bodies in depth; behind the great abstraction of exchange, there continues the meticulous, concrete training of useful forces; the circuits of communication are the supports of an accumulation and a centralization of knowledge; the play of signs defines the anchorages of power; it is not that the beautiful totality of the individual is amputated, repressed, altered by our social order, it is rather that the individual is carefully fabricated in it..." Michel Foucault, "Panopticism," in *The Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Vanessa R. Schwartz and Jeannene M. Przyblyski (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004), 78.
9. There are those who think that the image is an extremely rudimentary system in comparison with language and those who think that signification cannot exhaust the image's ineffable richness. Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," in *Visual Culture: The Reader*, ed. Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall (London: Sage Publications, 1999), 33.
10. Non-believers stands for skeptics and does not have a religious connotation in this context.
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## Changing the Game: Towards an 'Internet of Praxis'

There is a new spectre haunting the art world. Not surprisingly, it has been put forward in recent articles, panel discussions and books as the 'ism' that could, possibly, best describe the current dispositions of contemporary art. The name of the spectre is "post-internet art."<sup>1</sup> Unlike, however, its counterpart that was released in the world by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in 1848,<sup>2</sup> this contemporary spectre has not arrived in order to axiomatically change the established order of things; conceivably, it has arrived in order to support it.

Post-internet art refers to the aesthetic qualities defining today's artistic production, which is often influenced by, mimics, or fully adopts elements of the Internet. At the same time, the term incorporates the communication tools and platforms through which contemporary artworks reach their intended (or non-intended) audiences. Notably, in his book *Post Internet* (2011), art writer Gene McHugh suggests that regardless of an artist's intentions, all artworks now find a space on the World Wide Web and, as a result, "[...] contemporary art, as a category, was/is forced, against its will, to deal with this new distribution context or at least acknowledge it."<sup>3</sup> Quite naturally, this would seem like a strong oppositional force directed against the modus operandi of the mainstream art world. Yet, further down in the same page, McHugh characterizes this acknowledgement as a constituent part of the much larger "game" that is played by commercial galleries, biennials, museums and auction houses.

Thus, there are inevitable contradictions and challenges in the role that post-internet art is called to fulfil as a movement and/or as a status of cultural production. Firstly, there is an easily identifiable 'anxiety' to historicize a phenomenon that is very much in progress: the Internet is changing so rapidly, that if we think of the online landscape ten years ago, this would be radically different from our present experience of it. Furthermore, the post-internet theorization of contemporary art runs the danger of aestheticizing (or over-aestheticizing) a context that goes well beyond the borders of art: in the same way that we could talk about post-internet art, we could also talk about post-internet commerce, post-internet dating, post-internet travel, post-internet journalism, etc. Therefore, the role and the identity of the post-internet artist are not independent of a much wider set of conditions. This false notion of autonomy is quite easy to recognize if we think, for instance, of 'post-radio art' or 'post-television art' or, even, 'post-videogames art,' and the inherent structural and conceptual limitations of such approaches.<sup>4</sup>

Most importantly, however, any kind of aestheticization may readily become a very effective tool of depoliticization. The idea of distributing images, sounds and words that merely form part of a pre-existing system of power, inescapably eradicates the political significance of distribution. The subversive potentiality inherent in the characterisation of a network as 'distributed' was systematically undermined over the 1990s and the 2000s, due to the ideological perva-

siveness of neoliberalism during the same period. Distribution – not to mention, *equal* distribution – could have enjoyed a much more prominent role as a natural fundament of the Web and, accordingly, as a contributing factor in any investigation of digital art. Last but definitely not least, one cannot ignore the crucial fact that apolitical art is much easier to enter the art market and play the ‘game’ of institutionalization (and vice versa).

To the question: could the Internet and new media at large become true ‘game changers’ in the current historical conjuncture? What does ‘red art’ have to propose, and how does it relate to the previously described ‘post-internet condition’?

Interestingly, the term “post-internet art” was born and grew parallel to the global economic crisis and the Great Recession of 2009. One of the most important objectives of the social movements that were engendered by the crisis has been the effort to “reclaim” and “re-appropriate.” This aspiration referred not only to economic resources, but also to social roles, democratic functions, human rights, and – of course – urban spaces. Syntagma Square in Greece, Puerta del Sol in Madrid, Zuccotti Park in New York, as well as some of the most iconic public locations around the world saw diverse, or even ‘irreconcilable’ in some cases crowds demand change. Within the reality of Data Capitalism and its multiple self-generated crises, people increasingly felt that they have now been totally deprived of a place (“topos” in Greek).

It is worth remembering that the coiner of “utopia,” Thomas More, chose an island as the location where he placed his ideal society.<sup>5</sup> Any island constitutes a geographic formation that privileges the development of individual traits through a natural process of ‘appropriation.’ This encompasses both the material and the immaterial environment as expressed in the landscape, the biology of the different organisms, and – most relevant to our case – culture. Notably, when it comes to connecting utopianism with the cultural paradigm of new media art, we should not focus merely on the lack of a physical space (as articulated, for instance,

through cyberspace); rather, we should address the juxtaposition of “topos” with a potentially ‘empty’ notion of “space.” The transcendence of space in a ‘digital utopia’ absolutely necessitates the existence of a ‘topos.’ In a similar way to the one that Marx sees capitalism as a stage towards a superior system of production (communism),<sup>6</sup> the construction of a ‘topos’ is a prerequisite for the flourishing of utopianism.

