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Further Notes on An Escape Act

On the occasion of the invitation to contribute some writing to the exhibition catalogue for *Speculative*, I figured that I would use the opportunity to expand on a particular ongoing project. My interest in doing so is to ask about how we might deploy this notion of the speculative in relation to *this* immediate context – the art exhibition and the social practice of art, more generally.

David Graeber, when thinking about why there are relatively many communists teaching at Universities compared to anarchists, suggests that the University is perfectly compatible with external analysis and theorizing, whereas ethical transformations of practice and organization are practically off limits. The slow heaviness of institutions, pronounced inequalities of power, and silent political maneuverings all resist this kind of change. The mechanisms of exclusion in the field of art are a little bit different. Rather than actively policing boundaries (you can't be seen because you're not there) art operates on the regime of visibility (you can't be seen because you can't be seen, you are not legible). There is certainly a growing overlap between these two systems, such as the MFA and PhD programs, teaching jobs, residencies, project grants, which supplement the more obvious gatekeeping (museums, critics, curators, commissaires d'exhibition).

All of this is not to say that there isn't a lot of change in the various positions that one might take in the field of art: curator, critic, artist, writer, collector, gallerist, publisher, promoter, and so on. Over the decades the possibilities available to an individual in any one of these positions has changed, imbuing some with more power at certain historical moments. More than that, one could argue that in addition to an innovative body of work, cultural producers can distinguish themselves through an innovative performance of some combination of these roles. The implication, of course, is that artists have been among the avant-garde of neoliberal labor forms. From competitive self-entrepreneurship to flexible working requirements to confusing leisure and labor, to the precarity that all of this inevitably leads to, artists experience these conditions quite generally now.

None of this can be divorced from the financialization of just about everything, including art. Not only is art bought and sold, but the work of cultural workers generates increased real estate values, provides added value to otherwise unremarkable products, encourages investment, and so on. We have speculative entities like the Artists Pension Trust that redirect tendencies of mutual support and social responsibility towards faith in the market (while at the same time, trying to game the system). Regardless of some of the very admirable motivations of the company, APT imagines a collection of artists as a mutual fund, relying on exclusion to generate value. Obviously, it is a symptom of the last decade, and in the language of the internet, a meta-producer or aggregator rather than a new collectivity.

Speculation is a normative condition for artists. Who can possibly plan? Institutions are fickle, unstable, and interdependent. Most activity is necessarily contingent, our time is given to what opportunities exist, to what money we need to pay for the essentials, to what might make more opportunities. It would seem

then, that speculation is a potential site of contestation, or to put it another way, that some speculative cultural work ought to be directed towards “building a new world in the shell of the old world,” as the Industrial Workers of the World might put it.

This is not a new call. If anything it is simply an attempt to add my voice into a building, collective call. A few scattered examples, close to home, that spring to mind immediately are the Eternal Telethon, the computer programming language Processing, Upload Download Perform, the Elysian Park Museum of Art, and The Public School. But rather than provide a survey of what already exists, I wanted to conclude by expanding on a proposal that I’ve made a couple of times over the past year, in Aarhus and Cairo.

The proposal is for an escape act and I want to admit from the beginning that I don’t think I could follow through with it myself, which is perhaps the reason I want to keep returning to it. It begins with the question: rather than taking authorship as a monolithic axiom of contemporary capitalism to be affirmed or opposed (and the possibility, let alone the efficacy, of opposition is a question here), perhaps we can think of it as a mechanism, or a process, or a point of intervention?

The proposal is for the formation of something that is in between a school, a collective, a secret society, and a union. A group of artists agree to the following five rules:

First, we lose our real names. This is not an absolute change of identity, but rather we will count our number and then invent that many fictional individuals.

Second, all of our cultural activity, whether individual or aggregate, will be done under one or more of these fictional names. It is not simply that each of us will have an alter ego, but that we all have a multiplicity of alter egos available to use.

Third, when one of these characters is invited to an exhibition, residency, lecture, interview, performance, teaching position, or whatever, then any of us, and any number of us, might go. It will be a matter of collective discussion or convenience.

Fourth, when any money is earned through sales, salary, commission, or stipend, it is shared equally.

Fifth, if one of us wants to exit this arrangement, then we will “kill” one of the fictional individuals. The specifics of that are up to those who remain.

That’s it. Naturally, it’s the first point that is the most difficult to come to follow through with; it’s the inverted mirror image of the death in the fifth point. The obvious question becomes what it is that we do with all of our past work? The kultural kapital in the room looms very large. Perhaps some works, maybe even degrees, can be reassigned, but not all. And the related question, what to do with our social networks? Perhaps it will turn out that half of our social networks will be sympathetic to the escape act and play along, while the other half really won’t care because it makes no difference to them whether they have befriended an image or not.

If all is going well, the act turns from a redistribution of works and networks to a communization of skills and abilities. In Cairo, the group of us knew a total of 7 languages fluently, which we decided would be an important component of the cast of characters that we would develop. For example, we invented a computer programmer who also made translations (presumably of fiction and theory).

This is not to say that the characters need to be stable. In the same way that I might produce a piece of writing as The Writer and then a painting as The Painter, it might be that The Painter writes some poetry and then a letter to the editor and then starts a weblog. Six people might be involved in all of those things. The tensions between promiscuity and discipline, individuality and collectivity, are there to play with, and not a source of irreconcilable anxiety.

Perhaps the most obvious thing about the proposal is that it doesn't exactly escape the market, but tries to weasel its way into a new relationship with the market. For example, in order to resist commodification, one might choose to produce work that is immaterial, temporary, or even collectively authored. But time has demonstrated that the art market is quite capable of integrating the unsellable, provided someone sees value in it. The escape act may very well produce objects that are more market-ready than any of the individuals might produce on their own. I'm not sure if this is a problem with the proposal or not, but it is certainly something that gets worked out internally among the group. Maybe they are subsidizing the rest of their practices. Maybe they secretly long to make easily consumable things.

It's said that the hardest time for collectives is when they have success, and it is certainly unknown how the escape act would internally respond to success, although it is written in to the bylaws. Maybe someone will want to go solo? Maybe someone will become saddled with the responsibility of being the "value producer" and will grow to resent that.

And when these characters are fictional to begin with, what obligation does the group have to be faithful to them? Are their stories written on improvised? Might their names change over time? According to what system or scale could such questions be answered? Potential income? Overall narrative? Ethics? Art History?

The more I think about it, the more I come to think that an escape act probably is quite limited in its transformative potential. Maybe a group of people could pull it off, but what would that amount to, beyond those people? I suppose there could be many such groups, but would that just become some kind of Balkanized cultural theater? Or would such an exodus, in the spirit of Paolo Virno, modify the conditions under which relations of domination and financialization have managed to prosper?

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