

# The Free Art Collective Manifesto for a Counter-Hegemonic Art

## **Part I: Art and the Bourgeois Public Sphere**

*The history of all hitherto existing culture is the history of hegemonic struggles.*

High and Low culture, folk art and courtly culture, avantgarde and kitsch, mass culture and autonomous art, popular and elite culture, connoisseur and philistine, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of culture at large, or in the common ruin of the contending rivals within cultural division.

In pre-modern epochs of cultural history, we find almost everywhere a complicated arrangement of culture into various orders, a manifold gradation of cultural rank. As well as the division separating Fine Art from Craft and Popular entertainments like the circus, within the academy itself we have the hierarchy of genres; in almost all of these genres, again, subordinate gradations.

Modern bourgeois society has sprouted from the ruins of courtly culture and Romanticism, to produce autonomous art and the public sphere but it has not done away with cultural hegemony or cultural antagonisms. It has but established a new hegemony, new conditions of distinction, new forms of struggle in place of the old ones.

Our epoch, the epoch of art as big business, however, has this distinctive feature: it has simplified cultural antagonisms. Culture as a whole, while it is riven with a cornucopia of fissures, from race to gender and sexuality, is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great cultural formations directly facing each other – art and everything else.

The culture industry, including both popular and minority forms, the spectacle of mass culture and the spectacle of the biennial, has transformed information technologies, took hold of the press and communications, and commodified opinion. The present cultural hegemony, therefore, cannot be separated from the social domination of big business and has pushed into the background every cultural distinction handed down from the Middle Ages.

We see, therefore, how the current cultural hegemony is itself the product of a complex development, of a combination of forces, economic, technological and social, that have converted culture into business: the debased bourgeois public sphere.

The bourgeois public sphere has played a truly radical role in cultural history.

The bourgeois public sphere, wherever it has obtained hegemony, has put an end to all courtly, academic, premodern cultural relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the customary hierarchies of cultural distinction that naturalized social distinctions as matters of 'taste', and has left no other division within culture than niche markets, than the calculations and identities of varieties of money - the black pound, pink pound, grey pound, and so on. It has repackaged and commodified the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of Romantic sentimentalism,

in the recuperative economies of the spectacle. It has resolved personal taste into exchange value, and in place of the numberless indefeasible chartered pleasures, has set up that single, unconscionable pleasure - retail. In a word, for elitism, veiled by aesthetic and social illusions, it has substituted seductive, spectacular, consuming, standardizing hegemony.

The debased bourgeois public sphere has stripped of its halo every form of cultural participation hitherto honoured and looked up to with reverent awe. It has converted the viewer, the critic, the public, the audience, the lover of art, into its consumers.

The debased bourgeois public sphere has torn away from the studio its sentimental veil, and has reduced the museum into a mere tourist trap.

The debased bourgeois public sphere has disclosed how it came to pass that the liberation of art from church and state, which reactionaries so much admire, found its fitting complement in the most cynical calculations. It has been the first to show what cultural activity can bring about. It has accomplished wonders far surpassing Egyptian pyramids, Roman aqueducts, and Gothic cathedrals; it has conducted expeditions that put in the shade all former exoduses of nations and crusades.

The debased bourgeois public sphere cannot exist without novelty, constantly revolutionizing the products for sale, and thereby producing constantly shifting cultural relations, and with them the whole relations of society. Conservation of the old cultural conventions and competences in one form or another, was, on the contrary, the first condition of existence for premodern cultural formations. Constant revolutionizing of form and style, uninterrupted disturbance of all cultural conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the culture of the debased bourgeois public sphere from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and the consumer of art is at last compelled to face with sober senses the economic conditions of art and the relations between quality and hegemony.

The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the art bourgeois public sphere over the entire surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere.

The bourgeois public sphere has, through its exploitation of the world market, given a cosmopolitan character to art's production and consumption in every country. To the great chagrin of reactionaries, it has drawn from under the feet of industry the national ground on which it stood. All old-established national cultures have been destroyed or are daily being destroyed. They are dislodged

by new global cultures, whose introduction becomes a life and death question for all competing nations, by cultures that no longer work up indigenous publics, but publics drawn from the remotest zones; cultures whose products are consumed, not only at home, but in every quarter of the globe. In place of the old publics, satisfied by the population of the country, we find new publics, requiring for their satisfaction the markets, criteria and artworlds of distant lands and traditions. In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal inter-dependence of nations. The cultures of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local cultures, there arises a world culture.

The bourgeois public sphere, by the rapid improvement of all instruments of cultural distribution, by the immensely facilitated means of digital communication, draws all, even the most under-developed, nations into globalization. The vast rewards of the contemporary art market are the heavy artillery with which it forces all cultures to capitulate. It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to enter the art market and by that fact enter into the bourgeois public sphere; it compels them to introduce what it deems 'current' into their midst, i.e., to become consumers of the bourgeois public sphere themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its global market.

