

ART UNDER NEOLIBERALISM

This roundtable focuses on the significance, possibilities, and challenges of artistic practice and criticism under neoliberal conditions. Recent scholarship at the intersection of the humanities and economic theory has opened up new avenues for understanding the deep implications of neoliberalism in reshaping the whole realm of social relations and, even more fundamentally, our ways of behaving, perceiving, and engaging in the world. Beyond a set of economic policies aimed at promoting free trade, the deregulation of financial markets, the privatization of welfare, and the globalization of capital, neoliberalism has come to be regarded, in its most radical sense, as both the fundamental reconfiguration of individuals as “entrepreneurs of themselves” and as the reframing of subjectivity as human capital. These crucial transformations, which often accompanied the rise of a web-based, networked society, cannot be dissociated from the renewed centrality of identity politics in the public sphere. Contradicting the idea of rampant utilitarianism and rationalization, which is repeatedly emphasized by both the advocates and detractors of neoliberalism, the neoliberal stage of capitalism is not devoid of the “metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” which Marx attributed to the commodity.

We ask: Apart from the longstanding and much-debated problem of art’s commodification, how does neoliberalism transform and deter-

mine the conditions of artistic practice? Further, if neoliberalism is a substantially distinct stage in the history of capitalism, and not merely its intensification, what are the implications of this new condition for the practice and criticism of contemporary art? What does it mean to practice and theorize art, to be an artist or critic, under neoliberalism? Drawing on the central topic of this issue, is aesthetic, artistic, or political radicality in art still possible under the neoliberal condition? Can, or should, artistic practice constitute a significant site of resistance? Conversely, is the contemporary art world a paradigmatic case of, and even a model for, neoliberal capitalism?

To discuss these questions, we invited a group of scholars from a broad spectrum of methodological, political, and critical positions. Their contributions, in the form of brief reflections that react and respond to the questions above, were written independently and without knowledge of other participants' responses.

ARJUN APPADURAI

Bard Graduate Center, New York

There are many ways in which our neoliberal era makes itself felt in the worlds of art. We are all aware of the rapidity with which trophy artworks are priced into the stratosphere, biennials are turned into reputation-building markets, museums function as playgrounds for the super-wealthy, and art from the world's margins is pimped out by first-world curators, critics, and connoisseurs. Do we need more reasons to be worried? Alas, yes.

The role of art today is to bring the aura back into the work of art, this time as farce, not as any form of the sublime. Walter Benjamin famously bemoaned the death of the aura in the era of mechanical reproduction—the death of the specific form of duration and uniqueness that mechanical reproduction refuses and rejects. Today, the aura is back, but not in the sense that Benjamin admired. Nor is it the case that the aura has been degraded by new forms of reproduction, storage, distribution, and pricing, which put the commodity in the place of the singularity.

The aura has reappeared, but not in the world of art; it has entirely shifted to the world of the commodity. This is the result of the radical financialization of capitalism, the central sign and site of which is the financial form known as the derivative, a contractual entity that allows traders to bet on risk itself, and not just on the future value of a commodity. This sort of bet on risk is a bet on another risk, which is the uncertainty about the future value of the underlying commodity. As the chain of derivatives lengthens, the underlying commodity essentially vanishes, leaving only a mountain of tradeable risks. Financialized capitalism hates the sluggish materiality of the commodity and much prefers its unknown and vaporous future value, whereby any commodity can acquire the aura of uniqueness, distance, and immediacy that Benjamin saw as endangered by the growth of the commodity world. The financial markets thus lend the aura of the sublime to the profane world of dumb commodities and have become the true art practices of late capitalism.

Of course, this version of the auratic is farcical, in the sense that it makes fun of the aura of the sublime, the uniqueness and immediacy

that characterized the aura in its original (Benjaminian) sense. This is not a simple farce, however; it is a farce in the service of a larger tragedy, which is the massive expansion of the universe of predatory capitalism, with debt as the source of entrepreneurial profit. The debts of ordinary citizens are the assets that, leveraged into derivative forms, are steadily priced and traded to create mountains of unknown future value, from whose exchange huge profits can be made. In short, the materiality of real debt is turned into the auratic magic of future value. The larger tragedy in which this farcical return of the aura is embedded is the tragedy of the discovery of future value by capital, future value on which speculative risks can be taken and massive profits made, on the backs of the debt slavery of the majority of mankind.

If financial markets are the new sites of the auratic in this particular moment in the neoliberal age, what is the role of artworks in studios, auctions, museums, exhibitions, biennials, and the like? What, in other words, is the role of the conventional work of art, however avant-garde, radical, or inventive it might be? If financial products now do the work of the auratic in late capitalism, does it matter anymore whether the traditional work of art has become fully commodified, in the sense that Benjamin mourned? Is there any link between the art world and the financial world, with regard to the sites and experiences of the auratic in our neoliberal times?

The deep connection between the commodification of conventional art works (which has been going on for at least a century) and the auratic role of financial markets in contemporary capitalism is the relocation of risk that has occurred in the last few decades.

Mechanical reproduction, starting in the 1920s and 1930s, when Benjamin first wrote about it, was the first phase in eliminating risk from the artistic sublime. Photography, film, sound recording, and other mechanical forms of storage and reproduction of the work of art aimed to remove the risks of contingency, the uncertainties of duration and the vagaries of circumstance from the circulation of aesthetic objects. That effort continues today, with digital platforms, devices, formats, and infrastructures. But that battle to eliminate risk from the life of the work of art has lost its sense of urgency, since capitalism has discovered its own forms for the pursuit of risk, in such instruments as traded derivatives. Speculation is no longer most risky in the context of the artwork, but finds its most radical forms in finance capital. The address of the auratic has shifted.

Thus, risk in the practice of art and its institutions has become pale, because it has been replaced with another space that is much more crucial to the neoliberal imagination than the space of commodified art. Commodified art still has its uses, yet the art of commodification has moved on, and its avant-garde is to be found on the trading floor, operating in the financial markets and hedge funds.

Arjun Appadurai lives in Berlin and teaches at the Bard Graduate Center (New York). He writes on globalization, media, design, and cities. His most recent book (with Neta Alexander) is *Failure* (2019).

JOHANNA BOCKMAN

George Mason University, Fairfax

Neoliberalism is, most fundamentally, the governance or management of society and individuals through the market. Neoliberals call for the expansion of markets and the minimization of the state, while in fact they seek to expand, transform, and strengthen the state. The Eastern European transformations after 1989, some of the most important examples of neoliberalism, were in no way *laissez-faire* processes, though many people claimed they were. States and massive corporations used their power to seize socialist companies (handing some over to new capitalist owners, and shuttering others), to dismantle the welfare systems tied to these workplaces, to lay off workers on a mass scale, and to reorient, in a fundamental way, markets, politics, and societies from social well-being to individual accumulation. Here I examine this governance through “the market” and how this impacts art.

