

Le monde est à nous

Marco Scotini

One of the most intense moments in the 24-hour long *dérive* (journey) of the three inhabitants of the Paris banlieue in the masterpiece movie *La Haine* (Hate) by Mathieu Kassovitz is when Saïd, the Moroccan guy, comes out of the group and - filmed from behind, at night - intervenes on an advertising billboard. The image on the original poster represents Earth against a black background—the same one on which a Molotov bomb explodes in the opening sequence, a sort of leitmotiv in the whole film. By deleting and replacing a single letter with his spray paint on the billboard text, Saïd enacts a radical *détournement*, turning the sentence “*Le monde est à vous*” (The world is yours) into “*Le monde est à nous*” (The world is ours). *La Haine* is from 1995, ten years earlier than the riots that shook the Paris *banlieues* in 2005.

Now, some years later and in the midst of a global financial crisis, the French tycoon of art and finance launches again, in Venice, a populist challenge: this time the buzzword is “*Le monde vous appartient*” (The world belongs to you). It is hardly a coincidence that this takes place in Italy, but it’s a sign of a more global attitude. The title has been chosen to identify a blockbuster show held in Francois Pinault’s Canal Grande headquarter, Palazzo Grassi, devoted to artists from emerging countries: the *banlieues* of the globalized world. But in a wider sense this slogan also applies to the art audience, to the public of tourism and communication: a new workforce that - while it produces value, economies, and consensus - has to be controlled in order to, on the one hand, discourage it from enacting a social reallocation of commons, and on the other hand encourage a new, restricted and competitive channelling towards the business and wealth of the upper classes. What is “*Le monde vous appartient*” if not a “governance of the public” brought to its paradoxical consequence? In this paradox, the promise of redistribution - as stressed by the title - is turned into the form of ownership of a single collector: Francois Pinault. We are faced with the evidence of a typical situation of capitalist valorisation, in which one is allowed to participate in forms of expression and creation only as long as she or he accepts to be barred from their ownership.

Creative industries spur the ideological and political nature of the subjects to capitalise on their desires, over-determine their social roles and functions, and ultimately restore disciplinary *dispositifs* (devices) and hierarchies. “*Le monde vous appartient*” is an outright ideological mystification of the new subordination between the governing and the governed, so as to make the latter’s exploitation unrecognizable. The aim of current creative industries is to obtain the unquestionable identification of their employees, in a way that was unthinkable within the previous frame, in which the mere existence of a contract acknowledged the separateness of the two parties. But today, in cognitive capitalism, a statement such as “the business belongs to you” can be all but indifferent to current knowledge-workers.

Back in Venice, once again, on the occasion of the 2011 edition of the Venice Biennale, the Swiss curator Bice Curiger not only chose the title *ILLUMINATIONS* for an exhibition whose main sponsor is a multinational energy corporation such as ENEL, but awarded a Golden Lion to Christian Marclay’s work *The Clock*, in order to

comply with the marketing needs of the Swiss brand, Swatch. The previous year, one of the most recognized art dealers in New York became the first gallery owner to be appointed director of one of the major contemporary art museums in the US. After receiving a 30 million dollar gift from millionaire Ely Broad for its 30th anniversary, the Los Angeles MOCA, by now vulnerable to the irreversible financial crisis, defined its leadership model as an unprecedented union of marketing and art, contradicting the conventional appointment protocols. Meanwhile, the Guggenheim Museum in New York celebrated the retrospective and last exhibition of 51-year-old Italian artist, Maurizio Cattelan. About the show, the French newspaper, *Le Monde*, printed an article titled, "Maurizio Cattelan, Patron Saint of the Subversives"¹. But it is important to ask: Subversive of what? Since we know very well - as the same newspaper article makes clear - that Maurizio Cattelan is supported by such collectors as Francois Pinault in France, Eli Broad in the USA, Dakis Joannou in Greece, who are the real patrons behind the financialization of the contemporary art system. So it seems that there are many things unsaid, yet very well known.

