

## Fantasy Islands: Pleasure and Bureaucracy in Artist-Led Organizations

*People like me, can always believe in  
Love on an island surrounded by sea*

Tight Fit, *Fantasy Island*, Jive Records, 1982

*Once again  
It's all we're skilled in  
We will be shipbuilding*

Robert Wyatt, *Shipbuilding*, Rough Trade, 1982



*All the President's Men* (1976), dir. Alan J. Pakula

I have a fantasy. It is played out each time I watch *All the President's Men* (1976). It's about a nose for a story. It's about overcoming doubts to put in the graft necessary to follow things through. It's about surmounting brick walls erected by monstrous governance. It's about sceptical employers recognizing in you the zeal they once had to an extent that they put their own necks on the line. It's about overcoming paranoia as you plummet into a vast labyrinth of lies and corruption that will have you fearing for your life. 'Follow the money', Deep Throat tells us. And in so doing, perseverance will reveal

how deep the rot goes. Victory will validate all that you are – a humble soul in search of justice and truth. Yes, I have that fantasy, for all it's worth.

Follow the money, indeed. It seems apt to announce I am getting paid €80 for this. It is worth tracing the passage of this princely sum. I will start at the point where it leaves the government's coffers. The €80 has worked its way through to me via the Arts Council's Project Award for Visual Arts and via 126. By the time you are reading this, I will have used the money to go towards the cost of a website I purchased from *wix.com*. The website is to provide a platform for *Shooting Blanks*, an online journal produced by a group of third year GMIT Art and Design students as part of their Critical Theory module. Would the college not pay for this? I did inquire but it was suggested the students contribute towards the cost. I didn't think this fair and I was too embarrassed to ask them.

So the €80 has gone to *wix.com*. The payment went through Luxembourg so I am presuming very little of it comes back to the government by way of tax. *Wix.com* is an Israeli start-up company based in Tel Aviv. Its fourth quarter collections for 2014 was \$49.3 million. Its website tells me it is backed by a range of investor companies – Insight Venture Partners, Mangrove Capital Partners, Bessemer Venture Partners and Benchmark Capital. This list reminded me of *Start-Up Nation*, a book dealing with the success of Israel's hi-tech economy.<sup>1</sup> According to its authors, Dan Senor and Saul Singer, the success is to an extent that it now attracts more venture capital investment than anywhere in the world. Various start-up companies have led the way in areas such as security data links for banking transactions to new consumer apps using big data to understand, and benefit from, user behaviour. Senor and Singer's surprise is that the roots of this success lie in military intelligence. More specifically, it has grown from the activities of Unit 8200, the largest branch of the Israel Defence Forces. This is the unit responsible for undertaking global surveillance in a manner similar to the NSA and GCHQ. Matthew Kalman, writing in the Guardian, acknowledges that the predictive technologies developed for military purposes are now filtering through to the commercial sector.<sup>2</sup> It is claimed that the 8200 entrepreneurship and innovation programme (EISP) run by the unit's alumni lies at the centre of this and the success of so many of the new start-ups in Israel's booming hi-tech economy. If this is not enough, a dose of politics can be added to this business military complex. Recently, Naftali Bennett, a hi-tech millionaire and former member of the Special Forces Unit, has broken with Binyamin Netanyahu to take over the far-right Jewish Home party.

This is certainly a dark hi-tech economy I am picturing. And let's not forget, the origins of the internet lie in US government and military research as well as being developed by Californian dudes. Accounts of technological developments and social changes they engender often waver between a libertarian zeal and dystopian fear. Within critical theory, there is a significant shift towards the latter. Alexander Galloway, for example, cites protocol as a highly sophisticated system of rules and regulations governing the distribution of information that brings into being new modes of behaviour.<sup>3</sup> Attempts to subvert the dominant logic are seen by Galloway to be severely limited. We are all part of the network now – a structured virtual bureaucracy of control.

