

VOL. 2, NO 12 OCTOBER 2010

**WE ARE NOT RESPONSIBLE
FOR ANY BELONGING**



machete

Slavoj Zizek, Sycophant of Reason

It's like the start of a bad joke: what do priestly meditative practices, animal vision and environmental catastrophe have in common? The answer, of course, is nothing, unless they are being whipped through the dialectical machine of Slavoj Zizek's thought. There was very little in his talk Wednesday at the University of Pennsylvania that someone with even a mild interest in Zizek would not have already heard – the same jokes, the same critiques, the same seemingly counter-intuitive advice. But by the end of the lecture, as Zizek further explored his current fight against deep ecology, he did manage to integrate all these disparate moments into an interesting, if still insufficient critique of the present moment and a call for greater use of human reason.

Indeed, we should give Zizek credit – in the unfolding of his talk the elements did take on a sort of dialectical whole whose sum was greater than their parts. He began with a critique of the medieval monastic practice of negating desire by imagining the innards of the loved object. Although this type of thinking of the body might seem more “real,” Zizek maintained that the truth of the human was not to be found in its immanent decay so much as its fleeting appearance as whole and beautiful. In other words, the human is more than just matter, more than just the animal.

So the second step in this process was to consider the animal. Rather than thinking about how the human relates to the animal, Zizek proposed we consider how the animal relates to the human. The interesting question then is not “are we animal” or “can they reason” but rather “how monstrous do we appear in the eyes of the animal?” The truth of the relation is not that humans are food for worms, but that humans are ghastly, unnatural things. If the dialectic is hard to follow it is because Zizek would rather tell dick jokes (and to his credit his lectures are easier to digest than most), but the point is still there: the human as beautiful and the human as monstrous are not contradictory. They are both steps in his dialectical formation of a human being completely separated from nature. They are moving the discussion towards a demand for hyper-rationalization.

But Zizek knows that he is not there yet after these two moves. Without citing the fashionable names (Foucault, Agamben) or without naming the fashionable term (biopolitics), Zizek launched next into a critique of “law's power over life.” In this phase of the talk, he critiqued the various

ways in which legal measures are used to secure rights and privileges. Though he did not entirely spell it out, within the earlier frame of the talk, the point here would seem to be that the more we rely on legalist means of securing bodily protections and freedoms, the more we reinforce the system of law which in fact inhibits freedom and traps us into the



current regime. We can sue BP all we want, but that won't help us get rid of BP. In short, three forms of understanding the human have now been negated: as matter, as animal, and as citizen.

It is only in this context of triple negation that Zizek comes to his most recent controversial claim: getting back in touch with nature is the worst possible thing humans could do. After all, the earth's climate has for most of its history been inhospitable to humanity regardless of its practices. Nature is not inherently friend or foe, it simply must be dealt with in a way outside of the current legalistic imagination. Rather than appealing to the human as nature or the human as legal citizen, Zizek thinks we should break all such bonds in the name of a hyper-rationalized subject who is truly able to think through the coming environmental catastrophes.

He gives as an example global warming and the migrations that will be caused when the desert spreads in some regions of the world and icecaps melt in others. Mass migrations of this sort have occurred throughout human history and they have tended to result in mass panic, death and disarray. Given this situation, he contends, only a subject removed from nature, capable of using foresight and rational planning, will be able to confederate humanity in a non-legalistic way (legalism would here mean a regulation of haves and have-nots in the process of migration) and ensure that such atrocities are not piled on to environmental

catastrophes.

In spite of the hyperbolic hatred of such touchstones as human rights and nature, Zizek's point is not such a bad one. Indeed it is clear that a back to the woods movement will ultimately help a smaller percentage of the population than a movement for foresight and planning. Be that as it may, there is not in

fact much historical precedent to assume that centralized planning and reason are beneficial to humanity. (Zizek, who jokingly calls himself a Stalinist, should know this.) Moreover, it seems unclear that migration will necessarily be the problem humanity needs to confront. It could just as well be a giant meteor, a glitch in atomic bomb systems, a sudden global infertility problem, or so forth.

The problem with Zizek's dialectic, to borrow a phrase from Adorno, is that it lacks mediation. A proper dialectic does not simply cancel out the terms

it refutes, it also preserves them. The body as matter and animal life cannot completely disappear. Zizek, in his canceling move of hyper-rationalization, forgets the simple corollary of embodiment: contingency. Reason can only get us so far. The basic Darwinian insight remains true: adaptability to the contingent conditions of existence has always been, and remains to be, the most important solution. Rather than a subject ever more removed from nature, we are better off with a subject ever more dialectically intertwined with nature, capable of understanding at once the potentials of thought and the inexhaustible need to adapt to conditions outside the realm of the thinkable.

As is customary now in writing on Zizek, let me end with a joke. A man goes into a restaurant and orders soup. He calls the waiter over and says “Waiter, there's something wrong with the soup. Please try it.” The waiter says, “What's wrong with the soup?” The man replies, “Just try it.” The waiter says, “Is it too hot?” The man says, “Try the soup.” The waiter says, “Is it too cold, or too salty? Is there a fly in your soup?” The man says, “Just try the soup.” The waiter says, “OK, where's the spoon?” The man says, “A-ha!” Zizek's plan risks turning us all into such waiters who think so abstractly about the world around them they are unable to see the real problem at hand.