‘Red Art’ can be understood as a tool for the creation of such ‘topoi.’ The lesson that new media artists can learn from the political osmoses catalyzed by the economic crisis is that, in order to be effective, cyberspace should become part of a strategy that combines physical and online spaces, practically and conceptually, whilst taking into account the individual traits of both. The necessity expressed through this combination constitutes (at least partly) a departure from the developing discourses around the ‘Internet of Things’ or the ‘Internet of Places.’<sup>7</sup> Alternatively, or additionally, what is proposed here is the formulation of an ‘Internet of Praxis’ (including, of course, artistic praxis). This approach is vividly reflected in several of the projects examined in this publication, as well as in the theoretical frameworks that are outlined.

Digital art is today in a position to capitalize on the participatory potentialities that have been revealed by the socio-political events that defined the early 2010s. The reconceptualization of cyberspace as a ‘cybertopos’ is a constituent part of this new ground on which people are called to stand and build. Accordingly, the emergence of a culture of ‘post-net participation’ in which digital media transcend physical space by consolidating it (instead of ‘merely’ augmenting it), may allow us to explore “concrete utopias”<sup>8</sup> to a greater extent than ever before in recent times. It is by actively pursuing this objective that we would expect to change the rules of the game. Artists are often the first to try.

**Bill Balaskas**

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2. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels published *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* in London, on February 21, 1848.
3. Gene McHugh, *Post Internet*, 6.
4. The etymological comparison between the terms ‘post-internet art’ and ‘postmodern art’ could also highlight this context. Notably, in the case of this juxtaposition, ‘post-internet art’ puts a tool (the Internet) in the position of a movement (Modernism). If we were to consider the Internet as a movement, then, the natural historical link that would be established through the term ‘post-internet art’ would be with net art. Nevertheless, such a decision would assign net art to a status of ‘legitimization,’ towards which major museums, curators and art fairs have shown a rather consistent hostility. In this instance, historicization becomes a foe, since it would refute a ‘neutral’ relationship of the Web with art. This perspective is closely connected with the formation of an abstract notion of universalism, to which I refer further down (see endnote 8).
5. Thomas More’s *Utopia* was first published in 1516, in Belgium. There are several translations of the book.
6. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, with an introduction by David Harvey (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 51: “What the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable.”
7. The Internet of Things represents a vision in which physical items become ‘smart’ objects by being equipped with sensors that can be remotely controlled and connected through the Internet. The Internet of Places focuses on the spatial dimension of the capacities that Web 2.0 offers. For an account of the Internet of Things, see Mattern, Friedemann and Christian Floerkemeier, “From the Internet of Computers to the Internet of Things,” in *Informatik-Spektrum*, 33 (2010): 107–121, <http://www.vs.inf.ethz.ch/publ/papers/Internet-of-things.pdf> (accessed February 20, 2014). For an account of the Internet of Places, see Giuseppe Conti, Paul Watson, Nic Shape, Raffaele de Amicis and Federico Prandi, “Enabling the ‘Internet of Places’: a virtual structure of space-time-tasks to find and use Internet resources,” in *Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Computing for Geospatial Research & Applications* (New York: ACM, 2011), 9.
8. For more on the concept of ‘concrete utopias’ see Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, tr. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight, 3 vols (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986). Bloch differentiates between ‘abstract utopias’ and ‘concrete utopias,’ associating the latter with the possibility of producing real change in the present. ‘Concrete utopias’ should not be confused with seemingly similar theorizations such as Nicolas Bourriaud’s ‘microtopias,’ which structurally aim at preserving the existing status quo. Bourriaud asserts in *Relational Aesthetics* (2002) that “it seems more pressing to invent possible relations with our neighbours in the present than to bet on happier tomorrows.” Quite evidently, this approach stands far from the universalism that he advocates in his *Altermodern Manifesto* (2009) as a direct result of new technologies and globalization. At a time when neoliberal capitalism was entering its worst ever crisis, Bourriaud chose to largely ignore this context and build on a concept that – in the end – is apolitical and counter-utopian. ‘Post-internet art’ appears to follow a comparably dangerous trajectory.



# Suggestions for Art That Could Be Called Red

**What is Red Art? Or rather: what could Red Art be in today's post-communist, post-utopian world, a world shaken by conflicts engendered by contrary beliefs and ideologies which have little to do with communism?** A world in which countries and societies are disrupted by territorial disputes, and by bloody fights about questions of religious identity, national identity, and ideology? Where communism has been overrun by capitalism with rare exception; where the European left movement is weak. Where the post-industrial era has produced an economic reality that is orders of magnitude more complex, transnational and therefore more difficult to control or change, than history has ever seen. In this situation, can there (still) be art that deals with ideas of communism constructively, or does contemporary art look at communist ideals only with nostalgia?

And let's be clear: is art that simply speaks out against capitalism, globalisation and neo-liberalism from a leftist position – is this kind of art 'red' per se? Do we expect Red Art to be 'red' in content, for instance, in directly addressing topics such as class struggle, the negatives of capitalism and a new neo-liberal world order? And if it does, is it enough to be descriptive or do we want art to be more than that, i.e., provoking, forward-thinking or even militant? In 1970, Jean-Luc Godard drafted a 39-point manifesto *Que faire? What is to be done?* that contrasted the antagonistic practices of making political films and making films 'politically.' It called unequivocally for art that actively takes up the position of the proletarian class and that

aims for nothing less than the transformation of the world. With his legacy, what kind of objectives do we request from Red Art? Do we really still think that art can change the world or is that another idea from the past that has been overwritten by something that we like to call reality? Can art that is for the most part commercialised and produced in a capitalist art market be 'red' at all, or does it have to reject the system established by galleries, fairs and museums in order to be truly 'red'?

