

Spear v.s. scissors: Art held captive by budget cuts

Andrey Shental

Neoliberalization, privatization, commercialization

Austerity measure policies currently in effect in many countries have given rise to a special rhetoric reminiscent of Franciscan preaching poverty and humility faced with the vicissitudes of earthly existence. It's not just a metaphor: the English word "austerity" itself contains obvious religious connotations. Like religion, these austerity policies are naturalized and internalized affectively: comparing the national economy with the household, or appealing to collective traumatic experiences, as many critics have observed, produces a fake sense of community, as opposed to an artificially produced shortage, lack, deficiency. The apologists of austerity measures offer us only one possible way out of this crisis - sacrifice.

In his 2012 book "The Year of Dreaming Dangerously", Slavoj Žižek wittily summarized the austerity politicians' arguments: we live in critical times of deficit and debt and will all have to share the burden and accept a lower standard of living—all, that is, with the exception of the (very) rich". This begs the question: why does the social sphere has to be sacrificed, when we can more wisely apply taxes? This is immediately objected to with the axiom: "The idea of taxing them more is an absolute taboo: if we do this, so we are told, the rich will lose any incentive to invest and thereby create new jobs, and we will all suffer the consequences."¹ Or, alternatively, to transfer the least important sectors of society in the hands of private capital. Cuts in state subsidies of culture and experiments in privatization have affected many European countries, especially the former welfare states, which still kindle the remains of social democracy. In the UK, the Parliament led by the Conservative



Ellie Harrison, Bring Back British Rail, 2009

Party has for the past 3 years been effecting budget cuts and actively dismantling what had not already been dismantled at the hands of Margaret Thatcher and her labor successors. Budget cuts, which have affected art and culture much more than others fields of knowledge production, have in the English language been shortened to an almost onomatopoeic name, reminiscent of the clanging of old metal shears: cuts. In the part few years these cuts have not held the front pages of newspapers and magazines, but they appears in the nightmares of social workers who are in constant fear of personnel reductions and dismissals. According to a statement he made last year, David Cameron, tried to completely de-ideologize austerity measures: this policy is not just a temporary measure, but should be implemented as a public policy, and perpetuated as inevitable and necessary. It is difficult to imagine what the future results of this will be, but after two years we can draw certain conclusions and make forecasts.²

At the present moment, we can say that left critics' and journalists' worst fears were not justified. Everything remains seemingly unchanged: the galleries are still working, museums are free of charge, art journals continue to be published, and people are no less interested in art then before: a recent statistic by Tate Modern will reassure those who think that contemporary art is of no use to anyone anymore: crowds of people go there (although for what is another question).



Ellie Harrison, Bring Back British Rail, 2009

Against this background, failures and even the inevitable “healthy” fight for survival in a “free” competition economy seem insignificant. Some small galleries and magazines experienced serious difficulties, but almost all were able to find alternative ways of funding, and only a few were closed or reorganized. But who still remembers “Storey Gellery,” where no almost no one has visited? Who will regret the exhibition hall at the British Film Institute, when a luxurious library was opened in its place? In a country that suffers from a surplus and overproduction of art, such trifles simply are not worthy of attention. And what if tickets to the British Film Institute tickets are now nine pounds instead of six pounds? It seems that it doesn’t matter since people continue to go there.

At the same time, the “age of philanthropy” that former minister of culture Jeremy Hunt promised happened only nominally. The conservative minister promised that given greater tax breaks, the rich will take pity on art, and share their income and savings - and that the influx of capital from the private sector will transform the UK into a new Florence. Capital did begin to flow (4%), but it did not exceed the level of annual inflation (5.2%) and turned out to be more insignificant given its sharp decline in the previous years - of course, Hunt did not include this in his reports.³



Ellie Harrison, Desk Chair Parade / Desk Chair Disco, 2009/2011

Major changes in the art system are not limited only to closed galleries and shutting down journals, but also occur on the barely noticeable microlevel and often go unnoticed. The reduction of the state budget and the policy of attracting primarily private capital, lead to inequality and polarization, as Žižek observed: “the poor are getting poorer, and the rich - richer.”

