Toward an Evicted Avant

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Toward an Evicted Avant-Garde

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A thesis presented to the Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts at Washington University in St. Louis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

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1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary art has been evicted from both Heaven and Earth—divorced from the promise of spiritual ascension (or existential truth) as well as the emancipatory impulses of modernity (Marxism, anarchism, etc.). The artist is constantly on the make, trying to become in actuality what they feel themselves to be in essence, trapped between a rigid social position and the fluidity and openness of the contemporary art object or gesture. Within that trap are unspoken truisms about what work can and cannot be: too didactic, too earnest, or too confrontational. Contemporary art suffers an unbearable lightness of being and an unbearable weight of becoming. The avant-garde art model has become institutionalized and “weak,” too often detached from the concerns and audiences that can revitalize that model. The first task is to re-orient avant-garde art production toward popular concerns, audiences and forms. This does not mean imitating the “strong” images of the dominant culture, but using the art space as a theatrical space, a social and spiritual platform, to valorize proletarian narratives: the narratives of those who hold the power to abolish capitalism and create a genuine democratic society. To that end I aim to introduce the reasons for, and criteria of, an “evicted art practice.” Emphasizing the shamanistic role of the artist, the character of art, and the temporal aspects of both.

2. AGAINST THE WEAK AVANT-GARDE

Just their fingers' prints
staining the cold glass, is sufficient
for commerce, and a proper ruling on
humanity. You know the pity
of democracy, that we must sit here
and listen to how he made his money.
We have reached the Hegelian endgame; the fusion of art and philosophy. The art object has become, it is claimed, a philosophical argument in itself. But it is a pyrrhic victory – a *Twilight Zone* ending for art history, modernism and the avant-garde. The zeros of painting, Kazimir Malevich’s *Black Square* [*fig-1*] and Robert Rauschenberg’s *White Paintings* [*fig-2*], were long ago cyphered. Echoing Joseph Beuys’ “famous axiom” that “everyone is an artist,” *anything* can be made into art. But the world beyond the philosophical-art object remains stratified, full of wars, bigotries, and privations. Anything can be made into art. But there is a *small army of theorists dedicated to parsing out what is and isn’t art*. Anyone can be an artist – *if they aren’t too attached to the idea of eating dinner*. Art and philosophy have fused in the absence of the social revolution that was meant to accompany that fusion. The result is a philosophical-art object that is profoundly weak. If the present model of serious contemporary art is a *weak avant-garde*, the solution is a *popular avant-garde*: a rapprochement between artistic experimentation (*as art*) and mass emancipatory politics.

*Boris Groys’ weak avant-garde*

In his 2010 essay, “The Weak Universalism,” Boris Groys points to (some) of the above contradictions, describing an “academicized late avant-garde” defined primarily by its conditioning in art schools. Whereas the pre-avant-garde academy was focused on technical skill,
according to Groys, the weak avant-garde is defined by its knowledge and conditioning in the avant-garde cannon. Here the deprofessionalization of art, a product of anti-elitist and other modernist gestures, becomes highly professional.

This weak avant-garde tends to produce weak visual signs. The basis of this weakness, for Groys, is in the constant change and churning novelty of modern life. “[K]nowledge of the end of the world as we know it,” Groys writes, “of contracting time, of the scarcity of time in which we live” produces a kind of “messianic knowledge.” The avant-garde becomes, according to Groys, “a secularized apostle… who brings to the world the message that time is contracting, that there is a scarcity of time.” Because we live in a “chronically messianic” or “apocalyptic” epoch in which “change is the status quo” the artist seeks intentionally weak signs. These weak signs are the artists’ attempt to produce “transtemporal” works of art; “art for all time.”

Here Groys turns reification on its head. Instead of the concrete being made abstract due to the material interests (real or perceived) of bourgeois thinkers and artists, the concrete is made abstract to escape the temporal (but strong) images of a constantly changing popular culture. For Groys, Malevich’s *Black Square* – the zero of painting – is the ultimate weak sign. These transcendent images are not just products of artists’ weak messianism but also invocations of a weak universalism. The gods and utopias that animated the past have, in themselves, become weak. These weak images are to be contrasted, in Groys view, with “strong images with a high level of visibility” like “images of classical art or mass culture.”

While Groys offers many insights, most importantly the idea of the weak avant-garde itself, there are a number of problems with his analysis. 1) He is wrong, ultimately, about reification. 2) The two biggest related problems lie in glossing over the material basis of the weak-avant-garde and in his selective genealogy of the modern avant-garde itself. To make the
case, for example, that the modernist avant-gardes always tended toward weak images one must restrict history to the visual arts (leaving aside cinema, literature, theater, poetry, music, etc.).

The avant-gardes of theater (see Brecht) and film (see Eisenstein [fig-3] or Pasolini [fig-4]) continued to interact with strong images. Even then one must cut out Dada, surrealism, pop art, and the stronger images of expressionism, constructivism, futurism, etc. This omission makes sense in Groys’ schema—counterposing the weak avant-garde to anything remotely popular – but it leaves out a significant part of modern art history (often those elements most associated with emancipatory impulses—anarchism, socialism, national liberation, gay liberation and feminism).

Of course it is difficult to provide a precise definition of weak and strong images. These are tendencies in visual signing rather than clear taxonomies. For our purposes here we will say that the weak images tend to reproduce art historical gestures, particularly abstract gestures, without the context, meaning and innovation associated with the originals. Here we clearly see much “zombie formalism,” casualism and “atemporal painting.” They are often defined by their avoidance of contemporary contradictions (although they a product of those contradictions). Strong images tend to be the powerful and dramatic images of classical art, popular culture, and sometimes the complicit images of the avant-garde (Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst, etc.).

The political economy of the weak avant-garde

There is a material basis for the weak avant-garde, both in the political economy of the art world itself, and the broader cultural dynamics of contemporary capitalism. The art world rests on three institutional pillars: the academic, the non-profit/museum art space, and the art market. A fourth “invisible” pillar supports the art world as a world: the army of art volunteers (Jerry Saltz) and unknown artists that comprise the dark matter of contemporary art. “Like its astronomical cousin,” Gregory Sholette argues, “creative dark matter also makes up the bulk of artistic activity produced in our post-industrial society.” These are the working-class artists that achieve no notoriety, the volunteers at community art centers, etc.\(^\text{10}\) The art market, of course, is what reinforces the middle-class character of visual art production and the commodity status of the art object. The art economy is largely one of individual producers who make art on speculation to be sold in a boutique market.\(^\text{11}\) The vast majority of artists who participate in this market are unable to make ends meet by art sales alone. Regardless, the demands of this market, oriented primarily to middle and upper class collectors, tend to shape the content and form of art. Here is a possible explanation for weak images that Groys has missed – a rather prosaic truth that much of the bourgeoisie does not want challenging images hanging over their couches.

The logic of the market, of course, extends into the academic and non-profit art institution. In a survey of a thousand artists regarding compensation at non-profit art spaces, “58.4 percent were completely unpaid, without even expense reimbursement…. New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art, for instance, has a total annual operating budget of more than $250 million but paid surveyed artists for only 14.3 percent of exhibitions.”\(^\text{12}\) In 1973 Holis Frampton wrote a letter to MoMA citing the case of surrealist filmmaker Maya Deren, who, despite her art world notability, starved to death in New York City.\(^\text{13}\) As Red Wedge observes:
After more than three-decades of accelerating government cutbacks, non-profits now increasingly operate by the logic of capital accumulation in their own operations. Universities increase tuition and sacrifice education and research budgets for shiny new buildings. Museums sacrifice exhibition budgets for unnecessary expansions. Community groups increase the number of ‘gatekeepers’ to urgently needed (but dwindling) resources… As Lillian Lewis and Sara Wilson McKay observe in their article, ‘Seeking Policies for Cultural Democracy: Examining the Past, Present and Future of U.S. Nonprofit Arts,’ non-profits have been forced to increasingly rely on ‘earned income’ to maintain their operations. In 2004, non-profit art organizations depended on renting their space, charging admission fees, etc. for half of their operations budgets.\(^\text{14}\)

**The ideology of the weak avant-garde**

There is an ideological factor that echoes beyond the market itself. In “Zombie Gallery? The German Ideology and the White Cube,” Danica Radoshevich argues “the bourgeois intellectual appeals to the abstract because he conceives of himself as in touch with some generalized unreservedly ‘true’ human condition.” The canonical status of the museum/non-profit space, and the academic cannon itself, echo this bourgeois conceit. It is not the temporal chaos of contemporary life (in itself) driving reification. “When this [art] is installed in an empty, white walled gallery space,” [fig-5] Radoshevich writes, “its supposed ‘autonomy’ and ‘universal validity’ is… heightened, while its relationships to social or material contexts is erased.”\(^\text{15}\)
Post-modernism claimed to undermine canonical thinking. Instead, post-modernism reinforced it. Post-modernism and post-structuralism, heralding the end of totalizing metanarratives (such as Marxism), promised liberation from the ideological constraints of the past. While in some cases spurring liberation from essentialist notions of identity, post-modernism emphasized an endlessly discursive notion of power, privileging not social movements of the exploited and oppressed, but instead valorizing the theorist or professor. It has become increasingly clear that critics like Fredric Jameson, David Harvey and Ben Davis were right, post-modernism was the cultural logic and ideology of neoliberal capital. It celebrated social and cultural fragmentation at the very moment large corporations used that fragmentation to reorganize global production and capital accumulation to their advantage. An overgrowth of “anti-ideological” theory concealed (for the art world) a thousand real world disasters.

These unfolding disasters, recalling Walter Benjamin’s “angel of history,” are the material basis for the “state of permanent change.” Capitalism is a system based on the constant destruction and creation of capital (both fixed capital [machines] and variable capital [human beings]). At its most benign this appears as fashion and novelty—at its more brutal as shuttered factory gates in Indiana and ten-year old sweatshop workers in Indonesia; and of course as bombs falling on Syrian refugees. The temporal/transtemporal dialectic, created by the unfolding of combined and even economic development (UCD), is experienced differently depending on one’s social class, identity and geographic position. For Laura Hoptman, curator of MoMA’s “Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World,” contemporary painting has come to exist in a morally neutral miasma of styles and conceptual possibilities: “Time based terms like progressive – and its opposite, reactionary... Are of little use to describe contemporary works of art.” She continues: “In this new economy of surplus historical references, the makers
take what they wish to make their point or their painting without guilt, and equally important, without an agenda based on a received meaning of style.” Here Hoptman describes how the privileged bourgeois, situated in the center of global cities, experiences culture as a tourist in space and time.

The temporal working class

The majority of the human race, however, interacts with space and time in a far more constrained manner. The working-class subject experiences a gothic-futurist temporal displacement. They are buffeted by a history of autonomies gained and lost, a future that alternates between threats and promises, and the ever-precarious present. The simultaneously gothic and futurist nature of culture under capitalism is due to the universal character of uneven and combined development (UCD). UCD was famously adapted by Leon Trotsky to explain how late Tsarist Russia combined both the most archaic social and economic forms as well as the most advanced. As Vladimir Lenin wrote of this classical UCD, “The uneven and spasmodic development of individual enterprises, individual branches of industry and individual countries is inevitable under the capitalist system.” During the period leading into World War I UCD was primarily seen as phenomenon on the edges of capitalist development (in the colonies, etc.). In the neoliberal era, as industry has become regionalized and globalized, UCD feeds back into the global “center” — as deindustrialization and globalized labor markets appear to “roll back time” in various rust-belts. UCD has always been central to capitalist development and culture:

The initial impetus for the Gothic in art and literature stemmed from the marginalization of medieval forms by bourgeois relations and industrialization. The Gothic castle and the abbey stood in ruins, projecting both a nostalgia and fear of the past – things that were lost but also alien and threatening to modern life. The dynamics of capital continually recreate this process in
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contemporary culture, on various scales and in various geographies. This dynamic is the cultural echo of combined and uneven development. The hard fought autonomy of the small businessman is destroyed as capital is consolidated in larger units. “Self-made men” are proletarianized – as (far fewer) proletarians become “self-made men.” In the process thousands of little gothic worlds are created… As for the class struggle proper, while partial victories are possible… as long as capital reigns the history of bourgeois society is one of emancipatory dead-ends and cul-du-sacs… More Gothic worlds are born – in the shells of factories, in the empty union halls, in the empty mansions of declassed small capitalists, in the photographs of failed revolutions and in the broadsheets of all but forgotten sects.

