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Art and the end of capitalism

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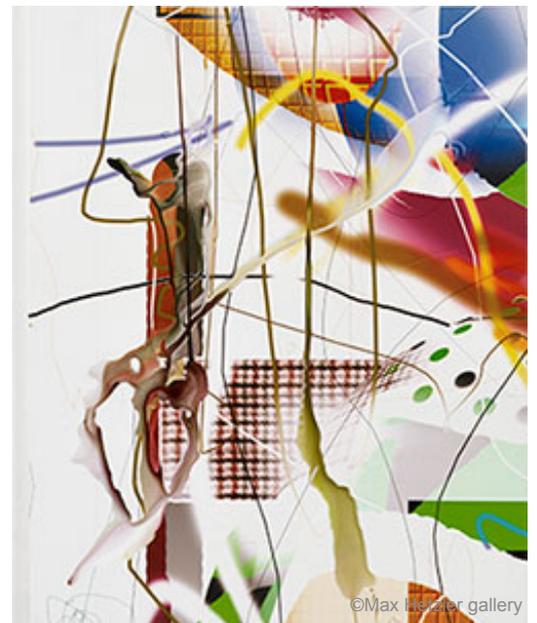
The theorist Jeremy Rifkin has diagnosed the beginning of the end of the capitalism, and artists are part of the prescription for a healthy, collaborative future

What does contemporary art really tell us about the world in which we live? Many of its most severe critics would say: nothing. It is trapped, instead, in a vainglorious moment of self-congratulation. Giddy with its own success, it has replaced rigorous social critique with playful riffs on its own history and back-of-an-envelope pranks, sheltering its vacuousness within ever-present ironic quotation marks.

The idea that art should comment meaningfully on the world's furiously fast-moving socio-economic trends seems out of date. Business leaders are proving themselves more nimble, and frequently more radical, than artists. The making of money is arguably engaging the most creative minds of our time, while artists play the ever-malleable court jesters, abdicating their responsibility, in times of political and cultural turmoil, to point to a saner way ahead.

But it needn't be so. In a new series of exhibitions at the Max Hetzler galleries in Berlin and Paris, artists are trying to shake off their introspection and build bridges to the real world. *Open Source: Art at the Eclipse of Capitalism* brings together a group of practitioners who have noticed that the world is changing beneath their very feet. The title of the shows is taken from the latest book by the social and economic theorist Jeremy Rifkin.

The Zero Marginal Cost Society, published last year, claims that we are in the thrall of a third industrial revolution, which signals the beginning of the end of the capitalist era. A new, collaborative, networked world, says Rifkin, firing on renewable energy, 3D printing and online higher education, will have replaced traditional business models by the end of the century.



'Untitled' by Albert Oehlen (2001)

The search for profit, in an age of near-free goods and services, will become less and less conspicuous. The capitalist market will “shrink into narrow niches . . . relying on a diminishing consumer base for very specialised products and services”. In its place, a new “social entrepreneurialism” will pursue and promote quality of life, accessibility of resources, sustainability. They will be “less driven by the invisible hand and more by the helping hand”.



Jeremy Rifkin

Rifkin’s work was well-received in Ivy League corridors, and inspired Lisa Schiff, who runs her own art advisory company, to put together the exhibition. “It is an optimistic book, and I loved that about it,” Schiff tells me from New York. “The realities of what is happening in the world are absolutely terrifying, and this is one person who is coming up with a solution.

“It is not just some anti-capitalist rant. It is a diagnosis, but also a prescription. [He is saying] we don’t have a choice.” Schiff connected the threads of Rifkin’s argument with some of the artists who were already on her radar. “I am not saying they have all even heard of Jeremy Rifkin,” she says. “But they are artists who, in form and content, are reflecting on the changes in the world around us.



Lisa Schiff

“I do feel that artists are fetishised in an a historical way, and I really wanted to ground them in some kind of tradition. It wasn’t that I was trying to shove them into a storyline. I feel that it came together very organically.”