So the journey of my €80 is revealing in ways I did not anticipate. It is revealing in two ways. In the first place, in order to develop the ramifications of the origins and destination of the €80 – from landing in the government treasury to those controlling, and profiting from, the means of distribution of what the money has helped to produce – it is necessary to have time and resources that are well beyond my scope. Quite simply, current circumstances are such that the chances of getting to grips with such questions are severely limited. The demands of full-time work, the lack of commitment of my employers to academic research, or, simply getting on with other aspects of life prevent me dealing with these issues in the necessary detail. It might also be argued that the results of such an endeavour might well be as significant as the €80 is to the profits of *Wix.com*. Still, it has to be said that the lure of investigative journalism and, in particular, the figures of Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman did flash through my mind while writing what I have so far. This is the surprise. Despite the gloomy scenario I have pictured, I've just been to fantasy island.

The second feature concerns what happens the €80 in-between the origins and destination identified. In short, the €80 has helped spark this writing into being. It has helped to provide a public platform for the interests and concerns of GMIT students. It is also part of a larger sum that has enabled the *126* publication to be produced. By extension, *126* continues to provide exhibition opportunities and discursive platforms on meagre budgets generated from other successful funding bids. There is the sense that successful bids overshadow the work put in to those other unsuccessful bids. Indeed, one of the undocumented stories of *126* is its numerous funding crises over the years and the effort put in to resolve these. The grander point to be made here is that something happens with the money in transit. It creates a space for the visual arts community to maintain their practices. It provides time in which to experiment, to take chances, to get things wrong, to discuss and work things through. To exhibit, perform or present is some justification for the preceding effort

as well as an opportunity for the wider artistic community to engage and show support. Ideally, it provides a destination affirming a space simply to be; a space where utilitarian pressure can be suspended, if so desired. (Of course this is a luxury rarely afforded to 126 directors caught up in its administration and survival.) These last points calls to mind a term – one that has curiously slipped out of usage in current art discourse. It is the idea of relative autonomy. At its most simple, it points to an independent creative process that serves no other function than its own aims, however defined (autonomy), but one not unaware of the wider cultural and social contexts in which it operates (hence the *relative*).

The idea of practicing on your own terms alone seems wonderfully exotic. Everyone bound in camaraderie by doing their own thing for the sheer joy of doing your own thing. Viewed in this way, 126 can be seen as an oasis of pleasure. Might this be one of the lures of existing on the periphery: to recognize the limits of our challenges to the grander social forces governing us and bear the inevitable hardships and sacrifices this may entail in the hope that the pay-off ultimately rewards? If I change the metaphor, should not 126 be seen as a fragile federation of fantasy islands having to maintain prudent diplomatic relations with the world beyond? I say prudent, as the challenge seems to be one of securing limited pieces of state funding in the knowledge that the crumbs on the table might well be the price to be paid for being able to do your own thing.



*The Parallax View* (1974), dir. Alan J. Pakula.

I have to admit, such dreamy notions of autonomy freshen me in cynical times like these. If only I could hold on to them without feeling somewhat deluded. I have been here before though and I didn't feel so daft when saying it. Reviewing the *126* exhibition in the Galway Arts Centre for *Circa* in 2006, I had this to say when considering how *126* was about to become a more formal artist led institutional space:

The challenge now for *126* is to retain the energy and enthusiasm that brought it into being in the first place, particularly in the light of its forthcoming administrative burden. One reckons that its success will hang on this.<sup>4</sup>

The sense was that new bureaucratic structures would inevitably develop in order to secure and maintain the gallery space and its programming. This would include more administration, project management and funding proposals to be undertaken by the board of directors. At the same time, there was the task of carving out a space within the wider competitive cultural sector. The point here is that pleasure and bureaucracy do not make easy bedfellows and that survival may well make for a grim affair.

The FOOTFALL Report (*FOOTFALL: Articulating the Value of Artist Led Organisations in Ireland*) testifies to this. Looking through the lens of recent critiques of neoliberalism helps clarify a predicament facing artist led institutions in Ireland. The shattering effects of neoliberalism on the

arts, humanities, education and public life in general have been outlined at some length in academic discourse in recent years. The writings of Chris Lorenz and Marina Warner are noteworthy in respect to present concerns.<sup>5</sup> Three features stand out.

