05 2022

A Review of Kuba Szreder's The ABC of the Projectariat

Manchester University Press, 2021

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On the jacket quote of Kuba Szreder's *The ABC of the Projectariat*, theorist/video artist Hito Steyerl says that the book creates "an alphabetical list– trusting that this mess will be easier to sort out once articulated aloud."

The mess that Szreder effectively sorts out is that pile of contradictions that appear when aiming to make art through the work of institutions. Specifically, to Szreder's interests, this is the mess that appears when dialing in on how political or socially transformative artwork does and does not function through the current neo-liberal cultural order. This thing we call the art world is experienced as the undifferentiated amalgam of many things: precarious working conditions, competing and collaborating political economies, the fickleness of financial and attentional markets, the personal and systemic results of individualism, the ways racist and sexist activities are culturally distributed, and the

simple brutality and collaborative sweetness of working together… among other things.

Szreder understands this system as an institutionalist who has curated for the Warsaw Biennial and participates in transnational projects like the L'Internationale network of progressive European museums, and the Feinart academic project on the future of European independent art spaces. But Szreder is also an outsider, a freelancer and an artist who works with independent initiatives and collaborative art projects like the Free/Slow University, Anti-fascist Year and Company Drinks.

Readers of the *ABC* will encounter the artworld in a manner reflective of how one might encounter it as a working artist, through bits and pieces and relationships rather than an abstract and theoretically singular thing. The artworld is a fractured experience rather than an articulatable structure that one might think an ABC would provide. But his affective approach greatly benefits the book. Its definitions are not theoretical exegeses, and the book reflects Szreder's years of actual cultural praxis. He avoids grand theories and offers few macropolitical analyses; the book is not about equivalencies between artist laborers and the other workers. Not a work of pure theory, it is nevertheless analytical. It details how to function in this artworld, artistically and politically, while holding on to art and culture's higher bohemian ideals. Szreder's bohemian idealism supports how the artworld should be a nexus of revolutionary potential, propositional artistic genius and delightful excess– but he also describes it as a world of opportunism, inequality, structural limitations, and ambition dominated by market capitalism. And so he describes actual difficulties of working where all this collide in practice.

For how it maintains an analytical perspective through its open and generous explorations of work, it is an excellent book. Szreder models a critical engagement with the actual workings of the artworld, this critical enmeshment should help the reader manage contradictions of working as an idealistic practicing artist, curator or other cultural worker. Thus, his authoring actively demonstrates the utility of theory beside experience, and not the other way around. The text feels like a chat with a trusted friend who understands what actually happens rather than what the P.R. wants you to believe. It gives you the real deal, revealing what theory obscures through its need to make pure architectures. Straight business talk, the likes of what Szreder delivers, is good enough, and that he delivers it as straight talk in order to contemplate how to work with the system towards systemic change is particularly notable.

Embodied in his writing is the knowledge of professional compromises and calculations that most every artist must make. Compromises, because operating with a political consciousness under the messy neoliberal order is difficult. Szreder's assessments of artistic peers is useful. Take for example this excerpt from the chapter entitled *E is for exclusion*- "The twisted horizons of social visibility maintain the illusion of artistic circulation as a world of opportunities, roamed by joy riders. This disorder affects particularly young members of the projectarians, who fall for perceptual aberration, unrealistically assessing their chance of winning in the race for visibility." (94)

Szreder's ABC is a literary device– an attractive means upon which to weave conceptual strands. The ABC allows him to balance theorizing (that there is a system for an ABC to be written) and attention to actual human interest (that a device makes things attractive and thus accessible and that this can be as valuable as a

comprehensive accounting of facts). Nevertheless, this is still an ABC book, with each chapter employing loose but coherent writing that expounds upon the chapter's keyword. *E is for exclusion* can be read as a one of several nodes in a thread that traces aggressive ways capitalist culture denies its own collectivity. This thread begin with *A is For Assemblage or apparatus*, and is refined through the *C is for circulation*, *D is for Dark Matter*, *W is for winner takes it all* chapters. Other threads emerge within these very chapters; for example, *E for exclusion* is also a node for the discussion of artist's psychologies, a thread that is also addressed in *A is for Artyzol*, *B is for burn-out* and elsewhere.

The *C is for circulation* chapter demonstrates how Szreder merges systemic analysis and affective solidarity with artists. Szreder describes the post-cold war art world as a global economy "composed of differing, yet truly interconnected, regional and international art worlds." This is an artworld that stands for bohemian idealism and artistic lifestyles that are nevertheless entangled in a brutal neo-liberal system which compels artists to feel like they must continually produce and appear productive just to keep their professional heads above water. The tension of Szreder's real politique is bound up in the fact that as an art world outsider he is skeptical of what the artworld can politically produce, yet as an insider he knows what it can do at it these skeptical margins. To describe these margins, there are chapters lauding art strikes, what artists add to spatial occupations, the possibilities for paintings within protests, and for organizations that he names *patainstitutions.*

In the *P is for patainstitutions* chapter, Szreder defines patainstitutions as mock organizations or undercommons institutions that critically play at the margins of formal institutional structures and that sprout up in their shadows. These

play or fake institutions, processes, organizations, or whatever, pave the "way for new institutions of the common which emerge between the tired opposition of public institutions and private enterprise, often in protest against the structural pressures of artistic circulation." (176)

In addition to his precarious position as a freelancer, Szreder describes his marginality in the S is for *semi-peripheries* chapter. He identifies himself and as a Polish citizen, as a "not-a-white-as-properly-bourgeois-Western-white." As the situation in Ukraine demonstrates, this periphery is "more colonized then colonizing" and vulnerable to "aspirational racism and homebrewed authoritarianism." (213) I can thus understand Szreder's appreciation for intuitions, knowing the ways that politics actually matter in the fight against authoritarianism. With its temporal proximity to authoritarian regimes, norm-breaking neighbors and overreaching idealism, Szreder has a sense for the structural effects of institutions: they can maintain norms, protect the marginalized, and can generate and maintain public spheres.