We should first understand the term “the market.” Like capitalist countries, socialist countries have always had a variety of markets. In the Soviet Union, for example, there were retail stores, farmers markets, and large flea markets, such as the Tishinska Market in Moscow, as well as a labor market.¹ For Karl Polanyi, one of the most important theorists for scholars of neoliberalism, markets have existed across human history and become a problem when they dominate society, as they do in neoliberalism. In the words of Richard Sandbrook, “Markets make good servants, but terrible masters.”² When neoliberals call for “the market” or “the market economy,” they are in fact asserting that hierarchical corporations, their owners, and their managers, in collaboration with a new kind of authoritarian state, should manage and control society and individuals. To realize “the market economy,” neoliberals demand privatization; liberalization of prices, capital, and trade; deregulation; austerity; and an entrepreneurial self

1 Emily Clark Brown, “The Soviet Labor Market,” *ILR Review* 10, no. 2 (1957): 179–200; Galina Zhikhoreva, “Flea Markets: Searching for Gems in Junk,” *Russia beyond the Headlines*, October 9, 2013, https://www.rbth.com/arts/2013/10/09/flea_markets_searching_for_gems_in_junk_30645.html.

2 Richard Sandbrook, “Polanyi and Post-Neoliberalism in the Global South: Dilemmas of Re-Embedding the Economy,” *New Political Economy* 16, no. 4 (2011): 437.

to undermine workers' power. By contrast, anti-authoritarian socialisms—like that advocated by Karl Polanyi, which involved the abolition of private ownership of the means of production as well as the call for economic and political democracy, direct democratic decision making on all technical and social-justice concerns, and markets—would strengthen workers' power and be distinctly non-neoliberal.³ Neoliberalism is inherently capitalist. Focusing on markets obscures our understanding of neoliberalism.

Focusing on markets also makes socialism appear neoliberal. Yugoslav worker self-management socialism, for example, relied on markets; its firms and workers participated in global markets; and its leaders criticized the state as part of their call for stateless communism. If one were to ignore its socialist institutions, including its moves toward economic democracy and the social ownership of the means of production, Yugoslav worker self-management socialism might superficially appear neoliberal.⁴ However, markets and consumption functioned very differently under socialism, because they did so within a broad set of socialist institutions.⁵ Within capitalism and its inherently anti-democratic, profit-driven, hierarchical institutions and aims, markets take on neoliberal management and disciplinary functions.

Neoliberalism adopts the shape of the terrain on which it operates, thus taking on different appearances in different places. As many scholars, including David Harvey, have argued, neoliberalism is a form of accumulation by dispossession that must continuously appropriate and commodify noncapitalist entities to survive and expand.⁶ After 1989 in Eastern Europe, neoliberals distortedly incorporated into capitalism socialist ideas, experiments, institutions, and commons which they simultaneously sought to destroy. At the same time, as Paul Almeida shows, the legacy of socialist revolution and state-sponsored mass organizations, even while under attack by

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- 3 Karl Polanyi, "'Socialist Accounting' by Karl Polanyi: With preface 'Socialism and the Embedded Economy,'" *Theory and Society* 45, no. 5 (1922) 2016: 385–427.
 - 4 Johanna Bockman, *Markets in the Name of Socialism: The Left-Wing Origins of Neoliberalism* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).
 - 5 Cristofer Scarboro, Diana Mincyte, and Zsuzsa Gille, eds., *The Socialist Good Life: Desire, Development, and Standards of Living in Eastern Europe* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020); David Stark, "Rethinking Internal Labor Markets: New Insights from a Comparative Perspective," *American Sociological Review* 51 (August 1986): 492–504.
 - 6 David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).



Mural of Paul Robeson,
Washington, DC, 2020.
Photograph by the author.

neoliberals, provided activists “a rich set of resources and experiences to use in campaigns to resist neoliberal measures in the 1990s and 2000s.”⁷

Mural art in Washington, DC, a topic of my own research, provides a good illustration of this contest between appropriation and counterappropriation of anticapitalist legacies. Washington, DC, plays a special role in neoliberalism, as the home of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the Washington Consensus. However, it has also been a major center of Pan-Africanism and Pan-African socialism.⁸ In gentrifying areas, African Americans have used murals, like the one of African American communist artist Paul Robeson wearing a lapel pin of Africa colored red, black, and green, as a form of space-claiming in the face of white settler colonialism. New, gentrifying businesses even seem to acknowledge their settler-colonial nature in their names, décor, and clientele. For example, in the center of the African American community on Georgia Avenue, NW, sits the Colony Club cafe. Neoliberals also appropriate and commodify murals and images of African Americans, integrating them into neoliberal capitalism in support of the gentrification and displacement of African Americans, which Brandi Summers has explored.⁹ Neoliberalism in Washington, DC, takes its shape from

7 Paul Almeida, *Mobilizing Democracy* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 130.

8 Michelle Coghill Chatman, “At Eshu’s Crossroad: Pan-African Identity in a Changing City,” in *Capital Dilemma: Growth and Inequality in Washington, D.C.*, ed. Derek Hyra and Sabiyha Prince (London: Routledge, 2016), 239–54.

9 Brandi Thompson Summers, *Black in Place: The Spatial Aesthetics of Race in a Post-Chocolate City* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019).



Exterior of the Colony Club,
Washington, DC, 2020.
Photograph by the author.



Poster for African Liberation Day,
Washington, DC, 2018.
Photograph by the author.

the appropriation and distortion of Pan-Africanism. Pan-Africanism and Pan-African socialism also remain “a rich set of resources and experiences”¹⁰ for mobilizations like African Liberation Day, which continues to organize against neoliberalism and settler colonialism in Washington and beyond. Neoliberals seek to appropriate mural art into markets and capitalist institutions that support gentrification, settler colonialism, and neoliberal capitalism, while Pan-Africanists and others still use art to realize another world.

Johanna Bockman teaches in the Global Affairs Program and the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at George Mason University, Fairfax, VA. She is the author of *Markets in the Name of Socialism: The Left-Wing Origins of Neoliberalism* (2011).

¹⁰ Almeida, 130.

NATHALIE HEINICH

CNRS-EHESS, Paris

In the 1960s and 1970s, a title such as “Art under Neoliberalism” would have been unthinkable: not only because the term “neoliberalism” was not yet used, but also because much of contemporary art (notably Conceptual art, performance, and land art) had very little presence in the market, being rather supported by small avant-garde galleries and, in France, by some institutions. As witnessed by Christian Boltanski, whom I quote in my book *Le Paradigme de l'art contemporain: Structures d'une révolution artistique*, many artists considered selling art to be rather shameful in the early 1970s.¹ Warhol in this regard was rather an antimodel.