The first is a limited discursive economy in circulation that structures debate. On the one hand is the dictum that if can't be measured in numbers, it doesn't exist. This is the line often attributed to the Chicago School of Economics, a bedrock of neoliberal thought. On the other is the idea that not everything that is valuable can be measured. This is Marina Warner's refrain in her recent writing in the *London Review of Books*. The former notion enjoys the upper hand in setting the terms and limits of debate by its widespread implementation through contemporary western governance. It is argued that discourse is perverted through the hegemony of management-speak. Harry Frankfurt's analysis of bullshit as the backbone of management-speak makes a crucial point in this regard:

The bullshitter ... does not reject the authority of the truth, as the liar does, and oppose himself to it. He pays no attention to it at all. By virtue of this, bullshit is a greater enemy of the truth than lies are.<sup>6</sup>

Chris Lorenz elaborates on this when he claims that the bullshitter is only interested in effects and does not necessarily believe in what they state.<sup>7</sup> Stephan Collini is on similar ground in noticing that compelling arguments against dominant policy are simply ignored by policymakers.<sup>8</sup> This is all the more so when specific terminology frames the debate. Here is Lorenz again: 'Who can legitimately stand opposed to 'transparency', or 'quality' or 'accountability'?'<sup>9</sup>

The second recognizes the fate of the academic, artist and administrator within new management and bureaucratic structures. The winners are those who choose to play by the rules of the game set by their institutional authorities. There is nothing new here. Institutions by their nature sift through and prioritize forms of production from the surplus in circulation. Competition is of course intensified with shrinking funding. Call it careerism or simply finding a means to survive, but, as the argument goes, the modes of production and performance brought into being can't but legitimate the masters to which they serve. Frank Donoghue makes the point that academics and artists are 'uniquely willing to tolerate exploitation in the workplace' since they are 'inclined by training to sacrifice earnings for the opportunity to exercise their craft'.<sup>10</sup> Rosalind Gill recognizes a privilege in undertaking research for satisfaction rather than money and asks if the pleasures of academic work actually 'bind us more tightly into a neoliberal regime'.<sup>11</sup>

The third feature is an increasing tendency to connect neoliberalism to Chinese communist corporatism and the deadening bureaucracy of state communism in the twentieth century. Here is Warner linking managerial performance in contemporary China and her recent experience of higher education in Britain:

...where enforcers rush to carry out the latest orders from their chiefs in an ecstasy of obedience to ideological principles which they do not seem to have examined, let alone discussed with the people they order to follow them, whom they cashier when they won't knuckle under.<sup>12</sup>

Lorenz similarly reflects on what he calls New Public Management (NPM), seeing it as 'outside all control and accountability because the management by definition represents both efficiency and accountability'.<sup>13</sup> Lorenz continues:

... state Communism as a bureaucratic and economic nightmare still has a historical lesson to teach us, long after the political dream of state Communism has evaporated: to see through the neoliberal NPM dream as representing the privatized versions of economic and bureaucratic totalitarianism.<sup>14</sup>

Warner reaches deep to core humanist values as a defence ('I still hold fast to the life of the mind – its beauty, its necessity'<sup>15</sup>). Lorenz, by contrast, recognizes the limits of dissent. Oppositional voices have little but cynicism and dissidence at their disposal, 'as was the case under communism'.<sup>16</sup>

These accounts help shine a light on a current predicament I am attempting to unfold. The predicament concerns the modes of practice shaped into being when artist led initiatives are over reliant on state funding in a time of economic and political strife. Instinct is telling me something crucial, if not being lost, is certainly being occluded. So far, I have been drawing on notions of fantasy, unfulfilled desire, the pleasures and enthusiasm of self-initiated projects and the idea of a relatively autonomous practice as some kind of counterpoint to these prevailing modes of practice. I sense there are real dangers in seeing this as a polarity, hence the idea at this stage is to view this simultaneously in terms of counterpoint and as a predicament.

Looking at the FOOTFALL Report in the light of the three features of neoliberalism helps to clarify these dilemmas. In the first instance, the document is grounded in the belief that while the value of these organizations is readily understood by members, 'it remains at odds with the metrics of government and many funders, whose measure for audience and income development serve to de-emphasize the potential of these organizations'.<sup>17</sup> The quest is to find a means for 'measuring the non-economic contributions of the arts to society' since a scarcity of 'reliable indices exist'.<sup>18</sup> This is

as much a matter of language as one of an appropriate methodology. Hence, Vagabond Reviews ask, ‘can we construct new language to communicate what is different about smaller, artist-led arts and cultural initiatives?’.<sup>19</sup> The methodological question is solved by using qualitative data-gathering methods:

Long-associated with applied social research, qualitative methods can convey deep understandings and connections with the subject matter at hand, formulating unique and fresh perspectives, mediated through an authentic language that can only be generated through direct experience and engagement.<sup>20</sup>

As such, this approach accesses ‘non-numerical forms of measurement’ and ‘intangible assets’ such as care, friendship, the love of art and non-commodified forms of experience.

