Doing something and doing nothing

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Culture is put busily to work these days. In Europe, certainly, culture is made the bearer of promises – the promise of a better quality of life, of a more educated public, of a more efficient and value-added cultural sphere, and, not least, the promise of regenerated economies. These promises are expressed in cultural policy initiatives that have been rolled out across Europe in emulation of the initiatives of the British Department for Culture, Media and Sport at the turn of the millennium, when culture was lauded as an economic and moral salvation.[1]

Cultural policy makes efforts to shape the future through art, or rather through the assumed side effects of exposure to culture, its 'value-added' benefits. The association of art and better living may derive from faintly heard echoes of the historical avant-garde, the New World promoters such as Malevich, Tatlin, Popova, Matiushin and El Lissitzky, who saw art as blueprints for the future. However, by this they did not mean that art boosted confidence under current conditions or imposed a sense of collectivity on a disparate and alienated community. Their blueprints did not even push art to re-present tangible images of a future worth living. Rather, they re-functioned art so that it might institute modes of non-commodified production, frequently collective and collaborative. Future-oriented art tested out transformed social relations of knowing, specifically by enlivening audiences, rattling their existence out of the habitual, appealing to a consciousness that re-apprehends the world and itself as new.

Contemporary cultural policy's vision of the better life is not one that imagines a fundamental newness in the world. Instead culture is deployed as the little bit that makes a difference. What cultural policy wants to be done is the work of social improvement. In Britain it relies on a language of acronyms and jargon: of art parsed through tags such as 'social exclusion' or bodies such as Social Inclusion Partnerships (SIPs), deployed 'as a means of tackling exclusion' by 'mobilizing community stakeholders' and 'identifying target groups'.[2] Bureaucratic structures of 'evaluation' and 'implementation' exist to administer the 'objectives' and 'measure' the 'outcomes and outputs' of funded projects in 'creating a dynamic environment for the arts' and 'improving the quality of life' of 'hard to reach social groups'. Cultural policy mobilizes art as a plus, an ameliorative measure recruited to lighten blighted lives and neutralize zones of anti-social behaviour. Culture is set to promote 'satisfactory intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual existence', and allow 'groups, communities and nations to define their futures in an integrated manner'.[3] This is what cultural policy wants done. What culture actually does is largely more practical. Culture boosts economies and generates wealth, displaying a talent for regeneration, through raising house prices and introducing new business, which is largely service-based.[4] The very future of urban areas in the Europe of today is pinned on the 'regenerative powers' of 'City of Culture' bids, with culture as the magic elixir that bestows new life. Culture is heralded as the universal grease relied upon to make the cogs of business revolve better and the joints of society interconnect more smoothly.

Creative activity is widely re-described as 'cultural industry' (or creative, sunrise or 'future oriented' industry) in the jargon of contemporary 'development' initiatives, and the same discourse is championed at a global level by supra-governmental bodies such as UNESCO. The 'culture industry', about which Adorno wrote scathingly, which in his day was associated with highly capitalized media forms such as film and radio, has been promoted with redoubled force. Cultural industries are any type of creative endeavour that can be measured according to its value-added economic outputs, direct or otherwise, even as they claim to be about a measurable productivity in the spiritual realm of values. As UNESCO puts it: 'Cultural industries add value to contents and generate values for individuals and societies.' The 'intangible' contents of the cultural industries are property, in the normal sense, for they 'are typically protected by copyright'. Some forces may worry that a few large culture providers will dominate these industries. The development of capitalism shows again and again that conglomeration is the very movement of its industry, and use of the term signals acceptance of capitalism's logic. Under

this sentence, culture becomes the ultimate in busy productivity, the most generative in financial and moral ('educative') terms.

Utopia of nothing

Adorno, of course, came at all this from the contrary direction, asserting not what must be done, but what not be done, what be undone or left undone, if hope was to persist within the ruins of a postwar Europe. In relation to the endless outputs of the culture industry Adorno sought an antidote that is a non-effect. 'Transformational praxis', he noted, would consist in inoculating people against the idiocy that every film, TV programme and magazine presupposes.[5] Adorno's Utopia – in which art is inextricably enmeshed – is directed towards undoing. His utopia eschews productivity. Utopia is glimpsed instead, in a sliver of languid experience. Future-dreaming is indolence. *Rien faire comme une bête*, lying on water and looking peacefully at the sky, 'being, nothing else, without any further definition and fulfilment'.[6] What is to be done? Nothing. This is to take the energies of negation seriously. We do not know who we are, or what we want. Or we know only negatively:

> We may not know what the human is or what the correct shape of human things is, but what it is not and what form of human things is wrong, that we do know, and only in this specific and concrete knowledge is something else, something positive, open to us.[7]

Adorno's utopia is a place for indolence, non-productivity, uselessness. Art likewise is not about ceaseless production, an industrial manufacturing of artefacts, values, by-products, outputs, outcomes and objectives – all necessary for grant applications and monitoring reports. 'It is not the office of art to spotlight alternatives.'[8] Art cannot tell us 'what is to be done'. Our imaginations are stunted by the very alienation and social deformation that make art possible – if perpetually inadequate – in class society.

