**Artist Development**

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I will, today, look at the new omniscience of a kind of ‘artists class’, maybe somewhere between the working class and ruling or dominant, and how its formalisation removes the need for autonomy as prerequisite for art. I will then try to develop this position as problematic in relation to present-day human struggle in particular, I will try to focus on the refugee crisis, I know it is problematic even to discuss it, but I will discuss this purely as a struggle most abstracted by media. I don’t pretend to be speaking about rights – I absolutely believe that Europe and other countries should accept their humanitarian responsibility and express solidarity without exception. But I want to show simply how this position is totally unavailable to the artist/architect/activist/urban planner hybrid, which sees this new artist class striving to elevate themselves above the everyday struggles of simple dirty existence, whilst maintaining claim to the very ordinariness which it fetishizes – and that this is precisely the symbolic problem of ‘empathy with the other’, represented here in the politicised – not in an emancipatory way – figure of the refugee.

**‘Develop, or be Developed’**

I will begin with an obvious point. There are two contexts where the two meanings of the word ‘development’ also holds the key contradictions (there is also a third one when it is used in relation to developing economies but I will focus mainly on these two other positions, there is also of course a fourth one in software programming, where the user-developer relationship has its origins). There is ‘development’ as it is used in the context of artist development – but there is, of course also ‘urban development’, in the sense of city planning. In both cases, the question asked is always the question of the ‘developer’ – namely, how best to utilise the space, what buildings we erect and so on. But there is, I claim, a clear dialectical contradiction here – it is the ‘developed’ which, under democratic societies, should hold the power to determine their own space. Yet in practical terms, the ‘developed’ is a relatively powerless position.

To be ‘developed’, I claim, is a position that holds all of our deepest fears – to be ‘developed’ is to be operated upon, to have our control and self-determination removed. The ‘developed’ in an urban planning sense refers to those people who already have houses on the ground where they lived for 30 years or generations or whatever, who are not considered and are invisible. The ideological illusion presented to artists in this new paradigm carries with it a new series of slogans posing as religious dogma or a type of neo-Buddhist capitalism present in advertising: ‘you can modify the situation if you only think of the right idea’, ‘Oh, you can change the world, you can hack the system only with your imagination’ and so on. ‘How should we develop it?’ is a key question unifying artists, architects, curators etc. – but it is precisely this question, I claim, that implicates the artist in the top-down process of manipulation and commodification previously the realm of architects, curators and so on.

Of course, there is familiarity, even suspicion among artists of the level to which their objectives synergise with those of capital interest – ‘gentrification’ is the obvious one here in Berlin – as well as the self as a kind of building site, or a site of constant development in the form of self-help, yoga, and so on. Now, I claim we are moving into a new era, where, not only on such clear terms as this, but also especially the activist voice, is being subsumed into capitalism and made to serve capital interest unconsciously. This is also the realm of identity politics and Greenwashing – where a re-direction of social change ensures the continuation of the status quo, and companies historically deeply involved in ecocide are asked simply to slightly tweak their mission statements, in order to preserve their continuation.

Here lies the true contradiction, I claim. We should ask of the absurdity of the developed adopting the ‘developer’ position – this would be a truly radical class-reversal, if the ‘developed’, in this sense, were suddenly able to determine the plan of the house of the developer. We must ask, I claim, the opposite question - for what purpose might the artist be being developed? Who is developing them? Are they encouraged to become developers? In the same way – who are we developing? Who are the people on the ground whose homes the artist symbolically removes? And why?