One generation ago, we probably would not have mentioned neoliberalism, either; rather, we would have talked about the international success of some new artist figures: Hirst, Koons, Murakami, and so on. At the end of the 1990s, we were merely at the start of a new process of spectacular bidding-up of certain types of works in the art market: spectacular, exciting, provocative works (as suggested by the very title of the Sensation exhibition, launched by the advertising company Saatchi)² that immediately appealed to a new generation of quickly enriched young traders, as well as to new collectors from emerging countries (the BRICs).

That is to say, neoliberalism has been only an indirect cause of this new inflection in contemporary art: by bringing new categories of amateurs to the art market who have needed to invest large sums of money but who have not necessarily possessed either a strong cultural capital or a deep knowledge of the history of modern and contemporary art, the financialization of the world market has fostered the development of a hedonistic, playful, and speculative relationship to art. This phenomenon breaks with previous trends in contemporary art, which used to be more appreciated by amateurs with high cultural but little economic capital.

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- 1 Nathalie Heinich, *Le paradigme de l'art contemporain: Structures d'une révolution artistique* (Paris: Gallimard, 2014).
 - 2 Charles Saatchi, Sensation (exhibition presented at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, September 18–December 28, 1997).

It would therefore be an error to think that neoliberalism brought about a “commodification” of art: this has always existed, because for centuries artists have needed to earn their living by putting their productions on the market, be it through direct interactions with customers or through the mediation of an art establishment. What neoliberalism has indirectly produced is simply the transformation of a certain part of contemporary art (but not all of this art, of course) into a luxury product, analogous to the yachts, watches, and overpriced handbags that today serve as an outward sign of wealth for those who have taken advantage of the financialization of the economic world.

By the way, no one would mind about this commodification—after all, who minds about the high prices reached by luxury goods?—if art were not associated in Western culture with values such as beauty, morality, spirituality, and authenticity that are broadly considered as incompatible with economic value. It is this antinomy regarding value that makes one wonder about the link between art and neoliberalism—a link seen as an enigma to be solved, even though the answer is obviously that of a more or less strong link according to periods and to artistic genres. As Marcel Duchamp put it so accurately: “There’s no solution, because there’s no problem . . .”³

Nathalie Heinich is a senior researcher in sociology at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique in Paris. She is the author of more than forty books, including *Le Triple jeu de l’art contemporain* (1998), *L’Art contemporain exposé aux rejets* (1998), *Le Paradigme de l’art contemporain: Structures d’une révolution artistique* (2014), and *Harald Szeemann, un cas singulier* (2015). Her first book (1991) has been translated into English as *The Glory of Van Gogh: An Anthropology of Admiration* (1996).

3 Marcel Duchamp, *Entretiens avec Pierre Cabanne* (Paris: Belfond, 1967), 45.

MARTIJN KONINGS

University of Sydney

The interface of political economy with arts and literature has become dominated by a particular image—capital’s Grinch-like theft of the future. Jameson called it “the waning of the utopian idea,”¹ and Fisher referred to it as the “slow cancellation of the future.”² The image rests on the tendency to interpret neoliberalism through the specific lens of “financialization” as a post-1970s phenomenon. According to this perspective, as the Fordist manufacturing economy went into decline during the 1970s, the liberalization of finance and the growth of debt created new sources of profits, albeit “fictitious” rather than real ones.³ Such perspectives portray neoliberalism as a capitalism on steroids. As those drugs are losing their effectiveness, what initially appeared as an accelerating movement of unchecked market expansion is now increasingly exposed to the weight of its own contradictions. By such reasoning, neoliberal policies are now just trying to keep an economic system going that has fundamentally run out of steam. The constant creation of new asset bubbles to further this end is fueling the ongoing concentration of wealth, and with each round of stimulus, more asset inflation is needed in order to produce a given increase of growth and employment. Neoliberalism, for all its claims to dynamism and innovation, has become a bailout society.

This means that a certain basic notion of “postmodernism,” much in the sense that Harvey outlined some decades ago,⁴ has never quite lost its salience as a characterization of how our aesthetic relationship to neoliberal life is conceived in high culture and intellectual life. By this logic, modernism can be seen as an expression of intense discontent with modern life that is accompanied by a renewal of faith in the possibility of establishing greater control over the direction of human

1 Fredric Jameson, “The Politics of Utopia,” *New Left Review* 25 (2004): 36.

2 Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2014), 16.

3 Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times* (London: Verso, 1994); David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

4 David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

history. Postmodernism, by contrast, has no such faith in the possibility of freeing ourselves from the tangled webs of the past or in our ability to assert a liberating direction forward. The secular condition that modernism associated with the potentiality of self-creation now appears as the impasse of self-referential signification. Whereas at an earlier time the postmodern condition may still have offered its own creative compensations, it has now morphed into the depressive stance of “capitalist realism,”⁵ the sheer impossibility of imagining a different future.

These terms of debate, even as they seek to establish how exactly the logic of capital affects our relationship to modernity, never raise the question of how “modern” our critique of capital really is. The image of capital that has such critical currency figures it as a “bad infinity,” in Hegel’s sense,⁶ an irrational movement that has no end or purpose other than its self-continuation and self-augmentation. This rehearses a premodern, religiously driven critique of capital as a movement whose self-referentiality rivals God’s power over creation and steals the time that is only God’s to give. The redeployment of that notion in modern times, most notably in Marx’s work, is meant to highlight the irrational element in a putatively modern and rational age. But there is still something awkward about this repurposing of a premodern critique of capital—above all, it fails to register how our relationship to capital *changes* with the transition to modernity.⁷

We can go back here to Adam Smith’s work as the founding moment of modern economics.⁸ It articulates the reconceptualization of capital not as a threat to divine order but as a secular source of order—“capital” becomes “the market.” Key to this shift was the assertion of the market’s institutional neutrality. In earlier times, such a notion had been unthinkable: even when money and commerce had been tolerated, they were never above suspicion and were always seen as inherently dangerous, prone to overstepping their boundaries. Yet we moderns find such a notion of institutional neutrality intuitive: no one reading Smith now can fail to appreciate the *prima facie* plausibility of his account of the merely “facilitating” role of commerce and trade

5 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2009).

6 David Harvey, *Marx, Capital, and the Madness of Economic Reason* (London: Profile Books, 2017).

7 Martijn Konings, *Capital and Time: For a New Critique of Neoliberal Reason* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018).

8 Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations, Books 1–3* [1776] (London: Penguin, 1999).

and its beneficial effects. This implies a very significant shift in our relationship to capital—which appears less and less as a bad infinity and increasingly as a benevolent universality, a way of organizing society that has an indefinite capacity for inclusion—that is, a distinctly modern form of community.

