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Class Composition & Its Discontents

Interview with Stevphen Shukaitis on Art, Politics, and Strategy

Jens Kastner

Jens Kastner: You are author of a book on autonomy and self-Organization,[1] and you recently organized an exhibition and a book on Gee Vaucher, who's best known as the main visual artist for the anarchist punk-Band Crass.[2] Then we can assume you are also familiar with history and theory of anarchism. In your latest book *The Composition of Movements to Come*,[3] you are re-reading some artistic avant-gardes from an autonomist standpoint. A central notion of this re-reading is "strategy". If I should characterize an anarchist perspective on any subject, I would choose "strategy" as one of the last. It seems contradictory to the anarchist radical moralism of acting here & now. So what does strategy mean for you?

Stevphen Shukaitis: When there is an area of political discussion or a concept that seemingly cannot be discussed it is often useful to start from there, or at the very least to investigate why this is the case. That would seem to be an important way step out of any 'radical moralism' – even if holding on to a sense of ethics at the same time. This particular book started coming out of experiences

of the anti-globalization or global justice movement of the 1990s and early 2000s. In particular it starts from ideas around employing a diversity of tactics, which was quite useful in terms of bringing together quite different often disparate approaches for common protests and projects. But for me that also raised the question of how one would even go about thinking or working through strategic directions for movement organizing.

I'm not so sure that there are not always already discussions of strategy occurring in anarchist and autonomous politics. It's just that they often times don't present themselves that way – in large part because of the negative connotations often associated with strategic thought as being a top down, hierarchical orientation to politics. And that is often the case. But my approach was to look at different ways that avant-garde and experimental arts, including the Situationists, the Art Strike, and Neue Slowenische Kunst function to create collective spaces that functioned as forms of collective strategizing. You might call it exploring strategy by other means, aesthetic in this case.

For example, you're arguing that the practices and ideas of Guy Debord and the Situationist Internationale should not be understood "only as artistic-political interventions, but also as methods of articulating strategies of collective subjectification through these practices" (26). Would that be valid for every avant-garde movement or even for all of these you have investigated?

I would hesitate at arguing that this would be the case for every avant-garde movement or practice. But it would certainly seem the case that avant-garde artistic practice, as it embraces the idea that it is attempting to radically change the nature of art, politics, and

social life in general, would contain some notion of reorienting collective subjectification. The Situationists, for example, claimed that they did not want lead or act in a vanguardist manner but rather to 'organize the detonation,' which for them became finding practices and creating situations in which new social subjects could emerge from and act collectively. Indeed, this might not always be clearly expressed, and remain implicit. And in those cases there is more work needed to tease out what notions and practices of subjectification are contained within. It's like Gee Vaucher says that all art is political, all aesthetics is political – the question is how you draw the line.[4] I would suggest that artistic avant-gardes need to have some approach to where and how that line is drawn. And this will be less readily apparent for movement that are more or perhaps even exclusively contained within the institutional 'art world' – such as was argued by Peter Burger (amongst others) about the so-called 'neo-avant-gardes' of the 1960s.[5] But even there you could find approaches to subjectification, just less explicit and not as developed.

One of your thesis is that the avant-garde "has not died" (72). Does that does mean that all of their strategies could be practiced today in the same way as during the 1960s? There still seems to be an emancipatory potential in art practices. On the other hand you are also stating that the utopian potential of being an artist has collapsed because in contemporary societies it "has been realized perversely in existing forms of diffuse cultural production. 'Everyone is an artist' as a utopian possibility is realized just as 'everyone is a worker'." (72) How would you mediate these positions?

It would be absurd to just fall back on repeating ideas or practices from the avant-garde today hoping that they would have the same

politics or resonance that they did originally. Of course they wouldn't. To the degree that any political or artistic practice can claim to be radical it's only in relationship with the composition of the situation it finds itself in. And that's part of why I'm trying to further expand the autonomist notion of class composition, using the concepts of political and technical composition in a broader sense to analyse social, cultural, and artistic practices. This follows from how Bifo describes this expanded sense of an autonomist Marxist framework as 'compositionism.'[6]