The exhibition, which will also be shown online on co-curator Eugenio Re Rebaudengo’s Artuner website, features a smattering of familiar names — Richard Prince, Frank Stella, Christopher Wool — as well as some emerging young artists of the post-internet era.

When I challenge her on the meaning of that category, Schiff says: “I prefer to think of it not as a thing, but a condition. I think it will come to mean many things when we look back on it: a sense of interconnectedness on one level, and isolation on the other.”

There are some trenchant and relatively straightforward observations of the failure of corporate culture to safeguard the environment — New York collective Bernadette Corporation’s “The Earth’s Tarry Dreams of Insurrection Against the Sun” (2010), two flatscreen monitors showing deep-sea video footage of the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill — as well as more complicated messages of a world which is beginning, via digital technology, to run itself independently of human agents. Katja Novitskova shows digitally-circulated images taking on a life of their own in her “Mars Potential (Cat)” (2014), while Ian Cheng’s “Entropy Wrangler Atik” (2014) is a live simulation showing how the lines between biology and software, living organisms and information, have become confused.

The concern of artists towards the wider world is a welcome twist, says Schiff. “All that is ever talked about is how much a piece of work is going to be worth. Of course capitalism couldn’t be more

present in the art world right now. But it is time to shift the conversation. Let's talk more about the economy at large."

She says Rifkin has been "excited, and very generous" since she approached him with the idea for the show. Rifkin, for his part, declares himself "pleasantly surprised" to find himself the subject of a contemporary art show. "Art is not my field," he tells me, "but I recognise the role of artists as an avant-garde, telling us where we need to go."

He says he does not regard his book as a work of unqualified optimism. "I would say I am guardedly hopeful." The seeds for a new era of collaboration come from human nature, he says. "We are the most social creatures on the planet. We are not the autonomous agents of the Anglo-American Enlightenment tradition."

I see art changing into different forms, becoming more collaborative ... and also more ephemeral

He adds that he has hopes for the younger generation of digital artists who seem to have a different sensibility from their immediate predecessors. "If you are a world war two baby like me, you see power as a pyramid, very vertical and exercised from the top down. The millennials have a very different idea. They judge a government or party by its institutional behaviour.

"And they have a different idea of freedom. My generation defines it as being autonomous, not beholden to others, and values exclusivity. Young people are all about inclusivity, access to networks, transparency. Further autonomy is death."

Social entrepreneurs, says Rifkin, will be less driven by the profit motive, and will willingly give their talents to the various networks they are in, to improve their social reputation within them. In this connected and collaborative world economy, the idea of the artist as an individual genius, which is so implanted in our consciousness, is "absurd", he says.

"I see art changing into different forms, becoming more collaborative, and seen as works-in-process, and also more ephemeral, which fits in with the notion of the digital world. Artists will no longer be so interested in creating a sense of immortality. The transitoriness of the experience, the enjoyment of the moment, will be everything. Life will be seen as a series of unique moments. And maybe we will see that reflected more in the art."

I ask Schiff if she thinks the commodification of art needs some kind of correction. "Well, yeah," she responds as if I have asked her if she thinks the world is round. "I don't want to sound naive. I am not sure it is even possible. But if we can stop just talking about the art world and the art market, and talk about the world at large, that would be a start."

Rifkin thinks that art still has a major, consciousness-raising role to play in the “defining issue of our time”: whether the planet will become extinct, or be able to replenish itself. “Artists can signal the various changes that are happening to us,” he says. “They are the canaries in the mine.”

‘Open Source: Art at the Eclipse of Capitalism’, Galleries Max Hetzler, Berlin, March 12-April 18; Paris, March 13-April 18, maxhetzler.com; Artuner, March 12-April 18, artuner.com

Photographs: Max Hetzler gallery; Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler Gallery; Gunnar Knechtel



'Mars Potential (Cat)' (2015) by Katja Novitskova

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