It is clear the report is firmly rooted in the discursive economy of value measurement. It seeks to bridge the gap in a way that is thoroughly worthwhile, admirable and accomplished. But there are tensions. Two stand out.

The first is where the language of the document wavers between ‘an authentic language’ and what must presumably be an inauthentic language – the language of the bureaucrat, PR or management speak (bullshit). ‘Programmes of care provide ‘holistic experiences’ for artists’, ‘Artists, theorists and curators are the ‘carers of concepts and ideas’’, and, ‘to nurture and sustain an ongoing collective presence’ are examples of the former.<sup>21</sup> ‘Development opportunities that prioritize ...’, ‘promoting unique exhibition opportunities ...’, ‘national leaders at the forefront of contemporary art’, ‘future-orientated’ and ‘considering strategies for moving forward’ are examples of the latter.<sup>22</sup> The report is intriguing for how, by necessity, it keeps a foot in both camps so as to be effective in its advocacy.

The second tension can be found in how it frames the report:

FOOTFALL aims to situate itself within this expanding field of arts research in the Irish context, with an emphasis on timely, practice-led activity rather than scholarly or academic discourse.<sup>23</sup>

This might not seem a curious opposition to make since artist led institutions have been set up, after all, as ‘an opportunity for artists to set the agenda’.<sup>24</sup> But why make the claim when the report is so obviously scholarly and academic? The report takes great care with methodological concerns, has undertaken an extensive literature review, answers calls for ‘more extensive, evidence-based



research on the visual arts in Ireland', and, moreover, adhered to the ethical principles laid out in NUI Maynooth's *Ethical Research Guidelines* and *Ethics Policy for Social Research*.<sup>25</sup> In short, the FOOTFALL report is thoroughly scholarly and academic. It begs the question if the emphasis is really on 'timely, practice-led activity' or if the report performs within, whilst it simultaneously distances itself from, a new administrative culture with its accompanying academic discourse. This is now a dominant mode of practice in the field of the visual arts and one not without its difficulties.

These tensions reveal that the model of the artist-educator-curator-citizen-activist-administrator-bureaucrat is the rising figure in the new hierarchy of the state funded visual arts sector despite persistent claims of non-hierarchical forms of governance in artist led organizations. Let's call the new figure the artocrat, as in *-cratic*: relating to a particular kind of government, rule or influence. (It's a terrible name, but I can't think of any other at present.) It is a figure that can account for the value of practice within a proselytising discourse and expansionist ideal. More often than not, socially-engaged art is the practice most highly valued. Rebecca Gordon-Nesbitt, for example, speaks of the 'elaboration of narrative' through project documentation and evaluation reports, 'while conveying the organizations' reach, engagement and impact'. Jason E. Bowman seeks a new definition of the practicing artist that can recognize all these various activities the artist is now increasingly expected to undertake (while aware of the problems and pitfalls, it must be said).

So a new mode of practice is being shaped into being in times of economic and political strife. One problem is that the new model can be all too easily perverted when creative dreams and ambitions are to be shaped through the language and performative demands of the proposal form and funding application. 'Young scholars waste their best energies writing grant applications', writes Warner.<sup>26</sup> Perhaps so, but the filtering system rewards those most persistent and willing to perform to the metrics of funding criteria. The artist led organization works by the same rules. Its survival depends on it. One fears a new figure of artistic survival is emerging that has to perform to the new agenda like a servant to its master.