Where does this gap between those who own the art and its system, and those who are only allowed to look at it, originate from? And how is the art public reacting? Does it keep its role of passive spectator? It seems that the real art public has become the one captured in the glamorous photos published in the Art Forum online column, "Scene and Herd," according to which Claudia Schiffer visiting the VIP opening of the Frieze Art Fair or Dasha Zhukova's magazine, *Garage*, are not just a parody of the whole art system, but the core of it. The global redistribution of wealth has caused the coming to the fore of two other phenomena; underscoring both the growing discrepancy between rich and poor, and the fact that a segment of society is trying to make its wealth seem perfectly natural. In this situation, contemporary art becomes a sort of a privilege, one that gives to those who own it a feeling of acquired right, something that no one would dare to put into question. In February 2012, on the occasion of the opening of the Whitney Biennale the group Arts and Labor posted a claim on their website, asking to close the Whitney Biennial in 2014, on the occasion of its first 100 years of history. It is important to know that the main sponsor of this Biennale is the famous auction house Sotheby's, which had recently locked-out 50 unionized art handlers in New York, at the same moment when it sold a work by Clifford Still for more than 70 million dollars. Arts and Labor members wrote:

"We object to the biennial in its current form because it upholds a system that benefits collectors, trustees, and corporations at the expense of art workers. The biennial perpetuates the myth that art functions like other professional careers and that selection and participation in the exhibition, for which artists themselves are not compensated, will secure a sustainable vocation. This fallacy encourages many young artists to incur debt from which they will never be free and supports a culture industry and financial and cultural institutions that profit from their labors and financial servitude.

The Whitney Museum, with its system of wealthy trustees and ties to the real estate industry perpetuates a model in which culture enhances the city and benefits the 1% of our society while driving others into financial distress. This is embodied both in the biennial's sponsorship - represented most egregiously in its sponsorship by Sotheby's, which has locked out its unionized art handlers - and the museum's imminent move to the Meat Packing District, a neighborhood where artists once lived and worked, which is now a gentrified tourist destination that serves the interests of the real estate industry.

We therefore call upon the Whitney in its centennial year to end the biennial and to support the interests of art workers over the capital interests of its trustees and corporate sponsors."²

Right inside the frame of the 2012 edition of the Whitney Biennial, artist Andrea Fraser, one of the major voices of Institutional Critique, decided to use the invitation to participate, not to exhibit her work, but to occupy a space on the Biennial's website³. In the text that she produced on this occasion she writes:

"It is widely known, that a private equity, managers and other financial industry executives emerged as major collectors of contemporary art early in the last decade and now make up a large percentage of the top collectors worldwide. They also emerged as a major presence on museum boards. Many of these collectors and trustees from the financial world were directly involved in the subprime mortgage crisis - a few are now under federal investigation.

More broadly, it is clear that contemporary art world has been a direct beneficiary of the inequality of which the outsized rewards of the Wall Street are only the most visible example. A quick look at the GINI Index which tracks inequality worldwide reveals that the locations of the biggest art booms of the last decade have also seen the steepest rise in inequality: the United States, Britain, China and, most recently, India. Recent economic research has linked the steep increase in art prices over the past decades directly to this growing inequality."^{4 5}

The text by Andrea Fraser is captured into a self-evident contradiction though, because it can be downloaded from the Whitney Biennial website, but with a copyright symbol of the Whitney Museum of American Art. The conclusion of Andrea Fraser is that it is necessary to abandon the rhetoric of the classical approach to art, because:

"It now seems that the primary site of the barriers between 'art' and 'life', between aesthetic and epistemic forms that constitute art's symbolic systems and the practical economic relations that constitute its social conditions, are not the physical spaces of art objects (as critics of a museum have often suggested), but discursive spaces of art history and criticism, artists' statements and curatorial texts. Formal, procedural and iconographic investigation and performative experimentation are elaborated as figures of radical social and even economic critique, while the social and economic conditions of the works themselves and of their production and their reception are completely ignored or recognized only in the most euphemized ways."⁶

So what do all of these events have in common? It is easy to understand how all of these symptoms share a single matrix, that is post-Fordist capitalism, in which financialization is just the other face – 'adapted and perverse' – of the contemporary transformation of labour and its value. Such labour now coincides with productive strategies in which the workforce's knowledge and cognitive competencies, and ultimately everyone's very life, assume the role formerly played by machines in the Fordist era. Here, in the socially diffused factories of cognitive capitalism/exploitation, it is less and less visible: it reaches so far beyond the boundaries of contractual working hours that it economically colonizes life itself, subjugating and controlling the space of 'free' productive action.