Strong-weak images vs. weak images

This is why Groys is wrong about the messianic and transcendent image. It is not the weak image that heralds the apocalyptic erasure of time. The weak image avoids the apocalypse unfolding around it. It is not the weak image that becomes, at the end of history, transcendent. The transcendent image is the image that alternates between weak and strong, like the breathing of a lung. The future does not belong to poor imitators of Malevich but to men who fly into space from their apartments [fig-6] and women who crawl out of the sea [fig-7]. It belongs to the hands throwing the tear gas canisters back at the police. The image that is both weak and strong connects aspirations to the reality of a weak position. The image of the popular avant-garde, therefore, is a column pointing to heaven with its pedestal covered in shit and cum.

fig-6: Ilya Kabakov, The Man Who Flew Into Space From His Apartment (1989), fig-7: Maya Deren, At Land (1944)
Weak political art, or situationism without soviets

The weakness of contemporary art is also found in some of its avowedly political art—our situationism without soviets, our hermeneutical circle of institutional critique and our patronizing philanthropy in (certain strands of) social practice art. For example, in 1992 Sadie Plant argued for neutering situationism in the following manner:

The line of imaginative dissent to which Dada, surrealism, the situationists, and the activists of 1968 belong continually reappears in the poststructuralist and desiring philosophies of the 1970s, and the post-modern world view to which they have led is itself faced with the remnants of that tradition… A cursory reading of poststructuralist thought leaves revolutionary theory without a leg to stand on…although poststructuralism is in some senses a radical break with the situationist project, a host of continuities makes it impossible to oppose the two world views completely. The interests, vocabulary and style of the situationists reappear in Lyotard’s railings against theory and Foucault’s maverick intellectualism...

“Like the situationists,” Plant argues, the poststructuralists “observe that the world now seems to be a decentered and aimless collection of images and appearances… and declare the apparent impossibility of a future progress and historical foundation.” Plant is wrong about the situationists – they did hold out for progress and historical foundation—calling for soviets in the French May. But Plant does describe a number of situationist inspired currents in contemporary art that play with the signs of exploitation and oppression without an emancipatory endgame

Social practice art appears to offer an alternative, but as Claire Bishop points out, one of the main problems with social practice is its rejection of authorship. This apparently radical gesture is in actuality highly conservative. Rejecting the author means ratifying the ruling ideas of society (which reject the idea of actual social or class struggle). It means accepting consciousness as it is. “[C]ompassionate identification with the other is typical of the discourse
around participatory art,” Bishop argues, “in which an ethics of interpersonal interaction comes to prevail over a politics of social justice.”

In insisting on consensual dialogue, sensitivity to difference risks becoming a new kind of repressive norm – one in which artistic strategies of disruption, intervention or over-identification are immediately ruled out as ‘unethical’ because all forms of authorship are equated with authority and indicted as totalizing.

The weak images of (much) social practice art beg the question. “[T]he aesthetic doesn’t need to be sacrificed at the alter of social change,” she writes summarizing Jacques Ranciere, “because it always already contains that ameliorative promise.”

3. THE SHAMANISTIC ORIGIN OF ART

One of the problems of the weak avant-garde is in its tendency to reject the spiritual and existential origins of art itself. This dynamic can be found both among would-be “art entrepreneurs” and among progressive artists (who wrongly believe their role is to demystify art and all that surrounds it). Both, in the end, are the Thomas Gradgrinds of contemporary art.

The Austrian art critic and Marxist Ernst Fischer, building on Frederick Engels’ “The Role of Labor in the Transition from Ape to Man,” invoked art’s pre-history in his 1959 book, The Necessity of Art. Largely a polemic against the cultural policies of “communist” Eastern Europe, Fischer attempted to describe how the origins of art were “magic”—the product of a great leap forward in human consciousness. The mastery of tools produced in humans a social knowledge—the abstraction and generalization of the world. This created a wealth of practical knowledge but it also created a method of knowing that far surpassed the empirical data that “primitive” humans had accumulated. Mythology and art were the product of this contradiction. “With the use of tools,” Fischer argues, “nothing is, in principle, any longer impossible.” Worlds
themselves became “magic.” Early humans named the seasons, aspects of sexual reproduction, named the flora and fauna. This gave our ancestors a feeling of immense power. Naming those things that could not be fully understood (death, life, love, etc.) would logically extend that power.\textsuperscript{29} “[I]n creating art,” prehistoric man (sic), “found himself a real way of increasing his power and enriching his life. The frenzied tribal dances before a hunt really did make the warrior more resolute and were apt to terrify the enemy. Cave paintings of animals really helped to build the hunter’s sense of security and superiority over his prey.”\textsuperscript{30}

Fischer’s overall thesis is correct, although his thinking is limited by the assumptions of his own time. He is wrong about the motivations of pre-historic cave painters. The “magic rite” explanation has been discredited—although it was a commonly held theory in the 1950s and 1960s.\textsuperscript{31} Various ideas have replaced the “magic rite” explanation for cave art. Possessed by a post-structuralist fear of generalization, some of these theories over-emphasize the data of a particular location—the San Rock Art of South Africa [\textbf{fig-8}] or Chauvet Cave in France [\textbf{fig-9}] for example—and refuse to draw wider conclusions (even when the data demands such generalization). A debate ensued between the so-called “pluralists” on the one side and the “shamanistic” model on the other.\textsuperscript{32}

\begin{center}
\textbf{fig-8: San Rock Art in South Africa, fig-9: Chauvet Cave in France}
\end{center}

\textbf{Cave painting and shamanism}
Davis Lewis-Williams and Thomas Dowson were among the first to argue that much cave painting and rock art was shamanistic—based on studies of San Rock Art and the analysis of phosphenes and abstract motifs [fig-10]. Phosphenes are light patterns that are not caused by external input—usually the product of hallucinations caused by hunger (fasting), movement (whirling dervishes or dance), intoxication or sleep deprivation. They evidence one of the central features of shamanism—entering altered states of consciousness to visit the “spirit world” in order to bring lessons and narratives back to the group. “Amongst hunter-gatherer communities” Lewis-Williams argues this “is called ‘shamanism.’”

The world derives from the Tungus language of central Asia. Today this is a disputed word. Some researchers feel that the term has been used too generally to be of any use... I, and many others disagree. We believe that ‘shamanism’ usefully points to a human universal—the need to make sense of shifting consciousness—and the way in which this is accomplished especially, but not always, among hunter-gatherers.

Jean Clottes, former director of research at Chauvet Cave, agrees with Lewis-Williams. “Clottes and Lewis-Williams,” David Whitley writes, “argued, in essence, that the caves themselves were topographic models of the trance experience. As the ‘entrails of the underworld,’ they were the vortex that, through ritual trance, the shaman used to access the supernatural.”

The anti-shamans
The post-structuralists counter that this interpretation ignores the specific cultural experiences that produced each artifact. But as Whitley argues:

That the art is in caves as different as Chauvet and Lascaux could reasonably be interpreted as shamanistic in origin… is no small conclusion. As Jean Clottes has repeatedly pointed out, this speaks to the fact that Paleolithic art reflects an extremely long cultural, artistic, and religious tradition—one that lasted for more than twenty thousand years.  

David Whitley, however, is wrong when he asserts that shamanistic cave painting and rock art reflected an “inner” vs. “outer” practice. The function of the shaman, based on observations in North America, Siberia and Australia, was multi-faceted. The pre-historic shaman was a priest, healer, joker, historian, storyteller, magician and scientist. Any quest to the spirit world was taken in a dialectical relationship with the needs, material and spiritual, of the hunter-gatherer group. This leads Derek Hodgson to argue Lewis-Williams’ shamanistic interpretation theory requires a “substantial leap of faith.” Nevertheless, the fact that cave painting does not limit itself to the marks associated with phosphenes and that such paintings are also “processed by different regions of the visual cortex” does not negate the shamanistic interpretation thesis. The modern and bourgeois impulse toward categorization and specialization did not exist in egalitarian hunter-gatherer societies. Shamanistic art metabolized the complex social, existential and cultural dynamics of early humans. Lewis-Williams answers this charge by looking at the interplay of mythology and ritual in San Rock Art, arguing that posing the question as either/or (myth vs. ritual) misses the point.

Metaphors of trance permeate many myths… Certain components of trance experience derive from the functioning of the human nervous system. For example, sensations of floating or flying in a realm above (sometimes suggested by feathers or wings) and penetrating the ground below via some sort of tunnel (or through water) are hard-wired human neurological experiences… They structure not only many San myths but mythology worldwide; all
religions have an ecstatic component, though extreme altered states of consciousness are not necessarily experienced by all adherents.\textsuperscript{44}

Both a collective social-narrative and an individual subjective experience permeate the work.

There is no categorical separation between the unique existential individual and the collective social mythology. They both exist at one and the same time.

There is… no evidence than an independently generated mythology determined trance experience. What the San talk about after trance experiences… and what is painted in the rock shelters both concern the same spiritual realm, the one in which many myths take place… The San painted neither generalized ‘mythology’ nor specific narratives, but rather their own forays into the spirit realm.\textsuperscript{45}

The idolatry of shadows

Of course there are fundamental differences between contemporary art and the art of primitive communism—but art continues to hold a dual social-spiritual functionality as well as a “profound negotiation between subjective vision and collective mythology.” Among the anthropologists it is those arguing for the shamanistic interpretation that are following a dialectical materialist approach to their subject—using empirical data toward probable generalizations of social and cultural movement. The post-structuralists, with their devotion to specificity, are trapped by their philosophical idealism. In their upside-down Platonic cave they obsess over shadows and refuse to consider the light.

4. FOR A POPULAR AVANT-GARDE\textsuperscript{46}

Olinde Rodrigues (1795-1851), in his essay, “L’artiste, le savant et l’industriel,” demanded that artists serve as [the people’s] avant-garde.”\textsuperscript{47} Rodrigues, a utopian socialist, was part and parcel of a long tradition that located the modern avant-garde in relationship to emancipatory struggles
and politics—a chain broken by the neoliberal turn and its post-modern and post-structuralist philosophies. The obvious question for any practical Marxist is: why do we need an avant-garde at all? The answer is that the avant-garde is not an invention of artists and academics. It is an organic product of capitalist culture: borne of UCD itself. The avant-garde, in terms of cultural production, remembers the past and anticipates the future. It is our responsibility, as radical artists operating within the weak avant-garde, to shape it and reorient it toward popular and radical concerns. As Bertolt Brecht notes, “capitalism has the power to immediately and continually turn the poison that’s thrown into its face into a drug, and then enjoy it.” What is subversive one day is decorative the next. In the face of this reification, the capacity of artists to experiment with form, content and context is even more important. In this way we can hope, however temporarily, to escape the reification trap and help return art to its ancient proletarian and spiritual home.