- Avi Alpert

Critique without a Critique

Aaron Sorkin and David Fincher's *The Social Network* asks you to participate in the meteoric rise of Facebook creator Mark Zuckerberg, who by all accounts ruthlessly cheated and lied his way into billionaire status. It is not terribly surprising that Sorkin (screenwriter) and Fincher (director) chose to avoid a direct critique of Facebook—by now it is virtually a truism that Facebook has contributed to the rapidly deteriorating state of our social relations—what is surprising is that Sorkin and Fincher have created a portrait of an internet tycoon who is in many respects a blank slate. The first thing we learn about Zuckerberg in the film's opening sequence is that he received a perfect score on his SATs and that he very badly wants to gain entrance into Harvard's exclusive final clubs. Not exactly *sui generis* for a Harvard computer nerd. Nevertheless, Sorkin's dialogue is sharp and he pulls you in as Zuckerberg proceeds to talk himself out of a relationship. Before his bewildered ex-girlfriend takes off she leaves Zuckerberg with the following diagnosis: "You're going to be successful and rich. But you're going to go through life thinking that girls don't like you because you're a tech geek. I want you to know, from the bottom of my heart, that won't be true: It'll be because you're an asshole." Commentators have suggested that this declaration functions as Zuckerberg's "Rosebud." Doomed to wander Silicon Valley as his bank account expands, Zuckerberg will nevertheless fail to win the affection and respect of anyone.

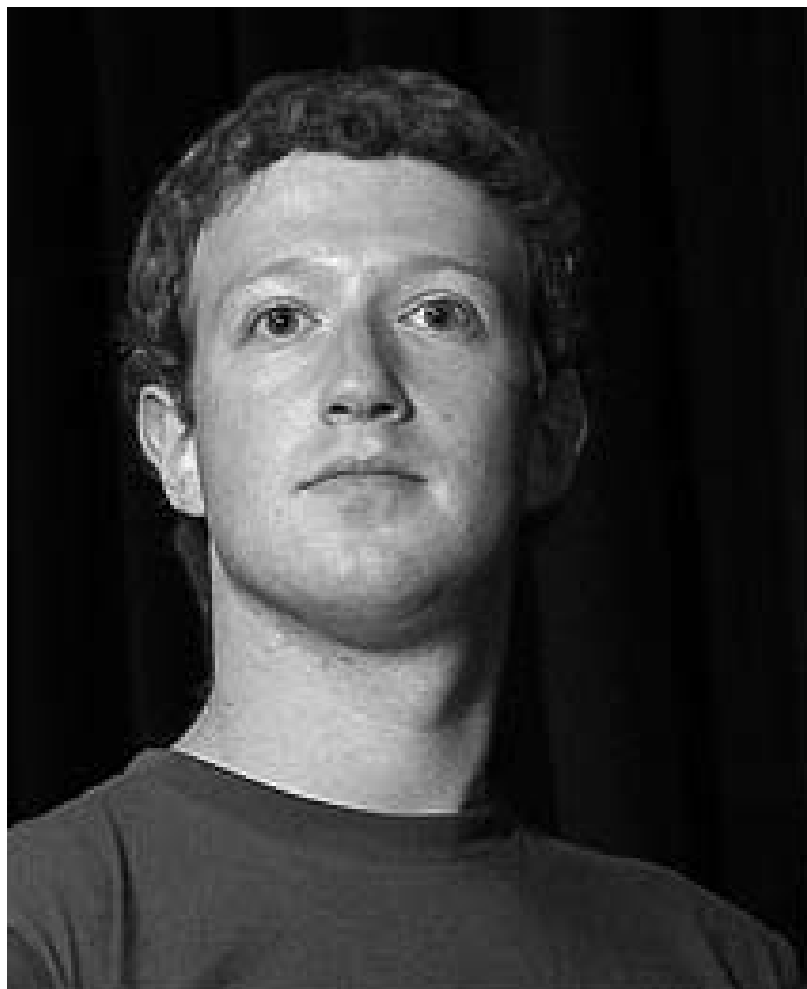
The meat of the film proceeds as a transmission of Zuckerberg's assorted lawsuits, particularly with "best friend" and CFO Eduardo Saverin, who Zuckerberg eventually froze out by reducing his ownership share to 0.03%. Additionally, Zuckerberg is sued by Cameron and Tyler Winklevoss for misleading them in the development of the "HarvardConnection," a precursor to Facebook. Whether or not the details of these trials are accurate is almost beside the point—Zuckerberg is clearly a self-serving entrepreneur who is willing to lie, cheat, and steal for the sake

of his company. The film is most successful in its portrayal of the speed and contingency of internet entrepreneurship—while the Winklevoss brothers wait for Zuckerberg to complete the HarvardConnection, Zuckerberg proceeds to develop and launch the Facebook without their knowledge. It is here that the logic of neo-liberalism presents itself—while the entitled Winklevoss brothers represent a "rule-bound" era of the American ruling class in their attempts to appeal to Harvard

President Larry Summers, Zuckerberg feels no such compulsion to adhere to the rules of the game. Saverin also falls prey to the illusion that finance is regulated and inherently principled. But the speed of internet entrepreneurship appears to eclipse all limits. While Saverin pursues more traditional avenues for promoting his company—e.g. interning for powerful financial firms in New York—Zuckerberg rapidly develops his own small empire with Napster founder Shaun Parker. With the assistance of Silicon Valley venture capitalists, Zuckerberg surreptitiously allows Saverin to sign away his own ownership share, thereby eliminating his future position within the company.

Much of the commentary regarding Zuckerberg's alleged behavior is interesting and it reflects significant assumptions regarding the nature and implicit legitimacy of capitalism. Lawrence Lessig, writing in *The New Republic*, insists that the sole "tragedy" of the film is that "policymakers are ferociously conspiring with old world powers to remove the conditions for this success." Lessig is speaking about the demise of "internet neutrality," and how we will inevitably return to a world where the Zuckerbergs of tomorrow will have to depend upon "permission" and "privilege." Leaving aside the fact that Facebook would have never amounted to anything without the wealth and privilege of its investors, Lessig's apologetics for Zuckerberg precisely misses what Sorkin and Fincher have been able to