Decades ago, when artists started to use new media such as video and the computer, their works were 'new' in the way they were produced and distributed, and changed the relationship between artists and their collaborators as well as between the artworks and their audiences and 'users' respectively. Most of this new-media-based art circulated outside the ordinary market and found other distribution channels. The majority of works were inspired by a quest for the 'new' and consistently broke with old aesthetic principles and functions. Much of it was also driven by a search for the 'better,' by overthrowing old hierarchies and introducing a more liberal and inclusive concept of the world, based on self-determination and active participation. Last but not least the emergence of the Internet brought us a fertile time for new and revisited utopias and artistic experiments dealing with collaboration, distribution of knowledge, shared authorship, and appropriation of technologies. Today we know that neither the Internet nor any other new technology has saved us, but that the hopes for a more demo-

cratic world and alternative economies sparked by it have come true, if only to a minor degree.

So how do artists respond to this post-communist, post-utopian condition? What can be discussed as Red Art in the recent past and present? In this issue of Leonardo we have gathered some answers to these questions in the form of papers, essays and artworks, the latter produced especially for this purpose. Bringing together and editing this issue was challenging because we decided from the start to keep the call for contributions as open as possible and to not pre-define too much. We were interested in what kind of responses our call would produce at a moment when the world is occupied with other, seemingly hotter topics, and it is fascinating to note that the resulting edition quite naturally spans decades of art production and the respective 'new' technologies as they related to ideas of social equality and empowerment – from video art to net art to bio art. This issue shows that the search for alternative ideas and perspectives, and an adherence to leftist ideals is neither futile nor simply nostalgic. But that this search is ever more relevant, particularly at a time when European politics is seemingly consolidating and wars around the world are establishing new regimes of social and economic inequality.

**Susanne Jaschko**

# Why Digital Art is Red

**The divide between the art shown in major museums and art fairs and that associated with the new media scene has been deep and durable.**

Many critics have puzzled over it, particularly because there is much that the two realms share, including the desire to put people into unusual social situations. <sup>1</sup> Yet some of the reasons for the divide are plain enough, and they are about money, power and social distinction. The economic divide is across competing models of capitalist activity: the exclusive ownership of objects set against the release of reproducible symbols into networks with the ambition that they achieve maximum speed and ubiquity of circulation. The social divide is between a conservative club of super-rich collectors and patrons, and their attendant advisors, who buy their way into what they like to think of as a sophisticated cultural scene (Duchamp Land), against a realm which is closer to the mundane and more evidently compromised world of technological tools (Turing Land). <sup>2</sup> Power relations are where the divide appears starkest: in one world, special individuals known as artists make exceptional objects or events with clear boundaries that distinguish them from run-of-the-mill life; and through elite ownership and expert curation, these works are presented for the enlightenment of the rest of us. In the new media world, some 'artists' but also collectives and other shifting and anonymous producers offer up temporary creations onto a scene in which their works are open to copying, alteration and comment, and in which there is little possible control of context, frame or conversation.

This description of the divide has been put in extreme terms for the sake of clarity, and there are a few instances of the split appearing to erode. <sup>3</sup> Yet its persistence remains one of the most striking features of the general fragmentation of the fast-growing and globalising art world. That persistence rests on solid material grounds, laid out by Marx: the clash of economic models is a clear case of the mode and relations of production coming into conflict, and is part of a much wider conflict over the legal, political and social aspects of digital culture, and its synthesis of production and reproduction. <sup>4</sup> Copyright is one arena where the clash is very clear. Think of the efforts of museums to control the circulation of images and to levy copyright charges, while at the same time surrendering to the camera-phone as they abandon the attempt to forbid photography in their galleries.

So where is Red Art and the left in this scenario? Amidst the general gloom and lassitude that has beset much of the Left in Europe and the US, the development of the digital realm stands out as an extraordinary gain. It allows for the direct communication, without the intermediary of newspapers and TV, of masses of people globally – who turn out to be more egalitarian, more environmentally concerned and more seditious than the elite had bargained for. Alexander Cockburn, with his long career in activism and journalism, remarks:

*Thirty years ago, to find out what was happening in Gaza, you would have to have had a decent short-wave radio, a fax machine, or access to those great newsstands in Times Square and North Hollywood that carried the world's press. Not anymore. We can get a news story from [...] Gaza or Ramallah or Oaxaca or Vidarbha and have it out to a world audience in a matter of hours.* <sup>5</sup>

It is hard to ban social media, it has been claimed, because it entwines video fads, kittens and politics (and banning kittens looks bad). So the insight attributed by some to Lenin – that capitalists will sell us the rope with which to hang them – is still relevant. <sup>6</sup>

In an era in which the political and artistic avant-gardes have faded, the affiliation of the art world that is founded upon the sale and display of rare and unique objects made by a few exceptional individuals – in which high prices are driven by monopoly rent effects – tends to be with the conspicuous consumption of the state and the super-rich. <sup>7</sup> Here, the slightest taint of the common desktop environment is enough to kill aesthetic feeling. The affiliation of at least some of new media art is rather to the kitsch, the populist, and to the egalitarian circulation of images and words, along with discourse and interaction. New media artists who push those attachments work against some of the deepest seated elements of the art world ethos: individualism, distinction, discreteness and preservation for posterity (and long-term investment

value). It should be no surprise that they are frequently and without qualification denied the status of 'artist.'