What occurs here is what Lefort might have referred to as a moment of foundational occlusion, a constitutive blind spot that occurs when transcendent legitimations of authority lose their power and secular subjectivity becomes responsible for re-presenting and symbolizing itself.⁹ In its Smithian origins, the gap between “capital” and the “market” is almost imperceptible, a crack in a mirror that is only visible when observed from very specific angles. Yet the consequences could not be more significant. From Smith’s moment on, the market is the imaginary of capital, and the problems of the latter are conceptualized in terms of the corruption of its true form—that is, the corruption of the market as an innocuous institution that privileges no one in particular and rewards effort and merit in neutral and impartial ways. This is particularly evident in the development of the republican tradition in the Anglo-American context, which has never abandoned the critique of capital but looks to the market as a check on corruption, a bulwark against monarchical concentrations of power.

As neoliberal subjects, we know all too well that the market is the most potent ideological image of capital. But here we miss the point if, as progressives are inclined to, we simply attack the tenet of “market neutrality” as a naïve, blatantly ideological faith in the magic of the market. What escapes attention in this way is that the image of the market expresses a much deeper, affectively and aesthetically charged relationship to capital. Of course, the market does not have an image in a visual sense: it is fully dematerialized, abstract, conceptual. But paradoxically, this does not diminish, but instead only enhances, its power for modulating our experience of capital.¹⁰ Vogl has outlined this effect in terms of the transfer of the power of theodicy onto the logic of *oikodicy*: whereas *theodicy* was the theological endeavor of reconciling the omnipotence and benevolence of God with the existence of human misfortune, *oikodicy* refers to the logic whereby moderns continuously reinvent a rich

9 Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. David Macey (Cambridge: Polity, 1991).

10 Martijn Konings, *The Emotional Logic of Capitalism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015).



Imagining the Future through the Market, 2015. Photograph of New York City graffiti. © Martijn Konings.

panoply of rationalizations for why the market has “not yet” delivered the inclusive and just social order that we expect of it.¹¹

Neoliberal oikodicy has a particular temporal structure: it works by constantly renewing the promise of a better future by making up excuses for the past. And this maintains a capitalist logic that turns the weight of the past into an endless series of provocations, animating a rationality that has us responding productively to and valorizing capital’s speculative claims.¹² We have yet to see a series of bailouts that does not subsequently become the rationale for another turn to austerity politics as a way to restore an orderly market. The capitalist past therefore is not “dead weight,” merely weighing down our movements and bringing the flow of history to a halt. Capital has never abandoned its promissory structure and remains a provocation machine, constantly demanding a renewal of our orientation to the future by forcing us to come up with constructive responses to situations not of our own making. It feeds on the unreflexive element of modernity, the way in which a rationality that takes itself to be secular and beyond irrational superstition comes to

11 Joseph Vogl, *The Specter of Capital* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014).

12 Lisa Adkins, *The Time of Money* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018).

revolve around a particular image that never delivers on its promise yet draws strength from that very failure. A truly modern critique of capital would need to be able to engage these practical operations of capital. They are not helpfully engaged by a notion of the stolen future, which is best seen as a formal loss of hope that does little to attenuate the intensity with which we experience capital's emotional rollercoasters.

Of course, it is difficult to think about the very idea of modernity without in some way emphasizing that it has opened up the future, that events are henceforth possible rather than scheduled. But this sensibility has always existed in the tension between radical and more politically muted forms of Enlightenment thinking. Central to the latter trend has been the consistent temptation to take the awareness of the contingency of history as an occasion to assert the possibility of rationally constructing the human future. Such idealism suppresses our awareness of the aporias, paradoxes, and blind spots that humanity's self-referential production of history implies. Kahn has shown that the early-modern perspective on poiesis as a secular activity, of which artistic creation was the emblematic expression, was characterized precisely by such engagement with the paradoxes of secular self-creation.¹³ What her story does not interrogate is the role of the rationalization of an ascendant capitalism in the abandonment of that critical character of poiesis, a movement that sacrificed the newfound "strength of the subject" at the altar of the "fallacy of constitutive subjectivity," in Adorno's well-known phrase.¹⁴

To identify the promise of modernity with the promise of the future is to play right into the logic of neoliberal oikodicy. Seen from this angle, the key achievement of modernity may not be its orientation toward the future, but rather the possibility of constructing a new relationship to our past—the effects of which we cannot know until they appear as the new past that we have made. Of course, this is not a particularly novel point—indeed, few artworks have circulated more in critical theory circles than Klee's backward-moving *Angelus Novus*, owing to Benjamin's interpretation of it as an image of progress. But such insights seem to get lost, perhaps not without fail but certainly far too often, when we start thinking about economic issues. When the ques-

13 Victoria Kahn, *The Future of Illusion: Political Theology and Early Modern Texts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

14 Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (London: Continuum, 1973), xx.

tion of capital rears its head, we all too readily turn to a plaintive style of critique that imagines the future we might have created had it not been for capital's constant interference with our plans and its pre-occupation of the future. The modern project may well turn out to be as irredeemable as many say it is, but that is not by itself a good reason for staying with a premodern, essentially religious critique of capital in the meantime.

Martijn Konings teaches in the Department of Political Economy at the University of Sydney. He is the author of *The Development of American Finance* (2011), *The Emotional Logic of Capitalism* (2015), *Capital and Time* (2018), and *The Asset Economy* (2020, coauthored with Lisa Adkins and Melinda Cooper).

LEIGH CLAIRE LA BERGE

City University of New York

Is there a more contested word in use today within the English-language humanities discourses than *neoliberalism*? What does it mean, how does it circulate, where does it derive from, and where will it lead? These questions not only are open for interpretation, but in fact are productive of genealogies so disparate as to be almost irreconcilable. On the one hand, any term with this much use, across so many disciplines, would encounter similar problems; in that sense, there is nothing unique about neoliberalism. The terms *commodity*, *capitalism*, *reading*, *abstraction*—just to name a few—would (and have) become similarly capacious. On the other hand, even among those terms, neoliberalism still stands out. In a 2017 essay on the saturation of the term's use in the humanities, the historian Quinn Slobodian and I anecdotally noted that of the words in the 135 abstracts submitted to a conference on “The Contemporary” for early- and mid-career scholars, held at Princeton University in 2016, *neoliberalism* came second in frequency only to the general prefix *post* (postmodern, posthuman, etc.).¹ Given that the conference was not devoted to economic concerns, the incidence of the term is remarkable. That was four years ago. What has changed since then, and how can the conversation about the multiple discursive worlds of neoliberalism be made specific to arts discourses and production?

For a start, we can delineate three main avenues of the term *neoliberalism*'s scope and breadth. First, the term is routinely used to periodize a post-Keynesian moment ranging roughly speaking from the mid-1970s until now. Second, neoliberalism denotes a logic of governmentality—a way to organize people and populations in accordance with a modality of a flexible yet reflexive form of state power that relates to economic management. This second use of the term is, of course, derived from Foucault's later works, the time when he read the actual ordoliberals and neoliberals and sought to tease out a theory of economic rationality distinct from Marxian and Smithian conceptions of it.