The bourgeois public sphere has subjected the country to the rule of the towns. It has centred its markets and debates within enormous cities, has greatly increased the exchange of information between the urban population and isolated and neglected the rural population. Just as it has made the culture of the country dependent on urban venues and events, so it has made non-western countries dependent on the western ones, nations of natives on nations of tourists, the South on the North.

The bourgeois public sphere, debased as spectacle, keeps more and more doing away with the scattered state of local culture, of the multiple centres of lived culture, and of provincialism. It has agglomerated culture, centralized the markets and forums of cultural circulation, and has concentrated power in a few hands. The necessary consequence of this is cultural centralization. Independent, or but loosely connected provinces, with separate interests, experiences, identities, and systems of thought, became lumped together into one nation, with one market, one cultural code, one hegemony, one frontier, and one public.

The bourgeois public sphere, during its rule of scarce one hundred years before debasement into fully-fledged spectacle, has created more massive and more colossal productive forces for culture than have all preceding generations together. Subjection

of nature to culture, desktop publishing, peer to peer global communications, myspace, home video editing, ipods, mobile phone talking and instant messaging, mobile phone photography and video, chat rooms and wikipedia - what earlier century had even a presentiment that such productive forces of cultural exchange would be placed in the hand of the ordinary consumer?

We see then: the means of production and of exchange, on whose foundation the bourgeois public sphere extends itself, were generated within the consumer market. At a certain stage in the development of these means of production and of exchange, the conditions under which the spectacle produces and exchanges, the commercial management of ideas and debate, in one word, the hegemonic relations of culture became no longer compatible with the already developed productive forces; they became so many fetters. They had to be burst asunder; they were burst asunder.

Into their place stepped market forces, accompanied by a social and political constitution adapted in it, and the economic and political distortions of the debased bourgeois public sphere.

A similar movement is going on before our own eyes. The globalized spectacle, with its social relations of culture, of cultural exchange and of commodification, a culture that has conjured up such gigantic means of information production and exchange, is like the sorcerer who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells. For many a decade past, the history of culture and debate is but the history of the revolt of bourgeois social sphere against bourgeois economy, against the inequitable social relations that are the conditions for the existence of the bourgeois social sphere and of its cultural hegemony. It is enough to mention the crises of authority that, by their periodical return, put the existence of the entire bourgeois culture on trial, each time more threateningly. In these crises, a great part not only of the existing culture, but also of previous cultural formations, are periodically destroyed. In these crises, there breaks out an epidemic that, in all earlier epochs, would have seemed an absurdity - the epidemic of delegitimation. Culture suddenly finds itself put back into a state of momentary barbarism; it appears as if a famine, a universal war of devastation, had cut off the supply of every means of consensus; culture and morality seem to be destroyed. And why? Because there is too much culture, too much information, too many truths, too much controversy. The cultural forces at the disposal of society no longer tend to further the development of the conditions of cultural hegemony; on the contrary, they have become too powerful for these conditions, by which they are fettered, and so soon as they overcome these fetters, they bring disorder into the whole of the bourgeois public sphere, endanger the existence of the existing society. The conditions of the society are too narrow to comprise the wealth of culture created

by them. And how does the cultural hegemony get over these crises? On the one hand, by spectacularizing consensus in the consumption of a mass culture; on the other, by the aestheticization of the art market, and by the nostalgic exploitation of art history. That is to say, by paving the way for more extensive and more destructive crises, and by diminishing the means whereby crises are prevented.

The weapons with which the bourgeois social sphere felled traditional culture to the ground are now turned against the bourgeois social sphere itself.

But not only has the cultural hegemony of the bourgeois public sphere forged the weapons that bring death to itself; it has also called into existence the social forces that are to wield those weapons - the critically engaged participants of counter-hegemonic culture - the philistines.

In proportion as the bourgeois public sphere, i.e., the spectacle, is developed, in the same proportion is the philistine, the counter-hegemonic cultural activist, developed - a section of cultural insubordinates, who exist only so long as they devise their own counter-hegemonic cultural positions, formations and institutions, and who find meaning only so long as their culture resists hegemonic culture. These philistines, who must surrender themselves piecemeal, are consumers, like every other inhabitant of the spectacle, and are consequently exposed to all the vicissitudes of seduction, to all the fluctuations of fashion.