Recognized, respected and promoted institutions acquire new spaces, overseas offices and stores. Only in 2012 the following commercial galleries have somehow manage to expand: Pace, Blain / Southern, Marlborough, Carlslaw St. Luke, David Zwirner, Space Station 65 , Eykyn Maclean, Michael Werner, Thaddaeus Ropac, Gagosian, White Cube, Vitrine, Carroll / Fletcher. This not only goes for private institutions, but also for charitable ones: Tate Modern increased its space through underground oil storage tanks and in parallel continues to build a new wing, the Jerwood Foundation opened a gallery of the same name, the David Roberts Foundation moved to a new multi-storey building, the organization Gasworks, consisting of studios, residences and exhibition hall, also plans to increase its space several times over.

Such disproportionate expansions lead to a peculiar aggravation of “class relations” within the art system, strengthening the position of artistic elites and - most surprisingly - to the formation of stellar systems and hierarchies within the leftist movement. As curator and theorist Simon Sheikh explained me in an interview, despite another rise in tuition costs, Goldsmith University, the main stronghold of critical theory in the U.K. or as it is called the “factory of criticality,” began receiving more applications from students than usual.⁴ This is not only due to the growing fashion for leftist ideas among young people, regardless of their background, but also indicates that Goldsmith professors acquired a special patent for leftist discourse, while other universities where “stars” of critical theory like Simon Sheikh himself do not teach, were forced to close their art departments.

In parallel with this polarization, the process of geographic centralization on the London axis also occurs - the budget of private donors interested in visibility or advertising their brand, is flowing, in contrast to the state budget: especially in the capital (an increase of 9%), while the provinces get several times less (a decrease to 32%). Another, more evident and not always conspicuous process is the commercialization of the art and related fields of research activity. To survive in a situation of intense competition, artists and galleries have no choice but to adapt to market demands. Moreover, bureaucrats suggest quite specific tactics to further the cultivation of mercantilism, such as cultural celebrities who should promote the art to the masses. And these suggestions became inevitable compromise for many, because in order to qualify for state grants, British institutions involved in charity work in the field of art, must have their own sources of income. At the same time, understanding the invasiveness of such an abrupt transformation, the state willing sponsors research and counseling centers that help pave the way to private financing “painlessly,” while fundraising is gradually shifted onto the shoulders of the institutions.



Ellie Harrison, *The History of Revolution: Fireworks Display*, 2010

As for state support, it is still carried out through a system of organizations, established as a result of the separation of the British Council into regional councils. Among them, the Arts Council of England (ACE) is the most powerful organization, which to its credit, copes very well with its tasks, even after substantial reductions in its budget. The ACE directly allocates money to organizations or grants to individual artists and redistributes its budget within a whole network of small independent substructures, among them the Film and Video Umbrella iFLAMIN (supporting film and video), The Art Catalyst (supporting art-science), ArtQuest (information and legal support), Art Angel (support for costly and risky projects), LARC (Liverpool community organization), etc.

However, the ACE continues to deliberately cut budgets and introduce new conditions of contracts, reducing their duration, which makes the situation of many institutions highly unstable. In this situation, non-profit, small and young organizations, as well as the artists themselves, and especially those who have just graduated are forced to find alternative ways of financing or horizontal ways to unite, for mutual support, and sometimes direct offensive.

Drowning people hold their salvation into their own hands

According to the critic and curator Lars Bang Larsen in his book “Work, Work, Work,” today we are experiencing changes in the time politics of labor, which results in time becoming a real currency - “The time that you will be spending or will have spent as the future time of deferred.”⁵ Developing his idea, one can add that time - is what the modern state least willingly provides, insisting instead on immediate effectiveness, efficiency and practical applicability of any type of production. Therefore, austerity measures are not only budget cuts but also the imposition of a certain alien and often harmful temporality.