I don't think it's my role to mediate the possibilities of artistic or cultural production. Rather what I tend to do is to observe (and participate in sometimes) practices that are already happen – and then to look at what they produce for those who are involved in them. This is along the lines of what John Clammer has described as developing not just a new sociology of art, but sociology from art.[7] And in that sense the belief in the utopian potential, the liberatory aspect, of being an artist has not collapsed today. You can see that when you talk to people who embark in trying to develop their career or life as an artist, or as a cultural producer more generally, because of the freedom they believe that will bring them. That's a very powerful, and still seductive idea. And perhaps that was never really the case – it was always a form of autonomy that was proclaimed and compromised at the same time. But what does the belief in those potentials of artistic and cultural practice do for those who believe in it? And yes, there are still dynamics of elitism existing within the combined and unevenly developed art worlds out there. But sometimes even when that elitism has been eliminated or reduced the idea of it persists as something to be railed against through railing against it, or making of populist gestures. I'm more interested in teasing out what that psychological and social investment in artistic and cultural practices

does for the people involved in them, more so than developing an abstract analysis of them.

Coming back to the "strategic-compositional reading of the avant-garde" (141). Your point is, in short, only if we are looking in a certain way, we will see certain realities: For example, the rupture of the everyday-life in the history of the avant-gardes instead of their contribution to the art history. But does this sort of investigation not tend to fade out realities that are not suitable? For example, the aspect of reproduction of an elitist circle in which every art *as* art is perceived, or the aspect of artists as role-models for cultural entrepreneurship. What about failure?

There certainly are aspects of failure to consider, and not always in a negative manner. Here I'm thinking of how that was explored in the book *Failure! Experiments in Aesthetic and Social Practices* that the *Journal of Aesthetics & Politics* released a few years ago.[8] Failure is often productive in the sense that it does something for those who are involved in whatever practice is in question, even if they did not attain the stated goals and is not considered successful. If anything I think there is too much of a focus on the failures of the avant-garde. And this fixation on failure is not helpful precisely because of the way it seems to block off looking at what is actually produced for those involved. And that's part of why I would say it can be helpful, and has been helpful, for the framing to have shifted away from the idea of avant-garde practices to experimental practice. Because when you talk about experimental practice it's less a case of being so worried about if the way is being led and more about what is produced.

A few years ago I was talking with Alan W. Moore about an exhibition about art and squatting that has taken place in London. [9] It was a wonderful exhibition and experiment showing all the great things that squatting had made possible by making more space for cultural production. And I asked Alan why refer to it as an exhibition at all – what was the importance of that? His response was that calling it an exhibition allowed for stepping outside of the realm of political calculation or sole focus on success. You might say that's almost putting the Kantian notion of purposeless purpose to a decidedly politically purpose. And I find that quite useful.

The possibility for failure or the possibility of remaining without any effect on social and political life of a society seems absent to me in the writings of many post-Operaist theoreticians. Antonio Negri characterizes art as multitude,[10] Paolo Virno says avant-garde art is "a lot like communism"[11]. What about criteria for success concerning the politics of art?

I probably just backed myself into a rather unpleasant Königsberg alley by mentioning Kant, but I don't think you're going to get anything like universal criteria for success.[12] I'm more interested in taking a more sociological approach and drawing from the criteria that people involved in various forms of artistic and cultural production give themselves, whether explicitly or implicitly. And those will vary widely, from attempting to move and influence people, to propagate ideas, or to further develop practices of expression or deepen meaning. The broad development of success metrics and KPIs can be left to the art bureaucrats – and surely they have for too many. If anything I'd argue for an approach that avoids being taken hostage to notions and criteria of success, whatever they may be. Or at least I'd suggest developing a more

flexible relationship with notions of success and failure as well as remembering that both change the conditions of the possible. And the main question always remains engaging with those conditions.

But not to speak about art all the time: The title of your book refers to the autonomist tradition. The term "composition" there was an analytic tool to investigate the changes which capitalist developments caused in the social and political mixture/ composition of the working class. The notion then also worked as normative bracket to identify certain processes, compositional processes of a struggling, self-organizing working class. In my view, the problem in this tradition of using the term – from Mario Tronti to John Holloway – is that the really important questions could not be asked. The answer is always already there: The working class is struggling for liberation. But what, if the people are not struggling, or struggling for the wrong reasons and dubious goals? With Pierre Bourdieu, I would agree that social analysis has to be focussed on struggles. But the results of these struggles should always considered open. Otherwise, you could not explain why so many working class members are voting for ultra-right wing parties. Do you think there is a usable – maybe strategical – anarchist/ autonomist approach to explain right wing populism?