It is also clear why the death of leftist ideas in elite discourse does not hold in new media circles, where the revival of thinking about the Left, Marxism and Communism is very evident. <sup>8</sup> The borders of art are blurred by putting works to explicit political use (in violation of the Kantian imperative still policed in the mainstream art world). <sup>9</sup> Very large numbers of people are continually making cultural interventions online, and value lies not in any particular exceptional work but in the massive flow of interaction and exchange. In that world, as it never could in a gallery, the thought may creep in that there is nothing special about any one of us. And this may lead to the greatest scandal of all: think of the statements that artists who deal with politics in the mainstream art world are obliged to make as their ticket of admission – 'my art has no political effect.' They have to say it, even when it is patently absurd; and they have to say it, even as the art world itself becomes more exposed to social media, and is ever less able to protect its exclusive domain and regulate the effects of its displays. So at base, the divide is economic, but at the level of what causes the repulsion from digital art – that puts collectors and critics to flight – it is deeply and incontrovertibly political. <sup>10</sup> They run headlong from the red.

**Julian Stallabrass**

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# POWERED BY GOOGLE

Widening Access and Tightening Corporate Control

by

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## INTRODUCTION

In accord with its mission to “organize the world’s information and make it universally accessible and useful,”<sup>1</sup> Google has, over the last several years, digitized millions of books from major research libraries – collections that have been built by the endeavors of librarians and cultural workers over hundreds of years, and with much public funding – and turned those collections into an online marketplace with the intention of end-running Amazon to become the world’s largest bookstore. There was one flaw in Google’s strategy of pillaging the world’s print culture: it tried to sidestep the copyrights claimed by commercial publishers and authors. However, Google reached a commercial settlement with the Association of American Publishers in 2012, after which the sole remaining barrier it faced was its long-running litigation with the Authors’ Guild. In November 2013, this obstacle to Google’s cultural accumulation strategy also seemed to have been overcome when the company won a resounding legal victory. A federal judge dismissed the case, saying that Google’s book scanning project is protected under U.S. legal provisions for fair use. While the Authors’ Guild vowed to appeal, Google got the green light to move ahead its plan for the world’s books.

## ABSTRACT

*The Internet and new media are often seen as constituting open spaces where cultural empowerment and free-flowing expressive creativity find emancipation from top-down political-economic power. However, this one-sided perspective is insufficient, if not even invalid: the democratization of art does not cease to confront structural obstacles in cyberspace, as is shown by this case-study of Google’s overt interventions into art and culture. Google is working to digitize museum collections at its own expense, and is making art work widely accessible on the Internet. We show how this widened access itself, however, functions as a Google market strategy for turning cultural production into a site of profit-making. Google is quietly reorganizing cultural spaces on a global scale, to incorporate them into its more encompassing business of information.*

Does the world’s art present equally tempting prey?

Still trying to expand, Google has placed the received traditions of global art and history in its sights. The company is moving into these territories, armed with its seductively powerful digital technologies, seeking to burrow more deeply into our cultural landscapes. Its corporate strategy for art and historical archives is complex – and profoundly important.

## THE BUSINESS OF SEARCH

Studies show that web searchers overwhelmingly limit themselves to the first page of search results in pursuing their queries; a commanding majority look at just the first three listings.<sup>2</sup> Whoever organizes these search results obtains a chokepoint over the wider Internet. With an estimated 62% share of the global

search service market,<sup>3</sup> Google has become the gateway to the Web for a large part of the world. In South Korea, China, Japan, and Russia, alternative or ‘home-grown’ search engines are dominant. Elsewhere, by and large, Google rules.

While trumpeting that its intentions are strictly benevolent and that search constitutes “one of the great intellectual challenges of our time,”<sup>4</sup> Google’s search business – the core of the company – actually has nothing to do with bettering the human condition. Its purpose is to provide advertisers with access to Web users, and to profit by charging for that access. In pursuit of this profit strategy, Google is doing everything it can to dig new channels for advertising to flow through. This is very lucrative. In its most recent year, Google harvested over \$43 billion in web advertising, which made up 95% of its revenue.<sup>5</sup>

At the center of Google's search engine sits its "algorithm" – the tangle of rules that structure the results pages it serves up in response to keyword queries. This algorithm is both intensively cultivated and proprietary.