If the third feature of neoliberalism is applied, one wonders how far it can be argued that the artocrat now upholds a similar role advocates of socialist realism once did under previous regimes. The classic Marxist debate between critics and advocates of socialist realism revolves around the differing approaches of Engels and Lenin towards the role of literature.<sup>27</sup> Where Engels defended the

uncommitted integrity of the writer, Lenin demanded the writer be 'an integral part of the organized, methodical, and unified labours of the social-democratic Party'. Here is Lenin from *Party Organization and Party Literature* (1905):

Literature must become a part of the general cause of the proletariat, 'a small cog and a small screw' in the social-democratic mechanism, one and indivisible – a mechanism set in motion by the entire conscious vanguard of the whole working class.<sup>28</sup>

Socialist realist art and literature is to be the 'small cog and a small screw' in the totalitarian state. Its virtue, according to its advocates, lay in foreseeing the totality of revolutionary action from within a socialist commitment. Leszek Kolakowski makes the point that the understanding and transformation of the world from this perspective were to be seen as one and the same process: 'The historical subject that has identified its own consciousness with the historical process no longer distinguishes between the future it foresees and the future it creates'.<sup>29</sup> As such, optimism is seen to have become 'schematic instead of historical'.<sup>30</sup> And so the argument goes that the utopian, emancipatory myth became an act of self-commitment, and, in the interim *before* its actual realization, the socialist realist served little else but the self-glorification of a Communist bureaucracy.

The self-same myth is reproduced in contemporary circumstance through the socially engaged ideals of the artocrat. Only this time, in the interim *before* its actual realization, the myth merely affirms the bureaucratic structures of neoliberal governance. Just as the Writers' Union was to extol the virtues of the proletariat in an increasingly disempowering bureaucratic totalitarianism, the artocrat now promotes active citizenship, social engagement and extol democratic ideals in a manner easily absorbed and increasingly shaped by neoliberal governance. That each could not/cannot afford to do otherwise is tragic.



*All the President's Men* (1976), dir. Alan J. Pakula

It might well be the case that looking at some of the wider issues emerging from the FOOTFALL Report through these lens has a distorting effect. It certainly comes across as an uncompromising view. I am reminded of those old debates that would see the trade unions as complicit with the capitalist order. In a time where we are witnessing the waning influence of unions with disastrous consequences, it is a view that comes across as extreme in its critique. Such a perspective allows little room for antagonistic relations within the management chain linking arts organizations to the government treasury, or wider forms of social antagonism for that matter. The subtle push and pull of negotiated power relations is overshadowed by a polarized 'us and them' model. Likewise, the critique pays little heed to the rigor of debate within the arena of socially engaged practices; as if its advocates are unaware of the dilemmas involved.

Still, there is a serious tension regarding the current hierarchies of (supposedly) oppositional art practices that needs to be addressed. It is a tension where accusations of pragmatic positioning or careerism sit uneasily with the idealism espoused by those doing, or aspiring to do, the 'radical' international circuit. The claims that such practices are indeed complicit with the neoliberal order (and unwillingly so) is a hard one to shake. It is a familiar argument, although it is one usually reserved for those practitioners doing the biennales or thriving in the art market rather than the 'authentic' oppositional voices lower down the order getting their hands dirty with 'real' social

engagement and tough bureaucratic struggles. I think of Miwon Kwon's recognition that the accumulation of frequent flyer miles was increasingly a measure of artistic success. It led her to consider if the nomadic artist was idealized worker for the precarious displacement of the masses under new capitalist expansion.<sup>31</sup> Lane Relyea extends this idea of the new Stakhanovites of cultural labour when he suggests that 'enhanced mobility is a defining characteristic of contemporary neoliberal agency'.<sup>32</sup> The new art world hierarchy is structured on such mobility. Authority emerges from developing an expertise precisely by accumulating and mediating knowledge between the old centres and peripheries; by being both here and there rather than one or the other. In other words, for Relyea, those 'without the time, money and institutional backing' to travel become parochial.<sup>33</sup>

How the artist led institution should address these questions of success as a matter of articulating its own value is, it seems to me, the crucial debate yet to be explored thoroughly even though it is riddled by its dynamic. Perhaps this is why it is such a difficult debate to address. For at the level of the artists led institution, it is to question the actions of practitioners just as reliant on the crumbs on the table and who work so hard to get at them. The commitment of previous and present directors to ensure the survival of *126* is not in question. It is precisely in recognition of such commitment, that the tensions between value and success merit continued scrutiny.

