

The Art of Ruins

The Factory of Culture through the Crisis

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Now that the financial world seems to be collapsing, writer and researcher Matteo Pasquinelli thinks the time is ripe to think about how the creative city and its gentrification processes will develop in the coming years. It's important that this debate goes beyond the position of the art scene and the cultural industry and that it includes the ruins that the immaterial accumulation of value has left behind.

The Underground of the Crisis

Political and artistic avant-gardes have always had an intimate relation with the *Zeitgeist* of the *crisis* and with the spaces and technologies that incarnate each paradigm shift. The most recent of the epochal turns has been the passage from industrialism to informationalism, that is the reorganization of the Fordist factory by digital networks. As Rebecca Solnit points out, the punk movement was precisely that form of life colonizing the suburban ruins that Fordism left behind in the Western world. 'Coming of age in the heyday of punk, it was clear we were living at the end of something – of modernism, of the American dream, of the industrial economy, of a certain kind of urbanism. The evidence was all around us in the ruins of the cities . . . Urban ruins were the emblematic places for this era, the places that gave punk part of its aesthetic, and like most aesthetics this one contained an ethic, a worldview with a mandate on how to act, how to live . . . A city is built to resemble a conscious mind, a network that can calculate, administrate, manufacture. Ruins become the unconscious of a city, its memory, unknown, darkness, lost lands, and in this truly bring it to life . . . An urban ruin is a place that has fallen outside the economic life of the city, and it is in some way an ideal home for the art that also falls outside the ordinary production and consumption of the city.¹

Coincidentally, in *A Grammar of the Multitude*, Paolo Virno as well marks the rise of post-Fordism (the new mode of production centred on language) and the uprising of the new political subject of the multitude in the same year of the punk explosion: 'Post-Fordism (and with it the multitude) appeared, in Italy, with the social unrest which is generally remembered as the "movement of 1977".²

Later on more subcultures and art movements continued to experiment and grow along the new infrastructures of production, along the invisible matrix of microchips and telecommunication networks, bringing the *information guerrilla* over the *information highways* and hijacking the language of the society of the spectacle itself. Today the financial and energy crisis changes the coordinates once again, revealing both the *energetic unconscious* beneath the Western economy and the abyss of *value speculation* beyond stock markets.

Where is the underground today? This ingenuous question is useful to condense a spatial disorientation specific to recent decades. If traditional avant-gardes have been growing

along the ruptures and interstices opened by epochal transformations, which kind of ruins are the digital age and financial crisis going to leave behind? Which relics will be colonized in the near future? Instead of indulging in the rhetoric of the crisis or in a self-victimizing theory of 'precarity', it might be better to figure out from now on how to colonize those spaces afflicted by the crisis. Contrary to what Solnit suggests, a ruin never falls 'outside the economic life of the city'. Relics of a former economic power, colonies of new forms of life, ruins are never a virgin territory.

The notion of the underground obviously belongs to the age of industrialism, when society had a clear class division and was not yet atomized into a multitude of precarious workers and free-lancers.³ The self-assuring spatial dimension of the underground seems somewhat nonsensical in an age of collaborative networks and among the well-educated 'creative' commons and Free Culture. What does it mean to be *underground*, when there is no longer an *outside*? However, despite the much celebrated *horizontal* cooperation, the autonomous production of culture feeds a *vertical* accumulation of value that emerges more clearly in the economy of contemporary cities. Apart from the culture industry, the art world and urban subcultures have been integrated in a more general *social factory* that provides, for instance, symbolic capital for processes of gentrification and real estate business. Between *creative industry* and *creative commons*, the chimera of the *creative cities* and their gentrification processes can represent case studies of new modes of production and zones of conflict yet to be explored.