"From the start," Google Executive Chairman Eric Schmidt underlines, "Google has constantly refined its search algorithm, which now considers over 200 factors in assessing site quality and relevance."<sup>6</sup> In 2010, only partly in order to enhance search quality and end-user experience, Google engineers conducted 13,311 "evaluations to see whether proposed algorithm changes improved the quality of its search results," and these reviews resulted in 516 alterations – more than one per day.<sup>7</sup>

Google repeatedly emphasizes that its algorithm is unbiased, anchored in scientific computational methods, and uniformly aimed at helping its users. A bright line is said to separate its "organic" or "natural" search results from advertiser-purchased links. All this is difficult to corroborate, however, because the algorithm is a closely guarded secret. Google's priorities as a business, in any case, pivot less on its individual users than on its patrons: corporate advertisers. It personalizes search results, by combining data generated by tracking individual users' travel across the web with data it acquires from its own in-house sources and from third-party vendors, in order to grant to its advertisers targeted real-time access to the particular users whom they desire to reach. Google's \$3.1 billion acquisition (in 2007) of the Web advertising network DoubleClick gave it the most sophisticated and far-flung Internet advertising infrastructure in existence. As a result, Google's business is to place ads not only on its own sites but also on thousands of independent websites – which cooperate in this arrangement in order to gain the resulting advertising revenue. Arguably, Google has rendered its need for supposedly

neutral search results mostly superfluous, because ads can be so accurately targeted at individuals as they surf. Google's reliance on the open Web harbors major implications for the company's strategy and, more importantly, for our system of cultural provision.

Today a \$50 billion company by revenue, Google faces a need to diversify, so as to reduce its dependence on these two related lines of business – search advertising and ad placement – as a profit source. It has used its near-monopoly on search, accordingly, as a base from which to extend into adjacent markets and hedge its risk. Consistently framing its strategy in terms of developing the open Web, the company is building up a mountain of content and destination sites, including video (YouTube), as well as Google Places, Google Earth, Google News, Google Finance, Google Books, and Google Play, its app store. It has moved forcefully into vertical search services for specialized markets in travel, shopping, and local commerce (Maps, Product Search, Flight Search).<sup>8</sup> It is an active participant in the competition to provide Internet functionality and business tools, via Android, its mobile operating system software, Google Docs, Gmail, and its Chrome browser. And, through its takeover of Motorola's mobile phone manufacturing subsidiary, it is offering an increasing range of hardware products, from Chromebooks to Nexus mobile handsets and tablets. These often interlocking businesses provide a context for thinking about its Google Cultural Institute.

#### GOOGLE CULTURAL INSTITUTE

Google publicly exhibited its interest in the arts and history when Eric Schmidt attended a ceremony in November 2009 with then-US Ambassador to Iraq, Christopher Hill, at the National Museum of Iraq. Schmidt promised to use Google's time and consider-

able resources to digitize ancient artifacts at the National Museum of Iraq and make them available on the Internet.<sup>9</sup> This was after the much-publicized looting of Iraq's National Museum of Antiquities in the early days of the US military occupation, which the United States did little to prevent despite numerous warnings.<sup>10</sup> Schmidt was actively serving United States foreign policy even as he presented the company as an independent and benevolent caretaker of global culture. In 2011, Google ingested the National Museum of Iraq into its Google Maps Street View Gallery.<sup>11</sup>

Shortly after this, the Google Cultural Institute (GCI) was established, with a mission to "help preserve and promote culture online to make it accessible to the world."<sup>12</sup> This not only constituted a bold extension of Google's mission of providing access to universal knowledge, but also seemed to signify a full-scale embrace of cultural preservation – in keeping with the company's artfully designed philanthropic programs.<sup>13</sup> In December 2011, Google inaugurated its Paris headquarters and, to much fanfare (then-President Nicolas Sarkozy attended), placed the months-old GCI as well as its Research & Development Center there. This was not a haphazard decision. Google holds more than 90 percent of the search engine market in France, and Sarkozy, in this case like many French people, has worried that Google poses a threat to French cultural heritage. Jean-Noël Jeanneney, then-director of La Bibliothèque Nationale de France, already had led a major initiative to establish a European Digital Library expressly as an alternative to relying on the anglo-centric Google Books. Uneasiness about, and downright antagonism to Google resonate widely throughout Europe, where Google dominates the search market and siphons off advertising, which might otherwise go to domestic companies. The search company's decision to establish its Cultural Institute in Paris, in turn, might be seen as a move to win the hearts and minds of the European people – or, at least, to enter the citadel of its foes.

Google went on to collect as "partners" some of the most illustrious international museums, galleries and cultural foundations, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Hermitage in St Petersburg, the Uffizi in Florence, the National Gallery in London, and Madrid's Museo Reina Sofia. Within two years, the Institute brought several digitization initiatives under its umbrella – Google Art Projects, World Wonders, the Dead Sea Scrolls, Nelson Mandela Centre of Memory – and readied renowned museum collections, cultural heritage displays, and unseen historical archives for public consumption. The Cultural Institute now offers online exhibitions, from the documentation of Auschwitz, to Apartheid in South Africa, to access to tens of thousands of works of art from 151 art institutions, to virtual tours of individual galleries, the White House in Washington DC, and the Palace of Versailles. The requisite infrastructure, the technical standards for describing objects, and the tools and funding required to digitize additional collections, all constitute sites of active engineering and development. Under construction is a Google-powered virtual museum and archives where art works are exhibited, histories are told and cultural memories are assembled and reassembled.

Is Google's move to expand access to the world's art treasures well-intentioned and benign? "When Google Earth started displaying paintings from the Prado in Madrid, allowing users to zoom in and see the art as an up-close digital photo," Ken Auletta writes with scant trace of skepticism, "it was giving many people access to art they would never see, granting them the time to study paintings that security guards in the bustling museum would never allow them."<sup>14</sup> Altruism, however, is at most a mere by-product of the process that is underway.

