

THE MANAGEABLE
SOFTNESS OF THE
SOLID WINE AND ITS
SOLAR RADIANCE

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The idea is the machine that makes the art. This axiom, with its already warped levels of recursivity, must bear witness to its scrambling: the machine makes the idea of art. What's the machine? The machine is the one that eats, it's the totality, the social body from which all cells divide.

If the art-making machine of the idea had an expressive causality that threw the thread of analytic conceptualism back to the fabricationary romances of the Productivists and the phoned-in orders of international-style modernism, the machine making art's idea re-phrases the impact of outsourcing on the ontology of art. On the surface it brings it forward to the condition of the artist as a particular capitalist language game, a managerial figure for whom the 'social hieroglyphic of value' becomes a formal concern. Elsewhere, this re-phrasing points to the cryptic lesson of indifference as fount of all radical differentiation: the linguistic algorithms of Roussel, the value experiments of Klossowski – the antinomic line in modernism that runs from Cahun, Höch, Picabia, Ernst and Duchamp to the wayward structuralists of the New Novel, Fluxus instructions, the concrete and L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E poets, and up to Kenneth Goldsmith and what have you. The controlled wreckage of signification is supposed to leave a radioactively fruitful soil where alterity can thrive - "the freedom of negative expression" - which gives a utopian spin to this materialist core, the utopianism of the fetish. The operations of chance are seen to create a baroque profusion where all combinatorial possibilities are present at once, and a plausible narrative order is the ultimate chance operation. It is maybe most notable in errant instances of avant-garde literature that the metaphor of the machine is at once inscribed into the machine that makes the art – *Locus Solus* pullulates with descriptions of machinery that are as stupefying as the linguistic devices that bring it into being, while *The Invention of Morel* diegetically exposes the monumental film projectors that have generated both the character's and the reader's sense of encompassing reality – and is sent further back along the production line, to tinker with the machines that make the machines.

It is not just the creative impulse which is omnipotent enough to relinquish its agency to a device of its own making or choosing and still claim the result as artistic praxis. The creative impulse itself is a machine which emerges out of a specific set of constraints and affordances, and it's an arbitrary one. Once out of the literary realm, the machines of language become the machines of sociality. These machines can work with next to no levels of conscious input. Prior to this writing, a cruise boat passed along the canal outside my window. There was a smattering of people on deck, but also a number of neon cardboard cut-outs in the shape of humans and fixed to the deck railing in a variety of social poses. From here, it seemed remarkably like the other passengers were including them in their conversations.

Artistic praxis emerges from the unmarked scaffolding of a social totality which bears on it directly or indirectly. The enunciation of those social relationships as part of another version of art was behind the expanded, systems-happy or imploded sites for activity inhabited by figures like the Artist Placement Group, Stephen Willats and Robert Smithson. From now on, the crucial question was how the artist would be situated in relation to what was not art, and whether this meant abolishing or expanding art. A similar critical question lay at the heart of the capitalist crisis at that time, and recurs now: would the rate of profit be restored or stifled by more commodification? Would the market eat itself? Art and money are both products of abstraction. They are both predicated on abstracting from specificity to universality, and both are kinds of currency. They diverge in the moment when the 'beyond-value' of the asset class that is art, which condition is at the root of its exchange value as an asset, starts to tip over into its opposite. As a commodity, it is all exchange value and no use value, which tends towards negating it as a commodity and proposing another notion of what could constitute use and exchange, and how such notions could be realized. Like prose which is not prose but the obtuse and glistening effect of compositional rules, art may act like a commodity but its tenuous or severed ties to utility make it the hole in what it is

not. Meanwhile, the transformation of the social role of the artist from medium of mystical truths into that of a mediator in and between institutions, (a de-skilled catalyst, a productive void in the middle of purposive doings, a crystal for bureaucratic layers to watch their reflections in, a conduit for arcana between symbolic registers and the most-favoured subject of relational risk) has had consequences, among them the work of Chris Evans.