protagonist. Yes, of course Zuckerberg is a narcissistic sociopath sprinkled with a touch of autism. But Sorkin and Fincher want you to acknowledge his fundamental character deficit and participate in it simultaneously. The film gets its biggest laughs when Zuckerberg heaps condescending insults on his opposing attorneys, and who wouldn't want to do that? Naturally it's at least a little fun to rise to billionaire status within the course of a few years and then be able to basically crap on anyone you happen to meet. But *The Social Network* functions only to the extent that it is able to get you to enjoy Zuckerberg's ride. Undoubtedly, there is plenty to criticize in Zuckerberg's character, but the form of the critique in fact conceals the structural illegitimacy of its subject. Sorkin himself has admitted that the film could just as easily been about "the making of toasters." It is clear that Sorkin and Fincher are not particularly interested in Facebook, the internet, or capitalism. Unfortunately, they also don't seem to be particularly interested in why it is that we live in a culture of deceit, or why it is that people like Zuckerberg are now seen as role models. Although Sorkin and Fincher are able to gesture towards a critique of Facebook through their portrait of the network's most paradigmatic user, the critique is never able to transcend the level of the portrait. The political failure at the root of *The Social Network* is that Sorkin and Fincher seem to be saying: "Forget about whether or not Facebook, MySpace,



demonstrate. Namely, that Facebook is not the invention of an individual, but rather the result of a set of social and technological conditions which allowed Zuckerberg and his immediate colleagues to launch a marketable platform. In the final analysis, no one is able to say who "invented" Facebook, for the internet is an infinitely connected, infinitely contextual thing.

Where the film fails is in its strange inability to distance itself from the anti-

Twitter, etc. are actually good or not—the bottom line is that Zuckerberg is essentially a bad guy." But the problem is not simply that Zuckerberg is a bad guy, the problem is that he's a bad guy and that he exists in a system which has enabled him to become so unimaginably powerful.

- Charles Prusic

**SYRUP ON
THE**

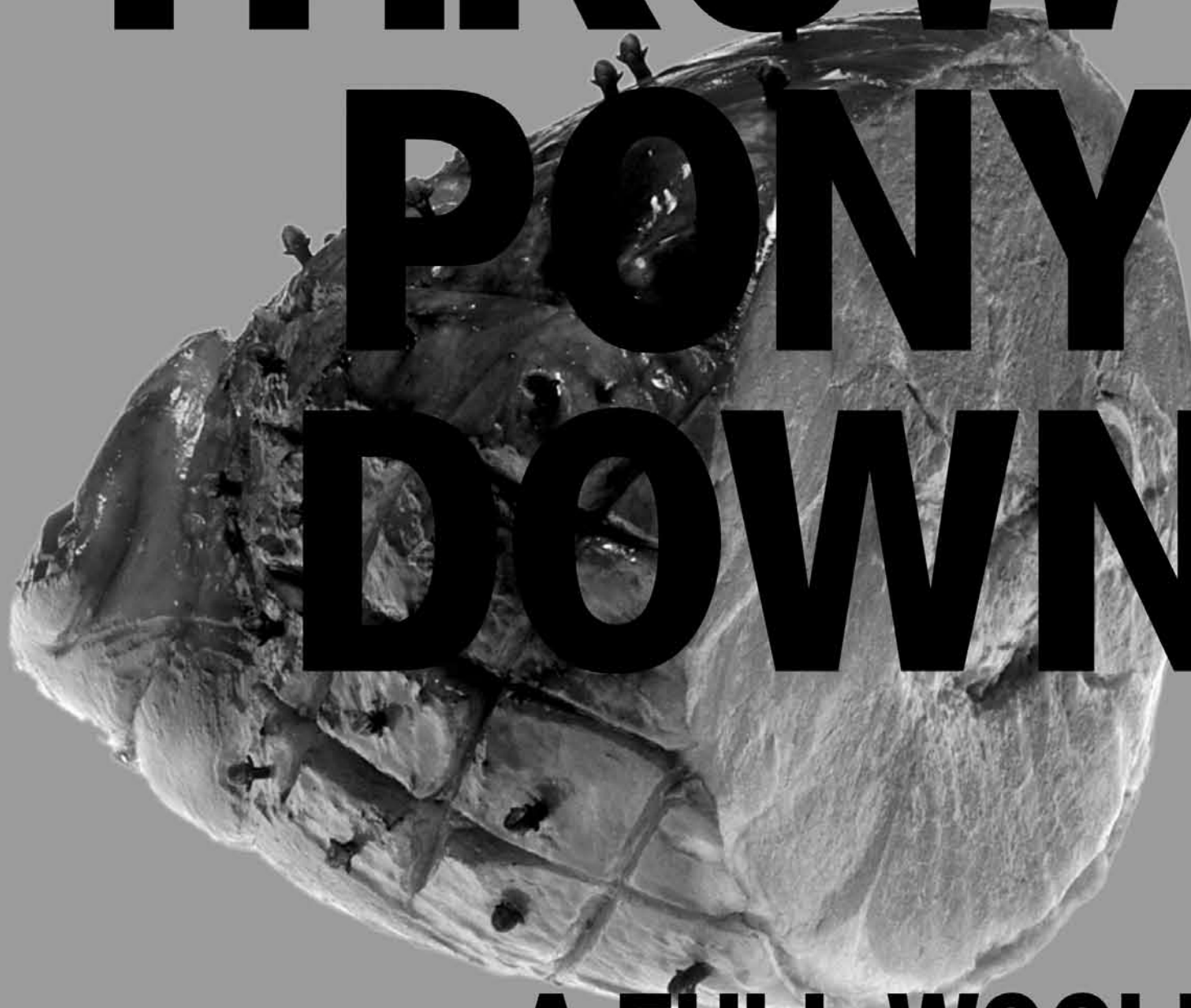
PHONE

OOZES

THROW A

PONY

DOWN



A FULL WOOLEN

SHEET OF

SHORN CROPPED CLIP CLOPS

The Creation of Brainstorms and Other Destructive Aims

Cubism aims to destroy by designed disorder.

Futurism aims to destroy by the machine myth....

Dadaism aims to destroy by ridicule.

Expressionism aims to destroy by aping the primitive and insane....

Abstractionism aims to destroy by the creation of brainstorm.

Surrealism aims to destroy by denial of reason....