**Vangaurd and avant-garde**

Many are rightly suspicious of the term “vanguard.” Despite its original meaning it has been associated with numerous historical disasters and present-day sectarian farces. I do not refer to any existing or historic formation. Instead I refer to the observation of figures like Antonio Gramsci and György Lukács that some working-class people come to radical ideas, action and organization before others. This organic vanguard, which includes socialists, Marxists, anarchists, feminists and others, is what concerns me here. The consciousness of the working-class, the exploited and oppressed, is mixed. Historically, the task of the most advanced workers was to increase the political independence, consciousness and combativity of their class—to mitigate the ruling ideas of society and foment ideas and action pointing toward working-class
self-emancipation. Because art is, in large part, an expression of social consciousness (and subconscious) it also reflects these mixed ideas. Therefore, one role of radical artists is to engage the competition of ideas—anti-racism vs. racism, feminism against misogyny, queering against gender normative ideas, solidarity against division, etc.

But art is also spiritual in origin—allowing human beings to imagine new worlds, make radical departures, see from new vantage points. The tactics and strategy of the class struggle must always be, in the end, practical concerns. Art is different. As Leon Trotsky and Andre Breton famously observed, art has its own laws. Rooted in the egalitarian hunter-gatherer societies (as described by Ernst Fischer) the art of primitive communism allowed human beings to project their imaginations on all that could not yet be known. Whereas capitalism tends to destroy the proletarian individual, art allows the individual to create their own universe(s)—places where they are no longer subjugated, where they become free, where they become the hero-martyr, take revenge, where beauty replaces ugliness, the delicate replaces the crude, or the crude explodes in the faces of the exploiting delicate. (fig-11)

fig-11: Mark Hogancamp, Marwencol (photo of ongoing installation, 2000-2016)

Neoliberalism and the collapse of “really existing socialism” disoriented the left (including left-wing artists). Adapting to diminished horizons we forgot how to dream grand dreams. The utopianism of the neoliberal turn (that the market would solve all our problems) and its cultural
post-modernism (that we would be free to determine our own identities) has been exposed to the withering criticism of reality. The market solves nothing for the vast majority. And while we are freer to imagine our own identities capitalism denies us the right to actualize them—through the constraints of poverty and the blows of transphobic bigots. Mainstream culture has grown alternatingly empty (in its endless reproduction of CSIs) and dystopian (The Walking Dead). The mechanical and digital reproducibility of art, holding so much promise to Walter Benjamin and others, is not under democratic control. The relations of production (a class society based on exploitation) are in conflict with the forces of production (the tools that should make a democratic culture truly possible).

Of course there is a difference between mass cultural products and unique art objects and experiences. The cultural impact of a painting or sculpture tends to unfold in months and years as opposed to the days and weeks. A painting may only become a mass phenomenon after thousands have seen it and it has been reproduced hundreds of times in other media. Picasso’s Guernica only became Guernica after it was toured to raise money for the Spanish Republic and used in dozens of anti-war protests. Brecht’s Threepenny Opera became a mass cultural phenomenon in a matter of weeks as its music was distributed on records across Germany. The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui—a non-musical allegory for the rise of fascism set in gangland Chicago—wormed its way into the cultural superstructure far more slowly.

Regardless, Benjamin’s hope for the reproducible image, like Joseph Beuys promise that “everyone is an artist,” remains unfulfilled. So the content of art, “high” and “low” is directed away from democratic socialist cosmopolitan ideas, and toward hierarchical themes—celebrity, wealth, success, fear of the other. We are left with the mechanical reproduction of misogyny,
heterosexism, queerphobia, racism, nationalism and imperialism—and we are left with the unique art object and experience trending away from such concerns.

**Aesthetic leveling and strong-weak images**

The strong images of the dominant culture offer no way out for the proletarian subject. Likewise the weak images of much of the academic avant-garde offer very little. The solution, for the class-conscious artist, is to connect weakened art and a weakened working-class to universal and totalizing aspirations. The strong-weak image is the mode of the popular avant-garde. And historically it has come from outside the art world as often as within it—and sometimes both, in the work of the Wild-Style graffiti innovators of the 1970s and the punk rock DIY posters and zines of the 1970s and 1980s. Raymond Pettibon, highly influenced by William Blake and Goya, was central to the early punk aesthetic, producing art for his brother’s band, *Black Flag*. The tension between “weak” and “strong” inherent to his work was summarized by Pettibon himself when he argued, “I am really asking is for you to look at Gumby with the same kind of respect that you would if it was some historical figure or Greek statue.”

(fig-12)

As Benjamin Buchloh observes, Pettibon is continuing and arguing with the work of Andy Warhol—too often dismissed by the left and too often emptied of contradiction and depth by his
would-be inheritors. Warhol’s leveling worked in multiple ways: bringing the popular and “kitsch” into the art space and then reintroducing the mark of the hand (however mitigated through mechanical reproduction) in the flaws of his screen prints. But Warhol—the son of a working-class Pittsburgh family—keeps doubling down. Like Pettibon, Warhol invoked Goya in his own disaster series (in work largely ignored in the U.S. but celebrated in Europe). This is not popular content per se but *popular concerns*: repressed sexuality and violence (the *Most Wanted Men* series banned at the 1964 World’s Fair) (fig-13), and mortality, both individual and social (*Marilyn, Race Riot, 129 Die in Jet*) (fig-14).

Pettibon and Warhol do not produce weak images but strong-weak images—incorporating the tensions of this world and the next—in the case of Pettibon in the degeneration of the “American Dream” that characterized early punk. This mirrors the actions of the first generation of great graffiti writers—claiming the urban space as their own, albeit symbolically. Such leveling does not eschew unfolding dystopias (as with the false equality of “atemporal painting”) but introduce social and existential contradictions—free expression vs. the bureaucratic city, disdain for failing official moralities, the death masks of celebrity, images of electric chairs reproduced as artistic fetishes. As Jamie Reid describes the early punk art milieu [fig-15] [fig-16]:

> The growth of the independent DIY [punk] scene in the late 1970s… resulted in graphic design for record sleeves, posters,
flyers, and fanzines that could be targeted to specific, often small-scale, markets. Many of these could be regarded as strongly noncommercial in terms of the mainstream record industry, or in the handmade, labor-intensive nature of the packaging itself. Their designs often involve strategies that, although based on limited budgets, were inventive and sophisticated—incorporating alternative production processes, the adaptation of available, low-tech materials, and simple, often handcrafted, printing techniques.\textsuperscript{60}


Early punk's visual artists recall Arte Povera’s use of “poor” materials—in particular the political “igloos” of Mario Merz (fig-17) and the interventions of Michelangelo Pistoletto (\textit{Venus of the Rags} and the \textit{Vietnam} mirror paintings) (fig-18) (fig-19).


Just as punk was born of deindustrialization—and a rolling back of development among industrial workers in the U.S.—Arte Povera was born of Italy’s post war industrial boom (and
antagonism toward U.S. imperialism and art-world arrogance). Arte Povera responded to American-style consumerism with a left-wing cultural romanticism. In 1967 the art critic Germano Celant published his essay “Arte Povera: Notes for a Guerilla War” comparing the group’s aesthetic strategies with the national liberation wars raging in Latin America, Africa and Asia.\(^{61}\) As Nicholas Cullinan writes:

Celant’s characterization of Arte Povera reflects Italy’s struggle to reconcile and adapt to its transition from a relatively impoverished and predominantly agrarian country ravaged by World War II to the rapidly industrializing nation propelled by the Marshall Plan-backed *miracolo italiano*, or economic miracle, in the late 1950s and early ’60s. Together with American aid, the growth of companies like the Turin-based automobile company Fiat… contributed to Italy’s burgeoning foreign trade. Yet this ‘miracle’ caused Italy a great deal of social tension and upheaval. A case in point was the dislocation engendered through… mass migration from the poor South to the rich North.\(^{52}\)

UCD provokes, by necessity, a cultural dislocation—with all its gothic and futurist notes, breaking both to the left and the right. There is no transcending such dislocations with weak images. The beauty and *pathos* comes from the struggle itself—in the Bronx, in Los Angeles, in the Factory (both Andy’s and Fiat’s), in Pittsburgh, in Turin.

### 5. NARRATIVE CONCEPTUALISM: INTERRUPTING DISBELIEF\(^{63}\)

Central to romantic and humanist cultural Marxism is the question of interrupting cynical disbelief through the re-establishment of distance and aura—but tethered to the *popular* concerns of those outside the rarefied art world—the “proletarian reality and fantastic hidden within the mundane and banal.”\(^{64}\) This method aims to “buy time” until the imagination of revolutionary proximity returns—when the actual rebellions of the working-class create a mass consciousness of alternatives. The work of ex-Soviet installation artist Ilya Kabakov may seem an odd model to
borrow from for such a project. His work is bound up with the “supposed failures of utopian modernism” but his reproduction of “social and artistic tensions (totality/subjectivity, mundane/cosmic, narrative/conceptual, proletarian individual/collective utopia, modernity/post-modernity)” provide a map to mitigate the weakness of the present-day avant-garde.65

Moscow Conceptualism

Ilya Kabakov is the Soviet born installation artist—working in collaboration with his partner, Emilia Kabakov, since the mid 1990s—producing work that invokes the dual social and spiritual character of art as they intersect with the social realities of the USSR. Kabakov’s theoretical approach, outlined by Boris Groys as well as Kabakov himself, has been called “total installation”—based on the German idea of gesamtkunstwerk—the idea of a “total art” most associated with Richard Wagner. Total installation aims to surround the viewer in a complete visual and narrative environment.66

The USSR, as Lara Weibgen argues, was a “constant presence” in modern art. While the early 20th century Russian and Soviet avant-gardes played important roles in the avant-garde narrative, the very existence of the USSR, long after its cultural and socialist degeneration, polarized ideological debates between capitalists (liberal, social democratic or conservative) and Marxists (democratic or Stalinist). Intellectual debates, prior to the collapse of the USSR and the ascendancy of post-modernism, were largely pushed into two hostile camps.67 These debates occurred largely outside of the Soviet camp itself (where dictatorship made such debates nearly impossible).

Conceptual art in the west, as Michael Corris argues, could be read in large part as a rejection of the commodification of art.68 This dematerialization of the art object was part and
parcel of the rebellions of the late 1960s—the French May, the student and Black Power rebellions of the United States, the spread of Maoist ideas, etc. However distorted (in Marxist terms) battle lines were drawn against the liberal or social democratic corporatist state, consumer culture, and their attendants—imperialism, racism, sexism, etc. By the time of the 1970s economic crisis and the return of “classical Marxist” concerns, conceptual art had already been metabolized into the art market and art world cannon.

Conceptual art in Moscow was born under a different star. Under the dictatorship of the Communist Party and influenced by Russian and Soviet literary traditions, Moscow conceptualism’s cutting edge was narrative. If Western conceptual art was driven toward categorization and definition, Moscow conceptualism was moved by a “graphomania”—an impulse toward writing. These artists did not target a (non-existent) art market or the “commodification of culture” but, as Groys argues, the “rules of the symbolic economy that governed the Soviet Union in general.” These stories were connected to how everyday life was experienced in the Soviet Union. “[L]ife consisted of two layers, “Kabakov recalls, “each person was a schizophrenic. Any person—a factory worker, intellectual, artists—had a split personality.”