But first the deadwood. Unlike the relational aesthete that is by and large filiated to such a lineage, Evans has no interest in activating social networks in or out of the artworld, and unlike the post-RA bricoleur, he's not about bringing disparate semantic traces into idiosyncratic indexes. He does insert himself into social contexts – mainly corporate or pedagogical – and proceeds according to the model of the Lacanian lover who can only give what he does not have to people who don't even want it.

The ineffably splintered points of intent that structure his projects unwind into objects that are determinedly opaque, to the point of wit; or craft. The way they both depend on and evacuate narrative, fusing incidentality into some unlikely physical object, makes them allegorical. The solipsism of the art object is turned into a pretext for staging the numerous social processes that obtain on its existence – consultants, commissioning bodies, patrons – and end up turning that staging into an autonomous art object itself, appropriated by the artist: outsourcing is both the method and the premise. The object in question may remain a drawing, a maquette, a plan, some correspondence or a screenplay condensed into a trailer. It is not the displaced residue of a back-story; its relation to negotiations, conversations, proposals, collaborations is formal, but also totally equivocal. It does need to be fabricated. There is the idea of vitiating formalism by narrativising the social relations around the form, which then becomes form in its own right. The disjunction between the relations and the form remains since narration does not amount to explanation. The logic cannot be reconstructed through the object or in other words. The process of the sculptures' genesis via language is not reversible, nor do the film scripts

fictionalize the informality or the tedium of the discussions with the people. Their metaphoric freight is more allusive, but, like the rat and cockroach pair that one Finnish mobile-phone executive thinks of when he tries to imagine what 'radical loyalty' could look like (maybe more 'radical persistence'?), there is satire but only so far as it's already there in brute mundanity, including that of the adjustments that make it visible. As poet Keston Sutherland writes on the bourgeois subject addressed through Marx's figure of the worker as a piece of gelatin (in the German), 'The point is not to make "everyone see what is on the end of every fork," but to make you see [...] that no one but you could eat from this fork, since this fork was intended for you.'

Evans' projects can be effective so long as they retain a quantum of indeterminacy that lets them unfold unpredictably and pass under whatever radars happen to be functioning that day. When trying to understand the acephalous and non-relational events that take place in these collaborative scenarios, and how they can't help but disclose something of the 'real' that feeds the abstractions of bureaucracy, enterprise and art, the APG-style 'spooof work' comes to mind.* The importing of colossally ambitious aesthetic wrongness into business contexts and its export back out as art objects or 'parable-like futuristic scenarios', as well as the replication of this wrongness at different scales and supports, seems to support this hypothesis. In some measure it is not actually too different from what corporate art consultants, or 'away-day' trainers, actually do. But then autonomous art production and the French Enlightenment *moraliste*-style dialogues of the screenplay betrays the world-spanning ambitions of corporate art and the interventionist hopes of contemporary art alike, undercutting both loyalty and radicality. A radical modesty, perhaps, of means, the airbrush?

And also, to end, there is a reversal of subject/object relations that evokes Klossowski's formulation of 'living currency' – subjects can become standardized objects of exchange, and objects live rich and instinctual lives. A thought experiment that is meant to dissolve the gap between them

and propose an economy that does not rely on the self as the original source of property rights, but which departs from alienation, from loss of self, as primary. The sculptures crafted by Evans or others and suffused with the visions of his interview subjects could be a step in this direction. The shape they take, the discussions that fed into them, the titles they assume and the places they've come out of and the places they come to rest are either so many incommensurable variables, or they are simply connected in abstruse ways that go beyond a code of equivalence, of substitution, and so of value. Symbolic processes and economic processes can come out of the same soil, or they can become friends of the divided mind and agree to part, each carrying a small bronze venus flytrap as a token of regard.

Like one of Roussel's aerostats, tidily assembling from the air a giant allegorical piece of land art constructed of magnetically-extracted teeth sorted by colour, all these little things perform like language which proliferates the idea of art.

Note

* See Howard Slater, 'The Art of Governance: The Artist Placement Group, 1966-1989' at *Infopool*: www.infopool.org.uk/APG.htm or *Variant*, issue 11: www.variant.org.uk/11texts/Slater.html

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