

**STEPHEN SHUKAITIS (2015) *THE  
COMPOSITION OF MOVEMENTS TO COME:  
AESTHETICS AND CULTURAL LABOUR AFTER  
THE AVANT-GARDE. LONDON: ROWMAN AND  
LITTLEFIELD. ISBN 9781783481729.***

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It has become a cliché of contemporary art to say that it is ‘political’. At the Venice Biennale in 2015, the endless pavilions, halls and occupied churches were full of work which alluded to the suffering, silence and displacement of women, transpeople, non-whites, refugees, migrants, the working class. The theme was *All the Worlds Futures*, and it was introduced with the omnipresent quote from Walter Benjamin about Klee’s angel of history and featured a live reading of all four volumes of *Capital* over the seven months that the exhibition was open. The curator, Okwui Enwezor, summarised his understanding of the (art) world like this:

The ruptures that surround and abound around every corner of the global landscape today recall the evanescent debris of previous catastrophes piled at the feet of the angel of history in *Angelus Novus*. How can the current disquiet of our time be properly grasped, made comprehensible, examined, and articulated? Over the course of the last two centuries the radical changes – from industrial to post-industrial modernity; technological to digital modernity; mass migration to mass mobility, environmental disasters and genocidal conflicts, chaos and promise – have made fascinating subject matter for artists, writers, filmmakers, performers, composers, musicians, etc. (2015: n.p.)

Fascinating subject matter indeed, and even if the art at the Biennale didn’t directly represent such matters, there was a persistent concern to write it up as if it were. The visitors were continually told that exhibits were opening up things that had been previously closed, drawing attention to new possibilities and connections, to re-telling the past or expanding the future. From images of caged and ditch-

digging convicts in Louisiana, to African refugees, denied residency, singing a stanza from the German national anthem in their own languages. Or a desk where the visitor signs a personal declaration - "I will always be too expensive to buy", or "I, the undersigned, hereby certify that I will always mean what I say." The declarations will be stored in the Adrian Piper Research Archive in Berlin for a century. Piper won the Golden Lion for best artist at the biennale. Art is politics by other means.

It's just not enough, in such circles, to just claim that something is beautiful, or that it was hard to make, or took a long time to make, or is made from rare materials. All those things might be the case, but are not enough in themselves to justify a claim for something to be contemporary art. And yet such claims are made regardless of the degree of institutionalisation of any particular art practice, with the big shiny galleries claiming the same sorts of political urgency as some edgy intervention by an angry young person on the pavement outside. And there's the paradox, because from the Biennale to MOMA, from the Tate Shop to the art bond, it is clear that art also equals urban development, tax efficient corporate social responsibility and tourist income. Art, in other words, also equals capitalism. The Biennale is a global tourist spectacular that fills the hotels and the restaurants, that brings the cruise ships and the luxury yachts, and provides high profile branding opportunities. Swatch, the Italian energy group ENEL, Japan Tobacco International, the lighting company Artemide, the illy coffee company and others were all main sponsors.

After paying my substantial entry fee, I wandered around the pavilions, with the rest of the global knowledge workers with good clothes and good haircuts. I'd never been before, and was enjoying the usual combination of attraction and disgust that possesses me when I go and 'do art'. Some powerful and beautiful things, some pretentious tosh, and all decorated with a fine dusting of high pitched political justification. And, I am in Venice, one of the spiritual homes of mercantile capitalism, gradually sinking as global capitalism poisons the planet. The contradictions stack up like acrobats, and it seems incredible that a gust from the stinking lagoon won't just topple the whole thing.

Stephen Shukaitis has been writing about an 'aesthetic' approach to politics for a bit now (2009, for example), and really does want to believe that there could be an enduring link between art and the political. His work is an attempt to show that 'imagination' is a form

of thought and action which can be treated as a kind of militant research, a challenge to the assumption that only certain procedures and institutions can produce knowledge (Shukaitis and Graeber 2007). In a trivial way, you could say that he is inheriting a romantic conception of the possibility that art could rupture the world, break the glass and show us something different, but he is too smart to be falling for that sort of heroic individualism, that immanence of the art object. The contradiction we need to begin with is that Shukaitis works in a British Business School, somewhere which most readers of this journal will probably assume to be inhabited by overpaid swivel eyed neo-liberals. I work in a Business School too, and can hence confidently assert that the Business School in the UK is less insane than the US version, but most of it is still trying hard to train the shock troops of neo-liberalism. Nonetheless, there are a fair number of B-School employees who don't share this vision, driven as they were to migrate from shrinking humanities and social science subjects and following the money into buildings with atriums and receptionists (Parker, 2015). Many of these people now do something called 'Critical Management Studies', a kind of well institutionalized fringe within Northern Europe. Now I'm sure that Shukaitis thinks that most of 'Critical Management Studies' isn't really very critical at all, and I would agree with him, but it has provided a home for both us. A home within the belly of the beast.

The point of this is to say that all institutions – even the Big Bad Business School - have gaps, and they are never total. Just as the Business School can harbor autonomist Marxists and queer theorists, so can the 56<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale contain work which might shatter the smug self-righteousness of the nodding people with stylish glasses. The problem, as Shukaitis knows well, is incorporation, recuperation, co-optation. As we have been told many times now, the 'New Spirit of Capitalism' is one that gobbles up opposition and uses it to sell new products, subjectivities and even workplace identities (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). All this will happen of course, but as Shukaitis continues to insist, to begin with the inevitability of defeat is a counsel of despair. He wants to believe in art, and most importantly, in movement.