The scale of Google's new endeavor is nothing short of planetary, but its reach is not merely physical or

geographic. The company's collecting impulse, likewise, evinces a breath-taking cultural and ideological range. To be sure, digitizing the treasured storehouses of art, collections drawn from all over the world, is impressive enough. However, Google's project goes beyond this. GCI is showcasing memories of oppression and, even, of oppositional politics. In GCI, the images of struggle against apartheid in South Africa, and of protest against the Vietnam War in the US are digitally reproduced and reassembled in hyper-realism. Contemporary Sao Paulo street art, repressed Brazilian authorities, has been accessioned by GCI. Such acts of representation, of bringing to visibility, may appear to neutralize – even to transcend – societal injustices and distortions both past and present. No matter what else, GCI bespeaks brilliant public relations. Time and again, Google has demonstrated that it is an adroit player in this secretive domain for the projection of corporate self-interest.

Steve Crossan, the director of the Cultural Institute, is being accurate when – downplaying and depoliticizing the Institute – he labels it as “just another engineering group” that happens to operate in the cultural sectors.<sup>15</sup> However, he is not shy to proclaim (for example, at the 2011 Avignon Forum) that GCI's purpose is to expose hidden archives and to make cultural resources come alive, so that users may explore and bring in their own perspectives. In addition, GCI provides the technical platforms for curators, historians, and experts to open the world to their knowledge. Popular engagement and specialized expertise appear equally welcome. On display will be individual voices and personal stories, revelatory discoveries, hidden histories, and a newly universal global culture.

These are potent fantasies of how transnational capital is being used for the greater good – for spiritual nourishment and democratic uplift. In fact, however, Google's deployment of digital technology betokens a

world of resurgent welfare capitalism, where people are referred to corporations rather than states for such services as they receive; where corporate capital routinely arrogates to itself the right to broker public discourse; and where history and art remain saturated with the preferences and priorities of elite social classes. GCI would be unlikely, even unthinkable, absent the chronic and politically induced starvation of publicly funded cultural institutions even throughout the wealthy countries. States' withdrawal or reallocation of resources to fund and operate the apparatus of cultural provision is its essential condition of possibility.

Yet if GCI sits at the head of what is now a long list of corporate incursions into art and culture,<sup>16</sup> GCI is more than a public relations master-stroke. It is also a calculated business strategy, as Google seizes a particular historical and social moment in order to engross culture into a site of prospective profit-making.

#### GOOGLE'S CAPITAL LOGIC (1): DEFENSE AGAINST COMPETITORS

Though Google's cultural project may seem to defy capitalist logic, it is not access for its own sake – access for democratically accountable and public purposes – that drives it. The company gives desultory hints of its rationale. In a *New York Times* interview, GCI director Crossan emphasized that Google did not seek an immediate financial return; yet, he portended, “having good content on the Web, in open standards, is good for the Web, is good for the users. If you invest in what's good for the Web and the users, that will bear fruit.”<sup>17</sup> With its parent company's stock flying high and its coffers full, GCI can afford to adopt a long-range perspective in its profit-projects. This is hardly unique; in fact, it is a common proclivity among large and well-established companies. As we write, for example, there come reports that IBM's decades-long

research into artificial intelligence technology finally may be transforming “into something that actually makes commercial sense.”<sup>18</sup> Why, then, might Google be willing to invest millions of dollars in promoting the arts and preserving culture around the world?

What Google is chasing after, not just through GCI but through many of its new business ventures, is content – actual and prospective digital content – and the data that users of that content will generate. The grotesque but quite serious vision that it shares with other leading units of Internet capital is, according to one Google manager, that “the entire output of our society... all the books, all the pictures, all the videos, all the people,” be transmuted into data: nothing less than “culture as data.”<sup>19</sup> There is no shortage of hubris in this strategic focus; what is historically new is its realism. Google is routinely mining unprecedented quantities of data in order to target advertising, to manage its legions of users – a huge, globally distributed, unpaid labor force<sup>20</sup> – and for other, as-yet mostly unpublicized purposes. As Google gleans finer, more immediate and more abundant data from everywhere and everyone, the strategy of all data all the time (more commonly called “Big Data”) may permit it to strengthen its existing businesses and perhaps to establish additional profitable lines. Google envisions a business of “forecasting” predicated on its data collection and computation capacity. Google's chief economist Hal Varian refers to this as “predicting the present” or “nowcasting” where Google Trends data can be used to generate the probability of auto sales by make,<sup>21</sup> box-office success for a just-released film<sup>22</sup> or the number of current global flu cases.<sup>23</sup> While Google itself cannot predict which data or algorithm may become profitable, the company is laying a foundation for heightened involvement in a business that is called “data analytics.”

In one vital respect, the strategy is defensive: Google is attempting to ensure that prized resources are not

locked up beforehand by a competing vendor. Such a result might mean that Google's search engine would be prohibited or hampered from linking to rich storehouses of content; or it might impact the terms of trade so that Google has to pay for the right to link. Both options are already evident. On the one hand, Proquest has signed a deal granting it exclusive access to digitized works held by France's national library.<sup>24</sup> And, in a different example, Facebook does not allow Google's search engine to sift through and re-present postings on its own proprietary network; Facebook competes with Google by building up services in-house, in hopes that by keeping its users on its site regularly and for extended periods it will draw a greater share of Internet advertising. On the other hand, following up on media magnate Rupert Murdoch's 2009 claim that Google acts as a “content kleptomaniac,”<sup>25</sup> big European newspaper publishing groups have mounted strong lobbying efforts to compel Google's news aggregation sites to pay them for linking to their news stories. In February of 2013, Google deflected one such attack, but only by signing an agreement with French president François Hollande in which Google will put forward \$82 million to help French news media to transition to the Internet in exchange for dropping their demand that Google pay them for every click to their news stories.<sup>26</sup> In March, after a fierce political campaign, the search giant won a second important victory, by warding off German legislation that, again, would have made news aggregators pay for the use of snippets of copyrighted news content.<sup>27</sup> Many Brazilian newspaper publishers continue to take a stronger stand, by opting out of linking to Google's search engine unless and until the search giant compensates them.<sup>28</sup>