He is also aware of how, at the margins of the art world artists are subject to poverty, mental illness, and continued marginalization. Szreder highlights the common aspiration for success that has creatives accepting arts' brutal financial terms. He also highlights individual and collective coping strategies they generate to persevere. Here, he highlights patainstitutions for their ability to improve institutional conditions: "The argument here is that the neoliberal arrangements of artistic circulation can be surmounted through social struggles waged by art workers, who reclaim, instigate and maintain the common owing to productive withdrawals, positive valorisation of the labour of love and pollination, by establishing patainstitutions and support structures, acting in accordance with their own interdependence." (130)

In proposing a different and more direct valorisation of interdependence through emergent institutions, Szreder sees a possibility for restructuring a different cultural world- built on solidarities between the marginalized. “The notion of interdependence also suggests such values like loyalty, empathy, firmness of convictions and devotion to a cause, at odds with the politics and ethical flexibility of the networked world, where convictions are peddled, ideals swapped and loyalties are transactional.” (137)

Szreder directly organizes against Poland’s illiberal contexts through efforts with the Anti-Fascist Year collective, and he also has participated in efforts to counter the rightwing take-over of Ujazdowski *Castle,* Warsaw’s Centre for Contemporary Art. Within this book, the sections that focus on the work of counter-institutional anti-fascism highlights a critical perspective on philanthropy. Rather than a bottom-up perspective around what organizes meaning and builds and sustains popular power against institutions ruined by toxic philanthropy- the book’s gloss around the cultural ontology of popular movements maintains a modern idealism for the possibility of liberal institutions. This modern gloss thus implies that art can exist as free-floating cultural data that can be downloaded into the lives of blank-coded people.

In my experience, readers who assume the political nature of their own artistic work often confuse their own struggles with wider political issues. Thus, the weight Szreder gives to the internal politics of possibly meaningful institutions, rather than the meaningful sociality that composes and somehow helps maintain them reveals the implicit modernist assumptions of the book. “Somehow help maintains” because the gap between how both people and cultural institutions function is sometimes quite wide– even while peoples continue to create and maintain themselves

regardless of how they relate to cultural institutions. Speculatively, *S is for the social* or *M is for meaning* chapters may have addressed this lack. But by not delving more deeply into ways in which interdependence and values like loyalty, empathy and firmness of conviction are actually fostered and maintained, *The ABC* suggests to artist/readers that the artworld and its near adjacents are the only sphere for common and meaningful sociality and solidarity. Szreder knows that this is not true, that there are other social and cultural forces that order life with little relation to the art world.

The continuity of churchly patriarchy, paternalism, nationalist affiliation, folk bias and beliefs despite more than 200 Years of liberal thought and Modern governances demonstrates that humans are not blank slates for formal cultural institutions to program. I do agree with Szreder's sense that art institutions might still act as "the cradle of socialism." (122) But by describing sociality only in the shadows of and interests orienting towards art world institutions, other deeply seated cultural trajectories that politically organize solidarities, empathy and loyalty are neglected. Relational and social innovation is not primarily mediated as a direct effect of neoliberal art institutions– though art institutions and social practice art does seek to profit from any kind of actual social innovation.

There is no broad general audience waiting to better relate to each other via well-governed cultural institutions. Rather, decolonial theorist Frank B. Wilderson says "we must come to grips with how the redemption of the subaltern... is made possible by the (re)instantiation of a regime of violence that bars Black people from the imaginary of redemption."[1] Wilderson and Silvia Wynter suggest that the logic of liberal institutions is dependent on the moral underpinning of conservative superinstitutions like the church. I mention this not to diminish the actual socio-

political potential of Szreder's projectariat or for even for art. Rather, I mention this in order to highlight the depth to which critical attention need go in order to fulfill its speculative promise. A speculative *P for poetics* chapter, might echo Sylvia Wynter's thoughts about how it matters that we ask art and poetry to solve certain problems and political and cultural institutions to address other ones[2].

For Szreder, patainstitutions demonstrate how shadow sociality emerges through institutional form to push for wider systemic transformation. Wynter clarifies how Western conservative institutions play a very active second fiddle to the political order of our lives by having set the underlying terms through which wider cultural meaning and values can be assessed. To rearrange this wide organization along the bohemian ideals of the projectariat, it may be of benefit, as Wynter suggests, to address how poetry and art are meaningful beyond the fickle collaborations between political, cultural and economic institutions we know as the art world.

Szreder's book is an outstanding contribution to the literature around the workings of art and politics, from its opening on how to manage a meaningful career in the precarious art world, to its fluent and accessible critique, and its demonstration of praxis-based knowledge. Even though it is no intellectual edifice, it is thoroughly intelligent. The book more than delivers on what it promises. I agree with Hito Steyerl in her assessment of this book that it rigorously explores the praxis of working to be a meaningful artist with the complications of the contemporary artworld so that its readers can truly begin to assess what the complex of activities within its margins do and do not do.

[1] Frank B. Wilderson III, “Afro-Pessimism and the End of Redemption” *Humanities Futures*, October 2015. Available online at https://humanitiesfutures.org/papers/afro-pessimism-end-redemption/

[2] Sylvia Wynter, “1492, A New World View” in Vera Lawrence Hyatt & Rex Nettleford (eds.) *Race, Discourse, and the origin of the Americas,* (1995: Washington DC, Smithsonian Institution).