-George A. Dondero From a speech given in the United States House of Representatives, 16 August 1949. Published in Congressional Record, First Session, 81st Congress, Tuesday, 16 August 1949.

Yevgeniy Fiks' exhibition at Temple gallery, Communist Conspiracy in Art Threatens American Museums, Sept. 8-Nov.9, 2010 centers on the rabidly anti-communist and conspiratorial ravings of the Michigan congressman George A. Dondero, who in the late forties, amidst the hysteria of McCarthyism, publicly likened modern art to 'germ carrying vermin,' claiming that it was 'communist inspired and communist connected.' This foreign disease, Dondero opined, had infected various public institutions and aimed to destroy the very fabric of American culture.

Rather than treat Dondero as a ludicrous abomination, a laughing stalk fit for satire or mockery, as one might expect, Fiks reinvents him as a corrective to the dominant and depoliticized reception of modernism, most notably enshrined at the MoMA. By taking his claims seriously, Fiks approaches the exhibition as a lawyer building a case that legitimates rather than discredits Dondero. The paintings that reproduce 'damning' quotes by Marc Chagal, Stuart Davis, Frida Kahlo, Magritte and Picasso and the drawings that reproduce portraits that Picasso and Fernand Léger did of members of the communist part of France are not supposed to be read aesthetically, but rather considered as evidence. As is didactically rendered in Flag Drawings, the signatures of Max Ernst, Gottlieb, Jacob Lawrence and Jackson Pollock, etc.—and thus the very historical identity of their painterly experiments—are reduced to exhibiting nothing other than a political commitment: an allegiance to the hammer and sickle. By actively repoliticizing these canonical representatives of modernism, Fiks pits himself against the efforts of Alfred H. Barr Jr., the first director of the MoMA who, at the time, had actively sought to depoliticize modernism.

This is particularly evident in Stalin's Directive on Modern Art, 2010: a vitrine that presents

a photographic history of the ties that figures such as John Heartfield, André Breton, Marc Chagal, Paul Eluard, and Picasso had either to the Russian avant-garde or the communist party (should communist party be capitalized?). The title alludes to a directive attributed to Joseph Stalin in the early 30s by Eleonor Jewett in the article Modern Art as a Tool of Propaganda published in the Chicago Tribune in 1955. The directive reads: 'create confusion in art and literature, promote the juvenile, the primitive, and the insane, and to further the perverted and the aberrant.' Fearing the consequences of such a directive and suspicious of its apocryphal status (considering Stalin's official endorsement of Socialist Realism), Alfred Barr set about to disprove the historical veracity of the attribution and thereby neutralize any relation between modernism's formal radicality and the political radicality of Marxism. By reaffirming the highly dubious truth of this directive, Fiks

perverts Alfred Barr's reactionary strategy that serves to conceal these artists' political commitments, exposing how institutions such as the MoMA continue to actively repress this history through their commitments to a formalist interpretation of modernism. We are thus invited to consider more than a serendipitous historical connection between Tour of the MoMA with Congressman Dondero and the modified catalogue, Communist MoMA highlights. The formal history that such a catalogue constructs retains the imprint of Dondero's reactionary ideology, subtly and not so subtly serving to distort the historical record. By exposing the truth of Dondero's paranoia, he touches upon the mechanisms through which repression is historically accomplished.

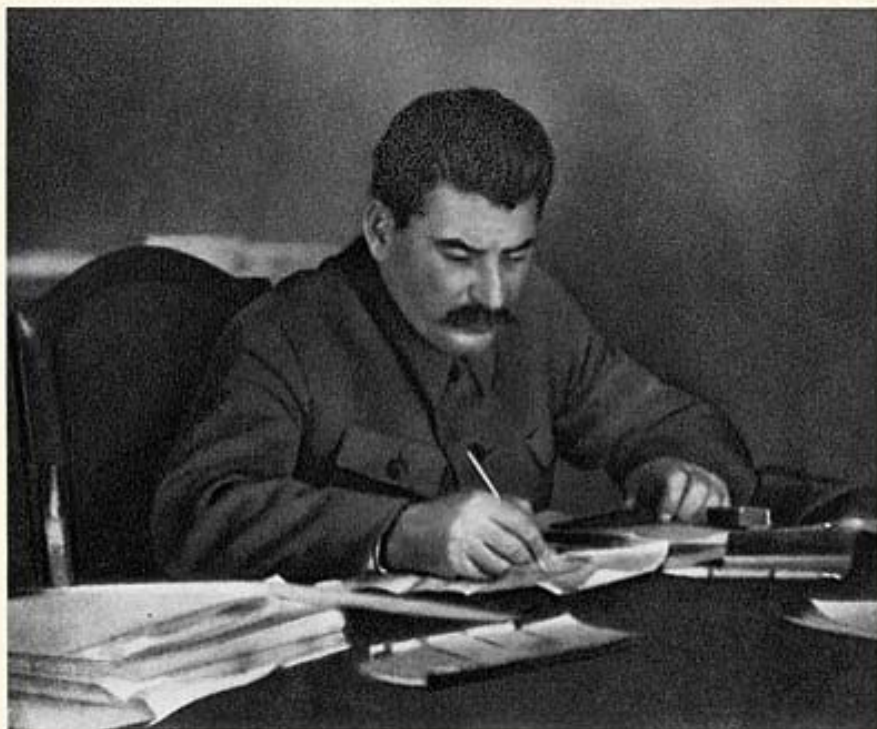
However, there is a sense in which Fiks' identification with Dondero does not go far enough. For although he accepts Dondero's conspiratorial hypothesis—the collusion between modernism and emancipatory politics—the exhibition strips Dondero's argument of its hyperbole and bombast, and its reliance on metaphors of degeneracy. Fiks chooses to adopt the non-aesthetic 'aesthetic' of the document, and thus the style of 'conceptual art.' He thereby distances Dondero's rhetoric from all of the fascist tropes that thoroughly saturated his discourse. He separates Dondero's hypothesis from the form of its presentation and thereby emphasizes the biographical and personal commitment that these artists had to communist ideology. This is an interest that one also finds in his paintings of members of the American Cold War Veterans Association or American communists in Moscow. As a result, he risks reproducing the very thing that he sought to resist; like Barr, he effectively separates the political commitment of these artists from their aesthetic commitments.