In the situation of the neoliberalization of the art system, small organizations who need more time to get on their feet and achieve visible results, find it especially difficult to adapt to the new rules of the game. They cannot make income through a cafe or a bookstore, or the release of souvenirs like copyrighted prints, let alone attract celebrities. Most often, they begin to engage in the sale of work, like many so-called non-profit galleries do behind the scenes. Common Practice was founded to support the most vulnerable of them, bringing together several institutions in different formats in order to jointly research and find ways out of this critical situation. Their publication “Value, Measure, Sustainability” developed the idea of “deferred value”: small organizations are as good as large ones, even though they do not provide tangible results in the short term, and therefore it is necessary to reconsider the conditions of funding and the metric approach in assessing their activities.

Namely, the study suggests ways to make better use of “immaterial assets,” included in the total turnover that employees have to perform - such as conduct paid consul-

tations, give lectures, etc., that is, ways in which to invest their subjectivity for a net profit. And this can have negative consequences: overtime, educational programs for profit; furthermore, the very orientation of education towards making a profit does not bode well. But what is especially confusing in the aforementioned publication, is the consensus that the pursuit of growth - physically, spatial expansion, and the expansion of activities in general - is the a priori goal of small institutions. Development is not outwards but inwards, and focusing on professional activities is not expected nor stipulated in general, bearing witness to how deeply the ideas of entrepreneurship and marketing have penetrated the consciousness of the British art system .

On Ethics

It is generally accepted that ethics is one of the radical artistic methods invented in the early twentieth century, that was intended to democratize art. However, ironically, everything turned out quite the opposite. The state system to support art in the U.K. can be said to capitalize on this idea: since 1994 the ACE survives by selling National Lottery tickets. According to the statistics, the lottery is played primarily by representatives of the lowest strata of the population, those engaged



Ellie Harrison, Artists' Lottery Syndicate, 2010-2011

in manual labor and working on a temporary basis. They, unlike many artists, often originate from the middle class, and have nothing to lose, so they are ready to give their last money on a fluke. The ethical aspect of this type funding is (with rare exceptions) a taboo among the art community, and is perhaps criticized by Christian organizations: it is easy to deduce that the latter comes from the belief that gambling is sinful by definition. This is a key paradox of British art. The local artistic intelligentsia continues to live with hope that the art changes something in this world, while the same art lives on the money of the people who go to galleries for anything except to get warm. This would not be an exaggeration, given that utility bills in the UK are constantly getting more expensive.

Some artists see an evil mockery of themselves in the fact that art is funded by the lottery: a career in the art world is also a kind of lottery, where success is often determined by luck and good fortune, and it is no secret that many artists themselves are living below the poverty line. Playing with this situation, the founders of the Artists Lottery Syndicate invented an alternative model to support the artistic community, by receiving money from the same National Lottery, not from above but from below. Artists bought tickets together to increase their probability of winning, and they planned to divide the money among themselves. As the organizer of this initiative, Ellie Harrison, told me, members of the syndicate invested 8436 pounds, but were only able to win 1346 pounds. The Artists Lottery Syndicate positioned itself as an artistic conceptual project, and its true mission was not to acquire earnings per se, but to draw attention to the commercialization of the financing system through the symbolic return the money back to the lottery.

As these monetary losses were burdensome for the participants, the syndicate was transformed into the organization Artistsbond, a less risky way of investment through a single state lottery — the National Savings and Investments, that even began to bring some profit. By the end of 2012, the organization has won three awards of 25 pounds, and each of the artists got their share of 32 pence. Under the terms of the agreement, any artist living in the UK who has a bank account may participate Artistsbond, but his or her participation should be lifelong: Ellie believes that in this way they oppose the demands of short-term effectiveness, imposed by the market and new cultural politics.