It's clear from all this that both business and political pressures are impinging on Google's freewheeling stance toward Web content copyrighted by others. If Google does not move swiftly to enclose cultural

heritage resources, or to help institute non-exclusive contracts for digitization and commercial re-use as a global norm – then it may be deprived of the preferred access that it has enjoyed up to now.<sup>29</sup>

For a search engine company, web content is the indispensable resource, as critical to its endeavor as oil is for Exxon. The existence of Google is built on the premise that there is searchable content on the web. Without web content, there is no need for a search engine, so Google's quest is to find – or make – abundant, coveted content. Thus, as an oil company is incessantly searching around the world for what that industry calls “easy oil” – vast reserves of easily drilled and high quality light oil – with little consideration for the environmental or human costs, Google is thirsty for new “easy content” – a reservoir of easy-to-ingest and widely desired content. To tap into rich veins of such content, Google has targeted the world's cultural institutions – museums, galleries, libraries and cultural foundations. Unlike Exxon, it is able to present its mission as benign. However, its strategy is not only defensive.

#### GOOGLE'S CAPITAL LOGIC (2): GOING INDOORS AND TO THE OPEN WEB

Opening up the gates guarding cultural reservoirs is a first step, as Google tries to reconfigure cultural spaces for incorporation into its evolving business of information. The next step, also ongoing, is to wrap up these newly-opened spaces with glittering technologies that combine convenience, efficiency and newness. The distinctive technical feature of Google's cultural project is that users are able to zoom in and out on paintings and sculptures, to see even the finest brushstrokes and to virtually stroll through museums. The technology that powers this “new and improved” art experience – “Street View” – supplements CIA-based satellite and geospatial imaging programs that Google acquired in

2004, and which are embedded in its Google Earth and Google Maps services. Often provoking outcries from privacy advocates, “Street View” has been used to map out almost the entire outdoor world. Its functions are to suggest to users where and how to go, where to eat, and where to shop. Now it is being applied indoors.

Google has begun to map the inside spaces of museums and galleries room-by-room and floor-by-floor. So far, its engineers have detailed the floor plans of dozens of museums and libraries in nine countries, including more than 30 museums in the United States – including all 17 of the Smithsonian Institution's museums<sup>30</sup> – and integrated them into Google Maps. To guide users through these new layers of digitized content Google has turned to its Android mobile applications.

The alluring demographics of museum attendance, however, allow Google to reach far beyond this prosaic service. While they are public spaces, open to all who can cough up an admission fee, most cultural institutions have been created by elites for elite classes, and are visited in disproportionate numbers by the upper and middle classes.<sup>31</sup> Members of these strata possess unrivaled discretionary income. Through GCI, Google is quietly targeting this coveted group of consumers – which marketers call a ‘most-needed audience’ – and reassembling them for targeted online delivery to advertisers. Google, that is, is bulking up its capacity to reach this favored cohort both directly in person and via the open Web.

Inside museums, the company will send alerts and revenue-generating features to users, attempting to drive foot traffic to specific areas. Users' smartphones will furnish them with turn-by-turn walking directions, suggestions about which exhibits and works to view, and tips about where to eat and shop in each museum.

A 2013 conference panel on “Museums and the Web” affords us some idea of the intensity of commercial colonization of museum space, with presentations on “eye-tracking studies” of museum-goers, “early detection of museum visitors' identities,” and “tracking on-site visitor flow.”<sup>32</sup> Google's work on facial recognition technology may play its part here.

Online, Google will collect data on which exhibitions and works of art are most-viewed, and on how much time is spent in particular spaces; and the company will enfold data about users' visits to GCI sites into its profiles of their overall web surfing. Presumably, it will incorporate this feedback into its search algorithm and its Web ad-placement program. Google, in other words, has embarked upon a long-term process whose aim is to capture and re-present not only works of art and cultural spaces but, behind them, its advertisers' most-needed audiences.

Google is only one of most ubiquitous and powerful of the participants in today's overarching efforts to exploit and profit from cultural heritage, archives, museums, and libraries. This is a full-scale commodification drive, and it exhibits a modal form: the “public-private partnership.” One partner typically possesses the cultural “assets”; the other, the capital required to “monetize” them. So many instances of this trend are on offer as to make it appear banal. The Cervantes Virtual Library, whose roots stretch back to 1999, combined nine Spanish public-sector agencies with eight corporate partners, including Banco Santander, Telefonica, the media group Prisa, the Spanish publishers association, and other companies. The British Library worked with Cengage Gale, a web-based database platform.<sup>33</sup> The John F. Kennedy Library, within the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration system, partnered with IBM and EMC Corporation.<sup>34</sup> The U.S. Government Accountability Office partnered with Thomson West.<sup>35</sup>