The book itself is partly a collection of essays published over the last decade, all revolving around the question of what art can do in terms of the composition of the social. Shukaitis begins with an autonomist conception of struggle and not with a structural Marxism of necessary economic relations. That is to say, we cannot know in advance what sorts of subjects, alliances and fractures might

emerge from particular moments because resistance is prior to power. This is not some sort of inexorable dialectic, seesawing its way to history's end, but a war of moves and countermoves, of positions established and then vacated. He is keen on the idea that his is a book of strategy, and even suggests that we could learn from some Business School approaches to enacting strategy. So this book is pitched as an attempt to learn from the strategies of various artists and to construct (as Raoul Vaneigem said of the Surrealists) 'a somewhat serendipitous tracery of theories and practices constituting a kind of map of radical refusal' (xv).

A key term here is the 'avant-garde', a tricky form of self-congratulation, but one that captures some sense of a relentless movement, a refusal to settle, an insistence on making the world now, at this moment, this very moment. This fits nicely with an autonomist's boredom with Marxist greybeards lecturing about structural determination, or ethicists telling us what we should do, or pragmatists deciding in advance that Politics must be about demands. Indeed, avant-gardes have often refused their very status as artists, instead demanding to be seen as workers, or as something else altogether. And for Shukaitis, this something else is a different form of social composition. Avant-garde art can produce an intimation of new forms of social relations. It is not interesting in itself, any more than the artist is interesting in themselves (those are the romantic traps) but in terms of what it can do, what sort of relations it can compose. 'This is what interests me: the generalization of modes of value production and interaction developed from within artistic practice to more general modes of social being' (78).

The substance of the book is a subtle and smart (though very poorly proofread) engagement with the Situationist International, Precarias a la Deriva, *Collectivo Situaciones*, various art strikes and refusals of work, and the *Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK)*, particularly the music and video of Laibach and the art of IRWIN. There is a broadly chronological structure here, and an exposition of the movements in terms of, for example, the Situationists counter-mapping the city through the *dérive*, or Laibach's strategy of overidentification through the use of totalitarian imaginary. His reading of the continuities of these movements is always historical, and always situated in the sense that he insists that no ideas or tactics are inherently radical. The question is what is done with them, when and where and by who. Each moment can be read for its strategies or, in the case of Debord and Becker-Ho's 'Game of War', for its very

musings on the necessity of strategy itself. Because if 'art' and 'politics' are practices that bring new relations into being, then it is never enough just to make something for a gallery, or get elected, because those are sites which are already partly crystallized by the interests of capital. Strategy, in a reversal of the Business School logic, is the attempt to escape capital, not to generate piles of it.

One of the parts of this engagement that fascinated me, and that resonated with the context that both I and Stevphen Shukaitis work in is the idea of institutions which are continually created and destroyed. The avant-garde have always been keen on announcements, shouty proclamations of a new something or other to be led by some new organized tendency – Futurists, Orphists, Vorticists, Constructivists, Suprematists, Productivists, Rayonnists, Stuckists and so endlessly on (Danchev, 2011). But the corollary of this institution building is that, when the names and symbols become appropriated by power, and the cash starts rolling in, then the symbols and structure are sometimes abandoned, left to the litter of history, in order that the movement can continue. As Shukaitis says, we might imagine 'autodestructive organization', based on Jean Tinguely or Gustav Metzger's ideas about art that destroys itself (42). Or, in the case of the NSK State project, an attempt to simultaneously inaugurate and destroy the form of a new state, to make and deny at the same time.

This is a really thought provoking book, and I would recommend it to anyone who wants to think about art in ways that are thoroughly social, and that try very hard indeed to rescue a radical politics from the global institutions of artcapitalism (Thornton, 2008). Shukaitis has a lovely way of being serious about 'the wisdom of the clown, the fool and the mystic' (xi), and cares deeply about the art and artists that he writes about. I want to believe him. My problem is one that is not a necessary difficulty with autonomist thought, but just an assumption that much of it continues to make. It's simple enough to say that we live in a 'social factory', and that we are 'immaterial labourers' engaged in some form of 'cognitive capitalism'. Such claims do make autonomist thought much easier to swallow, because the idea that resistance is prior to power is a more interesting claim for the purposes of action if we work in a gallery, publisher or a Business School. But it seems to me that most capitalist labour is actually material, whether mining the coltan for iPhones or harvesting the shade grown arabica.

Shukaitis does share some of my scepticism here (57), but he still gambles a lot on the idea of a certain kind of social change, and by implication then a certain kind of audience. And of course, it's an audience who would have something invested in the idea of art as a practice which symbolizes a political engagement. So when he quotes Randy Martin saying that 'art makes exchange possible, but is not of it' (82), it is precisely this impossibility of capture which sniffs ever so slightly of the sublime, and its improving properties for the educated classes. 'Art', it seems, is a signifier which is hard to fully socialise, even for people who are absolutely committed to a relational account of a world in movement. The concept seems to demand something other, some residue, some novelty, which allows us to nod wisely and stroke our chins as the sun sets over the lagoon, and the migrant waiters polish plates and wait for the customers. But then, if we are committed to escaping the present, then perhaps we do need words like this, words which gesture at other ways of being together, other ways of making things and composing ourselves. I wonder what other words we could use?

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