

LEA  
BOOKS

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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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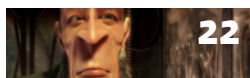
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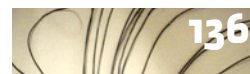


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# Commonist Red Art: Blood, Bones, Utopia and Kittens

**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*



## REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. Larry Ray, "At the End of the Post-Communist Transformation? Normalization or Imagining Utopia?" *European Journal of Social Theory* 12 (August 2009), 321-336.
2. Commonism was used by Andy Warhol. In this essay the word is rooted in Internet 'commons,' although similarities, comparisons and contiguities exist with the earlier usage. "Thus Warhol's initial preference for the term 'Commonism' was as ambivalent, and ambiguous, as the oscillating signs 'Factory' and 'Business.' Although it flirted with connotations of the 'common' with the 'Communist' (from cheap and low to 'dignity of the common man'), the term betrayed no hidden, left-wing agenda on Warhol's part." Caroline A. Jones, *Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 205.
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.
11. Lanfranco Aceti, *Our Little Angel*, Lanfranco Aceti Inc., personal website, January 10, 2014, <http://www.lanfrancoaceti.com/portfolio-items/our-little-angel/> (accessed January 10, 2014).

## 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**

## REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. The term ‘post-internet art’ is attributed to artist Marisa Olson. See Gene McHugh, *Post Internet* (Brescia: LINK Editions), 5.
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.”
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# 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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# TAKEN SQUARE

On the Hybrid Infrastructures of the #15M Movement

by

José Luis de Vicente

## NOBODY EXPECTS THE #SPANISHREVOLUTION

On May 15, 2011, thousands of citizens in the main spots of Spain took to the streets in demonstrations of protest, answering the call of a Facebook event that had circulated in the previous months through social media and online communities. The protest was not backed by any major political party or union, only by a horizontal loose collective of activist groups with minor impact and support, up until that point. In fact, the original call came from a loose pseudorganization, ¡Democracia Real Ya! (Real Democracy Now) with no public faces or a very defined agenda; At the time of the demonstration, Democracia Real Ya! was in fact only three months old.

Reasons to protest were quite defined and specific, though. A rampant unemployment that for younger people was reaching dramatic proportions (a rate around 45% for the 18-25 demography), a widening of the gap between citizens and a political class perceived as privileged and detached from everyday problems, constant scandals of corruption, and above all, a deep dissatisfaction with a dysfunctional democracy, stuck in an increasingly bipartisan system where both options end up meaning, in practical terms, no

*The text of this article is based on a lecture imparted during the Ars Electronica Festival 2011 as part of the Sensing Place, Placing Sense Symposium in September 2011. Several weeks after this talk, the emergence of the Occupy Wall Street movement and its global spread replicated many of the features and strategies of the Spanish 15M movement six months earlier. Instead of reevaluating the Spanish protests in light of the Occupy Movement, we have chosen to keep the focus on the original events that took place in May 2011.*

real option, and perceived as equally inefficient and unable to provide real solutions.

The demonstrations themselves, even though contemplated with scepticism by the mainstream media and political parties, were not surprising. "About time" was one common answer from citizens and analysts who were sure that the degrading social conditions would spawn eventually some reaction on the street. It was not surprising either or particularly new in 2011 that the reaction wouldn't come from traditional organizations, but from loose self-organized groups that would use Social Media to coordinate collective action and create a critical mass of participants. The argument that Social Media can be a catalyst that enables unprecedented mechanisms for collective action, and that these can have an impact on the political sphere have been discussed countless times in the last few years.

What was surprising is what happened the night after the demonstration. A small group of around 40 people who didn't know each other, wandering what to do once the demonstration was over, staged an im-

proptu assembly at Puerta del Sol, the main square at the heart of the city center, and decided to stay.<sup>2</sup> It's not clear who was the first to actually say "what if we stay?," but three days later it was not 40 people, but more than ten thousand; it was not only Madrid but Barcelona's Catalonia Square, or Metrosol Parasol in Sevilla, a shiny brand new example of iconic architecture from German architect Jurgen Meyer (the biggest wooden structure in the world today) and that was previously void of any significance in the city, until the movement took over it.

So you could safely say that nobody expected this; it was very clearly a case of a Black Swan.<sup>3</sup> Not that people would decide to go out on the street and protest, but the fact they did it in a fashion that nobody expected: reclaiming public space, rearranging it, reshaping it so that it would become a laboratory for discussion and participation. The shape of this movement would happen through appropriation, redefinition, and reconfiguration of the city.