However, for Dondero, the destructive dimension of the various 'isms' of Modernism (and thus its nefarious political commitments) could not be separated from their form. Fiks thus risks missing the crux of Dondero's paranoia that consists in linking the formal destructiveness of the modernist artistic gesture to a destruction of bourgeois culture itself.

In reply to a letter by Charles Plant excoriating President Eisenhower for attending an event celebrating MoMA's 25th anniversary, Dondero writes, "Modern art is a term that is nauseating to me. We are in complete accord in our thinking regarding this subject and its connection with communism. No one is attempting to stifle self expression, but we are attempting to protect and preserve legitimate art as we have always known it in the United States."

The truth of Dondero's paranoia does not consist in a "real" connection between modernism and historical communism, but in the fact that the negativity of modernism (its aim to destroy) reveals the effective absence of a legitimate American art. This is precisely the Real that induces Dondero's nausea.

-Alexi Kukuljevic



The Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY

No Soul For Sale: 2 Articles, both alike in dignity

In May of 2010 the Tate Modern staged No Soul For Sale, billed as a 'Festival of Independents' that was 'neither a fair or an exhibition, [but] a convention of individuals and groups who devote their energies to art they believe in, beyond the limits of the market and other logistical constraints'(1). NSFS brought 70 artist collectives to Turbine Hall who exhibited alongside one another without partitions or walls. The organization of the non-fair was purportedly modeled after the set of Lars von Trier's film Dogville(2), meaning that the non-exhibition space for each invited party was marked out on the floor. The quasi-convention was the second manifestation of NSFS--the first was hosted by X Initiative at the former Dia Art Foundation headquarters in Chelsea, New York in June of 2009.

The Tate Modern offered the invited organizations, collectives and etc (what are etc?) absolutely no compensation for setting up shop in Turbine Hall--but neither were the galleries charged to be apart of the proceedings. Though many spaces accepted the Tate's invitation as a great opportunity, at least one group of anonymous British artists and arts professionals called "Making a Living" issued an open letter that stated "The title No Soul For Sale re-enforces deeply reductive stereotypes about the artist and art production. With its romantic connotations of the soulful artist, who makes art from inner necessity without thought of recompense, No Soul For Sale implies that as artists we should expect to work for free and that it is acceptable to forgo the right to be paid for our labour." Read the entire letter online at <http://halfletterpress.tumblr.com/post/598525511/tate>.

This small protest was of course accepted by curator Cecilia Alemani as a welcomed institutional critique (3), but perhaps mostly forgotten about in the nearly six months since NSFS took place. The issues raised by NSFS have a larger, (larger than what?) art-world relevance and pitch an interesting conversation about the value equated to DIY arts establishments and what those stakes (which stakes?) might mean to the creative economy. In order to explore these issues I have written two articles.



This article takes a pro stance, arguing that artists do make art from an inner necessity without thought of recompense, that money may cause more problems for artistic happenings (what is meant by the word happenings?) than it solves, and that the experience gifted by the Tate to the galleries involved in NSFS was a priceless piece of PR that will grant each of these spaces a better chance at a successful future.

The opposite argument has been published online on the artblog. Please read it on the web at <http://theartblog.org/>.

Money can't buy me love

The facts are irrefutable that artists--maybe not all artists--but artists, do create art "from an inner necessity without thought of recompense." The streets are decorated with numerous artworks that persons risked legal repercussions to showcase anonymously. Artists create entire bodies of work to showcase at non-commercial venues where they have little chance of selling anything. Artists create work that they know has very little chance of being sold. Artists regularly band together to create collective studios or gallery spaces in shifty warehouses and often use their own money to pay the rent at such spaces. Some spaces like these, termed independent or alternative or DIY (or some similar ordering of words), constitute artists who work together as a pro bono publico staff creating gallery exhibitions that rival those put on by major institutions. Most of these "alternative" spaces only wish to display excellent, groundbreaking art--which in many cases is similar to the mission of any incarnation of contemporary art museum. That artists would think it necessary to form their own contemporary art center without

the monetary backing to do so, might be the major form of critic that these spaces offer. (I don't understand- the major form of critic? Critic of who exactly?)

The organizers of No Soul for Sale pegged the majority of independent spaces working today exactly right. The majority of alternative/DIY spaces today have not been formed under like-minded political agendas, instead they have been formed simply for love of creating art and maintaining a community of artists. These spaces have started without thought to whether the economy will be able to sustain them and they have started with the thought that there should be more places to display work and more artists creating work. There are more people creating art than any economy could sustain. There is not enough money for everyone to be paid and so a choice must be made. Art is seen as work worth doing, even if there is no monetary compensation possible.

It is enlightening to take a look at what the US Department of Labor has to say on the subject of Fine Artists:

"Fine artists typically display their work in museums, commercial art galleries, corporate collections, and private homes. Some of their artwork may be commissioned (done on request from clients), but most is sold by the artist or through private art galleries or dealers. The gallery and the artist predetermine how much each will earn from the sale. Only the most successful fine artists are able to support themselves solely through the sale of their works. Most fine artists have at least one other job to support their art careers. Some work in museums or art galleries as fine-arts directors or as curators, planning and setting up art exhibits. A few artists work as art critics for newspapers or magazines or as consultants to foundations or institutional collectors. Other artists teach art classes or conduct workshops in schools or in their own studios. Some artists also hold full-time or part-time jobs unrelated to art and pursue fine art as a hobby or second career."(4)

We later find this under "Job Prospects" on the same website:

"Competition for jobs as artists and related workers will be keen because there are more qualified candidates than available jobs." and also this "Only the most successful craft and fine artists receive major commissions for their work. Competition among artists for the privilege of being shown in galleries is expected to remain intense, as will competition for grants from sponsors such as private foundations, State and local arts councils, and the National Endowment for the Arts. Because of their reliance on grants,

and because the demand for artwork is dependent on consumers having disposable income, many of these artists will find that their income fluctuates with the overall economy."(5)

A regular model of artist today (unsuccessful or quasi-successful in terms of money), might be someone who would express the fact that they are doing what they love, that they continue making art because it adds some important meaning to life, and that they believe artwork holds a value to its audience. They may issue the statement "I make what I want to make. If the money comes, great--but if it doesn't, that's fine too." This person is aware that they need money to live and so they make a modest income by other means. Most artists are aware of the fact that the odds of being very successful monetarily are against them, and yet they continue to create.