**The refugee rendered as image**

To adopt the position of ‘developer’ is not only to achieve a kind of symbolic removal from solidarity in human struggles, but a kind of distance between the symbolic artist and the predominant symbol of precariousness in today’s global discourses – this is the figure of the refugee. Let’s be honest, when we look at the refugee in the media it is no longer a humanitarian issue. They are somehow now rendered inhuman, and the real authentic struggle is made small next to the dominant narrative associated with them. Here I claim that we are in a situation where the refugee is no longer even a refugee – even the word no longer connects with its original definition, which is, one who seeks refuge or safety from war or persecution. Rather, it has been reduced to little more than a manifestation of our deepest narcissistic fears as it is expressed in the media – namely ‘that one day my home will be taken away, that I will be forced to travel on a boat to Lampedusa in the middle of the night, carrying a child on my back’ and so on. My point is a simple one, our collective rejection of refugees is a rejection of a narrative which is not even connected to the people with whom it is associated, it simply exists to deny this fear within the European self. Is this not a perfect example of what Lacan would refer to as a ‘narcissistic defence’, where the ego experiences a threat to its identity and must respond by reinforcing its own reality.

My question is not to deny the existence of our collective responsibility, to take care of people in trouble, fleeing warzones and so on, precisely it is the opposite: that both the arguments constructed against - these kind of fascist nationalists - and paradoxically this ‘we must have empathy, take down the borders’ – are constructed as an engagement, not with the ‘other’, but with its narcissistic projection of the ego. To put it another way, the reality of the struggle is much too obscure – ‘they have fled many thousands of kilometres, it is not clear who began this war, maybe it was Putin, maybe Assad used toxic gas’ and so on - the figure of the refugee becomes not even a definition anymore, instead it becomes the perfect instrument of ideology. If you look for a moment at ecological crisis, if you look at the projections from scientists, it of course does not take long before you can reach a state of panic about this, I think Berlin becomes uninhabitable about 2046 or something, Jakarta 2026, some other major cities even earlier. Only when you look at these things together they begin to make sense. There is a coherent strategy – mostly the attempt is a deferral of responsibility and the preparation for future, even more brutal deferrals. The key question facing governments here, I claim, is not ‘how do we deal with refugees?’ but ‘How do we enter a future in which refugees are no longer single phenomena but a kind of perpetual reality?’ The question (for governments) becomes how to maintain ethical purity internally, upon which many of our codes and protocol are based, here I mean our relationship to Lacan’s ‘Big Other’, and simultaneously, nevertheless, trading as much as possible the external ethics upon which these conditions are founded.

**Australia**

You can already see governments preparing for this dystopian future . In the case of Australia, there are these offshore processing projects which is undertaken, setting up refugee camps on small island states in exchange for some foreign aid for development. It’s totally illegal, according to unenforceable United Nations conventions, and there are even, periodically, statements in the Australian media that it is illegal. The counter-response from the Australian government is devastatingly simple – if they choose to come by boat they will drown at sea, by preventing them from coming we are performing our humanitarian duty, in a sense we are saving them from drowning. In reality, of course, there are many other solutions. However, this response totally evades the complexity of the scenario, replacing it with a simple, provable claim – provable in a sense that there are images and video, not as a humanitarian argument – that people seek refuge in Australia because they want to in a sense destroy themselves. This simplification totally preserves the ethical integrity of the state by positioning it as protecting the lives of people hurt through none other than their own psychopathic self-hate. That’s why when refugees self-harm in the detention centres, which is now regular, this does not seem to create any sympathetic response from the public. This self-harm principle is anyway already established – in other words, the government has already affirmed that it attempts to rescue them from themselves by preventing them from coming, now they point and say ‘ah, look, they are also now harming themselves, thereby proving their desire to eliminate themselves is irresistible’. Of course, the Australian government, and not the individual, is in this case totally and directly responsible. The system of ethical distance which has been set up is so profound that it functions to efficiently prevent any humanisation and lay ground for future inhumane acts.

**Ritsema Example, Artists and the military**

Returning to the figure of the artist today, we must necessarily ask, I claim, what role the artist should play in these ‘interesting times’. Of course, the natural position is to reject fully this kind of ethical distancing, and perform an educational and synergistic role within social projects which may serve to harmonise and co-ordinate certain transitionary phenomena. Such a position also betrays the underlying need for difference in culture – this is precisely my problem with multiculturalism.