It's not enough to have the courage to publicly denounce this phenomenon, as many artists in the tradition of Institutional Critique, such as Andrea Fraser or

Peter Watkins, have already done. This is no longer a moral issue only. The current task of artistic and cultural professionals is to go beyond the legacy of Institutional Critique in favour of a socio-labourist point of view capable of equating art with any other form of labour in the social production machine. They need to go beyond the boundaries of capitalistic organization. There is an increasingly pressing need to unmask the hyper-visibility of organizations that are more hypothetical than real: Recognizing the true nature of curators as 'shepherds' of a new unilateral proselytism (neo-liberal propaganda), and revealing the hidden networks and procedures behind art world brands and corporate identities. But it is also more and more necessary to demand social rights to backup both the current transformation of the nature of cultural consumption and production, as well as the increasing imposition of quantitative and measuring criteria to knowledge as a whole. Defending cognitive labour, and demanding for a social recognition of human capital, are hence not only a duty of every subjectivity involved in such labour: they are an essential right. It is about becoming aware of the new time-space geographies of global knowledge production, as well as of the figures of the workers involved today in this process. And this reflection needs to start from the radical acknowledgment that these figures are still politically unarmed, and yet incapable of social recomposition. The invention of new forms of action and coalition seems to be crucial, especially now, at a time when the crisis is being followed by a reaffirmation of ever more oppressive neo-regimes and behaviours. Finally, this awareness needs to avoid the cynicism of the post-Fordist enterprise's innovative vision, as well as the wage-earner's nostalgic cynicism and the classical trinitarian formula of wage-profit-revenue. If the only possible option for art is to work on its own working conditions, it is just as necessary to consider the cultural industry as a new ground for political struggle.

As Walter Benjamin wrote, back in 1934, the difference between the author as a producer and the 'artist' (or the professional) will never lie in the mere production of works (and/or exhibitions) so much as their work will be based on those means of production themselves.⁷ Feeding the production system with an innovative critical spirit is useless if this does not entail its transformation. "Art and culture professionals, in the belief they master an apparatus which actually masters them, defend an apparatus they can no longer control," because, as Bertolt Brecht maintains, such structure no longer is "a tool for producers, as the latter still believe, but something which is used against them."⁸ If it is true that a sociological 'outside' can no longer be found in this new regime, that is no longer a given, then it must be built.

Back to Saïd, Hubert and Vinz in the nightly Paris *banlieue* - we shall be able to profane the semiotic *dispositifs* (devices) of our own exploitation and control. We shall write, once again, "*Le monde est à nous.*"

Notes

- 1 Philippe Dagen, "Maurizio Cattelan, saint patron des subversifs," *Le Monde*, December 2, 2011.
- 2 <http://artsandlabor.org/end-the-whitney-biennial-2014/>
- 3 <http://whitney.org/Exhibitions/2012Biennial/AndreaFraser>
- 4 Andrea Fraser, There's No Place Like Home, http://whitney.org/file_columns/0002/9847/andreafraser_theresnoplacelikehome_2012whitneybiennial.pdf
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 See Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York 1978. Rpt. Schocken, 1986, pp. 220-238.
- 8 Bertolt Brecht, cited in *ibid.*

Marco Scotini is an independent curator and art critic based in Milan. He is Director of the department of Visual Arts and Director of the MA of Visual Arts and Curatorial Studies at NABA in Milan. He is Editor-in-Chief of the magazine *No Order. Art in a Post-Fordist Society* (Archive Books, Berlin) and Director of the Gianni Colombo Archive (Milan). He is one of the founding members of Isola Art and Community Center in Milan. His writings can be found in periodicals such as *Moscow Art Magazine*, *Springerin*, *Domus*, *Manifesta Journal*, *Kaleidoscope*, *Brumaria*, *Chto Delat? / What is to be done?*, and *Alfabeta2*. Recent exhibitions include the ongoing project *Disobedience Archive* (Berlin, Mexico DF, Nottingham, Bucharest, Atlanta, Boston, Umea, Copenhagen, Turin 2005-2013), *A History of Irritated Material* (Raven Row, London 2010) co-curated with Lars Bang Larsen and Gianni Colombo (Castello di Rivoli, Turin, 2009), co-curated with Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev. He has curated solo shows and retrospective exhibitions of Santiago Sierra, Deimantas Narkevicius, Jaan Toomik, Ion Grigorescu, Regina José Galindo, Gianni Motti, Anibal Lopez, Said Atabekov, Vangelis Vlahos, Maria Papadimitriou, Armando Lulaj, Bert Theis and many others. His most recent exhibition was *Disobedience Archive (The Republic)* for the Castello di Rivoli (Turin, 2013) and *The Empty Pedestal*, an exhibition project dedicated to the art from Eastern Europe at Museo Civico Archeologico in Bologna, 2014.