The great majority of artists, art administrators and curators are very idealistic and romantic people who try to hide that under a shallow veneer of cynicism (where is this statement coming from?). In this light, it is hard to believe that the organizers of No Soul for Sale acted with the impulse to use or mistreat anyone invited to exhibit in No Soul for Sale; the question is only whether they did so accidentally. The Tate acted in a way familiar to the art world: they offered compensation that wasn't monetary (networking, acknowledgement, visibility) for a service they did not charge for (a space in Turbine Hall and thousands of viewers). Seventy organizations accepted the invitation irrespective or regardless of the cost of getting themselves to London.

Money can cause more problems than it solves

The following is an excerpt from a conversation with Andrew Suggs of Vox Populi concerning that organization's (which organization?) participation in NSFS:

Andrew Suggs: "I think it would be great if they could pay the spaces but that would probably come with a whole host of problems too. I mean what would that mean--corporate sponsorship?"

Annette Monnier: "Would you not participate if there was corporate sponsorship?"

AS: "It would have given me more pause."*

*It is important to note that this is an excerpt from a half hour conversation in which Andrew expressed various views, both positive and negative, about the NSFS experience.

Money has to come from someone with money, in the case of The Tate Modern some of that money comes from BP(6) whom we are all recently very mad at. It is funny that while writing an article concerning the benefits of working for free I should think of the adage "There is no free lunch", but it seems fitting, only in this case the money would be the lunch. There is always a cost when you take payment from someone.

It is uncertain whether The Tate could have paid everyone to participate in NSFS, it seems certain that the event would have been smaller and more regulated if money had been issued for services. There is the possibility that the only reason NSFS did take place is because it was seen as programming that would be exciting and issue press coverage while costing very little. Without money NSFS could be the type of event that was allowed to be noisy and chaotic and democratic.

Just like the Master Card Commercials

No conference I have heard of (if we can be allowed to think of NSFS as being more like a conference of independents than an art exhibition) has ever allowed spaces to have a table for free and The Tate may have gotten just as many fine participants by charging for space.

It is easy to argue that what each gallery invited to participate in No Soul for Sale got for the price of an airline ticket and hotel room was a priceless piece of recognition and PR. Each Independent invited to the "Festival of Independents" has been set apart from its peers and been gifted a valuable line item on their resume. The Tate provided a space and an invitation, all these galleries had to do was come and be. Valuable networking between participants took place, the Tate created a website just for No Soul for Sale that bios each organization (www.nosoulsale.com), and a discussion forum (little used) was even put to task in the attempt to solve and inconclusive findings about just what being a part of NSFS meant (<http://www.nosoulsale.com/forum/>).

The only thing a participant in NSFS didn't get was money, but they now have some better tools with which to apply to other people for it.

-Annette Monnier

Referenced in this text:

1. Tate Modern web press: <http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/eventeducation/musicperform/21839.htm>
2. "Restoring the 'Eek' to Eking Out a Living" written by Holland Cotter and published in the New York Times on June 24, 2009: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/25/arts/design/25soul.html>
3. Artnet news May 20, 2010: <http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/news/artnetnews/making-a-living-no-soul-for-sale5-20-10.asp>
4. Artists and Related Workers, "Nature of the Work" section from the US Department of Labor Statistics: <http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos092.htm#nature>
5. Artists and Related Workers, "Job Outlook" section from the US Department of Labor Statistics: <http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos092.htm#nature>
6. "Celebrate the Tate Modern and BP sponsorship with oil and dead fish" posted on Art Threat by Leslie Dreyer: http://artthreat.net/2010/05/tate_bp_intervention/

This article would not have been possible without valuable conversations with Andrew Suggs, Nike Desis, Josh Kerner and Angela Jeradi--all of whom were participants in No Soul for Sale.

A Rose By Any Other Name

While Juliet's rose may have smelled as sweet by any other name, the Nature Theater of Oklahoma's recent production at the Philadelphia Live Arts festival, *Romeo and Juliet*, retains the name of the Bard's classic but offers something completely different. This has led to some confusion. When an opening night in Paris attracted an audience expecting this New York based troupe's take on the original, some unlucky theatergoers left promptly – one imagines them in a huff – without being rewarded with a single “Where art thou.” I call these stalwart crusaders for the canon unlucky because the strange new flower here in bloom, though not a rose, smells just as sweet.

This is not to say that it smells the same. In place of Shakespeare's tragic tale of forbidden love, directors Pavol Liska and Kelly Copper give us a comic meditation on love, eroticism and memory in our age. The considerable and at times hysterical laughs derive both from the concept of the piece and from the appropriately hyperbolic acting of Anne Gridley, Robert Johanson, and Elisabeth Conner (as the dancing chicken). But one cannot classify this production strictly as Shakespearian parody, and the almost overwhelming funniness eventually yields to a tonal shift in the direction of ... well, what, really? At the end, the production is decisively no longer a comedy, but it is not yet a tragedy. As it is revealed here, our age calls to mind Hölderlin's assessment that “the tragic for us is that we are silently packed up in a container and taken away from the realm of the living, not that consumed by flames, we pay the penalty to the flames we could not tame.” Here the untamable fire of forbidden love gives way to the disquieting quiet of the silent containers in which we pack ourselves up.