Under this sentence, art refuses to provide ameliorating solutions, but rather exposes the contradictions and woundings, the split in our generic-being (*Gattungswesen*) occasioned by the division of labour. It is this split that accompanies the unequal allocation of cultural access and benefit. If art does ever signal Utopia, then it does so only perversely. Art's forms resist smooth functioning and hold open only a promise of an activity that is non-reified. Art is something (an exposure) resonating in relation to nothing (social negativity).

Into life

In 1967 the situationist group at Strasbourg University began the pamphlet *On the Poverty of Student Life* with the following line: 'It is pretty safe to say that the student is the most universally despised creature in France, apart from the policeman and the priest.'[9] This hatred has not abated, though it may be more specifically focused today on the 'art student' who does nothing, enjoying for several funded years an idle period of play and experiment. And worse, the art student is in training to become something to be all the more envied – idle *and* possibly wealthy – an artist. The character Henry Carr, British consul in Tom Stoppard's *Travesties* (1975), voices a widespread resentment, speaking to the dadaist Tristan Tzara:

> When I was at school, on certain afternoons we all had to do what was called Labour – weeding, sweeping, sawing logs for the boiler-room, that kind of thing; but if you had a chit from Matron you were let off to spend the afternoon messing about in the Art Room. Labour or Art. And you've got a chit for life? (passionately) Where did you get it? What is an artist? For every thousand people there's nine hundred doing the work, ninety doing well, nine doing good, and one lucky bastard who's the artist.

For the sceptic, art education consists in learning to conjure up rubbish that any child or psychotic could have thrown together.

These sentiments came to voice recently on early evening television in the UK in Endemol's celebrity-reality series *Art School*. Week after week minor celebrities went through the motions of a contemporary art-school training, with its emphasis not on life drawing, but rather on formalist tricks to rattle and rejuvenate perception: using blindfolds, left-hand drawing, chance and error, loosely grasped techniques for experimentation. What was unleashed in the wannabe artists was gruesome – anger, miscomprehension, hatred, arrogance, pity and embarrassing sentiment in the name of self-exploration. Radio presenter John Humphrys thundered with rage as he failed to 'learn something' and uttered the phrase of choice for today's anti-artists: contemporary art is a case of 'the emperor's new clothes'. And the talking heads of celebrity hobby-artists such as Anneka Rice or Vic Reeves reassured us that art critics and art tutors were all frauds: art is nothing but a mode of relaxation for the artists and a tool for generating pleasure in viewers. Any other claims are pretension. Art is a delight for the eye, produced by safely dead people from long ago, before the avant-garde arrived on the scene, or it is a hobby for the living and there is nothing to say

about it but banalities. Art means nothing today. To this end of meaning nothing, it must – as its something – be representational. The programme did what most programmes on art do. It made those who talk about art look pretentious. For there is no popular language of modern art criticism, except for the line: 'I could have done that.' This seeming self-assertion masks a fundamental alienation: in the desire to witness a reified form of skill, the viewer longs to have his or her own abilities and potentialities negated.

Alienation sets in specifically and crucially in relation to contemporary art. Contemporary audiences – that is mass-mediated contemporary observers – are recipients of the contradictions of contemporary culture, which continues to be a divided culture sustained by social division. People learn to love their separation, their specific identities that compete with other identities. There is a widespread appeal nowadays to specific identities (ethnic, religious, sexual) as cultures that are cherished for their differences and separation. Art production needs to be faced as one part of a totality – held up as separate because its separateness is part of that totality, which needs art to present its values as eternal. A critical approach acknowledges artistic autonomy, and yet also perceives art as slashed by, negatively formed by, or located in relation to social division.

What is to be done? If something, rather than nothing, then let it at least be worthwhile, which is to say truly *bouleversing*. The reification of human activity into the separate realms of work and play, of aesthetics and politics, must yet be overcome. The aesthetic has to be rescued from the ghetto of art and set at the centre of life. Such slogans common to the avant-garde of old have not lost their pertinence, because efforts for the better life have never yet been socially instituted. While Adorno may be right that art is a special type of labour, which reveals the critical pressure points of the system, in so far as it is industrialized as 'culture', it has become effectively like all other labour: alienated and boring. This is where we should start: with the conditions of labour wherever they occur. This means asking why cultural policies of 'social inclusion' are deemed necessary in the first place, and why class society both needs and doesn't need creativity.