[After Stalin] this dual life became firmly established, it was recognized by absolutely everyone, including the official organs of
the secret police. There was a very strict distinction between public and domestic, kitchen life.⁷⁴

Daily life in the “total installation” of the USSR (as Boris Groys described it) became a performance—a curation of one’s public self. Moscow conceptualism was not part of that public performance. It was underground, sometimes censored, occasionally tolerated, with an audience of a few dozen artists, poets and intellectuals (among them Kabakov and Boris Groys). Such work, as Lara Weibgen puts it, did not aim to criticize the art institutions in which it lived but rather to “compensate for the absent museums of contemporary art through various practices of self-institutionalization.”⁷⁵ Moreover, artists focused on the contradiction between the lofty (professed) ideals of the state and the reality of “everyday life.” An “earnest irony” came into being in which “speaking in quotations” was the only means left for sincerity.⁷⁶ Boris Groys describe the fruit of this earnest irony as “Romantic Conceptualism” and “discursive pop art.”⁷⁷

Ten Characters

This was the world in which Kabakov’s Ten Characters (1969-1975) was born. Ten Characters [fig-21] became the basis of his latter installation work. Each book is a collection about ten “little heroes” living in the margins of Soviet life as visionary (but unknown) artists or mystics.⁷⁸ These subjects are depicted with a kind of proletarian magical realism in the tradition of Gogol, Dostoevsky and Chekov.⁷⁹ The mundane (the weak) persists but it is connected to a fantastic psychological or cosmic ascension (or plan for such an ascension). Ten Characters, Joyce Beckenstein argues, “tell 10 fables, suggest 10 positions from which homo sovieticus can react to the world. 10 psychological attitudes. 10 perspectives on emptiness and white. 10 parodies of aesthetic traditions through which Kabakov evolved.”⁸⁰ While this is largely right, the reading of
Ten Characters is complicated by the particulars of Soviet art history. Kabakov knows that white can also signify the cosmic. Here is his push and pull with early Soviet modernism.

The new world was supposed to carry the perception of the cosmic. A new cosmos. All ideas come from the cosmos, and not from social life. The Russian avant-garde believed that a new cosmic era had begun. Technology, steamships, airplanes, steam engines, were all perceived to be the signs of the cosmos... All the Russian avant-gardists were accomplished visionaries, mystics, from Filonov to Malevich.81

**Total installation and “The Cave”**

As Kabakov started to make installations outside of the USSR in the late 1980s and early 1990s it was observed that, unlike most western installation artists at the time, Kabakov used the entire art space.82 “Installation is a three-dimensional invention, and one of its features is a claim to totality, to a connection with universals,” Kabakov argues, “Such claims take us back to the epic genre, to literature, to something immobile and yet worrisome... An attempt being made to encompass all the levels of the world.”83 [fig-22] Despite his understandable antipathy to Soviet cultural life Kabakov fights the loss of totality.


His invention of various characters—not unlike the characters of Edgar Lee Masters’ *Spoon River Anthology* (which aimed to expose the truth of “idyllic” small town American life)—raises,
once again, the possibility of God, revolution, cosmological ascension, and modernity, *against the distorted curation of everyday life*.  

Therefore the viewer is allowed to, as when reading a novel, suspend disbelief. The “installation space is a surrogate cave,” Margarita Tupitsyn notes, as in the origins of art (cave painting) and in a Platonic sense. The total installation brings us back to art’s primordial origins and confirms Plato’s nightmares. Kabakov knows, as Joseph Beuys learned, that “claims of mystical powers and otherworldly intervention have become a mark of bad taste… like farting at a table.” Within the metanarrative of the total installation, however, Kabakov makes mystical dreams “real”—“to reunite art with ritual.” Because it is not presented as fact—at it was with Joseph Beuys—it becomes permissible. Like China Miéville’s revised concept of “cognitive estrangement” in speculative fiction—in which “the alienation from the everyday” feeds a progressive “anti-realist” avant-garde—total installation reasserts totality and a rejects the tyrannical realisms of neoliberal capital.

**Installation and painting**

The rhythm of belief and disbelief continues in Kabakov’s use of paintings within installation. In his *Russia* series (1969) [fig-23] he produced large field paintings using a mix of the official red paint of the Soviet flag and the drab green painted on official buildings—producing a sickly brown. In other installations Kabakov uses Cezannism, an “officially forbidden” style based on “a particular interpretation of Cezanne’s work that focused on balance and painterliness.” Many of Kabakov’s fictional artists use this style of painting within his installations. “Modernists used paintings,” Margarita Tupitsyn argues, “as a point of departure” and in the context of the theatrical, aiming to share a “total; artistic universe.” The contemporary audience has no such
faith in heroic painting; the modernist painter has suffered the same fate as the authoritative voice. “The relationship of the painting to the space beyond the painting,” Kabakov notes, “is the relationship of the sacral and secular space.”

The painting within the total installation, therefore, creates a feedback between profane and sacred, real and imaginary, etc. Belief and disbelief are massaged, as in Brechtian theater, creating and eclipsing multiple distances. “Auracity” is invoked. Kabakov argues that installation casts a “magical spell.” Just as narrative conceptualism allows for the mystical and the emancipatory, the installation that frames the painting allows for the re-introduction of the modernist gesture. Kabakov is wrong, however, when he argues that he paintings “belong to no one.” They are quite clearly his paintings. But this is not a problem. The paintings act, in the context of installation, to invert the Brechtian maxim of interrupting the suspension of disbelief by invoking an anti-post-modern pose. No longer detached, disbelieving the world around us, we are absorbed in (and repulsed by) a narrative “characterized by melancholy and longing.”

The neoliberal gesamtkunstwerk

Artists in the present-day United States have our own digital gesamtkunstwerk—a total installation that involves self-curation and exists in contradiction to our everyday lived
experience. Our gesamtkunstwerk is not genuinely totalitarian—but is characterized by a political system in which only secondary matters are open for discussion.

Perry Anderson famously argued that the ‘imaginative proximity of social revolution’ was one of the three decisive coordinates of modernism; however, if we look at the peripheral modernism of Tango and Tarab, Kroncong and Marabi, the imaginative proximity of revolution must be understood to include not simply the remarkable European uprisings that produced “soviets” and “councils” in the cities of eastern and central Europe but the worldwide wave of anti-colonial rebellions that stretched from the May Fourth Movement in China in 1919 and the non-cooperation movement Gandhi launched in the wake of the 1919 Amritsar massacre to the 1919 Wafd rebellion in Egypt as well as the general strikes across port cities, mining towns and plantations: the Semana Trágica of January 1919 in Buenos Aires, the 1920 strike of Japanese sugar plantation workers on Hawaii's Oahu, the 1922 Rand rebellion on South Africa's Witswatersrand, and the 1925 killing of protesters in Shanghai that provoked the May 30 movement in Shanghai.98

Jacques Ranciere outlines in “The Emancipated Spectator” a fundamental truth of political art—that its ability to imagine “changing the world” was tied to directly to the actuality of social movements and revolutions in the 20th century.99 The collapse of alternatives meant that political art found itself in a position that could be called weak didacticism. For example, the impulse of Epic Theater, Ranciere argues, was to push the spectator away from a passive role (looking) and into action.100 Of course audiences in the 1920s and 1930s were already primed for action by the crises of the interwar period. Regardless, Ranciere asks, why is acting given primacy over looking?101 There is a fatal flaw in the argument that art’s primary function is to spur the proletarian into action. Art does not work that way. Art serves other basic human needs which overlap but are not identical to the needs served by social struggle.

The constrained spectator
“The primary knowledge,” Ranciere argues, “that the master owns is the ‘knowledge of ignorance.’” The instructor calibrates his vastly superior knowledge, at all times, a few steps ahead of those he instructs. There is always a delay inherent in the transmission of knowledge. It is within that delay that the instructor takes on a mythological and auric quality. Ranciere argues that there has been a kind-of equalization of the way in which knowledge is transferred, an “emancipation” that “starts from the principle of equality.”

“It begins,” he argues, “when we dismiss the opposition between looking and acting and understand that the distribution of the visible itself is part of the configuration of domination and subjection.” Ranciere is only half-right. In an unequal, oppressive, class society—in which spectacle plays a significant but not determinant role—looking is not necessarily a privileged position. The spectator only appears to have been emancipated. The digital dystopia promises the emancipation of seeing for rich and poor, black and white, male and female, but that is not how the social interactions surrounding and shaping images unfold. Just as the narrative of Soviet life was one of equality, so was the narrative of the incipient digital age. But whereas looking flatters the powerful, it tends to categorize and empty the weak. Ranciere is right when he argues that “words are just words.” But that has not always been the case. At one time words moved people to storm palaces. At one time they were considered “magic” things that held power over the natural world. Those days will come again.

6. FOR ART AS EPIC THEATER

Under the weak avant-garde, artists, art objects, gestures and spaces have struggled—not only with the material problems of functioning within capitalism (a totalizing problem), but also with what has been called “zombie formalism” (an echo of the essentializing modernist art gesture
without that gesture’s historic innovative role) and weak political art (echoing Foucault’s ideas of decentered power this art eschews “totalizing change.” All this tends to narrow the art object, space and gesture. Danica Radoschevich argues:

Though exhibition practices have been scrutinized for decades, the formalist "white cube" remains an international gallery standard for the exhibition of modern and contemporary artwork. Simon Sheikh … identifies that “gallery spaces and museums are still white cubes, and their ideology remains one of commodity fetishism and eternal value… The sustained predominance of the white-cube is especially fraught with respect to the art market in post bailout New York, wherein a recession era boom speaks powerfully to the character of American late-capitalism. This circumstance indicates the artist’s subservience to the inordinately wealthy, and complicity in their gratuitous consumer desires in an era of severe and increasing economic stratification… A number of artists and critics deride modern formalism because it has historically privileged artists, whose work is not framed with respect to identity, thereby trivializing the works of artists who are canonically and/or socially marginalized. But even these artists’ works are almost always exhibited in the inert, white walled formalist gallery... This pernicious double bind speaks to the paradoxes of the supremacy of formalist values in the contemporary art world.108

While Radoschevich concludes that this is a fatal flaw for the art space itself109, I believe this raises the need for an alternative idea of the avant-garde art object, gesture and space—one that reasserts the idea of narrative (a proletarian subject), metanarrative (the idea of totalizing systemic change) and recasts the art space as theater (as an ancient spiritual and social platform). As noted earlier we must oppose the bourgeois post-modern notion of atemporality—championed by Lara Hoptman (among others) and counterpose the stark existential temporality of the proletarian subject—bound and constrained by material, social and ideological conditions (the working-class trans youth who cannot afford to transition, the demonized single-mother, the Black man beaten by police, the laborer who has lost his job, the immigrant being deported, persons who sacrifice their dreams in order to make ends meet). That majority, as argued above,
confronts its own temporal displacement in a gothic-futurist manner. “To let history wash over you,” as I have argued, “is to be consumed by a past of horror and nostalgia, a history of autonomy gained and lost, repeatedly, and on various levels.” The theatrical art-model poses a *radical temporality* and reasserts the political and existential. As Alain Badiou writes:

…Politics *takes place*, from time to time. It begins, it ends. And, similarly, from the fact that a theater production requires the simultaneous and ordered presence of the seven elements, it follows (and this is an essential triviality) that a theatrical spectacle begins and ends. Representation *takes place*. It is a circumscribed event. There can be no permanent theatre. …everything in it, or almost everything, is mortal.

The art space is a stage, and as Badiou argues, the stage summons the crowd. Therefore it is inherently political as it mimics but is not identical to the state. The seven elements, noted above, according to Badiou, are “place, text, director, actors, décor, costumes and public.”

While there are clear parallels to the art space the comparison is not perfect—nor does it need to be. The art space is more “irrational” than the theatrical space. The “perishable” narrative nature of both, however, is key.

There are three main concerns for art that tends to deal with the art space as Epic Theater:

1) The centrality of narrative—and the complexity of the individual subject.

2) The use of the art space as a theatrical space.

3) Employing a push and pull between belief and disbelief, distance and proximity, aura and its obliteration, along the lines of the push and pull of Brechtian theater.

Brecht sought to engage the audience, appealing to the traditional emotional and visual snares of the dramatic arts, while alternatively “distancing” the audience from those tropes. The goal was to spur a proletarian audience into action—towards social revolution. The distancing techniques of Epic Theater were meant to introduce a contradiction within the play; plays that
would employ the traditional snares of “high” and “popular” theater (which Brecht often plagiarized outright), and then interrupt them by exposing the inner-workings of the theater itself (asides to the audience breaking the fourth wall, putting the band onstage, exposing the set construction, speeches and songs that seemed to have no connection to the overall plot, etc.). In Epic Theater there are two nods to the popular, the popular concerns of a proletarian audience, and the popular theatrical and narrative devices used. But Brecht does not stop there—to the consternation of “socialist realists” like György Lukács.