From the 'Artistic Mode of Production' to the 'Art of Rent'

The integration of the art world into the economy of global cities and specifically into gentrification processes is an old and widely covered phenomenon. Already in 1982, Sharon Zukin recognized a specific *artistic mode of production* at work in New York: through the seductive power of the art scene, industrial buildings became attractive for newcomers and construction companies turned them into fashionable lofts. Zukin was quite clear about this passage from productive economy to financial speculation: 'By an adroit manipulation of urban forms, the Artistic Mode of Production transfers urban space from the "old" world of industry to the "new" world of finance, or from the realm of productive economy to that of nonproductive economic activity.'⁴

In 1984, Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Ryan explained similar techniques of urban regeneration in their article 'The Fine Art of Gentrification', that furthermore pointed out how they were affecting the aesthetic canon itself.⁵ The renovation of the Lower East Side of Manhattan came together with a neo-expressionist wave and they recognized the exhibition 'Minimalism to Expressionism' at the Whitney Museum in 1983 as a key signal. According to Deutsche and Ryan the art scene of minimalism was more engaged and aware of the social context, while neo-expressionism was paving the way for yuppie individualism. After decades yuppies have turned into *bobos* and these localized tactics became a global strategy under the notorious label of 'creative cities'. In East Berlin, for example, the gigantic project Media Spree is going to transform an area of 4 km along the Spree River, renowned for its music and art underground, into a new district for global media corporations. Contrary to the basic understanding of 'creative economy' promoted by Richard Florida, the debate on gentrification shows at least how cultural production partakes in processes of financialization and speculation of material infrastructures.⁶ A new *art of rent* has overtaken the old *artistic mode of production*.

To understand the new business models based on the exploitation of the immaterial commons it is useful to contextualize the role of the art scene within the history of gentrification theory. Neil Smith was the first to introduce gentrification as the new fault line between social classes in his seminal book *The New Urban Frontier*.⁷ However, he describes the gentrification of New York principally through the notion of *rent gap*: the circulation of a differential of ground value across the city triggers speculation when such

a value gap is profitable enough in a specific area. David Harvey expanded the theory of rent to include the collective production of culture as a terrain the market needs to get new marks of distinctions for its commodities. In his influential essay 'The Art of Rent', Harvey introduces the notion of *collective symbolic capital* to explain the gentrification of Barcelona. Here the fortune of the real estate business is rooted in the cultural capital which the city has been gradually sedimenting thanks to its sociality, tolerance, artistic movements, gastronomic traditions, natural heritage, etcetera.⁸ Harvey's notion of collective symbolic capital underlines for the first time a political *asymmetry* around the acclaimed cultural commons: the intangible assets of culture are linked to profit accumulation along the parasitic relation of *rent* and not through the regime of intellectual property.

Commons Incorporated, or the 'Communism of the Capital'

The notion of collective symbolic capital shows the asymmetric vectors through which a very material economy exploits cultural production. While a mainstream debate is hypnotized by the issue of *intellectual property* and the opposition copyright/copyleft, cultural commons themselves are peacefully integrated in flows of *material production* and *value accumulation*. What gentrification simply reveals are the new rent techniques over the commons on a city scale. Besides the corporate offensive on copyright, there are also business models that exploit cultural capital with no need for dramatic enclosures – a sort of *capitalism without intellectual property* that many activists of Free Culture refuse to recognize. Someone calls it: *wikinomics*⁹ I prefer: *Commons Incorporated*.

Long before the bailouts that *de facto* nationalized Western banks to rescue them from the 2008 credit bubble, Virno introduced the idea of an emerging *communism of capital*. Post-Fordism 'incorporated, and rewrote in its own way, some aspects of the socialist experience' and in particular the collective dimension of cultural production. He writes: 'The metamorphosis of social systems in the West, during the 1980s and 1990s, can be synthesized in a more pertinent manner with the expression: communism of capital . . . Post-Fordism, hinging as it does upon the general intellect and the multitude, puts forth, *in its own way*, typical demands of communism (abolition of work, dissolution of the State, etc.).'¹⁰