At root, the question of artistic autonomy is at stake. The argument so far is that the 'uncommitted integrity' of art practices is being side-lined in favour of an instrumental (antagonistic) alliance with the current social order. It is worth considering two instances in the contemporary moment where the question of autonomy on the grounds of socially engaged practice are played out.

The first I have in mind is Ailbhe Murphy's, *Temporal Economies in Socially Engaged Arts Practice*.<sup>34</sup> Examples of long term durational practices are considered through an informed ethical stance. These are pitted against numerous models falling short on either or both accounts. It is the intensity of commitment that is striking, particularly with the examples of Jeanne van Heeswijk and Tania Brugera when they address the tension between artistic autonomy and the instrumentalization of practice. For Van Heeswijk, autonomy is neither useful nor affordable given her role in the city is to be an 'instrument that works on self-organisation, collective ownership and new forms of sociability'.<sup>35</sup> Brugera's commitment is based on the idea that the role of art is not merely to signal problems but the 'place from which to create the proposal and implementation of possible

solutions'.<sup>36</sup> The intensity of engagement is born of the immensity of the task. It is equally as uncompromising as the preceding critique. The point here is to recognize that autonomy is seen as unaffordable given the tough context in which to intervene through sustained engagement. As Brugera reveals, the urgent need for intervention makes for quite a proposal. The debate between artistic autonomy and an instrumentalized practice is summarily (and wearily) dismissed as a lingering residue of old. It is simply ignored as a matter of urgency. As such, it is an approach vulnerable to Kolakowski's critique of schematic optimism as it applies to pragmatic forms of agency navigating neoliberal funding streams. Furthermore, there are echoes of the dilemma of unwilling complicity outlined previously by Donoghue and Gill.

The second example is Gregory Sholette's, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture*. His notion of 'creative dark matter' is significant for how he seeks to include a more diverse body of practice within his critical sphere. He is one of the few voices to speak of the value of the excluded surplus from art's hierarchies.<sup>37</sup> Sholette defines dark matter as follows:

It includes makeshift, amateur, informal, unofficial, autonomous, activist, non-institutional, self-organized practices – all work made and circulated in the shadows of the formal art world, some of which might be said to emulate dark matter by rejecting art world demands of visibility, and much of which has no choice but to be invisible.<sup>38</sup>

The idea is that the damned of the art world (*les damnés de la terre*) can rise up by 'grasping the politics of their own invisibility and marginalization' and refuse the art world's system of legitimation. Sholette continues:

Here, politics must be understood as the imaginative exploration of ideas, the pleasure of communication, the exchange of education, and the construction of fantasy, all within a radically defined social-artist practice.<sup>39</sup>

Sholette considers artistic autonomy *from* art's hierarchies (whether 'by choice or circumstance') as an antagonistic force. But as a question of effectivity, Sholette has his doubts, given its discontinuity and instability and the need for a 'new sustainable culture of the left'. After examining numerous examples of practice, Sholette becomes more convinced of its potency:

As this creative dark activity refuses to be productive for the market, it remains linked, however diffusely and ambiguously, to an archive of resistant practices ... but every now and again, this *other* social [non]productivity appears to mobilize its own redundancy, seems to acknowledge that it is indeed just so much surplus ... and in so doing frees itself from even attempting to be *usefully productive* for capitalism (or *for Art Inc.*).<sup>40</sup>

And hence his conclusion: 'The archive has split open. We are its dead capital. It is the dawn of the dead'.<sup>41</sup>

I sense Sholette is not entirely convinced of the capacity of such diverse practices to coalesce to create enough momentum for significant social change – hence the final horror fantasy. It is as if too much is being asked of the artist when they are expected to, or at least commit to, overthrowing present relations. This is what makes his argument intriguing. It fulfils the standard optimistic demand of leftist rhetoric. In so doing, he validates the wild and disparate efforts characterizing perhaps the best work of artist led institutions. His recognition of redundant 'social [non]productivity' upholds the value of art's relative autonomy and an 'uncommitted integrity'.