In this particular case, the debate on whether social media is a tool that empowers citizens catalyzing

decentralised actions, or if this form of “slacktivism” creates a false sense of participation that cannot actually replace political action -best expressed in the Shirky-Mozorov debates<sup>4</sup> and in the cultural wars around the Internet’s impact in different social uprisings- is irrelevant. The important story in this scenario might be not so much if the participants in the May 15 protests, what would come to be known as the 15M movement, succeed in changing the political structure, but how they expressed a reimagining of public space, of its role in community building, that was intimately connected to dynamics originating in online space.

At the center of the instant city that became the Puerta del Sol camp, known as Acampada Sol, a 21 year old architecture student called Alberto Araico, interested in sustainable architecture, built a semicircular dome out of pallets. It would become the information point of the camp, and the closest thing it had to an architectural icon. Looking at the picture published by El País, Spain’s most important newspaper, of the dome with its builder,<sup>5</sup> I could not help thinking: what if the Smart City, that image of a clean efficient urban environment mediated by technology, would in fact actually look instead like this?

Maybe you can build a new sense of public space shaped by technologies that are not sophisticated sensors, public objects with APIs, energy monitors and the rest of lexicon of Smart urban technologies, as hyped by an emerging industry of corporate agents that want to be involved in the construction of the 21st Century Mega Cities. Maybe there is another Smart City built up by citizens downloading DIY-instrutables showing you what you can do with pallets, cheap tools like free, ad-sponsored video streaming services, and popular microblogging sites that allow us to coordinate on public space with unpredictable results.

### A PROTEST OF MANY PROTESTS

In the months after the events on May 15 many different narratives were proposed and drafted to create a genealogy of a movement that, with the vague referent of the “Arab Spring” (arising in radically different circumstances) seemed to come out of nowhere, unite different agents in the ideological spectrum, and claim no direct parents. Probably the most exhaustive one was the “Conceptual Map” of Acampada Sol,<sup>6</sup> a collaborative mindmap developed as the events where taking place, trying to connect every specific request, strategy or action with previous cases in the recent or not-so-recent history of activism. The map shows how in the previous 2-3 years, different modes of campaigning, different demands and different agents gathered in an unlikely common goal in time and space. Many of them combined online organization with public space occupation.

The firsts ones were dealing with the protests demanding a right to housing, in the wake of one of the most extreme real state bubbles in the West, leaving 3 million empty houses waiting for a buyer, and hundreds of thousands of young people unable to afford a house due to the skyrocketing prices created by speculation. “V de Vivienda” (V for Housing)<sup>7</sup> was an important precedent in staging public space protests for the right to housing before the bubble exploded, from 2006 onwards.

Equally important was a protest movement completely focused on what was going on the Internet around the copyright wars and anti-piracy legislation, a conflict that had essential relevance on online space, but was also slowly seeping into the street. Sinde’s Law -named after a film screenwriter who served as Minister of Culture between 2009-2011- would allow closing websites without court action, using a committee of experts under the rule of the Ministry of Culture that would attend the reclamations of IP Holders. The massive protest movement against the law completely

monopolized the social media sphere in the country for the last couple of years. #Nolesvotes<sup>8</sup> – first movement named after a hashtag – promoted heavily in Twitter and Facebook voting against all parties that supported Sinde’s Law in 2011 elections, and two years before the “Manifesto for Fundamental Rights on the Internet,” a collaborative Manifesto<sup>9</sup> written as a Google Wave by many bloggers, journalists and local internet pundits that become the most heavily retweeted, blogposted document in 2009, defending fundamental civic rights on the internet under threat by antipiracy legislations.

Maybe the most interesting hybrid activist movement preceding 15M was that originated by Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca,<sup>10</sup> a series of groups defending people evicted from their own houses by mortgage foreclosures. One of the most socially conflictive circumstances arising from the crisis is that affecting those who bought a house at high prices at the peak of the bubble, at low interest rates, then saw how as unemployment exploded and rates rised, their home was simultaneously devaluating. This has left thousands of citizens, many of them immigrants, in the worst possible set of conditions; out of a job, unable to pay a ever-increasing mortgage, they would lose their home to the bank. However, since their property had devaluated heavily, losing their house would’t cancel the totality of their debt, and many would have to face the burden of a monumental debt that would make them unable to reconstruct their lives. The Plataforma de Afectados, uniting people under this condition, would develop a surprising and effective methodology to denounce the unfairness of the situation. Every time an eviction was programmed, they would use Social Media to announce the location and time of the affected house, asking citizens to attend and stage a “flash-mob” blockade. In dozen of successful actions, court officials executing the order would stand powerless in front of 300 to 500 people preventing them access.