The artist and the crowd

Crowdfunding is a relatively new way of sponsorship based on the horizontal collecting of donations through the Internet. It was invented in the United States, where government support of culture is minimal; and after the introduction of austerity measures crowdfunding became popular in Europe. Currently in the UK there are several organizations that collect funds to support art projects: WeDidThis, WeFund, Sponsume, Crowdfunder, as well as their US counterparts - such as Kickstarter and Indiegogo. The Crowdfunding model is based on the principle



Ellie Harrison, Work-a-thon for the Self-Employed, 2011

of “all or nothing,” accruing money for a limited time: if the project does not gain the required amount within the specified period, it is simply not sponsored. This is also called “participative” financing, as all the donors are rewarded either by direct participation in the project or a souvenir or some privilege. It can be effective among small groups of like-minded people, and at the state level, such as in France, where donations for the restoration of the dome of the Pantheon in Paris were rewarded by invitations to a private party.

Using Crowdfunding to fund art projects causes the similar fears as does the open distribution of taxpayers’ money. Assuming that taxpayers will determine the UK’s museums exhibition policy, then high Renaissance and modernist masters or even entertainment projects would be almost exclusively exhibited. Exhibitions containing anything “controversial,” would not receive a budget. However, if the content of the exhibitions would be determined by experts in contemporary art, regardless of what visitors want to see themselves, then this model by definition cannot be called democratic - that gets us back to the old dialectic of intellectuals and people.

The structure of Crowdfunding holds inside it this intractable conflict. On the one hand, it helps some young artists to start a career: in the UK money was successfully collected for three final exhibitions, used to pay for the participation of several

contestants in the BP Portrait Award, implementing projects of young curators, publishing catalogs, etc. But if we take a quick glance we come to realize that these internet servers are primarily used for entertainment projects, equating art with graphic design and fashion. Still, the money that goes to support the arts, is hardly comparable with the millions of dollars that Internet users donate to burn discs by their favorite rock bands or for the development of new computer games.

The very ideology behind these sites raises many questions. For example, the British lead of Crowdfunding Ed Whiting defines it as “a microphilantropy” that raises a new generation of “major donors” - that is, the very rich, who will invest, but only under the condition of low taxation. Moreover, Crowdfunding usually does not involve the possibility of selfless donations and thus mediates the perception of art: as I wrote above, each donors is supposed to get some material or symbolic gain. Thus, aesthetic judgment, which, according to Kant, must be disinterested, is in fact inscribed in the logic of real subsumption and entrepreneurship. Despite this, Crowdfunding still has the potential to support protest, critical, and even revolutionary art, that is hardly represented in state institutions.

All of these initiatives (as well as many others) allow art to survive in the era of austerity measures, but they also tell us something about the need to change the existing system, in which art can serve either private capital or exist through money received from the lottery.



Ellie Harrison, General Election Drinking Game, 2010

Freelancers

The above problems may seem to some readers - such as myself coming from Eastern Europe, no more than the whining of spoiled British artists snickering on grants and high fees, and in general living in a country where there so much art that it is almost nauseating. And these readers would right to some extent. In many ways, the role of non-profit galleries in the UK is no more than lengthening curriculum vitae, or to facilitating exchanges of compliments between insiders at exhibition openings. As for those galleries that are engaged in marginalized areas and local communities, they in many ways just diverting attention from the real social problems: no gallery in east London failed to prevent riots that happened there in August 2011. While interning in a gallery in Hackney - where in some parts pogroms occurred - I watched as students of African and Arab descent arrived there entirely lost: they did not want to see art projects and even less to discuss them with the gallery employees. At the same time they were photographed by interns in order to send documentation to the ACE, as the galleries are required to report on their alleged charitable activities.