1 Leigh Claire La Berge and Quinn Slobodian, “Reading for Neoliberalism, Reading like Neoliberals,” *American Literary History* 29, no. 3 (September 2017): 602–14.

Finally, we have the self-defined neoliberals, including F. A. Hayek, Gary Becker, and Wilhelm Röpke—among others—who conceived of 20th-century democracy as a threat to capitalism and who sought to find ways for the nation-state and for international coalitions (WTO, GATT, etc.) to enshrine and protect certain zones for the flourishing of capitalist transactions. They argued for both a strong state and a regulated economic sphere.

Art historians, and indeed artists themselves, are most apt to use the post-Keynesian and Foucauldian approaches to the term. We live in a neoliberal era and are confronted with neoliberal logic on a daily basis. Such claims go unremarked in much arts-oriented discourse; indeed, they are often assumed. The result of these theoretical assumptions is that neoliberalism is likely to be treated thematically and as a matter of content in both the production and interpretation of art. A social-practice piece that represents economic inequality might be understood as a “critique of neoliberalism,” for example, while the loss of governmental arts funding might be received as an example of “neoliberal policy.” After a decade of critical theory-oriented books that give broad coverage to neoliberalism as a period—such as David Harvey’s *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*—or as a representation of a dominant ideology—for example, Wendy Brown’s *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution*—this makes sense.² But does it make for good aesthetic theory?

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I was quite pleased that Pedro Erber and Octavian Esanu asked me to participate in this roundtable on “Art under Neoliberalism,” since for years I’ve argued in articles, conference papers, and my recent book *Wages against Artwork: Decommodified Labor and the Claims of Socially Engaged Art* that, for arts and humanities scholars engaged in interpretive work, *neoliberal* is the wrong term.³ That situation could change, but the onus is on scholars in arts disciplines to bring about this change by moving beyond the tired tropes of entrepreneurialism and deregulation. The stakes are different in historical disciplines, as wonderful recent books like Melinda Cooper’s *Family Values* and Quinn

2 David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 2015).

3 Leigh Claire La Berge, *Wages against Artwork: Decommodified Labor and the Claims of Socially Engaged Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

Slobodian's *Globalists* have shown.⁴ These books, along with Nancy MacLean's *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right's Stealth Plan for America*, trace what neoliberals actually did and how they imagined themselves doing it. Somewhere between intellectual history and genealogy, these studies offer a specification of the term *neoliberalism* itself, one that will enlarge our conceptual grasp of the phenomenon as well as help us decide whether we should continue to endow it with the capacious presence it now has.

Do we have a body of art scholarship that has explored what neoliberal art is? I do not believe so, and my answer prompts me to ask a different question: do we need one? I am thinking of recent works of Marxist aesthetic theory such as Jasper Bernes's *The Work of Art in the Age of Deindustrialization* or Claire Bishop's *Artificial Hells*. Bernes makes little use of the term *neoliberalism*, and he always uses it as an adjective rather than a free-standing noun. Bishop doesn't have much truck with the term, either, nor does Nicholas Brown in his recent *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art under Capitalism*.⁵ These studies are each rigorous in their own way, as they seek to define the relationship between capital and culture. What do we make of the fact that none of them offer a real, conceptual engagement with neoliberalism? Instead, they treat neoliberalism not as an atmosphere or a context, but as a philosophy of economic management and an approach to understanding what in fact constitutes the economic as such.

...

How should those interested in art elaborate, develop, and specify the term *neoliberalism*? We cannot be content with an appropriation from social science or history into art, but rather, we must seek out a conceptual translation. Dave Beech has started such a translation process in his book *Art and Value*,⁶ but there is more to be done—and more to be wary of. In his work on Adorno's aesthetic criticism, Stewart Martin contends that "institutional theories of art and the 'artworld' . . . have, so far, been

4 Melinda Cooper, *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017); Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

5 See Jasper Bernes, *The Work of Art in the Age of Deindustrialization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017); Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2011); Nicholas Brown, *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art under Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

6 Dave Beech, *Art and Value: Art's Economic Exceptionalism in Classical, Neoclassical and Marxist Economics* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

developed at a level of generality that fails to register the specificity of capitalist forms.”⁷ Martin makes this claim in the context of deployment of the term *commodity* in art and aesthetic discourses. But his criticism is apt to our discussion of the term *neoliberalism* as well.

Lee Konstantinou recently edited a dossier in *Post45* entitled “The 7 Neoliberal Arts,” which he introduces with the claim that “neoliberal artists have thus internalized the notion that the artist is also, necessarily, an entrepreneur or economic player.”⁸ He specifies how neoliberal artists function by arguing that they, essentially, have to create their own publics and interpretive lenses as a result of the neoliberal imperative to “invest in the self.” He writes: “the boundaries of their work expand beyond the form of aesthetic objects to the infrastructures that sustain their work. They do not just make comics but *comic-book companies*. They don’t just create video games but *game studios*. They are makers not only of aesthetic forms—but of aesthetic *fields*.”⁹ This may be true of contemporary artists, but surely it is not the *differentia specifica* in relationship to 20th-century arts production and history. We are still waiting for that context and specification to be developed as it relates to neoliberalism.

Leigh Claire La Berge teaches at the City University of New York. She is the author of *Scandals and Abstraction: Financial Fiction of the Long 1980s* (2014) and *Wages against Artwork: Decommodified Labor and the Claims of Socially Engaged Art* (2019).

7 Stewart Martin, “The Absolute Artwork Meets the Absolute Commodity,” *Radical Philosophy* 146 (November–December 2007): 15–25, 21.

8 Lee Konstantinou, “The 7 Neoliberal Arts, or: Art in the Age of Mass High Culture,” *Post45* (August 21, 2020), <http://post45.org/2020/08/the-7-neoliberal-arts-or-art-in-the-age-of-mass-high-culture/>.

9 Ibid.

research centers, but none of them come even close to art education. So far, Brussels left the arts to the member states. Now, whether future architects, urban planners, software designers, and circular-economy experts need an experimental “green-deal art school” may be something that needs to be discussed further. However, what’s remarkable about von der Leyen’s proposal is that it goes truly beyond existing EU research policy instruments, such as Horizon Europe or Creative Europe.

Coming from a deeply federated Germany, where culture and education are considered strictly a matter of the *Länder* (states), the European Bauhaus idea could, in theory, be reworked and turned into a bold blueprint. Von der Leyen implies that Europeans should come up with a new institutional form that can steer through the ecological and digital challenges. Even for the European Commission, it is a given fact that existing art academies, design schools, technical universities, and humanities departments cannot be expected to come up with such a transdisciplinary school concept. For many, it was already clear before von der Leyen’s speech that we are in need of new beginnings after Covid-19. How can art education become more relevant? And how can it cease to produce precarious artists, curators, and critics while squandering their energy to serve outdated formats and ideals of autonomy? The arts can do better than merely acting as a motor for the gentrification of creative “smart cities” and “collaborative” work spaces in which the real gain is further segregation. Agreed, the arts can play a major role in “societal challenges,” but as a problem accelerator—not merely as part of a PR and marketing campaign. Our Bauhaus can do without aesthetic solutionism.