Gentrification is only one of the many cases of a value chain generated by the *general intellect* of the art world, urban subcultures and digital networks. Free Software, for instance, helps IBM and other corporations to sell more proprietary hardware. File-sharing networks sabotaged the music industry and its copyright regime, but at the same time gave life to a new generation of fashionable devices, like iPods, and to the MP3 market, too. Contrary to the cheap interpretation of Free Culture inspired by Lawrence Lessig and Yochai Benkler ('information is nonrival'),¹¹ the commons of culture are never an independent domain of pure cooperation and autonomy, they instead constantly fall subject to the force field of capitalism. The 'communism of capital' is then not merely exploiting the creative talents of the multitudes, but has established a whole fictional commonality that hides the material and conflictual roots of value. In European 'creative cities' artists and activists complain about gentrification driven by cultural capital, but no exit strategy can be envisaged until the debate is hypnotized by the issue of *intellectual property* rather than *value production*.

The Ruins of the Unsustainable as the New Frontier

Art underground and urban subcultures made fertile again the massive spaces and urban areas that Fordism left behind. After cultivating a workforce of precarious and freelance workers, what kind of ruins is post-Fordism preparing for the post-financial age? Google data centres storing petabytes of 404-not-found pages? Carcasses of computers and LCD screens, dumping grounds of iPods and mobile phones? Shards of dismembered social networks? Behind any digital and culture commons the barbaric shadow of value crisis is looming. Referring specifically to a new wave of urbanism as a response to the crisis, Bruce Sterling has predicted for 2009 'the ruins of the unsustainable as the new frontier'¹² The gentrification of the 'creative cities' is likely to come to a halt and slide back into the spectre of *degentrification*. In the scenario of financial crisis, is it possible to imagine a role for aesthetic and cultural production outside the net of the corporate parasites as well as outside the cages of the museum and its 'art activism'?

The factory of culture is described today mainly by the horizontal (apparently flat and immaculate) plateau of the cultural commons. Nevertheless this dimension is always crossed by the vertical axis of value. The positive vertical of the surplus-value extracts and accumulates profit from the horizontal plane through intellectual property, monopoly rent and gentrification techniques. On the other side, the negative vertical is the incarnation of the *negative surplus*, that is, the multitude of precarious workers and artists that compose the culture industry and produce value. Here finally we find the underground – underneath the 'commons'!

he coordinates of artistic and political practice in the age of cognitive and financial capitalism must be found along these intangible vectors of value, reclaiming autonomous and productive spaces against the material ruins of the Creative City rather than contemplating the reassuring identity of the precarious workers. As the punk underground grew out of the ruins of the suburban factories and cyberpunk along the first precarious Internet connections, it is time to imagine the factory of culture entering the ruins of the surplus-value that the fall of financial Babel are about to leave behind.

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Footnotes

1. Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (New York: Viking, 2005).
2. Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude. For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2004).
3. Rosalind Williams, *Notes on the Underground: An Essay on Technology, Society, and Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990).
4. Sharon Zukin, *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).
5. Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara G. Ryan, 'The Fine Art of Gentrification', *October*, vol. 31, (Winter, 1984).
6. Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).
7. Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier. Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (New York/London: Routledge, 1996).
8. David Harvey, 'The Art of Rent: Globalization and the Commodification of Culture', in: *Spaces of Capital* (New York: Routledge, 2001).
9. Don Tapscott and Anthony D. Williams, *Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything* (New York, Portfolio, 2006).
10. Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, op. cit. (note 2).
11. Lawrence Lessig, *Free Culture: How Big Media Uses Technology and the Law to Lock Down Culture and Control Creativity* (New York: Penguin, 2004); Yochai Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).
12. Bruce Sterling, 'State of the World 2009', *Beyond the Beyond*, 2 January 2009, <http://blog.wired.com/sterling/2009/01/bruce-sterlings.html>.

Tags

Capitalism, Commons, Urban Space, Art Discourse

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