Owing to the extensive use of digital technology, and to the commodification of culture, the citizen of the bourgeois public sphere has lost all individual character, and, consequently, all charm for the philistine. The spectator becomes an appendage of the machine, and it is only the most simple, most monotonous, and most easily acquired knack, that is required for its consumption. Hence, the exertion of the spectator is restricted, almost entirely, to that required for the consumption of a cultural commodity, and for the reproduction of the market for that commodity. But the price of a commodity, and therefore also of its consumption, is not merely an economic factor but requires cultural capital. In proportion, therefore, as the repulsiveness of the work increases, the wage decreases. What is more, in proportion as the use of machinery and division of labour increases, in the same proportion the burden of toil also increases, whether by prolongation of the working hours, by the increase of the work exacted in a given time, or by increased speed of machinery, etc.

Modern Industry has converted the little workshop of the patriarchal master into the great factory of the industrial capitalist. Masses of labourers, crowded into the factory, are organized like soldiers. As privates of the industrial army, they are placed under the command of a perfect hierarchy of officers and sergeants. Not only are they slaves of the bourgeois class, and of the bourgeois state; they are daily and

hourly enslaved by the machine, by the overlooker, and, above all, in the individual bourgeois manufacturer himself. The more openly this despotism proclaims gain to be its end and aim, the more petty, the more hateful and the more embittering it is.

The less the skill and exertion of strength implied in manual labour, in other words, the more modern industry becomes developed, the more is the labour of men superseded by that of women. Differences of age and sex have no longer any distinctive social validity for the working class. All are instruments of labour, more or less expensive to use, according to their age and sex.

No sooner is the exploitation of the labourer by the manufacturer, so far at an end, that he receives his wages in cash, than he is set upon by the other portion of the bourgeoisie, the landlord, the shopkeeper, the pawnbroker, etc.

The lower strata of the middle class - the small tradespeople, shopkeepers, and retired tradesmen generally, the handicraftsmen and peasants - all these sink gradually into the proletariat, partly because their diminutive capital does not suffice for the scale on which Modern Industry is carried on, and is swamped in the competition with the large capitalists, partly because their specialized skill is rendered worthless by new methods of production. Thus, the proletariat is recruited from all classes of the population.

The proletariat goes through various stages of development. With its birth begins its struggle with the bourgeoisie. At first, the contest is carried on by individual labourers, then by the work of people of a factory, then by the operative of one trade, in one locality, against the individual bourgeois who directly exploits them. They direct their attacks not against the bourgeois condition of production, but against the instruments of production themselves; they destroy imported wares that compete with their labour, they smash to pieces machinery, they set factories ablaze, they seek to restore by force the vanished status of the workman of the Middle Ages.

At this stage, the labourers still form an incoherent mass scattered over the whole country, and broken up by their mutual competition. If anywhere they unite to form more compact bodies, this is not yet the consequence of their own active union, but of the union of the bourgeoisie, which class, in order to attain its own political ends, is compelled to set the whole proletariat in motion, and is moreover yet, for a time, able to do so. At this stage, therefore, the proletarians do not fight their enemies, but the enemies of their enemies, the remnants of absolute monarchy, the landowners, the non-industrial bourgeois, the petty bourgeois. Thus, the whole historical movement is concentrated in the hands of the bourgeoisie; every victory so obtained is a victory for the bourgeoisie.

But with the development of industry, the proletariat not only increases in number; it becomes concentrated in greater masses, its strength grows, and it feels

that strength more. The various interests and conditions of life within the ranks of the proletariat are more and more equalized, in proportion as machinery obliterates all distinctions of labour, and nearly everywhere reduces wages to the same low level. The growing competition among the bourgeois, and the resulting commercial crisis, make the wages of the workers ever more fluctuating. The increasing improvement of machinery, ever more rapidly developing, makes their livelihood more and more precarious; the collisions between individual workmen and individual bourgeois take more and more the character of collisions between two classes. Thereupon, the workers begin to form combinations (trade unions) against the bourgeois; they club together in order to keep up the rate of wages; they found permanent associations in order to make provision beforehand for these occasional revolts. Here and there, the contest breaks out into riots.

Now and then the workers are victorious, but only for a time. The real fruit of their battles lie not in the immediate result, but in the ever expanding union of the workers. This union is helped on by the improved means of communication that are created by Modern Industry, and that place the workers of different localities in contact with one another. It was just this contact that was needed to centralize the numerous local struggles, all of the same character, into one national struggle between classes. But every class struggle is a political struggle. And that union, to attain which the burghers of the Middle Ages, with their miserable highways, required centuries, the modern proletariat, thanks to railways, achieve in a few years.

This organization of the proletarians into a class, and, consequently, into a political party, is continually being upset again by the competition between the workers themselves. But it ever rises up again, stronger, firmer, mightier. It compels legislative recognition of particular interests of the workers, by taking advantage of the divisions among the bourgeoisie itself. Thus, the Ten-Hours Bill in England was carried.