We also know that these new insights have not taken away the mystique of the historical Bauhaus. The critiques that a century ago the school wasn’t green, that it excluded women, and failed to make postcolonial statements are ultimately justified, but are also a bit too easy. What’s important is the difference that such initiatives can make today. What if we were able to get such a hybrid school off the ground, with a young and visionary staff from across Europe and beyond? To face the stack of crises, we should learn to zoom out, bring in difference, question authority, work on hard problems, avoid consensus at all cost, embrace the weird, and remain paranoid. The paradoxes of modern “dark ecology” (as described by Tim Morton) will be only one of the many courses offered at the school.⁴ What will students make of the Extinction *Vorlehre*, including a collapsology course?

4 Tim Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

We urgently need to re-create the world. In line with the pioneers a century ago, the Bauhaus 2.0 will need to stop building and instead create architectures (as the saying went back then). This time, the task will be to dream up federated networks, inclusive code, and a public digital sphere aimed at supporting free cooperation, radical care, and mutual aid between a multitude of players. The real challenge for an innovative Bauhaus network will be to face Silicon Valley and the venture-capital “startup” rhetoric and unmask this entrepreneurial model as a major obstacle to change. The centralized (digital) platform model needs to be questioned. The aim of a 21st-century Bauhaus cannot be to create a handful of European billionaires.

We should embrace a design aesthetic that is always already self-reflective. To mention only one of many possible sources of inspiration, we could go back to the Swedish Digital Bauhaus Manifesto, written by Pelle Ehn back in 1998.⁵ Mixtures of art, science, education, and public policy can hardly be called “German.” Quite the opposite. “This is the Europeanization of a German development model,” said Welch Guerra in *Politico*.⁶ And lest we forget: the staff of Bauhaus 1.0 was hardly German. The cosmopolitan gang had to flee the Nazis and found themselves exiled across the world.

The deconstruction of the Bauhaus 1.0 ethic and aesthetic should remain an important background for any project that proclaims itself a new Bauhaus. The critique of modernism has been the task of the critical postwar 1968 generation. We can read entire libraries about the totalitarian reality of the concrete urban deserts designed by Le Corbusier’s clones (or travel to China ourselves). By now, we know whom the Bauhaus movement excluded, and why. We also know the underlying philosophical logic that made it so easy to adopt these arguments from the same forces that had needed the exclusions in the first place. Most importantly, we should never forget why the Bauhaus failed to become the truly democratic artistic force it had set out to be. However, the fact that Bauhaus 1.0 was “inherently not inclusive,” as an open letter from the Maastricht Jan van Eyck Academie claims,⁷ should not stop

5 Pelle Ehn, “Manifesto for a Digital Bauhaus,” *Digital Creativity* 9, no. 4 (1998): 207–17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14626269808567128>.

6 Joshua Posaner, “Von der Leyen’s Green Bauhaus Dream,” *Politico*, last modified October 6, 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/bauhaus-von-der-leyen-green-recycle/>.

7 “Objections to the Term New European Bauhaus: A Letter Addressed to the President and Vice President of the European Commission” (open letter, Jan van Eyck Academie), last modified November 6, 2020, <https://janvaneyck.info/news/call-for-action-objections-to-the-term-new-european-bauhaus>.

us. We need to understand the political momentum currently providing a context of urgency to found a network of experimental interdisciplinary “green-deal” art schools, leaving room open for collective mourning. We live in the midst of the COVID pandemic and the greatest economic recession since the 1930s, after all.

What happens when we start with Tim Morton’s “dark ecology,” instead of rushing into the ruthless promotion of “positive energy” that “creative designers” are supposed to express?⁸ Criticality is something Europe should claim and be proud of. It is productive force that invites us to reflect and bring in other voices.⁹ The emphasis on solutions runs away from very real conflicts in society that need to be faced before we can start to implement blueprints. Ecological solutionism hides the choices that need to be made and smoothes conflicting interests—turning conflicts into “challenges” and “wicked problems” that can be resolved through better branding and marketing. The network of “rainbow houses” can do a better job.

Bauhaus I.O emerged from a crisis-ridden Europe similar to ours. It created a new engineering style for the world from an economic, technical, social, and artistic point of view. It understood the need for a new form of education, especially against the intrusion of authoritarian political movements. Its staff had to confront, as do we, a traditionalist, conservative establishment born from the values of “old Europe.” A century later, the touristic and academic city of Weimar still gives us that vibe. This is the courage we wish to have as we dream of an art-and-design education that dares to ask fundamental questions and dares to make a difference.

Geert Lovink is a Dutch media theorist, Internet critic, and founder of the Institute of Network Cultures at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences. He is the author of *Uncanny Networks* (2002), *Dark Fiber* (2002), *My First Recession* (2003), *Zero Comments* (2007), *Networks without a Cause* (2012), *Social Media Abyss* (2016), and *Sad by Design* (2019).

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- 8 René Kemp and Joost van Haften, “Building Back a Better World: A Plea for a Bauhaus Initiative” (working paper, United Nations University–Maastricht Economic and Social Research Institute on Innovation and Technology), last modified October 20, 2020, <https://www.merit.unu.edu/building-back-a-better-world-a-plea-for-a-bauhaus-initiative/>.
- 9 See Mieke Gerritzen and Geert Lovink, *Made in China, Designed in California, Criticised in Europe: Design Manifesto* (Amsterdam: BIS, 2020).

IGNACIO M. SÁNCHEZ PRADO

Washington University in St. Louis

In 2017, Gabriel Orozco captured the headlines of the Mexican cultural world with his installation/exhibit *Oroxco*. *Oroxco* established a fully functioning Oxxo convenience store inside the kurimanzutto gallery in Mexico City. Oxxo and kurimanzutto are both peak products of Mexican neoliberalism.¹ The main concept of the installation was the merger of the retail and art economies. In *Oroxco*, regular consumer items (bottles of soda and water, snacks, candy, detergent, etc.) were sold, but a system of stickers branded them as works of art. The catalog provides entries for the items very much as a museum would, adding also the material and numbering of the stickers: “013. Chocolate Hershey’s Cookies & Cream, barra 4I, Vynil, GO12869.”² The graphic geometric stamps that intervened the brand logos in the products and turned them into works of art only came to be at the moment the pieces were purchased, and only a certain number of items within the store were available for this scheme. For the duration of the installation (from February 8 to March 16), various pricing and inventory modifications were enacted, in response to supply and demand, speculation, and other consumer behaviors.