And so the tension in the title of this piece persists: that the pleasures of a relatively autonomous practice should act as some kind of counterpoint to the prevailing (and perhaps necessary) modes of bureaucratic practice accounting for value in the artist led institution. It should be said, Sholette's influence can also be felt in the FOOTFALL report. The report does repeatedly uphold a 'fidelity to artistic practice' while returning time and again to the problem of empowerment and resistance. But the problem appears to be that the balance of the report and accompanying symposium tilts towards an advocacy of utilitarian practices bound by emancipatory tones – a practice that performs consistently within a discursive economy it always promises, but never manages, to dissolve. And therein, it is argued, a new form of practice arises and endures.

So what if things are taken a step further? If Sholette retains his examples within the orbit of socially engaged art, what would it be to articulate a defence of practices born of *indifference* to the emancipatory rhetoric of arts advocacy – those dreamier notions of autonomy I mentioned earlier? It could be argued that such practices are no less vulnerable to being accommodated or neutralized under neoliberal governance than socially engaged art. While it would be as equally dependent on art's administrative structures and funding streams, its vulnerability is laid bare in making evident how utopian impulses, in whatever form they take, can only achieve the most fragile and perhaps most fleeting of existences under present circumstance. Attention to these moments can reveal unaffordability as the tragedy of our times.

This is hardly a new idea. Its roots are firmly lodged in the traditions of critical theory. But they have been nourished by unexpected sources and claims. Three are worth mentioning as possible points for (future) critical elaboration.

The first the figure of Georg Lukács. Lukács has often been read as an apologist for the Stalinist era when gave up his utopian visions as a means to reconcile with the socialist reality of the USSR. He was a severe critic of the avant-garde, for its denial of the social construction of the self in favour of an existentialist ontology.<sup>42</sup> His notion of critical realism is at odds with socialist realism. More than aware of the 'abstract and romantic Utopianism' of politically orientated art, Lukács stressed the capacity of great writers such as Tolstoy, Balzac and Mann to capture a sense of the great historical forces underpinning contemporary circumstance through the destinies of their individual characters.<sup>43</sup> Importantly, such insights were not dependant on political orientation or a conscious world view.

The second are two questions posed by T. J. Clark in *For a Left with No Future*. They are worth quoting in full:

First, what would it be like for left politics not to look forward – to be truly present-centred, non-prophetic, disenchanted, continually 'mocking its own presage'? Leaving behind, that is, in the whole grain and frame of its self-conception, the last afterthoughts and images of the avant-garde. And a second, connected question: could left politics be transposed into a tragic key? Is a tragic sense of life possible for the left – for a politics that remains recognizably in touch with the tradition of Marx, Raspail, Morris, Luxemburg, Gramsci, Platonov, Sorel, Pasolini? Isn't that tradition rightly – indelibly – unwilling to dwell on the experience of defeat?<sup>44</sup>

It is telling that the *New Left Review* would only to publish the article on the proviso that the editor provide a lengthy critique and uphold the old formula.

The third is Max Horkheimer's *Fable of Consistency*.<sup>45</sup> It tells the tale of two talented poets, poor in the good times but now starving under a bitter tyrannical rule that has swept the land. The tyrant caught wind of their talents and invited them to his table. Amused by their wit, he offered both a pension. 'I couldn't possibly take it', the first poet said, 'look what he has done to our people'. The other poet replied, 'If that is how you feel. You must be consistent. You should turn down the pension'. And so she did. She returned home to finally die of starvation. The second poet accepted

the offer and he prospered as a renowned court poet. The moral of the tale: only a tyrant can afford to be consistent.

I hope the dilemma posed is clear: to have the courage and consistency to articulate and preserve a fleeting irrepressible freshness through visual intrigue as a matter of the times we are in. I flag this point as my fear is that if such a quest were to be addressed, the requisite autonomy necessary may well be marginalized by the virtuous zeal and bureaucratic efficiency of new socially engaged practices and arts advocacy. At worst, one may be perceived as a threat to the other. At best, there is the sense that such critical *decadence* will more likely be tolerated than advocated as artist led organizations are forced to navigate new funding criteria. Either way, our present crisis has us acting as bureaucrats. I recognize this in my own work at GMIT as well as hearing this from the experiences of previous 126 directors. The very survival of artist led institutions and art colleges depend on this state of affairs. Hence the framing of this essay as a predicament and not a critique. For what was the initial fantasy at the opening of this essay other than one of successfully battling a bureaucratic behemoth?