In the discussion following the production I attended, Copper recounted the way she and Liska developed the concept and the language of *Romeo and Juliet*. In the nascent stage, the idea was to develop the language of the piece – its closest approximation to a script – by recording telephone conversations with a set of favorite interlocutors. Those on the other end of the line were to respond to the simple question, “What is love?” So many of the respondents answered this deceptively simple question by referring to Shakespeare's star-crossed lovers, however, that Liska and Copper decided to revise the guiding question. Now, the recorded conversations would capture people's attempts to recall, to recount, to remember the original of which the resulting play would be only nominally a copy. And the result refers to the original according to the logic of the childhood game ‘telephone’: lapses in memory produce creative distortions and creative interpolations that reveal much more about us than they reveal about what went on back then in ... was it Verona?

Indeed, the lapses in memory provide much of the comic and critical substance, and are acknowledged with a telling regularity in the on-stage monologues that recapitulate and interpret the recorded responses. One respondent, played with a manic but earnest wit by Gridley, wilts at the prospect of trying to recall anything of *Romeo and Juliet*, saying that her memory has been erased and replaced by some mental version of TV snow. The generalized

cultural amnesia must in some sense be cause for concern, but it is also cause to reflect on what, exactly, we did with cultural objects when our memories were not so saturated with internet-era white noise. Another of Gridley's character's, as if offering an excuse for allowing her cultural memory to go slack, remarks that nobody goes to cocktail parties anymore and wonders where people do go nowadays to show they are smart: “Do they talk about Hamlet in chatrooms?” Rejecting the highbrow cocktail party and the highbrow chatroom alike, a character played by Johanson strays far afield from Shakespeare toward talk of Anna Nicole Smith, 9/11, and Osama bin Laden. Although Johanson's presentation captures the floundering incoherence of someone trying to get his bearings in unfamiliar terrain, in the end we learn that the departure of these ramblings from any pretense to cultural knowledge is precisely the point. We talk about things like *Romeo and Juliet*, this fellow argues, for the same reason that we talk about pop-cultural nonsense or the daily headlines: we need something to talk about.

We certainly do need something to talk about, something to give shape to the world we share in common, and the literary canon may have once served this role. But this production refuses the false distinction between an antiquarian nostalgia for the canon, on the one hand, and media saturated oblivion, on the other. Rather, in staging the constitutive lapses in cultural memory, this *Romeo and Juliet* engages with and in some sense retrieves the canonical one while transforming it for comic and critical effect. Part of the critical force certainly lies in the performance of our cultural and historical amnesia, but the void thereby opened up must be filled in with something, and the respondents are by no means taciturn. After all, we need something to talk about.

What do we talk about when we've lost our bearings in the world and its manifold histories and heritages? In this case, sex. In the various attempts to retell the story of *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare's subtle and uncertain allusions to sex are exploded with a striking consistency; the implicit is explicated, the unsaid said. Romeo's brooding is taken as a euphemistic cover for his “jerking off,” Romeo has a “raging hard-on,” to Romeo's man-whorishness one character counterpoises Juliet's sluttishness. And, of course, “they do it,” as more than one character seems to need to affirm. All of this is very funny, but for me it also provoked a moment of self-reflection as I noticed how often I do the same thing with texts. Just as the fire of *Romeo and Juliet*'s love is forbidden, there is also a kind poetic taboo in Shakespeare's text that allows for innuendo while barring explicit talk of sex from rising too far to the surface, and this makes *Romeo and Juliet*'s professions of love all the more enthralling. We, however, seem to be unwilling or unable to let the unsaid remain unsaid, and this seems symptomatic of the fact that we are no longer consumed by flames.

The tone shifts in what we might call the second act, as Gridley and Johanson join each other on stage for the first time in the performance. Whereas the primarily comedic first act takes place in monologue, the more dialogical second act becomes subdued and reflective as the characters talk about sex



and love and, paradoxically, the narcissism of thespian ambition. Whereas the comedic monologues evinced a certain obsession with conflating love and sex, or with reducing the former to the latter, the argument advanced in dialogue attempts to separate the two; the actor can let sex be nothing more than what it is as long as she or he can count on being loved by the audience. The ambivalence and uncertainty with which Gridley and Johanson profess their desire to be loved by their audience, however, marks a wavering threshold between an explanation of artistic ambition and a justification of the loneliness its achievement entails. Because the fires of forbidden love do not consume us, we can pack ourselves up in the containers of our own projects and thereby take ourselves away from the realm of the living. The age revealed here is one that forbids almost nothing, in which the sky portends nothing and lovers are not star-crossed but are merely stars, endlessly circling one another without really touching.

The uneasy disquiet of the second act yields, in a postscript, to meditative quiet as the lights are extinguished and Gridley and Johanson perform the canonical-to-the-point-of-cliché balcony scene in the dark. The intentional over-pronunciation and mispronunciation that characterizes the first two acts (in which ‘poison’ sounds like ‘posion’ and the accent falls with a thud on the second syllable of ‘balcony’) gives way to plainspoken verse, and the previous comic hyperbole disappears. One is tempted to see this as a nostalgic return. Whereas those responding to the question “What is love?” could only do so by turning to Shakespeare and those turning to Shakespeare could only do so in the mode of creative forgetfulness, the performance ends by giving the Bard the last word. Just as the first two acts creatively distort this canonical text to produce a genuinely contemporary work, however, the return at the end to a straightforward presentation of Shakespeare's poetry gives new life to words so often forgotten. In the hands of the Nature Theater of Oklahoma this epilogue does not imply a return to the fires of forbidden love and to the penalty they must exact for lack of payment. Such a return would be obscene in our age, as reactionary voices are raised with increasing ferocity to divide licit from illicit love and to thereby determine which lovers may be sacrificed. Here, instead, we hear in these words so often heard and so often forgotten a profession of love beyond the petty but nonetheless draconian contingencies conspiring to make love forbidden. Beyond tragic sacrifice as well as isolated indifference, we are compelled to step out of our containers, to return to the land of the living, and to let a new kind of fire burn brightly.