### NOT A DEMONSTRATION, A RECONFIGURATION

Returning to the 40 people united at Puerta del Sol on the night of May 15, you could probably say that the single most important decision taken there that night (willingly or unwillingly) was framing their activity not as an action, but as a transformation of space. This would not be a protest, but a reshaping and a redefinition of this very significant public space, to turn it into an open laboratory to stage experiments in the practice of democracy and to recover the function of public space as Agora.

A significant moment takes place when at that same assembly the people gathered decides that they will become an entity and a location. To make this explicit they open a Twitter Account, @acampadasol,<sup>11</sup> publishing their very first message at 01:55 am. A website would soon follow, Toma la Plaza,<sup>12</sup> that will become a communication hub between different cities as camps start spreading all over Spain, with their own twitter accounts and website. In a matter of days the movement effectively becomes a network.

The members of Acampada Sol understand in an intuitive way that social media is not only a communication tool but also the arena where their movement is gaining support and recruiting new members. On the second night at the square, a police intervention dismantles the camp. The permanent narration of the events through Twitter creates a strong popular reaction against the police intervention, multiplying the number of people at the square ten-fold in little more than 24 hours, consolidating their presence at the square to the point it becomes clear the camp will not be easily dismantled.

### RIDING THE ALGORITHM

As the camp at Puerta del Sol grows larger, an increasing number of banners, signs and legends start to

cover up the space of the square. But being aware of the intimate connection between public space and the space of social media, the movement is as proficient and prolific creating hashtags that are retweeted and referenced again and again. At this point, an inventive strategy is developed (or accidentally discovered): instead of focusing on a single hashtag for all messages, it is replaced with a new one every couple of hours. Because the Twitter algorithm calculating Trending Topics does not consider only the volume of messages using one hashtag, but the speed of a concept spreading from nowhere, the effect is a complete monopolization of the full list of Trending Topics on Spain. During the week following the 15M event the protest monopolized the national twitter stream, to the point it was hard to find messages that did not made reference to them, or included hashtags linked to the movement.

The notion of the protests not as an event but as a spatial intervention definitely takes over when maps of the camps started being drawn out, as an actual necessity to navigate the square. The need for basic infrastructure giving support to the hundreds sleeping in the square and thousands using it during the day, along with the organizational structure of the protesters that generates commissions and working groups, produced an emerging Instant City coming out of nowhere in 2 days.

The map of Acampada Sol <sup>13</sup> shows how to find their library, made up with hundreds of books donated by participants and citizens; the legal department, offering legal assistance to protesters as they follow the evolution of events; a small dispensary for medical attention, a kindergarten, and the most popular and crowded, the kitchen-restaurant, cooking for the residents of the camp with ingredients donated by citizens (money donations were consistently rejected). The twitter account is actively used to organize a

chain of supply, connecting the supporters willing to help with the specific material needs of the camp at every given moment.

The Instant City is consistent, in a certain way, with the nature of the protest, since the climate at the camp in this moment is not one of desperate complain and rejection, but a propositional atmosphere centered around the desire to build something new. The bodies that will channel this desire are the commissions and the assemblies, holding open sessions where anyone can participate. In order to establish a time and a space to open up the discussions on themes ranging from feminism to cultural policy, to economy and the environment, the city is segmented so that specific corners of the square and intersections of nearby streets are devoted to specific discussions. Sometimes protests end up in the staging of assemblies in every possible space in the city, creating unlikely scenes like public assemblies in the asphalt of a major avenue at 3 AM.

As everyone who has participated in horizontal unstructured processes of participatory democracy will surely know, the assembly creates huge challenges for the decision taking process; as participants go from dozens to hundreds, scalability becomes a problem and there are huge bottlenecks; for many participating, the process is as invigorating as frustrating, and a better system to aggregate opinion and channel decisions is longed for, but not developed.

#### MEDIA INFRASTRUCTURES

On the first spontaneous gathering of protesters at the square two days after May 15th, a young journalist named Juan Luis Sánchez climbed to the top of one of the buildings at Puerta del Sol and recorded what was going on before any national TV station got there.

This original 40 second clip <sup>14</sup> spread in minutes through social media, reaching international blogs, and being reproduced hundreds of thousands of times in the following hours. It would also be the start of a continuous self-organized media covering of the events at the square. For the next three days, Juan Luis would stay up there holding his iPhone in his hand, broadcasting to thousands of viewers daily through a free streaming service.