Undoing and redoing

Walter Benjamin's closing statements to his 'Artwork' essay, on 'the aestheticization of politics' and the 'politicization of art', continue to reverberate in the present. We live in a world of mediated political spectacle that enforces passivity and knee-jerk reactions. Politics is a show that we are compelled to watch and where the 'sides' on offer are simply divisions within the same. Benjamin's phrase indicates that beyond the aestheticization of political systems, figures and events is a more fundamental aestheticization (or alienation): the aestheticization of human practice. This amounts to an alienation from our generic-being, to the extent that we accept and enjoy viewing our own destruction. Benjamin discussed the issue of art's politicization in the context of human annihilation: war becomes the ultimate artistic event, because it satisfies the new needs of the human sensorium, which have been remoulded technologically. This was the completion of *l'art pour l'art*, or aestheticism, as seen in 1936, which means that everything is an aesthetic experience now, even war. Humanity watches a techno-display of ever greater 'shock and awe' proportions, which amounts to its own torture.

It might appear on the surface as if, in response, the politicization of art has indeed been adopted in a widespread manner within the 'artistic community'. Exhibitions frequently draw attention to 'political' questions of poverty, gender, ethnicity, globalization and war. Art fairs, biennials, triennials, quintennials (such as *Documenta*) and cities of culture present themselves formally – as well, frequently, in their contents – as global enablers, reinvigorated new public spaces of enfranchisement and change. But this is not the victory of the Benjaminian idea of art's politicization. In fact, it is a further symptom of the aestheticization of politics. For what is produced by the real politicization of art is not that to which we have become accustomed in galleries – politically correct art that largely satisfies itself with and within the gallery and grant system, competing within the terms of the creative and cultural industries. The new art fair as global public space indicates how the forum of internationalist exchange (manifest in the First–Third Internationals) has reverted to that from which it took its model, or constituted its capitalist mirror-image: the world exhibition or trade fair. It is equally lathered in a good dose of boostering, even as the feel-good rhetoric reminds us to feel bad. Its globally exported format and critical discourses parallel the global mobility of capital and its economic ideology alike.

Cultural policy insists on the busy activity of generating values from culture, with ranks of artists, educators, arts managers and gallerists constantly 'doing something' with target groups. While Adorno indicated that 'doing nothing' was the sign of utopia achieved, a Benjaminian perspective might contend

that there is something to be done and something to be undone. Alienation is to be undone through the passing of the 'curative' technological aesthetics of reproducible art before the 'politically educated gaze'.[10] This represents an undoing of culture's traditional forms. The something to be done involves a correspondingly new type of activity, and not one to be directed and monitored from without. The real politicization of art means a thorough rejection of systems of display, production and consumption, monitoring and inclusion as well as elitism and exclusion, as art disperses into everyday practice and becomes political – that is, democratically available to all as practice and matter for critique. For Benjamin genuine politics – the rational management of technologies, the democratic incorporation of the users of those technologies, revelations about the property-stakes that drive the system – requires self-activity: authors as producers, audiences as critics, as he put it.[11] Likewise the art that a new 'communism' politicizes is not art as known and inherited (and reified for consumption), but rather, again, an opportunity for self-activity and self-constitution.

Notes

1. Two places where European cultural policy is fervently debated are the European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies (http://eipcp.net/) and the Scottish journal *Variant* (www.variant.randomstate.org/).
2. For just one example, see www.culturalpolicy.arts.gla.ac.uk/Research%20documents/SIP_toolkit_01.pdf.
3. See UNESCO website.
4. See Chris Smith's contribution to *Tate Modern: The First Five Years* (2005) online at http://tate.org.uk/modern/tm_5yearspublication.pdf. Chris Smith was the first British Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport in 1997.
5. Theodor W. Adorno, 'Individuum und Organization' [1953], *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. VIII, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1986, p. 456.
6. Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott, New Left Books, London, 1974, p. 156.
7. Adorno, 'Individuum und Organization', p. 456.
8. T.W. Adorno, 'Commitment', in E.Bloch et al., *Aesthetics and Politics*, New Left Books, London, 1977, p. 180.
9. Widely available on the web, e.g. http://library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/en/display/4.
10. See Walter Benjamin, *One Way Street and Other Writings*, New Left Books, London, 1979, p. 251.
11. See 'The Author as Producer' (1934) in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, Part 1, *1927–1930*, Belknap/Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 2005.