Oroxco provides a good example of what I call the “social organicity of neoliberal art.” Debates about art under neoliberalism tend to point to the same tension. One side of this tension is embodied in the expectation that the work of art, and the field of cultural production at large, is somehow autonomous from the economic production of value and the function of objects as commodities. Versions of this expectation run from Bourdieusian approaches, assuming the relative autonomy of the cultural field and the production of symbolic capital, to the inherent or negative autonomy of the artwork due to some form of reflexive element within its form, as has recently been theorized by Nicholas Brown in the wake of Adorno.³ On the other side, various theorists have emphasized the subsumption of art institutions and production to structures of flexi-

1 For the record and catalog of the piece, see Gabriel Orozco, *Oroxco* (London: Koenig Books, 2018).

2 Ibid., 323.

3 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Nicholas Brown, *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art under Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

ble and decommodified labor that run parallel to neoliberal constructs such as the creative class or the gig economy. This is evident in the work of scholars like Sarah Brouillette and Leigh Claire La Berge.⁴

In my view, the indecision and indistinction between autonomy and subsumption, between symbolic and economic capital, is the key and distinctive feature of neoliberalism as culture. Neoliberalism functions on the basis of a profound culturization of the economy that has intensified as a process of flexible subjectification across the social spectrum. These processes are visible from the internalization of its values (entrepreneurship, for instance) even in the baroque economies at the intersection of informality and globalization—a topic admirably studied by Verónica Gago—and the thorough integration of the “work of culture,” as Arlene Dávila terms it, in the imaginaries of development and social mobility.⁵

Oroxxo is, in its deliberate obviousness, about the subjective imbrications of art and the precaritized economy of neoliberalism. This works in part through the identification of the gallery with the convenience store. Oxxo, the dominant brand in the country, in the model of such US chains as 7 Eleven and Circle K, is owned by Femsa, a corporate behemoth invested in the manufacturing and production of Coca-Cola products, beer, and other beverages. Kurimanzutto began as an itinerant art gallery in 1999 and settled in a space in the San Miguel Chapultepec neighborhood in 2008. The entities are both organic products of neoliberalism: a corporation that rides on deregulation, labor casualization, and the monopolistic cooptation of geographies of retail, and a gallery frequently engaged in the visibilization of the economic notion of art. It is worth remembering that kurimanzutto’s first event, *Economía de mercado*, consisted of the opening of an art-selling stall in a major food market in Mexico City.

The many works that render visible the relationship between commerce and art—Orozco’s installation, Banksy’s *Exit through the Gift Shop*, Pablo Helguera’s *Librería Donceles*—coexist with schemes of financialization that more radically place the artwork into the category

4 Sarah Brouillette, *Literature and the Creative Economy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014); Leigh Claire La Berge, *Wages against Artwork: Decommodified Labor and the Claims of Socially Engaged Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

5 Verónica Gago, *Neoliberalism from Below: Popular Pragmatics and Baroque Economies*, trans. Liz Mason-Deese (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017); Arlene Dávila, *Culture Works: Space, Value and Mobility across the Neoliberal Americas* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

of the asset. One can recall here efforts to re-capitalize art—like *The Art Market 2.0* or Maecenas—that advocate financial instrumentalizations such as the creation of credit markets backed by artworks, blockchain forms of art ownership and exchange, and the purchase of fractional interests in works of art.⁶ These phenomena cannot be accounted for, in my view, solely by focusing on the idea of intensification. Rather, the idea of “neoliberalism” speaks to the ways in which the social functions of art and its circulation are thoroughly imbricated in the configuration of the social and the economic in itself, as part of a large and complex network of cognitive and cultural elements that are no longer superstructural but have become fully infrastructural. In this network resides the social organicity of neoliberal art.

Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado teaches in the Latin American Studies Program and the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures at Washington University, St. Louis. His most recent book in English is *Strategic Occidentalism: On Mexican Literature, the Neoliberal Book Market and the Question of World Literature* (2018).

6 MacDonald-Korth, Duncan, Vili Lehdonvirta, and Eric T. Meyer. *The Art Market 2.0: Blockchain and Financialisation in Visual Arts* (London: Alan Turing Institute, 2018). See also the website www.maecenas.co.

WILLY THAYER

Universidad Metropolitana de Ciencias
de la Educación (UMCE), Santiago, Chile

Several of the essays in *Escuelas de arte, campo universitario y formación artística* (*Art Schools, the University Field, and Artistic Training*, 2015),¹ an anthology edited by Carolina Herrera and Nelly Richard, suggest that, in Chile, the *art/neoliberalism* relationship refers back to the *neoliberalism/university* relationship: “the idea that the Chilean visual arts scene constitutes a field configured by academic institutionality has become a common position. Critics, artists, and historians have insisted that the development, transmission, and conditions for registering art and artists in the country, are all subordinate to the blueprint devised by the university institutions that train visual artists. . . . The Cuban critic and curator, Gerardo Mosquera . . . maintains an analogous assessment: ‘The Chilean taste for erudite discourse . . . must be related to the weight placed on the teaching of art in the country. . . . The vast majority of artists possess a university diploma in their specialty. The various universities have their own traditions and tendencies, and the artists are basically classified according to university and graduation year. . . . Many have asked themselves if the history of local art might not simply be the history of the academy.’”² In the same vein, the art theorist Carlos Pérez Villalobos notes: “Art degree programs (a limited labor market of artists and intellectuals that emerged from them) promise their users they will invest them with knowledge of art and make them believe that art is a productive practice, passing over how art—the ceremony of art that, in modernity, was a prestigious trigger for experience (a reflexive elaboration of suffering)—is today all that occurs within art programs.”³ Carolina Herrera, coeditor of the anthology, high-

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- 1 Carolina Herrera and Nelly Richard, *Escuelas de arte, campo universitario y formación artística* (Santiago de Chile: Ediciones Departamento de Artes Visuales, Facultad de Artes, University of Chile, 2015).
 - 2 Claudio Guerrero and Kaliuska Santibáñez, “Academias, museos y salones: El proyecto institucional del arte moderno en Chile (1797–1947),” in Carolina Águila and Nelly Richard, *Escuelas de arte, campo universitario y formación artística*, Ediciones Departamento de Artes Visuales, Facultad de Artes, University of Chile, 2015, Santiago, 29–30.
 - 3 Carlos Pérez Villalobos, “Chilean Art Now,” in Carolina Águila and Nelly Richard, *Escuelas de arte, campo universitario y formación artística*, Ediciones Departamento de Artes Visuales, Facultad de Artes, University of Chile, 2015, Santiago, p. 67.

lights that there “have come to exist 16 or 18 art schools that offer a Bachelor’s degree in art in 2011. . . . Our artists have an academic origin.”⁴

It was not the university vanguard of 1968, nor that of Allende’s “education for all” (1970–73), nor even the artistic avant-garde (1956–73) or the neo-avant-garde (1976–83) who effected the transition from engaged art and critical modernism to art as commercial university *dispositif*, in the sense recently suggested. Rather, it is not excessive to insist that the dictatorship (1973–89) changed both art and the university to effect this transit, this transition⁵ from engaged vanguard and trans-textual modernism to a culture of academic historicism, competition between university galleries and exhibition spaces, and the exchange and academic indexing of art as curriculum. The dictatorship also changed the pension system, the health system, the parliament, and the constitution, subordinating everything to the *financier and business classes (empresariado financiero)*. The government of this period even subordinated the spoils and institutionality of sovereignty to the spoils and institutionality of the commercial classes. And following the neoliberal interface, art, the university, democracy, the State, and the National Congress were not alone in their mutation. Even the mountains and the sky were transformed (*mutaron*).