The unmediated online streams that would broadcast 24/7 the events at Puerta del Sol would be an essential cohesive element to unite those who were on site and those following the events through Social Media; it was a back channel that certified and in a way stabilized the actual presence of the camp. The audiovisual commission of the camp, coordinating broadcasting efforts, will play a central role also in the coming months, at the big demonstrations that are organized in June and October 2011 all over the country. Their role is to offer a testimony of the reality of what was going on, bypassing the distrust and scepticism that many felt towards mainstream media and their coverage of the protest.

But media devices and their communication infrastructures would fulfill another essential function for the protesters; it would become a mechanism for defensive surveillance, as the permanent presence of recording devices would ensure that any event would be registered, from multiple points of view. This videos would provide valuable information, but also a tool for negotiating the conditions in public space. When the first episodes of police violence against demonstrators exploded in Barcelona two weeks after May 15, during an operation to clean up the camp at Catalonia Square, the events were recorded, uploaded and widely seen before the political representative who ordered the action could host a press conference explaining their version of events. In an ironic twist, the

politician would complain of the unfairness of debating a situation in the public arena when one side could offer plenty of recorded material to defend their positions while the other -his- couldn't. Video would also be used to identify particular police agents that were involved in specific acts of violence, as police officers would systematically deny their identification number when requested, and, against regulation, would not display it on their uniforms.

#### TAKEN SQUARE

One of the most iconic images produced by the 15M movement would be taken in Valencia on May 20. It depicts two young persons, a man and a woman, climbing up the façade of the city hall, with a sign on their hands. The picture shows how what they are trying to do is intending to change the name of the square, from "Plaza del Ayuntamiento" (City Hall Square) to "Plaza 15 de Mayo" (May 15 Square). They would not be alone in this; different street art and activism actions would become some of the most iconic sentences created by the movement and turn them into street signs. The most memorable one sat at the foot of the equestrian statue at the centre of Plaza del Sol. Installed by art students, it simply said "We were slept, we woke up. Taken Square."

Like the camp, the placard is not there any more; it has been installed and removed several times. It is a reminder though that the movement that took over one specific point in the city was using the language of the city to express a will to the city, a need to bring back the political and recover public space as the natural space where the public can be discussed.

A distinct model of taking over the city to reshape it and reclaim it was in action in Spain during three weeks. One hybrid model of global participation, tak-

ing many elements of the self governance of online communities and injecting them into the heart of the city, reinvigorating it, recovering it as the space for discussing what model of society we want, to imagine and shape out a new one. And in this exercise of recovering the city, the weak links of social media, the strategies of peer production communities and the mechanisms of emergent organization without strong hierarchies were absolutely central. Beyond Social Media activism, the 15M movement became a movement for the shared, spontaneous creation of space. ■

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5. Patricia Gosálvez, "Reportaje: Arquitectura de guerrilla en el 15-M," *El País*, June 17, 2011, [http://elpais.com/diario/2011/06/17/madrid/1308309860\\_850215.html](http://elpais.com/diario/2011/06/17/madrid/1308309860_850215.html) (accessed January 13, 2014).
6. The website of Una línea sobre el mar, "Mapa conceptual de la acampadasol," 2011, <http://www.unalineasobreelmar.net/mapa-conceptual-de-la-acampada/> (accessed January 13, 2014).
7. Sindominio.net, <http://www.sindominio.net/v/> (accessed January 13, 2014).
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9. Lacking a website of its own, this text collaboratively drafted was massively reblogged. See, for instance, Escolar.net, "Manifiesto: En defensa de los derechos fundamentales en Internet," December 2, 2009, <http://www.escolar.net/MT/archives/2009/12/manifiesto-en-defensa-de-los-derechos-fundamentales-en-internet.html> (accessed January 13, 2014).
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11. The Twitter account of "acampadasol," <http://www.twitter.com/acampadasol> (accessed January 13, 2014).
12. The website of Toma la Plaza, <http://tomalaplaza.net/> (accessed January 13, 2014).
13. The website of Toma la Plaza, "Plano de Acampada Sol," May 21, 2011, <http://madrid.tomalaplaza.net/2011/05/21/plano-acampada-so/> (accessed January 13, 2014).
14. "Vista aérea de la concentración en Sol 17M #acampadasol," YouTube video, 00:40, posted by "Juan Luis Sánchez," May 17, 2011 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ar2nmOQZEjw&>.



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