Honestly I'm not the best person to ask about populism, right wing or otherwise. But my basic inclination in how to approach that question would be to look at ways that the desires and aspirations expressed in congealed into those kinds of politics are the frustrations and thwarted demands that were either abandoned by the Left, or that were stolen from it. So you can look at the way that someone like Trump addresses himself to those who feel

abandoned and screwed over the neoliberal trade deals, or the way that the Brexit campaign resonated with those who very much felt that they left out of the benefits of neoliberal globalization. And you combine that truncated sense of class consciousness with a convenient scapegoat, whether in terms of racialized politics, or through heightened fears around migration and refugees. That's my first thought there.

I know I just said a minute ago that there was too much emphasis on failure in the art historical framing of the avant-garde, but I would suggest the autonomist tradition has had perhaps the opposite problem, where there has not been nearly enough consideration of failure, or more conceptually not enough attention paid to the dynamics of class decomposition. There's an interesting question about conflating strategic and analytical dimensions in autonomist thought. I would broadly agree that is often the case, sometimes productively, but not always.[13] You can also find figures whose work is more useful in thinking that through – such as Bifo and Silvia Federici. That was a key aspect of my first book was putting the concepts of recuperation and class decomposition, at the centre of an autonomist analysis. And that's important not because of wanting to develop a fixation or fetish of failure, but because the grounds of political recomposition will be found in finding ways to counter and undermine existing dynamics of class decomposition. In that sense your question about right wing populism is very pressing indeed – and that's something that very much would be good to consider. A very fruitful way to start thinking about that can be found through the writing of Alberto Asor Rosa, who was both a key influence in early Italian Operaismo, and a key commentator on literature and culture. And in that spirit I will leave you with a quote from his recently translated book *The Writer and the People:*

How to create a profound and organic relation between intellectual enquiry and vast popular needs has been the dominant question of all those thinkers and movements that have sought a serious strategy for the various uprisings for independence or national renewal. How to create such a relation today, after past bourgeois failures, is the dominant question of a workers' movement that aspires to escape from the narrow horizons into which reformist leaders have forced it for decades. The problem of the relation: hence, intellectuals/people is only one aspect of a much vaster vision of class struggle.[14]

[1] Stevphen Shukaitis: *Imaginal Machines: Autonomy & Self-Organization in the Revolutions of Everyday Life*. New York: Autonomedia 2009.

[2] Stevphen Shukaitis (ed.): *Gee Vaucher: Introspective*. Colchester/ New York/ Port Watson: Minor Compositions 2016.

[3] Stevphen Shukaitis: *The Composition of Movements to Come: Aesthetics & Cultural Labour After the Avant-Garde*. London/ New York: Rowman & Littlefield 2016.

[4] Alex Burrows, "Something From Nothing: The Crass Art Of Gee Vaucher." *The Quietus*. 2 December 2012. Available at http://thequietus.com/articles/10865-gee-vaucher-crass-art-interview.

[5] Peter Burger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

[6] Franco Berardi, *Precarious rhapsody: Semiocapitalism and the pathologies of the post-alpha generation*. London: Minor Compositions, 2009. 142-143.

[7] John Clammer, *Vision and Society: Towards a Sociology and Anthropology from Art*. London: Routledge, 2014.

[8] Antebi, Nicole, Colin Dickey, and Robby Herbst, Eds. *Failure: Experiments in Aesthetic and Social Practice*. Los Angeles: Journal of Aesthetics & Protest Press, 2007.

[9] For more on Alan's work on this see http://occuprop.blogspot.co.uk

[10] Antonio Negri: *Art & Multitude. Nine letters on Art, followed by Metamorphoses: Art and immaterial labour*. Cambridge/ Malden, MA: Polity Press 2011, p. xii.

[11] Paolo Virno: "The Dismesure of Art. An Interview with Paolo Virno." Von Sonja Laevert und Pascal Gielen. In: Pascal Gielen/ Paul De Bruyne (Hg.): *Being Artists in Post-Fordist Times*. Rotterdam: NAi Publishers 2009, pp. 17-44, p. 18.

[12] Although perhaps not. For more information on an interesting Marxist-Katnian aesthetics, see Michael Wayne, *Red Kant: Aesthetics, Marxism and the Third Critique*. London: Bloomsbury, 2014. My review of the book can be found here: http://marxandphilosophy.org.uk/reviewofbooks/reviews/2015/1758.

[13] For more on this see Stevphen Shukaitis, "Recomposing precarity: Notes on the laboured politics of class composition" *ephemera: theory & politics in organization* Volume 13 Number 3: 2003, 641-658.

[14] Alberto Asor Rosa, *The Writer and the People*. Calcutta: Seagull Books