Yet, the decline of galleries and a reduction in the production and distribution of art cannot be a solution in a context in which the downside is little more than a chimera or ideological construct, produced by capitalism. In a system where the public budget is downsized in order to increase the salaries of the rich or pay the national debt to banks, we can hardly count on the fact that that money for the arts would instead go to a "more necessary" social sphere. Therefore, upholding the art system in its entirety - even considering that in a few decades of neoliberalism its sociality was partially atrophied - is primarily an ethical and ideological position. This is not a quixotic attempt to get back to a post-war social democracy, but a necessity to resist the expansion of neoliberalism, which is destroying the remnants of a society in which art has become the last refuge for politics. Moreover, art as defined by Stendhal as a "promesse du bonheur," that is promising happiness in spite of lack and suffering, may be one of the few remaining antidotes to this artificial austerity.⁶

However, the impossibility of reducing cultural production is associated with a completely different issue, that reverses the problem on its head. In this country, contemporary art has reached a deadlock: it exists in such amounts, concentrations and forms that it is not needed by society nor by the state which sees how wonderful this art pays for itself in the galleries of the central, eastern and south London. But given the current situation, measures like the reform or partial dismantling its infrastructure will only exacerbate unemployment and create new serious social problems. During the period which is now remembered as the years of well-being and prosperity (especially during the time of prime minister Tony Blair), art spawned hundreds of arts organizations and trained thousands of professionals, whose existence is now totally dependent on competent funding. British humanities institutions produce thousands of artists, curators and critics from around the



Ellie Harrison, *Anticapitalist Aerobics*, 2013

world annually, forming a reserve army, which ultimately leads to structural unemployment and a post-wage economy based on exploitation. In this situation budgetary deficits, the artistic elite, obsessed with the idea of infinite growth and development, is unable to slow down its momentum, or otherwise reform adequately. As a result, it “lumpenizes” students and graduates, creating class inequalities in an age of already record-high levels of unemployment among young people. Any resistance against the new austerity reforms is criminalized, and the students themselves, who do not agree with these economic measures aimed against them as “class,” are publicly denigrated as naive and uneducated.

Faced with these issues, the British contemporary art system is unable to resolve not only structural, but also ethical contradictions. It illegally exploits students and graduates, denies ethnic, gender and sexual equality, and it is perhaps more successful at this than any other immaterial industry. Young professionals full of ambition and expectations agree to unpaid internships, and in most cases they end up performing mindless and thankless job to supplement their semi-fictitious resume. Gallery interns are forced to seek any means of subsistence to help them get a job in their field in a hypothetical future. Moreover, because of this, a conflict emerges among young people: those who cannot work for free are doomed to remain forever freelancers or completely change their sphere activity. Such a system is also beginning to take shape in Russia - where wealthy arts organizations like the “Garage,” which now also has unpaid Internships or the “Manezh,” where volunteer work is actively promoted.

Produced under such conditions, art paradoxically creates a new kind of autonomy and self-reflection: artists, critics, art historians and curators, all faced with the problem of survival, focus their practice and research activities on the context of their own existence, survival and artistic and economic relations.

Currently in the UK there are many organizations dealing with the problems of exploitation: Critical Practice, Precarious Workers Brigade, Future Interns, Rag-pickers, and, of course, ArtLeaks. Through these and similar initiatives the problem of the precarity of art labour becomes an integral part of art itself and its discourse. But precisely this inward turn works like a spring, ready to shoot back at any moment. Art's self-reflection provides a new opportunity to get out of its own autonomy.

This unassimilated debris, marginal elements of the artistic infrastructure, allied with each other, give some hope for a change in the status quo. The very terms "intern" and "freelancer" as Hito Steyerl notes in her text⁷ have their own tradition, being etymologically connected with the struggle for freedom and justice: freelancer refers to a free medieval spearman, while intern is associated with the word internment. However, in order not to fall into philosophical realism by giving these notions real political power, we should be primarily talking about them as a *potentia*. They could become modern fighters with the system, because they are not bound within its contracts, and are situated in the border zone between the "inside" and "outside." Art, which is sponsored by the poorest people, while the rich launder their money, art, from which productivity, efficiency and utility is demanded, cannot but trigger their rejection and protest. However, in practice, these fighters become active actors of contemporary protest movements, but they do not become revolutionary subjects.