Altogether, collisions between the classes of the old society further in many ways the course of development of the proletariat. The bourgeoisie finds itself involved in a constant battle. At first with the aristocracy; later on, with those portions of the bourgeoisie itself, whose interests have become antagonistic to the progress of industry; at all time with the bourgeoisie of foreign countries. In all these battles, it sees itself compelled to appeal to the proletariat, to ask for help, and thus to drag it into the political arena. The bourgeoisie itself, therefore, supplies the proletariat with its own elements of political and general education, in other words, it furnishes the proletariat with weapons for fighting the bourgeoisie.

Further, as we have already seen, entire sections of the ruling class are, by the advance of industry, precipitated into the proletariat, or are at least threatened in their conditions of existence. These also supply the proletariat with fresh elements of enlightenment and progress.

Finally, in times when the class struggle nears the decisive hour, the progress of dissolution going on within the ruling class, in fact within the whole range of old society, assumes such a violent, glaring character, that a small section of the ruling class cuts itself adrift, and joins the revolutionary class, the class that holds the future in its hands. Just as, therefore, at an earlier period, a section of the nobility went over to the bourgeoisie, so now a portion of the bourgeoisie goes over to the proletariat, and in particular, a portion of the bourgeois ideologists, who have raised themselves to the level of comprehending theoretically the historical movement as a whole.

Of all the classes that stand face to face with the bourgeoisie today, the proletariat alone is a genuinely revolutionary class. The other classes decay and finally disappear in the face of Modern Industry; the proletariat is its special and essential product.

The lower middle class, the small manufacturer, the shopkeeper, the artisan, the peasant, all these fight against the bourgeoisie, to save from extinction their existence as fractions of the middle class. They are therefore not revolutionary, but conservative. Nay, more, they are reactionary, for they try to roll back the wheel of history. If, by chance, they are revolutionary, they are only so in view of their impending transfer into the proletariat; they thus defend not their present, but their future interests; they desert their own standpoint to place themselves at that of the proletariat.

The 'dangerous class', the social scum, that passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of the old society, may, here and there, be swept into the movement by a proletarian revolution; its conditions of life, however, prepare it far more for the part of a bribed tool of reactionary intrigue.

In the condition of the proletariat, those of old society at large are already virtually swamped. The proletarian is without property; his relation to his wife and children has no longer anything in common with the bourgeois family relations; modern industry labour, modern subjection to capital, the same in England as in France, in America as in Germany, has stripped him of every trace of national character. Law, morality, religion, are to him so many bourgeois prejudices, behind which lurk in ambush just as many bourgeois interests.

All the preceding classes that got the upper hand sought to fortify their already acquired status by subjecting society at large to their conditions of appropriation. The proletarians cannot become masters of the productive forces of society, except

by abolishing their own previous mode of appropriation, and thereby also every other previous mode of appropriation. They have nothing of their own to secure and to fortify; their mission is to destroy all previous securities for, and insurances of, individual property.

All previous historical movements were movements of minorities, or in the interest of minorities. The proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority. The proletariat, the lowest stratum of our present society, cannot stir, cannot raise itself up, without the whole superincumbent strata of official society being sprung into the air.

Though not in substance, yet in form, the struggle of the proletariat with the bourgeoisie is at first a national struggle. The proletariat of each country must, of course, first of all settle matters with its own bourgeoisie.

In depicting the most general phases of the development of the proletariat, we traced the more or less veiled civil war, raging within existing society, up to the point where that war breaks out into open revolution, and where the violent overthrow of the bourgeoisie lays the foundation for the sway of the proletariat.

Hitherto, every form of society has been based, as we have already seen, on the antagonism of oppressing and oppressed classes. But in order to oppress a class, certain conditions must be assured to it under which it can, at least, continue its slavish existence. The serf, in the period of serfdom, raised himself to membership in the commune, just as the petty bourgeois, under the yoke of the feudal absolutism, managed to develop into a bourgeois. The modern labourer, on the contrary, instead of rising with the process of industry, sinks deeper and deeper below the conditions of existence of his own class. He becomes a pauper, and pauperism develops more rapidly than population and wealth. And here it becomes evident that the bourgeoisie is unfit any longer to be the ruling class in society, and to impose its conditions of existence upon society as an overriding law. It is unfit to rule because it is incompetent to assure an existence to its slave within his slavery, because it cannot help letting him sink into such a state, that it has to feed him, instead of being fed by him. Society can no longer live under this bourgeoisie, in other words, its existence is no longer compatible with society.

The essential conditions for the existence and for the sway of the bourgeois class is the formation and augmentation of capital; the condition for capital is wage labour. Wage labour rests exclusively on competition between the labourers. The advance of industry, whose involuntary promoter is the bourgeoisie, replaces the isolation of the labourers, due to competition, by the revolutionary combination, due to association. The development of Modern Industry, therefore, cuts from under its feet the very

foundation on which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products. What the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable.