FIONA JEFFRIES
ESCAPING FREEDOMS: PERCEPTUAL INTERVENTIONS
AND SOCIAL CHANGE

LOADED
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Is it enough to grasp the notion of artistic practices as necessarily a reflection of the moment of its production or reception? Or are we better served by seeing it rather as a reflection on that moment and its potential? What are the conditions that might enable artistic practices to project themselves beyond the limits of the present and ourselves? These questions seem to return at times of major upheaval, when dramatic transformations rupture commonsense appearances and refashion ways of living. Today, there are many reasons to believe we are living through one of those moments in history: declarations of permanent war, hyper-financialization, mega-urbanization, abandoned utopias, security panics, global protest, the impossibility of communication, the pervasive penetration of communication media into every social crevice, and metastasizing economic crisis. These processes and transformations, many of which echo the key themes explored by the artists that participated in the 2009 exhibition *Loaded*, have become emblematic of the profound changes that are presently reshaping the world. We constantly hear about and experience them daily in myriad ways, yet, as the exhibition title suggests, the intensity of their sheer materiality is enough to confound our understanding of their deepest consequences.

Some of the most tangible effects of today's global financialization and deregulation include unprecedented socio-economic inequality, retrenchment of the social wage, and a dramatic restructuring of the world of work. We only need to look at the pallor of the American rustbelt against China's shining new manufacturing zones to see how the de-industrialization of the global north matched staggering, rapid proletarianization in the global south. Not surprisingly, the past three or four decades of exodus from the global countryside to the factory floors have propelled the urbanization of marginality alongside extreme wealth on a scale never seen before. At the cultural level, an increasingly concentrated, privatized, and homogenized global communication industry has fueled a heightened valorization of "information" and expansive connectivity, enabling the media sphere to envelop more and more aspects of daily life.

But these profound structural transformations have also produced deliberate political responses around the world. One response is found in the startling numbers of people in both the global north and global south who are mobilizing around religious fundamentalism, open and proud xenophobia, blustering patriotism, resurgent patriarchalism, militarism, and an apparently growing appreciation for claims to cultural superiority. Their forms of protest to job loss, spiraling precarity, cultural degradation, and the corrosion of social worlds are multi-faceted and dynamic, but what many share is an impulse toward radical exclusion and the ideological elevation of rigid social conformity. This reactive politics finds its most passionate expression in an increasingly authoritarian political atmosphere that reverberates across much of the cultural terrain, finding powerful spokespeople across the media spectrum and even in governments and institutions of law. In the United States, for example, this politics of exclusion has erupted in an assortment of protest movements, most notably the "Minute Men" anti-immigrant militias and the anti-tax and anti-government "Tea Party" uprising. Analogous, but culturally resonant, reaction has flared up across much of Europe, where an unleashing of xenophobic sentiment and exclusionary political movements has led to the electoral success of parties like France's National Front, the British National Party, and Italy's Northern League.

A standard culturalist analysis of these frightening developments posits that the significance of the backlash movements lies in their expressive capacities as well as in their demonstrative proof of humanity's primordial irrationality. But what is significant about these resurgent exclusionary protest movements is that rather than targeting the material foundation of the structural changes underway, they are responding to their psychological effects in terms of disempowerment, dispossession, a sense of insecurity, feelings of superfluousness, disrupted identities, alienation, and so on. This appears in radical contrast with the cycle of struggle that erupted in the form of a counter-globalization movement of the past decade. This movement's significance has arguably consisted of bringing into focus a politics of structural transformation rather than a decontextualized and fearful expression of disaffection and loss. The movement's anti-sweatshop discourse, for instance, focused on the new industrial geography of exploitation, drawing connections between de-industrialization and industrialization and conditions of southern production and northern consumption. The ecology and anti-militarism components of the movement articulated the connection between wanton destruction and shareholder capitalism. Culture jamming and tactical media intervened on the level of perception to critique both the commodification of the visual environment and cultural dispossession. Yet for all of its passionate and well-conceived critiques of the neoliberal mode of capitalism, the alter-globalization movement has been unable to galvanize more broadly the widespread repudiation of metastasizing disaffection around the outright rejection of accumulation by dispossession.

One of this "movement of movements" chief political effects was to articulate forms of thought and action capable of grasping the millennial challenges bearing down on planetary society. In the overdeveloped world, where political protest had become an increasingly staid affair, it performed radical interventions at the level of societal perception. And its transformation of the lexicon of street protest into artistic intervention offered a glimpse at a potential cultural free-for-all. This utopian impulse reinvented, by way of return, a much older set of desires along with

their attendant historical controversies: to collapse the distinction between art and politics, between politics and everyday life, and between artist and political subject. Its actions brought the crisis of representation in the realm of formal politics and the politics of representation in the terrain of artistic practice into productive tension.

Some important questions remain unanswered in that moment's wake. Why is it, then, that in difficult times, so many of us on this planet become attracted to movements of radical exclusion rather than movements of radical social transformation? How is it that forms of protest that do not address the actual structural foundations of dispossession and disaffection seem to have so much more cultural resonance than those that do? Are we facing a crisis of the political imagination?

These questions speak to the central themes that preoccupied Marxist-utopian psychoanalyst Erich Fromm from the 1930s through to his death in 1980. In his work, Fromm elaborated on a materialist psychoanalytic critique of capitalist society, showing how material conditions not only give rise to material impacts but also produce concrete and identifiable effects on the psyche. Such effects find their most transformative and controversial manifestation in moments of overflowing crisis, when emergent aesthetic and cultural expression can pose new possibilities, but also articulate dangerous passions such as rigid devotion to authority, virulent xenophobia, and "contempt for the weak."[1] Today, in a world weighed down by growing inequality and dispossession, Fromm's ideas stands up against the resurgent lazy vogue of social Darwinism, a theoretical trend that finds its own justification in the naturalization of a society based on savage competition.

Here I would like to propose that Fromm's insights open up analytically useful ways of thinking about the contemporary rise of protest forms that are based on a politics of defensive reaction. The resonance of his work springs from his efforts to understand the psychic dimension of the dialectical tension between the individual and society as it developed through the history of capitalist modernity, and more specifically, of what he determined was the inversion of bourgeois society's positive *idea* of freedom into a negative *experience* of freedom. In the 1940s, Fromm wrote about the rise of fascism in Europe and the culture of conformity in liberal democracies that were increasingly organized around a marketing-oriented consumer culture.[2] While they may be substantively different, these two opposing political forms were connected, he argued, by the problem of freedom in capitalist society. As he saw it, bourgeois modernity gained its legitimacy and dynamism through its embrace of principles of freedom. Capitalism necessitates freedom, its proponents never cease to argue, and in this proposition they find support for the belief that it must be ethically as well as materially superior to other forms of social and economic organization.

But capitalist freedom comes in two parts: the freedom that workers have to sell their labour power and the freedom that capitalists possess to buy and trade commodities on an open market. What Fromm found was that even though capitalist modernity was said to be built on freedom *to* sell and buy, its effect was to compel its labouring subjects to seek freedom *from* this hyper-individualized and highly insecure definition of freedom. After all, having the freedom to sell their labour power has rarely given workers any guarantees about the ability to find a buyer or to earn enough sustenance from the transaction. By assuming a monopoly character, Fromm argued, capitalism created the conditions in which surplus alienation thrives: people were catapulted out of tight-knit communal worlds, such as those that characterized medieval society, into a narrowly individualized mode of existence. Because this process

of separation and individuation is ongoing, Fromm was able to see in it the production of unbearable feelings of insignificance and powerlessness. Not surprisingly, the advance of capitalism has always provoked a desire to escape the intolerable burden of negative freedom.

In thinking about the enormous changes that have taken place over the last forty years, what is important to retain from Fromm's analysis is his argument that the development of capitalist society had effect not only at the material level but also at the level of the psyche. This is an insight that artists have often taken much more seriously that many of our critical scholars and political commentators. What Fromm recognized is that people do not simply absorb and adapt to the conditions hoisted upon them by a changing world. They actively seek to deal with the psychic as well as the material effects of those changes. Fromm built his analysis of the effects of modern capitalism on the psyche in an effort to understand the rise of popular Nazism in post-World War I Germany. In the particular circumstances of that time and place, he argued that people's search for an escape from negative freedom was enacted in large part through widespread submission to the external authority provided by Hitler's Nazi Party and a passionate nationalism. But it is clear that today we are no longer contending with the specific context of Germany in the 1930s. So how do we think about the effects of contemporary capitalism? We know that global capitalism has undergone profound transformations since the end of World War II, especially over the last forty years, when the prevailing neoliberal discourse and style of government have explicitly equated capitalism to freedom. We can certainly take stock of the dramatic material effects of these transformations. But what about their effects on the contemporary psyche? How do these differ from those that made up the particular subject of Fromm's study? Could it be that they have something to do with the ways that people today protest the material conditions of their lives?

The questions I've raised here are in urgent need of attention. Taking them seriously will require not only the energy and efforts of activists and researchers but also the work of artists engaged in critical aesthetic production. At historical moments such as ours, propelled by a surplus of negative freedom, it becomes critical to ascertain the conditions under which aesthetic practices can intervene politically and take us beyond the constraints of the present and free our stiffening political imaginations. "The aesthetic," Brian Holmes reminds us, "goes beyond knowledge and prescription, to touch you where you live, in your body, with others."[3] To become art, however, the aesthetic must find expression in a context of freedom. Artists engaged in political thinking, research, and expressive action today are forced to confront the restrictive negative freedom that capitalism imposes, and break through to the positive kind of freedom that Fromm so brilliantly called for. The trick, as Holmes proposes, is to use art's "circuit, calendar, format, and economy, without being overly affected by its standards of axiomatic neutrality or its competitive relations."[4]

In this regard, the startlingly wide-ranging works that made up *Loaded* suture new perceptual interventions to a world of metastasizing turbulence. The exhibition's expansive, searching thematics—the contortions of the iconic business suit, the ghostly presence of the 1960s and the prevailing cynicism of political legacies, the possibilities suggested by post-humanist experimentation crushing up against enduring utopian possibilities among them—evoke a planet hovering on the precipice of historic social change and a society that has always been there. The exhibition was brought into a world reeling from global economic meltdown, images of violence, bad public information, and surplus cultural confusion in order to create an aperture for the articulation of political speech at a moment when new lexicons could not be more vital.

NOTES

1. See Rainer Funk, "The Continuing Relevance of Erich Fromm," *International Erich Fromm Society* (2009), http://www.erich-fromm.de/biophil/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=189:the-continuing-relevance-of-erich-fromm&catid=34:statisch (accessed 14 January 2010).

2. Erich Fromm, *The Fear of Freedom* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, and Co., Ltd., 1941).

3. Brian Holmes, "The Oppositional Device. Or, Taking Matters in Whose Hands?," in *Taking the Matter into Common Hands: On Contemporary Art and Collaborative Practices*, ed. Johanna Billing, Maria Lind, and Lars Nilsson (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2007), 38.

4. Ibid., 41.