![fig-24: The premiere of Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill’s Threepenny Opera (1928)](image)

Brecht’s working-class audience is going to rule the world. They are not there to be tricked or deceived (in the larger sense). But they are there to see the theater (to be tricked in the smaller sense). Brecht employs shaman’s tricks (the various artistic and narrative devices of the theater) and then exposes how they work. The result is a pumping of the conscious and subconscious, back and forth, awake and dreaming, repeatedly; from his musical experiments with Kurt Weil (Threepenny and City of Mahogany) to his more didactic plays like Saint Joan of the Stockyards. But Brecht, no intellectual weakling, was never able to finish his theoretical writings on Epic Theater. He destroyed repeated drafts on the subject. Always, in Brecht, there is an unknown part of the process—the subjective expressive element that could not be reduced to Marxist strategy. Even when he finally settled down in East Berlin no political party could effectively dictate the
Brechtian Theater is always about, at one level, the unity of opposites. For Brecht the political, totalizing and abstract truth is in constant communication with the subjective experience of that truth. Brecht learned his Marxism from the apostates Fritz Sternberg and Karl Korsch (who was purged from the German Communist Party [KPD] in 1926). Brecht, like his friend Walter Benjamin, never officially joined the KPD (or any of its offshoots). Moreover, Brecht’s Marxism was marked by Korsch’s emphasis on historic specificity; which helps explain Brecht’s anthropological approach to his subject matter (and Korsch's expulsion from the KPD). As Stanley Mitchell argues:

Epic theatre is a product of a historical imagination. Brecht’s “plagiarism,” his rewriting of Shakespeare and Marlowe, are experiments in whether a historical event and its literary treatment might be made to turn out differently or at least be viewed differently, if the processes of history are revalued. Brecht’s drama is a deliberate unseating of the supremacy of tragedy and tragic inevitability. Echoing his own “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” [Walter] Benjamin comments: “It can happen this way, but it can also happen quite a different way—that is the fundamental attitude of one who writes for epic theatre.”

Therefore Anthony Squires is partially correct when he writes:

For Brecht, emotional pleasure is shallow and its use is based on an assumption of the audience’s incapability to derive meaning from reason. Brecht rejects this saying, “[t]he one tribute we can pay the audience is to treat it as thoroughly intelligent. It is utterly wrong to treat people as simpletons when they are grown up at seventeen… I appeal to reason.”

But this did not mean that Brecht did not care about human emotion—or the individual subjects of his epic plays. As Brecht argues in his polemics with Lukács:

Even those writers who are conscious of the fact that capitalism impoverishes, dehumanizes, mechanizes human beings, and who fight against it, seem to be part of the same process of impoverishment: for they too, in their writing, appear to be less
concerned with elevating man, they rush him through events, test
his inner life as quantité négligeable and so on. They too rationalize
as it were. They fall in line with the “progress” of physics. They
abandon strict causality and switch to statistical causality, by
abandoning the individual man as a causal nexus and making
statements only about large groups.\textsuperscript{118}

“Man does not become man again by stepping out of the masses,” Brecht continues, “but by
stepping back into them.”\textsuperscript{119}

Brecht’s Marxism does not stand separate from the interior life of the actual proletarian
individual. Brecht reproduces within his work the contradictions of proletarian subjectivity as
they are actually expressed and experienced. His distancing techniques cannot be read as a one-
way street. His exposure of the artifice of the theater—breaking the fourth-wall, leaving the stage
curtain partially drawn, placing the musicians on the stage itself, undermining the tropes of
“culinary theater” (theater meant for entertainment more than enlightenment), mocking “high
opera” with Weill's appropriation of popular music—does not work without the existence within
his plays of the fourth-wall and the tropes of historic theater. Likewise it is the back and forth
(between the science of the social and the spirit of the individual) that creates the particular unity
of Brecht’s plays.

This is the emotional (and quite frankly, political) intelligence that Lukács, tending to see
workers only in aggregate, could not comprehend. Thus Brecht presents us with a social vision,
but not one of homogeneity. He presents something like the carnivalesque, a differentiated
totality, a democratic totality, the working-class, poor and middle-class as it actually is, in
movement, sometimes toward historically progressive ends, but not always, usually pulling in a
hundred different directions.\textsuperscript{120} Brecht produces theatrical monuments, but unlike fascist or
Stalinist monuments, they are not monolithic. Nor do they avoid the judgment of history (as
post-modern monuments attempt to do). As Douglas Kellner writes:
Brecht distinguished his separation of words, music, and scene from the Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk, which fused the elements into one seductive and overpowering whole in which word, music, and scene work together to engulf the spectator in the aesthetic totality. Conversely, in his “separation of elements,” each aesthetic component retains its autonomy and ‘comments’ on the others, often in contradiction, to provoke thought and insight.¹²¹

Such contradictions are reproduced, for example, throughout The Threepenny Opera, with evocations of sentiment and the traditional theater in constant battle with the hard material truths of the world. “For instance, in The Threepenny Opera,” Kellner writes, “first Mac and Polly, and then Mac and Jenny, sing of love and romance. But the scene is first a warehouse full of stolen goods and then a brothel, and the plot is one of deception and betrayal.”¹²²

In order to achieve such effects Brecht was a ruthless plagiarist, looting the historical theater as well as contemporary culture, staying true to his maxim, “don’t start from the good old things but the bad new ones” but always managing to incorporate both. Aside from the rewriting of John Gay’s The Beggar’s Opera, Brecht lifted entire passages from the Bible, Francois Villon and Rudyard Kippling (forcing him to pay royalties to Villon’s translator). He also worked in collaboration, not just with Weill; also with his actors, friends, other playwrights, on each step of production. It was not Brecht, but another playwright, who actually gave Threepenny its name. “Brecht reflected that plagiarism was a form of art,” Parker notes, “and that every Golden Age of art was characterized by the energy and innocence of its plagiarism.”¹²³

Toward epic theater in visual art

The artists and artwork surveyed here are concerned, in large part, with a kind of narrative conceptualism, dealing with subjects whose concerns exist in significant part outside the realm of art (although not entirely), subjects constrained by their material, social and political position
within larger systems. Not all of them hit all the notes of Epic Theater—but they point in a good trajectory—toward constructing a new mythology, presenting the “constrained proletarian subject” and engaging in distancing techniques that create auric value. Today, it is disbelief that reigns supreme in the art world (in part as a bulwark against “totalizing metanarratives” like socialism). To interrupt this disbelief we need to employ a Brechitan alternation between distancing and distance eliminating tropes. An electric shock can both stop and start a human heart.


In Ilya Kabakov’s The Man Who Flew Into Space From His Apartment (1989) (fig-25), the protagonist is an archetypal resident of the collective apartments in which working-class Muscovites were once forced to live. In Felix in Exile (1994), South African artist William Kentridge presents his alter ego, exiled from the apartheid state, confronted by what he has left behind, including the surveillance of state barbarism. Nedko Solakov’s semi-autobiographical Top Secret is a confession of the artist’s role in the Bulgarian police state. Emory Douglas’ protagonists are poor and working-class African Americans (and others) uniting against racism, capitalism and the police.

Kabakov, Kentridge, Solokov and Douglas treat the art gesture as a social-spiritual performance and the art space as theater. In so doing they escape the straight jacket of modernist
essentialism and post-modernist disbelief in metanarratives—a space that traps art between formalism, “image management” and the false neutrality of “social practice.” This does not mean we can uncritically accept the social and philosophical views of these artists. But, in the spirit of Brecht, we can steal from them many of the narrative and theatrical tools we need to create visual art as a kind of epic theater—reclaiming the gallery space as a site of ideological contestation between a bourgeois and proletarian narrative.

**Expressionist Agit-Prop**

In the mid 1960s Emory Douglas was making props for Black Communications Project in the Bay Area—a theater collective that included the poet Amiri Baraka. Douglas produced a series of “flats” that could be easily moved and changed between acts or plays, developing what Baraka would describe as an “expressionist agit-prop.” In 1967 Douglas joined the nascent Black Panther Party for Self Defense (BBP), eventually becoming its Minister of Culture, and devoting his artistic skills, for the next decade, to the party. Douglas would design or supervise much of the art in the *Black Panther* (the BPP’s newspaper) and would introduce a weekly poster to be printed along with the newspaper. These images tended to fuse hand-made drawings, often with heavy black lines reminiscent of some African designs, caricatures that recalled George Grosz, along with Constructivist and John Heartfield-like photo-collages. This combination of mechanically reproduced images with subjective hand-made expressionism mimicked the distancing techniques of Epic Theater. The stories Douglas told were the heroic BPP battles with racism, war, capitalism and the police, as well as the stories of “regular” African Americans’ everyday lives. There was both collective struggle and subjective
personality—whether it was that of Douglas, a single mother, the grotesque subjectivity of the “pigs.”

Douglas did not merely aim to make propaganda (although he made excellent propaganda). He (along with the BPP) constructed a counter-mythology, to “fuse everyday Black life with a revolutionary spirit.” As Laura Mulvey argues, “moving from oppression and its mythologies to a stance of self-definition is a difficult process and requires people with social grievances to construct a long chain of counter myths and symbols.” With the passage of time, the older work of Douglas has taken on an ephemeral and gothic character. The newspapers and posters have become, in part, indexical records of the political performance of the BPP, a second layer of auric distancing. The recuperation of Douglas by the art world has given him the chance to preserve the memory of the BPP in a new arena, and his past work has often been presented (rightly) in a theatrical manner [fig-28]. The inclusion of Douglas in the art space is an opportunity—not just for Douglas (although this recognition is well deserved), but an opportunity to change the nature of the art space itself.

**William Kentridge: Double performances**
South African artist William Kentridge also got his start in agit-prop theater. Kentridge grew ambivalent about the project and its ability to communicate the depth of the alienation and suffering he witnessed:

We would stage a play which showed domestic workers how badly they were being treated, implying that they should strike for equal rights. This would be presented in a hall with four thousand domestic workers…There was a false assumption about the public, in that we ‘knew’ what ‘the people’ needed, so I stopped my involvement with these groups. The early twentieth-century German Expressionists, such as Otto Dix and Max Beckmann, as well as the early Soviet filmmakers and designers of propaganda posters, had a way of using their anger, drawing it quite directly, that corresponded to what I was feeling at the time. 130

Kentridge’s work has been shaped by his position as a witness to apartheid—the white Jewish child of anti-apartheid attorneys. Kentridge could escape the direct barbarity inflicted on Black South Africans. Contemporary 1960s and 1970s American and European art did not “translate” to South African conditions. His work became shaped by his experience with theater (on the one hand) and inter-war European expressionism and propaganda on the other—allowing him to assert a human subjectivity in an inhuman context: 131 “Adorno’s much-quoted proclamation about the end of lyric poetry [following the Holocaust] was directly followed by his assertion that literature must resist this verdict.” 132 South African artist Dumile Feni Mhlaba (“Goya of the Townships”) [fig-29] also influenced Kentridge’s move toward a kind of neo-expressionism. Mhlaba’s work combined African motifs, expressionism and gothic naturalism. 133
In 1979, after years of struggling with painting, Kentridge produced a series of monoprints, fusing drawing and the theatrical. The series, *Pit*, created a small mise-en-scene.\textsuperscript{134} Sometime later Kentridge began his “signature” works of drawings turned into film animations; animations in which you can see the residual marks of previous iterations of drawing. These works were based around a series of fictional characters: Soho Eckstein (a white, presumably Jewish, South African businessman), Felix Teitlebaum (a white, presumably Jewish, South African artist) and Mrs. Eckstein (Soho’s wife and Felix’s lover). The struggles of South African apartheid and the early 1990s transition unfold around these characters. The residual marks of the drawing serve as a Brechtian device for Kentridge:

> The principle is that there’s a double performance: you watch the actor and the puppet together. The process recalls Brechtian theatre: the actors focus on the puppets and the audience has a circular trajectory of vision from the puppets to the actors and back to itself. It’s about the unwilling suspension of disbelief. In spite of knowing that the puppet is a piece of wood operated by an actor, you find yourself ascribing agency to it.\textsuperscript{135}

*Felix in Exile* (1994) \textsuperscript{[fig-30]} captures Felix Teitlebaum, Kentridge’s "sensitive" alter-ego, in exile from South Africa on the eve of the transitional elections. In a small one-room apartment Felix is surrounded by drawings and images of a Black African woman, Nandi, who surveys the violence of the Apartheid state (prefiguring the Truth and Reconciliation commission). Echoing
previous films in the series, such as Mine (1991) [fig-31] (in which strikers miners confront the gluttony of Soho Eckstein, among other things), Felix in Exile portrays a resigned complicity in which white South Africans witness the unraveling of the apartheid regime—resigned, in part, because of the compromise that allowed the economic order to survive the transition.\textsuperscript{136} Formalist echoes and conceptual detachment were, obviously, not an option in the South African context, and while agit-prop was needed, something else was needed as well: an expressionist valorization of repressed subjectivity (of Black but also white South Africans).