Google, crucially, is involving itself in this commodification drive partly in order to enter new lines of business – to diversify, as mentioned earlier, because a pair of business lines, search advertising and ad placements, still accounts for most of its revenue. Google is launching a paid subscription service on YouTube, a mobile payments system, and a fee-based streaming music service with an ad-supported “free” option to rival those run by Deezer and Spotify. The logic behind these ventures is instructive. The company looks to extract the maximum profit by leveraging its vertically integrated business structure. It could “install its music streaming product on its Nexus range of mobile handsets and tablets,” for example, and/or build its streaming service into its mobile operating system, Android.<sup>36</sup> It also could study consumers' listening habits in order to “build up a valuable database for advertisers.”<sup>37</sup> No matter which path toward “monetizing” a given service or content site is selected by Google executives, however, the cornerstone of the company's profit strategy overall constitutes nothing other than the open Web itself. By being free to track users wherever they go on the extraterritorial Web – inclusive not only of Google's affiliated sites but also the untold other sites that are independently owned – to send advertisements to users across this huge expanse, and to mine and analyze the resulting torrents of data, Google has staked itself to a universalizing capital logic.

Under active construction is a new landscape of enclosure, less palpable, perhaps, than the hedges that cut into the commons in early modern England, but comparable. This enclosure, paradoxically – unlike its predecessor – actually may *widen* access. But access by itself constitutes an insufficient criterion for appraising this political-economic project. This, ultimately, is the lesson taught by Google's deployment of means of digital reproduction to post museum galleries and historical exhibitions online.

As 2013 opened, the U.S. Executive Branch gave its blessing to Google's endeavor. Despite surging opposition by the U.S. citizenry to the wholesale strip-mining of personal data on which the entire commercial Web was deliberately predicated as the Web was built out during the 1990s, U.S. authorities continued to oppose substantive protections of private rights – not only in the U.S. itself, but also in the European Union.<sup>38</sup> Their efforts were rewarded when a few of the EU's most powerful member states – the UK, Sweden, Belgium and, above all, Germany – broke ranks with their peers and insisted that the European Commission 'water down' its proposals to impose tough data protection rules on tech companies led by Google and Facebook.<sup>39</sup> Yet, in the wake of leaks about US National Security Agency (NSA) surveillance programs, it is an open question whether EU member states will continue to favor Google. As we write, France, Germany, Italy and Spain have joined forces and ordered Google to rewrite its privacy policies in Europe or face legal action. Even British regulators – who, unlike their peers, barely punished Google for snooping on personal data via Street View cars – asked Google to delete any data remaining from its Google Street View mapping service. In addition, Britain's Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) has demanded that Google modify its current privacy policies by September 2013.<sup>40</sup>

Meanwhile, responding to complaints by companies with which Google competes, from Yelp to Microsoft, the U.S. Federal Trade Commission concluded a nineteen-month formal investigation of Google's search business, and took no substantive actions to restrict its often-aggressive market behavior.<sup>41</sup> Commenters predict that, disencumbered of these threats by government authorities, Google will be emboldened "to further strengthen its already dominant position on the Internet."<sup>42</sup> The ramifications span far beyond the question of anti-competitive discriminatory practices in the market for Internet search. Not only has

Google's extraterritorial dominance in search services been validated. Even more important, Google is being permitted to continue building its business as a corporate colossus astride the open Web: its commodification strategy for "culture as data" – expressly including but by no means limited to museum and archive and cultural heritage – has been ratified.

Other obstacles of course exist. The most important are political and geopolitical. In still-somewhat-economically-dynamic China, Google possesses a toehold at best. European antitrust regulators, meanwhile, intended to strike a deal with Google to settle the antitrust case by accepting the company's proposals, including labeling search results; yet, Google's US counterparts, led by Microsoft, vehemently urged the EU to reject Google's proposals for reforms. EU regulators in turn sought additional concessions from Google; but it remained an open question whether and how they might alter Google's conduct, or add further responsibilities to competitors and users.<sup>43</sup> Withal, Google's extraterritorial market power remains unrivaled; and European authorities continue to evidence an impressive willingness to embed with transnational capital – be they the French Ministry of Culture under Socialist President Hollande, or the German Parliament in the era of Christian Democrat Angela Merkel.<sup>44</sup> Google's grasp, thus, seems to be expanding to match its unrivaled reach.

## CONCLUSION

We must not reduce the complex political economy behind Google Cultural Institute to the idea of mere "access." Google, it is true, will increase and probably widen in social terms access to art works and archives in the storehouses of its digital partners. However, as Jeremy Rifkin detailed thirteen years ago, when Google was still a mere fledgling in the search market,

an emerging "age of access" actually betokens a "new culture of hypercapitalism."<sup>45</sup> Under whose auspices and with what preconditions and side-effects is access being granted? Is this process guided by democratic principles, in order to forward the needs and interests of the world's billions? Or, like the expansion of the commercial advertiser-based press in 19th and early 20th century England and the United States,<sup>46</sup> is it unfolding mostly from above as a reflex of capital and class power? These questions may be hard to contemplate, but they are urgent.

Actual users will, of course, be free to make what they will of Google and its partners' art works. They may even put these works to use in turning 'unfreedom' into an object of analysis and emancipatory action. *Imagine* – in John Lennon's sense of *Imagine* – a world in which a modernized sales imperative did not undergird and intertwine with the digitization of art works. Imagine a world in which search engine algorithms were open to public inspection and were democratically accountable, like reference librarians. No such prospect will be powered by Google. ■



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