-- Jeffrey D. Gower



Machete Interview with Nathalie Heinich

For a Comprehensive Sociology of Artistic Imaginaries



Gabriel Rockhill:

In much of your work, you have sought to denaturalize the social imaginary that undergirds the modern conception of the artist. This social imaginary, which is less than 200 years old, has produced a powerful network of images and associations linking the purportedly

innate, original talent of the 'creative genius' to a bohemian lifestyle in which material poverty is supposed to function as the inverted guarantee of a spiritual legacy. In demonstrating the contingency of these imaginary constructs, your goal is not, however, to discard the imaginary in favor of the real via a positivist form of sociology. On the contrary, you argue that this social imaginary is a powerful force that produces real effects. Why has it been important for you to contextualize and relativize the figure of the modern artist? What role do the imaginary and symbolic representations of artists play in the 'material reality' of artistic production?

Nathalie Heinich: It is true that my work started with the aim of demonstrating the "socially constructed" nature of the notion of art and of the artist, as we say now – but as we did not yet say as I prepared my Ph.D. in 1981 with Pierre Bourdieu on the French academic system and the "constitution of the field of painting" in the 17th century (see my book *Du peintre à l'artiste*, published in 1993). However, this was but a starting point. After a while, I had to break off with this critical point of view, this conception of sociology as having to dismiss the actors' preconceptions, which appears to me now as a kind of prehistorical step in the history of the social sciences. My first book, *The Glory of Van Gogh* (1991 in French, 1996 in English), was the turning point in this evolution, since I understood that the interesting point was not to demonstrate that the history of Van Gogh as a misunderstood painter was but a legend, as I did in the first chapter of the book: the real thing was to understand why such a legend had emerged and proliferated during the 20th century. This radical change in my scope of analysis is what I now call a kind of "comprehensive turn" – as I tried to theorize it in my book *Ce que l'art fait à la sociologie* (1998). In this view, legends, myths, misconceptions, preconceptions do not have to be dismissed (unless they come from social scientists, of course, since they have to search the truth), but to be understood, that is, related to the basic reasons—values, expectations, emotions...—which give them, not their truth, but their coherence, and their meaning in the eyes of the actors. And here you're right: in such a perspective, these conceptions are all the more interesting that they have strong implications and effective consequences. For instance, most artists today act according to the imaginary role of the bohemian artist that developed during the 19th

century; or rather, most people expect artists to match this role, whereas the smartest among contemporary artists play with these expectations, flirting with kitsch, conspicuous wealth and cynical behavior, in the path opened by Andy Warhol one generation ago (just think of Jeff Koons or Damien Hirst, among others). But once again, my role as a sociologist is not to criticize such attitudes, nor the expectations behind them: my role is to describe and investigate their "axiological" background (the set of values which support them), exactly as a grammarian aims to make explicit the basic rules of a language.

Gabriel Rockhill: You have claimed that contemporary art has been marked by a general displacement from the object of art to the subject of creation such that it is the life of the artist that becomes the true work of art. How does this novel status of the contemporary artist relate to the commodification of media personalities in which the lives of stars offstage becomes as important—if not more important—than their lives on stage? How is the cultivation of an artistic persona related to the media personas cultivated by what Adorno and Horkheimer called the culture industry?

Nathalie Heinich: Here we have to be very precise, in order not to confuse distinct issues.

- First: it is not so much contemporary art, but modern art, which emphasizes the very person of the artist. It started with what I call the "singularity realm," which progressively replaced the "community realm" during the 19th century: originality, unicity, personality, individuality, transgressions of conventions, began to be considered a quality and no longer a flaw – the turning point for this new conception having been personified in the case

of Van Gogh. Such an emphasis on the person only keeps on with contemporary art, as we see, for example, in the case of Duchamp, and the tendency to consider the work of an artist mostly according to biographical issues.

- Second: this distinction between modern and contemporary art is essential to understanding what has been at stake during the whole 20th century (whereas the distinction between classic and modern art is relevant for the 19th century, from the Impressionist movement onwards). I developed this in *Le triple jeu de l'art contemporain* and *Pour en finir avec la querelle de l'art contemporain*. Both modern and contemporary art rely on the transgression of previous norms (whereas classic art relies on the reproduction of conventional norms, even if they happened to change slowly from generation to generation). But the norms transgressed by modern art are formal, stylistic norms: that is, the way to depict (or not depict) things in painting or sculpture; whereas the norms transgressed by contemporary art are ontological: that is, what defines art for common sense, what makes the difference between art and non-art (including the expression of the artist's interiority, which is the main requirement in modern art – contrary to classic art). Here again, Duchamp's readymades are the perfect illustration of this specificity of contemporary art.

- Third: things are quite different if you consider visual arts, or literature, or music. And they are still more different if you consider the creative side of art (painting, writing, composing...) or the interpretative side (acting, playing, dancing...). Your question starts with a phenomenon I observed mostly in visual and literary creation (my basic fields of research) and continues with a phenomenon—"media personalities" and "cultural industries"—which mainly deals with actors, musicians, famous

athletes or TV personalities. This last issue—on which I am presently writing my next book—has very little in common with the former issue, except for this emphasis on the individual, the person. And even this phenomenon appears quite different in both worlds: the image is fundamental in celebrity culture, whereas words, stories are more important in traditional "major" arts (among many other differences).

- Fourth: the "Frankfurt School" view of "cultural industries" is exactly what I try to break with: that is, a critical point of view supported by a theoretically ambitious discourse (very poorly grounded in empirical data). My deep antipathy towards these kinds of intellectual positions—which continue to flourish today on all the campuses of the Western world—relies on both political and scientific grounds. Politically, I consider that it is only a "chic," "politically correct" way to reject popular culture for mere elitists reasons. Scientifically, I think that this transgression of Max Weber's "axiological neutrality" is the main obstacle to the development of social sciences.

To be continued in the next issue of Machete

- This interview was conducted in Paris, France in October, 2010.