**Nedko Solakov: Top Secret**

As noted, while conceptual art in the “West” (particularly the United States) tended to focus on the definition of signs (and was therefore preoccupied with text), conceptual art in the Stalinist Eastern Block tended to focus on story and narrative. Eastern European conceptual art echoed Moscow conceptualism in this regard (see above). Bulgarian artist Nedko Solakov made this double-life the subject of his autobiographical/confessional installation/sculpture *Top Secret* (1990) [fig-32]:

> The chest-file contains in alphabetical order notes with texts, drawings, and small objects that tell about the life of the author and about the period between 1976 and 1983, when, as a student who believed in Socialism, he collaborated with the secret service of the former political regime in Bulgaria.”\textsuperscript{137}

44
In most former Stalinist European states the records of the secret police have been (at least partially) made public. Bulgaria is an exception so there is little verifiable information about the extent of Solakov’s collaboration. Regardless, his confession produced a great deal of controversy. Putting aside, for a moment, questions about Solakov’s complicity in a totalitarian state capitalist regime, what is most striking is the translation of crude oppressive state data into subjectivities; a symbolic restoration of what was lost. The victims of the secret police are given the dramatic value of the drawings, hand-made, individual, subjective and expressive.

Ilya Kabakov: The Man Who Flew Into Space

Kabakov’s first international works (as noted above) tended to invert the symbolic mythology of the USSR towards the dreams of individual working-class or other socially constrained protagonists in Soviet life. As Boris Groys described The Man Who Flew Into Space from His Apartment [fig-33]:

[I]n his installation uses images of Red Square and other symbols of the communist, Soviet utopia in order to tell the story of the individual, private fate of the hero of the installation. The great utopian narrative describing how all of humanity would one day be collectively propelled out of the gravitational pull of oppression and misery and into the cosmos of a new, free, weightless life has often enough been dismissed as passé, old-hat, a thing of the past. Yet stories of personal, private dreams and of individual attempts to realize these dreams cannot be told other than with recourses to that good old collective utopian narrative.
Of course, the *ultimate* reason that the story of individual emancipation cannot be told without the “good old collective utopian narrative” is because *individual emancipation is only possible through collective liberation*. The false socialism of the USSR concealed the truth that democratic socialism from below was the alternative to both Western capitalism and Eastern “communism.” Regardless, as noted above, Kabakov developed a series of strategies in “Total Installation” to allow for the suspension of disbelief of modern and pre-modern “utopian dreams.” Total installation creates a (theatrical) space in which metanarratives can be believed. In part this was done by creating a fictive space representing “the world” that contained within it expressive art objects. This Brechtian distancing and alternation parallels the contradiction between the hand and collage in Douglas, the residual traces of mark-making in Kentridge and the contradiction between the “official file” and the informal drawings of Solakov in *Top Secret*.

![Fig-33: Ilya Kabakov, The Man Who Flew Into Space From His Apartment (1989)](image)

**“The immortality of things”**

The fight to recast the art space as a site for a narrative “Epic Theater” will not be an easy one. Some academics and curators have a vested interested in maintaining the weak echo of modernist essentialism—they are the keepers of an incomprehensible “word.” The art market, despite being dominated by the mega-galleries, contains many well-meaning dealers and gallery owners. Regardless, the system depends on the sale of work. This commodification does not change the
fact of the gallery’s theatricality but complicates its conscious use; undermining art and the social and existential conditions art needs to address. Finally, as Groys notes, “the museum is, by definition, opposed to progress for it is the place dedicated to the immortality of things.”

Our goal is not to stop the museum’s dedication to immortality, but to replace the word “things” with “people:” *the billions of unique subjectivities repressed by the global anti-narrative of neoliberal capital*. This includes “things” in as much as they are a record of the (very temporal) human performance.

### 7. DIFFERENTIATED TOTALITY, OR THE CARNIVALESQUE

![Fig-34: Patrick Houdek — a memorial mosh pit for slain drummer Tim Beaty at the Lost Cross House in Carbondale, Illinois (2016)](image)

The collective working-class, the majority of the population defined in terms of a relationship to economic production, is the key to the transformation of society. But the working-class is not homogenous. It is defined by its thousands of differences: race, gender, sexuality, nationality, psychologies, cultures, biographies, etc. It cannot come together by subsuming those differences.

But the enemy — neoliberal capitalist culture — depends on the isolation and separation of all these elements. A left-wing cultural opposition unites these in a *differentiated totality*. It comes together without sacrificing the subjectivities of its constituent parts. It avoids vulgar Marxism as well as the fatalism of post-modernism and middle-class strands of anarchism. It echoes Mikhail
Bakhtin’s ideas of the carnivalesque, taken from Rabelais, but it is fused with the avenging crowds of the Zola novel. Differentiated totality is the enemy of both rhizome and (class) hierarchy. The crowd has returned but not yet cohered: in Spain, in Greece, in Occupy, in Ferguson. In order to avoid the fate of the Egyptian heroes it must learn to express a new totality.

Rabelais borrowed his ideas of the carnivalesque directly from the peasants of late medieval France, collecting wisdom “from the popular elemental forces” of “idioms, sayings, proverbs, school farces, from the mouth of fools and clowns” and in so doing was “the most democratic among” the “initiators of new literatures”—“at home within the thousand-year-old development of popular culture.” Key to the presentation of a chaotic totality—a threatening diversity—in Rabelais is the carnival [fig-35]. The medieval carnival institutionalized, over several months each year in the late middle ages, a reversal of fortune—the weak would be strong (or the strong would be ridiculed), the powerful would serve, etc.—in events such as “the feast of fools” or the “feast of the ass.”

Orchestrated spectacles aimed to, albeit in a confused manner, democratize the medieval commons through:

1. **Ritual spectacles**: carnival pageants, comic shows of the marketplace.
2. **Comic verbal compositions**: parodies both oral and written, in Latin and the vernacular.
3. **Various genres of billingsgate**: curses, oaths, popular blazons.

Clowns and fools—the descendants of the shamans—were at the center of these events. These carnivals were almost always held at “moments of crisis” in the calendar (solstices, etc.). “In the framework of class and feudal political structure this specific character could be realized without distortion only in the carnival and in similar marketplace festivals,” Michael Holquist writes, “They were the second life of the people, who for a time entered the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance.”
This “temporary liberation” from the “established order”\textsuperscript{149} was progressively abolished with the rise of capitalism and the industrial revolution—but democratic aspirations found new paths. Gustave Courbet’s \textit{A Burial at Ornans} [\textbf{fig-36}] famously translated his anarchist politics\textsuperscript{150} into the Salon of 1850-1851.\textsuperscript{151} Compared to academic painters Courbet’s painting was described as having an “anti-composition”—in that no figure is given primacy over any other.\textsuperscript{152} “Courbet’s democracy of vision,” Linda Nochlin writes, “his additive, egalitarian composition, were seen as the concomitants of a democratic social outlook.”\textsuperscript{153} Produced as a series of separate portraits of his fellow citizens Courbet makes his hometown equal in the face of death.\textsuperscript{154} A similar aesthetic would permeate much of 20\textsuperscript{th} century muralism—particularly its greatest practitioners, the Mexican muralists, also highly influenced by radical (Marxist) politics [\textbf{fig-37}]. Courbet and Diego Rivera alike foreshadowed the “all-over” aesthetic championed by Clement Greenberg in New York School abstraction. [\textbf{fig-38}]
Likewise, Sergei Eisenstein (Battleship Potemkin, Strike, October) translated the dialectical principle “quantity becomes quality” to his version of film montage.\(^{155}\) [fig-39] Eisenstein saw montage, as opposed to the static mise en scène of early cinema—including the pioneering work of George Méliès—as explosive in character.\(^{156}\) “[Whereas] the [filmmaker] Pudovkin argued that the most effective scene is made through linkage—smoothly linking a series of selected details from the scene’s action,” Anna Chen writes, “Eisenstein insisted that film continuity should progress through collision—a series of shocks arising out of conflict between spliced shots: ’…the juxtaposition of two shots by splicing them together resembles no so much the simple sum of one shot plus another—as it does a creation.’”\(^{157}\)

![fig-39: Sergei Eistenstein, plotting out the montage technique](image)

This is a dynamic equality—not the false equality of the “rhizome” in which a series of “random” objects are presented like butterflies pinned to corkboard. Of course there is a weakness to much modernist “democratic” presentation in that it often lacks the bodily chaos of the medieval carnivalesque, and therefore the full diverse and anarchic quality of the working-class. The new “epic” cannot not merely combine archetypes. It must aim toward\(^{158}\) fusing a massively varied constellation of individual subjectivities and cultural identities—united objectively (if not subjectively) against the forces that oppress and exploit them.
The Romantic dialectic\textsuperscript{159}

Such fidelity to individual subjectivity was central to classical Marxism—but obscured by the Stalinist and social democratic determinism. It was also central to the first cultural rebellion—the Romantic—against capitalist culture. The Romantic was born of the echoes of a pre-capitalist past, as Michael Löwy argues, in which qualitative value (in morality, aesthetics, philosophy) trumped quantitative value (holding of money).\textsuperscript{160} Löwy writes, Romanticism is often:

\begin{quote}
...reduced to a nineteenth century literary school, or a traditionalist reaction against the French Revolution—two propositions found in countless works by eminent specialists in literary history and the history of political thought. This is too simple... Romanticism is a form of sensibility nourishing all fields of culture... in opposition to the melancholic mood of despair, to the qualifying mind of the bourgeois universe, to commercial reification, to the platitudes of utilitarianism and above all, to the disenchantment of the world.\textsuperscript{161}
\end{quote}

As I have written elsewhere:

Romanticism was, according to Löwy, the product of the contradiction between capitalism’s celebration of individual personality on the one hand, and capitalism’s debasement of that personality on the other. The late medieval/early capitalist intelligentsia found itself in material conflict with the utilitarian worldviews of the new ruling-class. As they were trained to see everything in terms of its qualitative value (good art, good philosophy, good ethics, good writing, etc.) the artists, poets, monks and philosophers of early capitalism bristled at how the new system valued everything by exchange... They counterposed “spiritual” and “humanistic” values against the “rational” world capitalism claimed to be. They wrote against the “Dark Satanic Mills” of industry (Blake) and celebrated the night (Novalis) — because at night industry ceased (or slowed) and the possibility of magic returned to the world.\textsuperscript{162}

Because an advanced and complex capitalism requires an intelligentsia that deals in qualitative as opposed to merely quantitative values, but at the same time sees these values as alien and hostile, capitalism continually recreates the conditions that first gave rise to late 18th century Romanticism. Löwy writes:
Capitalism gives rise to independent individuals who can carry out socioeconomic functions; but when these individuals evolve into subjective individualities, exploring and developing their inner worlds and personal feelings, they enter into contradiction with a universe based on standardization and reification. And when they demand their imagination be given free play, they collide with the extreme mercantile platitude of the world produced by capitalist relations. In this respect, Romanticism represents the revolt of repressed, channeled, and deformed subjectivity and affectivity.