**Gavin Murphy. April 2015**



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<sup>1</sup> Dan Denor and Saul Singer, *Start-Up Nation*, Twelve Publishers, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew Kalman, 'Israeli military intelligence unit drives country's hi-tech boom', *The Guardian*, 12 August 2013. (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/aug/12/israel-military-intelligence-unit-tech-boom>)

<sup>3</sup> See, Alexander R. Galloway, *Protocol: How Control Exists After Decentralization*, MIT Press, Massachusetts and London, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Gavin Murphy, '126', *Circa*, No.118, winter 2006, p.84.

<sup>5</sup> See, in particular, Chris Lorenz, 'If You're So Smart, Why Are You Under Surveillance? Universities, Neoliberalism, and New Public Management', *Critical Inquiry* 38 (Spring 2012), pp.599-629; Marina Warner, 'Diary', *London Review of Books*, Vol.36, No.17, 11 September 2015, pp.42-3, and, Marina Warner, 'Learning My Lesson', *London Review of Books*, Vol.37, No.6, 19 March 2015, pp.8-14.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted from Chris Lorenz, op. cit., p.627.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. It is interesting to compare Harry Frankfurt's description of the bullshitter to Max Horkheimer's description of fascism: 'Fascists have learned something from pragmatism Even their sentences no longer have meaning, only a purpose'. Quoted in, Martin Jay (1973), *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950*. University of California Press, Berkeley, 1996, p.156.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted from Marina Warner, 'Learning My Lesson', *London Review of Books*, Vol.37, No.6, 19 March 2015, p.8

<sup>9</sup> Quoted from Lorenz, op.cit., p.625.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Lorenz, op.cit., p.626.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Warner, 'Learning My Lesson', op. cit., p.10.

<sup>12</sup> Marina Warner, 'Diary', op.cit., p.43.

<sup>13</sup> Lorenz, op.cit., p.609.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p.629.

<sup>15</sup> Warner, 'Learning My Lesson', op. cit., p.10.

<sup>16</sup> Lorenz, op.cit., p.699.

<sup>17</sup> Sarah Thewell, quoted in, Joanne Laws, *FOOTFALL: Articulating the Value of Artist Led Organisations in Ireland*, 126 Artist-Run Gallery, Galway, 2015, p.7

<sup>18</sup> Joanne Laws, *FOOTFALL: Articulating the Value of Artist Led Organisations in Ireland*, 126 Artist-Run Gallery, Galway, 2015, p.24.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p.21.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p.57.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p.21 and p.48.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p.10 and p.21.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p.12.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p.26

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p.14

<sup>26</sup> Marina Warner, 'Diary', *London Review of Books*, Vol.36, No.17, 11 September 2015, pp.42-3

<sup>27</sup> See, George Steiner, 'Marxism and the Literary Critic', *Encounter*, November 1958, p.33-43.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p.33.

<sup>29</sup> Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism: Its Origins, Growth and Dissolution, Volume 3: The Breakdown*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1978, pp. 298-299.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p.296.

<sup>31</sup> Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, MIT Press, Massachusetts and London, 2004, p.156.

<sup>32</sup> Lane Relyea, *Your Everyday Art World*, MIT Press, Massachusetts and London, 2013, p.14.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p.13.

<sup>34</sup> Ailbhe Murphy, 'Should I Stay or Should I Go?' *Temporal Economies in Socially Engaged Arts Practice*, *Fugitive Papers*, Issue 5, winter 2013, pp.16-19.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. p.18.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Gregory Sholette, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture*, Pluto Press, London and New York, 2011, p.1.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p.4.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p188.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Leszek Kolakowski, op. cit., p.293.

<sup>43</sup> Michael Lowy, 'Lukács and Stalinism', *New Left Review I*, No.91, May-June 1975, p.26

<sup>44</sup> T. J. Clark, 'For a Left with No Future', *New Left Review 74*, March April 2012, pp.57-58.

<sup>45</sup> Max Horkheimer, *Dawn and Decline: Notes 1926-1931 and 1950-1969*, trans. Michael Shaw, Continuum Books, Seabury Press, New York, 1978, p.77.