Ok, now I will turn to a quote from an artist. The speaker is, Jan Ritsemer, a Dutch theater director. He states, it is very short:

*“Artists are like the army – they are sent out to the front lines of new frontiers, and made to do the dirty work for a neoliberal capitalist machine looking to use cultural capital to expand itself”*.

Here Ritsemer presents in clear terms the connection between cultural capital and military. After the fall of the Berlin Wall the British Council had an open plan to establish bases in Eastern Europe, and for 15 years they kept these, so as to encourage the relationship between Eastern Europe and the UK, and in about 2006 suddenly they all closed. Of course this was never about sustaining long-term cultural partnerships between nation states, but using culture as a weapon of expanding influence – it is no coincidence that NATO was also expanding at this time, we also get this unspoken agreement, later violated, between George Bush Senior and Gorbachev. From the statement from Ritsemer, we can see not only a connection between cultural capital and military, but the figure of the artist as “on the front line”, offering an image of artists somehow making way for a corporate or military expansion. Again, the point here seems totally obvious – the artist is employed as a kind of battering ram for military and to state corporate interests to open new areas and as, in the colonial sense, missionarie.

**Arts Activism**

We can see how this is problematic in the sense that the omniscient position of the artist, unwilling to lower itself to human struggles, symbolically floating above contradiction, collaborating with both Mercedes Benz and Greenpeace, is quickly and even consciously subsumed into collaboration with the system of alliances between global corporations and military. Evidence for the claims of Ritsemer is found upon examining forms of contemporary art practice, which reveal their potential military application when you look at them as tools for artist development. For example, my favourite is, maybe you know it, ‘Art Activism’. On the surface, this form is a simple combination of art and activism. But we must really ask, I claim, what changes when the artist intervenes, and the intention when we do thisThe attempt to purify the objectives of art into something more directly political, to me mirrors the worst reproductions of capitalist cultural product, hand in hand with the promise that you do not need to change your consumption to do so. What is difficult for us to accept is that we are reduced to a purely passive role of an impotent observer, who can only sit back and watch what their fate will be. The offer here is, ‘we make it simpler for you’. We make the product – you can remain a consumerist, because your altruistic, solidarity with the poor, it’s included into the price. Though one cannot deny that the emergence of the form of Art Activism signifies a real need for ontological intervention, we must question from where this need comes, and if it is not just from a sense of guilt at the production of art as primarily a first-world activity.

**Conclusion – the limits of knowledge and radical self-erasure**

The potential in art activism is that Art does not need to change its inherent structure of power, because there are artists doing this work for us. We should be cynical about any claims to intervention from the symbolic position, to sacrifice the assumed objectivity of art for something which cannot be misinterpreted as being pro-capital or pro-status quo, in other words, which cannot be appropriated by capital. This is the fantasy of art activism, hand-in-hand with the aestheticisation of protest movements. One can even imagine, if we are really cynical, art-activist actions orchestrated by political parties in the future, the artist at the centre of campaigns – why not? If they are standing in the place of the authentic political encounter, it is absolutely rational. We might also imagine practitioners of Relational Aesthetics running workshops for advertisers, and can you imagine it, the poster on the streets of London, a young white girl is on the streets of Pakistan with engaged-looking children, the sentence underneath reads ‘Theatre of the Oppressed courses, just 6,000 pounds per semester, for this amount we promise you can change the world’ or something. These may seem like fantasies but I claim these ideas are already firmly embedded in a capitalist logic in its totality – in fact, the compromise of knowledge is absolutely the price of making art now. Perspective is directly, ironically traded with empathy. I’m not saying we shouldn’t seek power, nor do I want to suggest that expressions of solidarity the authentic struggle require necessarily a fluidity between developer and developed; that there is some kind of ‘third position’. No, I claim precisely the opposite – the answer is a totally clear paradox. Within this paradigm, it is precisely the artist position itself which must be refuted, and in a sense remade, if it is to survive these present transformations – resist both the calls to inhuman paradise, the position of developer, and any false appropriation of the struggles of the ‘developed’.

Thank you very much.