In the Chilean neoliberal interface, it is not so much that art, the university, pensions, and so forth, are financed by capital coming from diverse sectors; rather, a sectorless financial capital subsumes to its rentability whichever sector has met the conditions of being made profitable. Among these sectors are both the university and art. Financial profitability constitutes the mission and the principle of excellence for any given sector within this interface, in such a way that what is excellent is that which offers the highest return at the

4 Carolina Herrera, “Encuentros de escuelas de arte o una plataforma en construcción; in Carolina Aguila and Nelly Richard, *Escuelas de arte, campo universitario y formación artística*, Ediciones Departamento de Artes Visuales, Facultad de Artes, University of Chile, 2015, Santiago. p. 21. The original statement reads “llega a contar con 16 o 18 escuelas de arte que concluyen en una Licenciatura en la especialidad al año 2011. . . . Nuestros artistas tienen un origen académico.”

5 See Willy Thayer, *La crisis no moderna de la universidad moderna* (Santiago de Chile: Editorial Cuarto Propio, 1996); Willy Thayer, “El Golpe como consumación de la vanguardia” (2003) and “Crítica, nihilismo, interrupción: El porvenir de la Avanzada después de Márgenes e Instituciones” (2005), both collected in *El fragmento repetido: Escritos en estado de excepción* (Santiago de Chile: Ediciones/Metales Pesados, 2006).

lowest cost. Any sector, any collective and multispatial determination of art within the heteronomy of financial rentability, is planned out as the *use value* of *profitability's value*. If, under liberalism, a consumer good presupposes certain qualities, under neoliberalism, the commodity is consumption without a good, or consumption of the consumer good as consumption of the potential to generate further financial profit . . .

The hypothesis of the dictatorship as neoliberal transition, or the coup as the neoliberal realization of the avant-garde, operates against the grain of any reading that would see in modernist trans-texts or those of the Chilean “neo-avant-garde” of the 1970s and 80s a specific agent of the “change” in art. The modernist writings of the 70s/80s always worked against change, as a counter-closure opposed to sovereign-dictatorial and neoliberal financial modernization. The fact that these modernist circles thematically incorporated into their artistic medium, into their toolkit, recently arrived and arriving technologies—technologies proper to the hegemonic structure upon which neoliberal modernization was intentionally staged and carried out—tends to be confused with a modernization of their writings. But neo-avant-garde modernism (under any name) never modernizes. It profanes, it defrauds modernization's frameworks, thematizing its *mise-en-scène* and its horizon. Modernism does not change, does not modernize, *does not progress*—it mutates. And mutation is not change, nor is it action, much less advancement or progress.

The modernization of the *dispositif* of art in Chile, the eighteen art schools of which Carolina Herrera speaks—these are neither the effect nor the product of Dittborn's *Pintura aeropostal*, nor of Lotty Rosenfeld's *No +*, nor of Leppé's *Gallinas*. The neo-avant-garde did not inspire these curricula, nor did it drive the conditions for the academization of art, artwork, and artist. To consider the deconstructive pragmatics of modernism in the 1970s and 80s, the inspiration for the programs and bibliographies of these art schools aestheticizes these structurally historicist schools by using modernist analogies. If the neo-avant-garde happens to be incorporated to the materials and bibliographies of many of these schools, if monographs are written about artists from the neo-avant-garde or about the *Escena de Avanzada*, the gesture of these works is far more historicist than modernist. Their programs, in turn, are far more historicist than neo-avant-gardist.

The neo-avant-garde of the 1970s and 80s did not write in order to bring about change, advancement, or progress. Their work was not written, if it was written, “in order to.” They withdrew from teleology, as well as from the strong position pulsing behind the common question “from where?,” understood as: from which class, race, gender, country, species, do you speak or write? They wrote neither from nor for. Stammering, they wrote, in each case, a body, a language, a minor *Geschlecht*.

I have suggested that modernism does not change, progress, advance, or revolutionize. Instead, it constitutes the pause *par excellence*, the absolute pause of modernization. This pause does not belong to the multitude of rests, stops, and inactions that, combined with the droves of occupations, engagements, diligences, interventions, and realizations, create action and sustain it with their rhythms, in a way that is analogous to how the punctuation or notation of a text, a musical score, or a script animates and supports the efficacy of the artwork’s act, its execution. The modernist pause does not belong to the procession of lulls, respites, and delays that feed off the phenomenology of action—and its associated categories of work, production, intentionality, capitalization, progress, advanced groups. Rather, it is the pause of that action’s horizon, in the plasticity of its stoppages and activisms.

A proper, or more proper, name for this pause would be *mutation*. Mutation constitutes the pause of action and of the categories that constellate the action in their rests and rhythms. If action presupposes intentionality, teleology, act, an interest that conditions and holds together a movement occupied and preoccupied with things (*pragmata*), then mutation, whose only possible event is that of *the continual variation of nature*,⁶ constitutes the *nonbeing* of the pure heterology that becomes without arriving at anything, nor at anything’s beginning, because it does not set out from any particular thing. Mutation *performs* the absolute pause⁷ of the horizon of action, of the act, of being. Nothing can act where the only event is that of variation, the open wound of becoming that does not act, does not arrive at declarations, borders, edges.

6 Cf. Deleuze, *Le bergsonisme*, PUF, 1966, 32; *Différence et répétition*, PUF, 1968, 306.

7 “Absoluto no significa incondicionado . . . sino multiplicidad como corporeidad sin límites” [“Absolute does not mean unconditioned . . . rather a multiplicity as corporeality without limits”]; Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Mil Mesetas*, Pre-textos, 1994, Valencia, p. 111.

The neo-avant-garde, then, changed nothing. Nor did it intend to change anything. It stammered a mutation as it created its future past, its retrospective posthumousness, against the grain of the dictatorship, of neoliberal modernization. And writing, a mutation, is not an action. Less a scouting party than a pack, it is a multiplicity in which each singularity brings about a becoming.

TRANSLATED BY CONOR HARRIS

Willy Thayer teaches philosophy in the Programa de Teoría Crítica and directed Ediciones Macul in the Department of Philosophy at Universidad Metropolitana de Ciencias de la Educación Santiago de Chile. His most recent book publications are *Technologies of Critique* (2020) and *Imagen exote* (2020).