The unique art object and experience are suited to valorize the unique subjectivity of the proletarian subject—and the combination of those unique subjects in a differentiated totality.

8. EVICTED ART

Both working-class politics (socialism, Marxism) and shamanism have taken a blow in the late academic avant-garde. Benjamin Buchloh’s “Beuys: Twilight of the Idol” famously accused the post-war standard bearer of social sculpture and art-world shamanism of fascism—under the false notion that all mythology tends to be reactionary [fig-40].

While the art world may tend to avoid class politics as well as the unique social-spiritual function of art, a proletarian-shamanism persists beyond the art world. In 2000 working-class artist, punk music aficionado and alcoholic, Mark Hogancamp, was brutally beaten in an upstate
New York bar by a group of men who objected to his cross-dressing. As he later recalled, “I do believe I died that night.”

People ask me what it’s like to die, because I believe that I died there in Kingston Hospital and they brought me back. My brother… asked me if I saw any lights or if I heard any voices, and I told him no. It was dark. It was silent. It was nothing. No lights. No music. No people. I didn’t hover over my body in a corner of the room. Nothing. It was just… it wasn’t cold. It wasn’t warm. It was just quiet. Peace. It was darkness.

In hunter-gatherer and early agricultural societies apprenticed shamans would go through a ritual death in order to become medicine men and women. Like Joseph Beuys’ mythic near-death and rebirth origin story, Hogancamp’s story fits the shamanistic mold. He woke up with an impaired memory, unable to draw, was reborn—he decided to stop drinking, stop being racist and closed-minded. “Racism, prejudice, hatred, addiction,” he notes, “I figured those were learned things, so I could unlearn them in my second life.”

As he recovered he created, behind his home, a 1/6th scale Belgian village permanently stuck in the middle of World War II. The village, Marwencol [fig-41, fig-42, fig-43], was filled with women (figurines) that took care of a soldier modeled after Hogancamp—brutally beaten by Nazi SS officers. Eventually the town became a sort of haven—everyone, including the German soldiers, were allowed in Marwencol (as long as they “behaved themselves”). But conflict continually returns to the village. The Nazis are determined to take it. The town’s banker, “the Belgian Witch of Marwencol” Deja Thoris, acts as a sort of trickster. Most characters are based on friends, neighbors and old co-workers. Even his real-life attackers have second lives as SS soldiers in Marwencol. The narrative is ongoing—and at each stage of the story Hogancamp documents it with a 35 mm camera. He himself is also a character—one he refers to as the
“Giant of Marwencol.” And his alter-ego within Marwencol has created his own miniature town inside the miniature town.

In 2005 Marwencol was “discovered” by photographer David Naugle. Since then Hogancamp’s photographs have been shown in art galleries. A documentary film, Marwencol (Jeff Malmberg, 2011), was produced about Hogancamp and his evolving installation. He has been interviewed on NPR. “Once ridiculed as ‘the guy who plays with dolls,’” Chris Shellen writes, “Mark became respected as an artist by local residents.” Hogancamp has created a narrative in which the horrors of this world are sublated and confronted. This is the reason this so-called “outsider artist”—a phrase that doesn’t really apply to Hogancamp—has struck a cord with so many. Hogancamp, before his assault, was a skilled drawer, built trade showrooms, even worked on children’s books, and spent his time in “mosh pits at local punk clubs.”

Hogancamp doesn’t merely tinker with signs and slight variations of the modern inheritance. Marwencol has pathos and beauty and drama. Rooted in a prosaic world that most of us are all too familiar with, it offers contemporary artists a model—a way out of zombie formalism and discursive chatter. It reminds us that art is pathos and artists are shamans. I will not argue that Marwencol is in its entirety a progressive project (it is very problematic in terms of gender). The point is that this artist—until 2005 part of the “dark matter” of art—has created an entire narrative in which the horrors of this world are sublated and confronted. This is the method that I believe we should be bringing to the art world proper.
Since December 2014 I have approached my work under a rubric of total installation—creating a fiction around art objects so that they interact not merely with the “white cube” but with a broader social metanarrative. Such objects may include banal studio elements (easels, paint, etc.), newspapers, telescopes covered in stickers, fryer baskets equipped with handcuffs, coffee cups painted with Malevich crosses, etc.

The “channeling” of fictional characters, reprising the shamanistic role of traveling to the underworld, mitigates the existential weight of contemporary art—its unbearable lightness of being and weight in becoming. It does so through the negation (partial and temporary) of the “white cube” and its reification—using the auric power of the cube but cutting against its faux neutrality with a theatrical installation. The fictional proletarian artist-trope allows for the reintroduction of both the shamanistic role of the artist (through “channeling”) and in the stories of the artists themselves. This undermines residual post-modern disbelief (as noted). Expressive journeys, valorizing the subjective individual, become possible. Within that fictional metanarrative other metanarratives (revolution, ascension, etc.) can be asserted. The paintings are meant to, in part, provide the epic element of art as “Epic Theater”—introducing multiple additional characters into the installation space and narrative. This is modeled on Kabakov’s Ten Characters, Brecht’s “separation of elements,” Edgar Lee Master’s Spoon River Anthology, the carnivalesque, the “all-over” aesthetic of post-war abstraction, etc.

In these paintings, that act like songs within an larger opera, working-class characters offer confessions, accusations and dreams. These are meant to communicate two things most of all: A) The unique individual subjectivity and affectivity of the proletarian individual. B) How that subjectivity is distorted and constrained by the present systems (neoliberalism, capitalism) and their attendants (racism, imperialism, heteronormativity, etc.). This is conveyed in image,
text and material. In the *13 Baristas* series, for example, I began using coffee as a patina over the images. In *Red Mars* I have added meteorite dust and glitter (among other things). The approach to text—borrowed from William Blake, Raymond Pettibon, and others—is meant to both communicate and function as an “anti-meme”—a romantic rescue of the image/text combination from digital reproduction that lacks aura and valorization—an alternative to the digital gesamtkunstwerk. The paintings are modular, meant to combine with the other paintings, but in a changed way, evolving over time. This modular muralism is meant to recreate, once again, the idea of differentiated totality. The anthropomorphic painting combines, as in a mob or crowd (the “all-over” effect), but it also separates. Each individual painting is a commodity. Like the proletarian individual who must sell themselves (in employment) each day, the paintings (and the overall narrative they comprise) are sold off, taken apart, made less than they are as a whole. Nevertheless, by associating the working-class individual with the artistic fetish it is my hope to valorize that subject. The unified voice of the fictional artist(s) mitigates the false equality of the rhizome and asserts the dynamic of totality.

At each level of I evoke the push and pull of Epic Theater—the distance creating and eliminating devices that massage belief. Like Brecht, I appropriate from art history as well as popular culture and political imagery. For example, in *13 Baristas* I quoted both Emory Douglas’ *Black Panther Logo* [fig-44] as well as Caspar David Friedrich’s *Wanderer in the Mists* (augmented with a flying saucer and the text “the certainty of math”) [fig-45]. In *Kick the Cat* I quoted various medieval depictions of “Saint George and the Dragon” and the many versions of Judith beheading Holofernes—but applied them to present day conflicts with the police. In *Red Mars* I have quoted the famous image of Malcolm X standing by his window armed [fig-46], Mantegna’s *Dead Christ*, Delacroix’s *Liberty Leading the People* [fig-47], Krzysztof Wodiczko’s
Homeless Vehicle Project [fig-48], Albrecht Dürer’s Self-Portrait at the Age of Twenty-Eight, etc. Each of these is, however, fused with the narrative of a revolution unfolding on Mars.


A Painter for Our Time [fig-49]

fig-49: Adam Turl, A Painter for Our Time (2014)
This began with my project, *A Painter of Our Time*, named after the novel by John Berger, about an expat Hungarian artist living in London attempting to find the dynamic between expressive art and Marxist politics in modern painting. My installation focused on a character named Calvin Williams (loosely based on a faith healer and sculptor invented by myself and filmmaker Husni Ashiku some years earlier, but really a fictional version of myself). I recreated his studio in the Lewis Center “Safe Space”:

In 1999, Calvin, a failed painter, became involved in anti-capitalist politics. He stopped making art. Ten years later, after losing his job as a typesetter, he fell into a deep depression. That depression was only broken, temporarily, when he began a series of abstract mixed-media paintings about the U.S. Civil War. When his unemployment ran out he moved in with his brother’s family in St. Louis. They allowed him the use of a single room to continue painting. Calvin desperately tried to find an image, a process or a combination of images that would salvage both his own life and the idealistic dreams of his youth. Neglecting his health, and once again fallen into despair, Calvin passed away in December 2014.

*13 Baristas [fig-50]*

I continued this narrative device in my *13 Baristas* series/installation (about a group of fictional radical artists/coffee shop workers in the near future). I created a “fake” newspaper “published by the 13 Baristas Art Collective” (13BAC) *[fig-51]*.
The leaders of 13BAC, Maggie Cromwell, Amy Sverdlov and Sidney Williams, were hunted by the police for their involvement in a general strike in Chicago. On the lam they wrote the following:

In 2028 two art school drop-outs formed the “13 Baristas Art Collective.” While we always claimed to have 13 members, largely for narrative purposes, we never had more than four members at any one time. Maggie Cromwell, not missing, and Sidney Williams, the son of the late painter Calvin Williams, were the main force behind the “collective.” Four years ago Amy Sverdlov moved into their southwest side studio. Maggie and Sidney met during the 2025 strikes. Amy, a former coffee shop employee and adjunct art professor, joined them after the planning meetings for the 2033 relief demonstrations. The goal of our collective was always to elevate the complex narratives of other “proletarians”—not reduced to some abstraction, nor seen in isolation from social class. Maggie believed that our work should serve two purposes:

To assert the pathos of proletarian morality in the present. And if we failed to abolish the current order, serve as a cultural building block for those remaining, those who would rebuild in the ruins.

The 13 BAC newspaper republished images of the collective’s paintings, poetry and imagined political exploits. I had recreated the southwest side studio of the 13 Baristas in my own apartment—and later recreated it in the Brett Wesley Gallery in Las Vegas, Nevada [fig-52]. I also displayed the work salon-style in a group MFA candidate exhibition [fig-53].

*Kick the Cat* [fig-48, 49, 50]

*Kick the Cat*, was a “spin-off” of *13 Baristas* about the adult children of laid-off Caterpillar workers in Peoria, Illinois.


In October 2015 I installed in Project 1612 (an art space in a converted garage) in Peoria along with the following text:

This is a recreation of an exhibit organized by Mary Hoagland in a Peoria garage in 2041. It included her own work as well as work by the 13 Baristas Art Collective (13BAC), an association of artists spearheaded by Sidney Williams, Maggie Cromwell and Amy Sverdlov.

Hoagland was born in Peoria, Illinois in 2012. Her father, Mark Hoalgand, worked at Caterpillar for 29 years before losing his job when Mary was three years old. Mary eventually moved to
Chicago to study painting at the University of Illinois. She dropped out a year later, found work as a barista in the Bucktown neighborhood and joined 13BAC. 13BAC produced most of their work in a uniform style reminiscent of old punk rock zines, comics and political broadsheets. They were also known for covering their paintings in coffee and using disposable coffee cups as painting surfaces. Amy Sverdlov also recruited Mary into the Socialist League for a United Revolutionary Party (SLURP).