On the one hand, the system of contemporary art, affected by its internal contradictions become a crucible of the politicization and radicalization of its members, which led to some extent to the student protests in 2010. On the other hand, when this same system is more and more constrained, we do not see the escalation of conflicts and protest movements. Perhaps it is because the artists belong to a narcissistic class, closed in itself and who is not ready for solidarity. By interacting an activist group which appealed to the international consolidation of artists, I was confronted with the fact that artists are not willing to recognize their social and financial situation. Given that class conflict is beginning to emerge on a certain age level, youth and poverty begin to be perceived as a shameful, yet inevitable transitional period. After several years of Internships and low-wage jobs, people seems happy to forget about their experiences as if they were a necessary step to a successful career.

No less problematic is “organization on the ground” and the establishment of trade unions, because workers are afraid to speak about their rights and to demand anything under the threat of losing their jobs. In this situation, oddly enough, a direct action in the gallery space - even though I am not in full support of this method - proves an effective measure, allowing for some clarity and a kind of “political education.” Ideally, such an action should be accompanied by solidarity with the employees themselves and grow into a common struggle, instead of being limited to a moment of “intellectual terrorism” by intimidating gallerists and drawing attention to these issues.

However, a more problematic aspect of activism on the territory of art, is its openly economic character. As David Beach rightly observes, instead of demanding the abolition of wage labor as such, as in the tradition of the engaged left movement, interns are fighting for relative exploitation, that is, for the replacement of slavery by another form of slavery, and therefore, the continuation of capitalist labor relations.⁸

In the context of austerity measures, the notion of a possible “horizon” narrows more and more, being reduced to a simple opposition between decades: the 90s were better than the 10s and 70s were better than 90s. Moreover, the emergence of the phenomenon of unpaid work in the private and public sector is so demoralizing that even a meager salary begins to look like a possible way out. On the one hand, these measures apply to the majority of young professionals in the art system who feel the urge to fight them, and on the other hand, since such a position may be a dead end in terms of changes in the system as a whole, we should not talk about lowering fees and free education as the given right of any student, we should not talk about social democracy as a satisfactory and tolerant form of government, but about an alternative social model as fundamentally possible and necessary. When speaking of higher wages, the abolition of internships and improved working conditions, we at the same time need to identify with other workers in other fields and other countries. And as banal as it may sound, economic demands should lead us to the political ones, while at the same time not pushing away potential allies.

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Ellie Harrison was born in London and now lives and works in Glasgow, where she sees herself as a ‘political refugee’ escaped from the Tory strongholds of Southern England. She describes her practice as emerging from an ongoing attempt to strike-a-balance between the roles of ‘artist’, ‘activist’ and ‘administrator’. As well as making playful, politically engaged works for gallery contexts, she is also the coordinator of the national Bring Back British Rail campaign, which strives to popularize the idea of renationalising of our public transport system, and is the agent for The Artists’ Bond - a long-term speculative funding scheme for artists, now with 120 members across the UK.

Endnotes

1 Slavoj Žižek, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*, Verso Publishers pg. 23

2 See “David Cameron makes leaner state a permanent goal”:

<http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/nov/11/david-cameron-policy-shift-leaner-efficient-state>

3 These figures are from 2012.

4 See my interview with Simon Sheikh in Russian:

<http://theoryandpractice.ru/posts/6823-saymon-sheykh-sovremennoe-iskusstvo—eto-mesto-izgnaniya-politiki>.

Unfortunately the interview was never published in English

5 ‘The Paradox of Art and Work: An Irritating Note’ in *Work, Work, Work: A Reader in Art and Labour*, Stenberg Press, 2012, pg. 22

6 See Steven Shaviro, *Accelerationist Aesthetics: Necessary Inefficiency in Times of Real Subsumption*:

<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/accelerationist-aesthetics-necessary-inefficiency-in-times-of-real-subsumption/>

7 Hito Stereyl, *Art as Occupation: Claim for an Autonomy of Life*, e-flux journal #30, 12/2011

<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/art-as-occupation-claims-for-an-autonomy-of-life-12/>

8 See David Beech, *Reproduction, Interns and Unpaid Labour*:

<http://dbfreee.wordpress.com/2014/03/11/reproduction-interns-and-unpaid-labour/>