In 2037 Haogland was seriously injured in a car accident on Lake Shore Drive. During her recovery she moved back home to Peoria and began a series of fictional paintings about the children of Caterpillar workers—“Kick the Cat”—named for the rank-and-file union newsletter produced by union militants in the 1990s. Unfortunately, Hoagland’s output was limited by injuries and poverty. She depended on SSI and food stamps and frequently could not afford painting supplies. She lived in her brother’s garage until her death in 2049.

Hoagland dreamed of people like her fighting back, but filtered through the lens of art and myth. So she imagines kidnapping Punxsutawney Phil (the prognosticating groundhog made famous in the movie *Groundhog Day*) in order to stop global warming. She imagines a woman named Judith in East Peoria slaying a corrupt policeman. She imagines that she herself was St. George slaying a dragon that was tormenting her hometown. Using similar methods as the 13BAC, she covered paintings with coffee, drew on coffee cups, exposed stretched canvases and hung them from the rafters of her garage.

*Red Mars* [fig-51]

[fig-51: Adam Turl, *Red Mars* (2016)]
My current project, *Red Mars*, is a series/installation about a man who believes he can see a future revolution on a colonized Mars using a telescope in his backyard. The fictional artist, Alex Pullman, has written several poems and made paintings and drawings about the dozens of characters [fig-52, fig-53] he imagines living on colonial Mars. In addition to the paintings and sculptural objects I/we have produced a “comic,” *Red Mars* that aims to push and pull on narrative belief. It does this in part by highlighting the contradiction between the narrative and the commodity status of the art objects [fig-54].

I can see and hear the future of colonized Mars, including people’s thoughts, using the telescope on my back porch, off old Highway 13, between Murphysboro and Carbondale, Illinois. My visions came to me jumbled and out-of-order. But I have re-organized my observations to make them comprehensible and grouped them by subject. --Alex Pullman, 2038

In 2042, using the time-dislocation device in the basement of the Wham building at Southern Illinois University I traveled back in time to the year 2016. I murdered and took the place of an unknown artist named Adam Turl. The Big Muddy’s floods got worse year after year. Everything was drowning. By 2042 it was already too late for us. –Alex Pullman/Adam Turl, 2016

These images belong to the realm of strong images as outlined by Boris Groys, but they are weakened in their fusion with fantastic tales, and the use of poor materials, and in their limited near-monochromatic color scheme. In *Red Mars* I flattened the images with a series of stickers wheat pasted to the canvas (meant to evoke a contradiction between the auric and mechanically reproduced image, recall punk zine culture as well as elements of Asian scroll art) (fig-58). The proletarian nature of the paintings remains central. For example, taking a sexist image of Robbie the Robot carrying an unconscious woman and turning the woman into a Christ-like martyr of the “Ares Coffee Riots” on Mars [fig-59].
Red Mars, like other projects, is set in the future, playing off the gothic-futurist conditions outlined above. This is meant to evoke, once again, the existential character of working-class life (in contrast to the atemporal bourgeois celebrated by Laura Hoptman). The auric (distancing) power of the painting is central to its meaning (and its ability to valorize its subject). But this must be in conflict with mechanically reproduced and poor materials (in the vein of Arte Povera or Emory Douglas). For these installations I have created newspapers, comics and zines that shape the metanarrative around the paintings. I used poor materials (such as stained and inked coffee cups) to create a proletarian material poetics—borrowing from the Beuysian tradition but pointing toward the oppressive nature of materials in working-class life: “[A] tabletop overloaded with white paper coffee cups” Jenessa Kenway writes of 13 Baristas is a “miniature memorial to the working class, each cup a gravestone marking the passage of another workday.”\(^ {174} \) In Mars Fry-Slave (Red Mars), the painting text, in Sharpie, reads “I could still smell the fat after two weeks without food.” This recalls how, when working as a fry cook, the grease clogs your sinuses. Even if you were to go hungry you would still smell it. Likewise, in 13 Baristas, I coated mattresses and bed linens with coffee. The materials of the world are still “magic,” but unlike Beuys’ fat and felt, they also confront working-class people as an alienating burden. The fantastic quality of the over-arching narrative creates a sense of alterity that allows a critical irrealism in the viewer.
The elements of evicted art

To summarize the elements of “evicted art”:

1. Art is Shamanistic in Origin: As Ernst Fischer observed in *The Necessity of Art*, the origin of art in hunter-gatherer societies resulted in the projection of the human imagination on all that which could not yet be understood. Fischer argued that this was both a social and spiritual aspect of early art. Humans, he argued, rebelled against consuming themselves in the confines of their own life. At the same time art served to unite small bands of human beings around common concerns and common narratives. While all the individuals of these societies participated in art—the key practitioners tended to be the shamans. These shamans negotiated their own (and others’) unique personalities with the collective mythologies and needs of groups as a whole.

2. Weak Avant-Garde: Boris Groys argues, in his 2010 essay, “The Weak Universalism,” that the contemporary avant-garde has become “weak.” In his view artists avoid the “strong” images of classical art and popular culture in favor of “weak” images that, among other things, elude confrontation or social complicity. In Groys’ view this is because artists are seeking images that transcend time (in a world in which change is the
only constant). This weakness, however, is a byproduct of avant-garde art becoming too separate from the concerns of the majority of the population—paying rent, personal loss, deferred dreams, making ends meet, falling in/out of love, etc.—due to the ideologies, political economy and structure of contemporary art.

3. Popular Avant-Garde: Throughout the 19th and 20th century, artists looked to spiritual or political utopias that would alleviate human suffering. Such artists (Goya, Gustave Courbet, the Mexican muralists, the surrealists, etc.) aimed to elevate the inner and outer life of “regular people.” In recent decades it became fashionable to be suspicious of any such beliefs. For art to escape its weakness it must again champion these concerns and beliefs.

4. Narrative Conceptualism: One strategy to reassert “belief” in art comes from the installation artist Ilya Kabakov. Kabakov was part of the underground (and illegal) Moscow conceptual art scene (1970s-1980s). The Moscow conceptual artists, unlike Western conceptual artists, had a profound interest in narratives and story. They created a counter-mythology to the false mythology of the Soviet dictatorship. They elevated the stories of working-class Soviet citizens into fantastic tales—not unlike “magic realism” in late 20th century Latin American literature. Kabakov went on to create what he called “total installations”—environments that surrounded the viewer, most famously The Man Who Flew Into Space From His Apartment. 178

5. Epic Theater: Kabakov’s “total installation” recalls the “Epic Theater” of 20th century playwright Bertolt Brecht. Brecht sought to engage his audience, appealing to the traditional emotional and visual snares of theater, while alternatively “distancing” the audience from those tropes. The distancing techniques of Epic Theater were meant to
introduce a contradiction within the play; plays that would employ the traditional snares of “high” and “popular” theater (which Brecht often plagiarized outright), and then interrupt them by exposing the inner-workings of the theater. The result is a pumping of the conscious and subconscious, back and forth, awake and dreaming, repeatedly. Like the breathing of a lung (alienation followed by suspension of disbelief, *repeat*), this gives his plays life, and endows them with a sort of unified but democratic chaos.  

6. The Democratic Image: I am interested in recreating this theatrical, democratic and aesthetic chaos within the art space. I am particularly interested in the “high-low” or “strong-weak” image—images that connect the reality and concerns of “regular” people with the fantastic or utopian.

7. Evicted Art: A) I see my artwork as both social and spiritual. B) My use of painting is meant to valorize the stories of “regular” working-class people. C) I create fictions—fictional artists to produce work, and fictional characters—to inhabit my theatrical “total installations.” In my installation, *A Painter of Our Time*, a working-class artist is forced to move in with his brother after becoming unemployed. He desperately searches for a painting or image that will give meaning back to his life. In *13 Baristas* I created a fake collective of artists who also worked at coffee shops. They compulsively covered all their paintings in coffee and drew little crosses on coffee cups. My present installation, *Red Mars*, is about an artist who lives in Southern Illinois who believes he can see the future of a colonized Mars through a telescope in his backyard. D) Like Brecht I try to create a “push/pull” in my work, both conceptually and visually. In *Red Mars* I have covered the canvases in stickers, underlining their flatness and contrasting the unique “auric” value of a hand-made painting with mechanically reproduced images, etc.
8. Interrupting Disbelief: It is my hope that my work plays a modest role in preparing people to believe, once again, in a progressive and collective mythology—a way of moving through the world—both together and as unique individuals.

**Grace and social genius**

If the ancient functions of art—its socialistic and spiritual roles, best summed up by the term shamanistic—have been evicted from the weak avant-garde, radical artists who believe art is a human necessity (not mere communication) should claim that eviction as a point of pride. An Evicted Art, like the Moscow conceptualists, creates an alternative world to sublimate the horrors of this one—to provide an imaginary space for working-class resistance. As China Miéville puts it, “Taking alterity as a starting point might allow us to trace structural relations between fantastic genres and the anti-realist avant-garde. It might also allow a revisiting with critical rigor of a traditional—and traditionally denigrate as woolly and anti-theoretical—notion of the ‘sense of wonder,’ as intrinsic to the field.” Of course Miéville is writing about Marxist speculative fiction, but one can translate the sentiment to the other arts. In doing so we can defeat the tyrannical realisms and cynicisms of contemporary culture. We can get rid of the Thomas Gradgrinds of the world; and do our part for a return to grace and social genius.

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CITATIONS


2 This section of the thesis will be posted as an article on redwedgemagazine.com in early April. Some passages were adapted from presentations given at the School of the Art Institute of...


Gregory Sholette, Dark Matter (London: Pluto, 2011), 1

See Ben Davis, 9.5 Theses on Art and Class (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013)


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This is a reference to Ilya Kabakov and Maya Deren


Plant, 112

Of course not all social-practice art falls into this trap. Amie Sell and Thomas Hirschhorn are two progressive social practice artists whose work rises, in the tradition of Beuys’ social sculpture, above such false pretenses.

TOWARD AN EVICTED AVANT-GARDE

25 Bishop, 29
26 This section is based, in part, on a lecture I gave on “Ernst Fischer and the Necessity of Art” at the Socialism 2013 conference, and a blog post titled “Against the Idolatry of Shadows”: http://evictedart.tumblr.com/post/86063806928/against-the-idolatry-of-shadows
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32 Hodgson, 866
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44 J.D. Lewis-Williams, 108
45 This section is based, in part, on my contributions to an internal perspectives document for the Red Wedge editorial board (2015-2016).
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71 Corris, 18-20 and Groys
72 Corris, 18-20
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87 Kabakov, Tupitsyn and Tupitsyn, 66
88 Kabakov, Tupitsyn and Tupitsyn, 66
89 Koenig, 448-455
90 Kabakov, Tupitsyn and Tupitsyn, 66
91 Kabakov, Tupitsyn and Tupitsyn, 66
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94 Kabakov, Tupitsyn and Tupitsyn, 71
95 Kabakov, Tupitsyn and Tupitsyn, 67-68
96 Keonig, 448-455
97 Keonig, 448-455
101 Ranciere, 278
102 Ranciere, 278
103 Ranciere, 278
104 Ranciere, 278
105 Ranciere, 280
109 I do not necessarily disagree. I believe, however, that the “white cube” and the commodity status of the art object and experience cannot be abolished under capitalism. Therefore, as left-wing artists we should seek to promulgate our work and ideas, as possible, within these systems even as we criticize them. It might be preferable, in fact, to highlight the commodity status within our work.
112 Badiou, 2-6
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Nochlin, 20

Nochlin, 24

Nochlin, 27


Chen, 109-111

Chen, 111

Of course doing this fully is impossible—it is the political art equivalent of the sublime.

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Löwy and Sayre, 25

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Miéville, 244