On the Creative Question – Nine Theses

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'Culture attracts the worst impulses of the moneyed, it has no honor, it begs to be suburbanized and corrupted'. — Thomas Pynchon, *Bleeding Edge*

'We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars'. — Oscar Wilde

1. Goodbye to Creative Industries

A creepy discourse on creativity has captured cultural and economic policy. Creativity invokes a certain pharmacological numbness among its spruikers – a special sub-species entirely unaware of how far removed their version of creativity is from radical invention and social transformation. Their claims around the science of economy are little more than a shoddy con. While 'creativity' is increasingly seen as a main driver of economic development, the permanent reference to creative classes, creative cities, creative industries, creative innovations and so on has rendered the notion all but meaningless. Degraded to a commercial and political marketing tool, the semantic content of creativity has been reduced to an insipid spread of happy homogeneity – including the right amount of TED-styled fringe misfits and subcultures – that can be bureaucratically regulated and 'valorized'. To this rhetoric corresponds a catalogue of 'sectors' and 'clusters' labelled as creative industries: a radically disciplined and ordered subdomain of the economy, a domesticated creative commons where 'innovators' and 'creatives' harmoniously co-mingle and develop their auto-predictive 'disruptions' of self-quantification, sharing and gamification. Conflict is anathema to the delicate sensibilities of personas trading in creative consultancy.

2. Welcome to the Creative Question

The creative question has replaced the social question. In the 20th century the consequences and problems of industrial capitalism found a temporary solution in the class compromise of the welfare state. In digital capitalism we have to address the social question in terms of the creative question: what is

today's source of value and who owns it? We need to turn the pompous, meaningless chatter on creativity into a debate on how to come out on the positive side of the digital *pharmakon* (the nuanced combination of all things good and evil). To those who tell you 'how we are going to live twenty years from now', shout them down with ideas of how you *want* to live in twenty years!

3. Creativity without Abundance

We hear so much about the supposed 'economy of abundance' in the age of its digital reproducibility. Yet such abundance remains a phantom as long as it is a surplus for the final few. We need to talk about the redistribution of abundance. Piketty has to be updated for the internet age. We urgently need to get a better understanding of how 'extreme inequality' translates into digital culture. The question here is not one of 'selling out'. The new cultures of decentralized networks have turned into an Bataillian orgy of generosity: a 'sharing-by-default-economy' where the gift has lost its power of social reciprocity. Today, the economy is no longer based on abundance or redistribution of (common) wealth. Instead, there is a 'winner takes all' logic exacerbated by the speed of implementation and scaling.

4. Industry without Investment

Overall, capital has withdrawn from the creative sectors. This, despite the predominance of the economy within the work of creativity. Creative industries were all set to enter an economy of indistinction: the arts were supposed to be no different from mining, agriculture or car manufacturing. Except this didn't happen. Though the factory did, and so the cognitariat march on. With the withdrawal of public money the sector suffered from overall disinvestment. Investments were never made, and perhaps never will be due to the prevailing Ideology of the Free. But what's our critique beyond this banal observation of increasingly shrinking opportunities? Gentrification? We know that's a key part of the story. Pumping bucks into infrastructure to support innovation? That still goes on in the IT sector. But artists aren't part of that world. Instead they migrate to 'maker culture' – an economy entirely hooked into 'supply chain capitalism' (Tsing), as much as hipsters prefer the axiom of 'authenticity'. It is the old undercover story: artists can only participate if they reinvent themselves and morph into another role.

5. There is no Creative Ecology

Creative industries policy started with the ambition of setting up creative ecologies where ideas and innovation can be born, mature and thrive. However, these creative ecologies rarely materialize beyond the one-off success story. The massive invention of new business models for artists and cultural producers has not yet happened. As soon as original concepts were 'hatched', these creative ideas took flight to the highest bidder. In the digital real-time economy, prototype practices are left naked and abandoned, without the means to develop an auto-immune system to protect against the predatory speed of vulture capitalism. How, then, to proliferate the concept so that it holds a transformative effect in ways that refuse accountability? Memes, remixes and viral culture are now so well established within the repertoire of dispersal that they've become mainstreamed into oblivion. Shadow worlds without PRISM staring down your most radical gesture are now on the agenda. Invert the Right to Forget and we get a memory that cannot be contained. Storage without a trace is a key strategy for practices of anonymity and a commons beyond expropriation. USB libraries, blue-tooth networks, off-the-grid computing – these are just some of the options that register radical practice outside the stack.

6. Shadow and Time

We suggest two principles here: shadow and time. *Shadow* is an unintended consequence, an event vacuum, which remains invisible for passers-by. It does not register on the development maps of the managerial class. *Time* is needed in order for the substantially different to grow. Maturation, which is creative growth, requires time. Don't be afraid of the cycle. Who's afraid of the *longue durée*? The time of creativity is that of idleness and procrastination, indeed *otium.* This turns out to be the opposite of frantic entrepreneurship and instant valorization. This is why creative industries policy can only propose fixed formats and known concepts: template capitalism. Maker labs, with their standard 3D printers and software, can only produce more of the same. Open source is not the solution to this problem. Neither is it sufficient to place the wild, weird bohème at the helm.

7. Sharing without Caring

Right now there is a structural dissonance between the wonderful ideas of our creatives and their social and economic efficacy. The lack of creative ecology means that today's great idea for a better society turns into tomorrow's unemployed taxi drivers and homeless city dwellers. Welcome to platform monopoly capitalism. Groupon, AirBNB, Uber, MyWheels and

countless others. Here, we do not witness so much a gross violation of the rules of appropriation as an attempt to reshape existing economic activities and drive labour to its bones: a disruption without a cause. Let's not delude ourselves: we are not sharing anything when we rate the last wretched soul who gave us a cheap lift with his Uber cab. We do not share anything when we drive a Hertz or Avis rental car (except our likes). Sharing only happens in the absence of market transactions. And it doesn't have to 'scale'. This begs the question: can we still speak of creative industries, which in Europe's policy world (and beyond) rests on the economization of culture? Everyone is keenly aware of the fact that Creative Industries as a policy meme has passed its use-by date. This is why we need to warn ourselves: changing labels will not help us much. This makes deconstruction of the term by itself into such an impotent gesture. The problem of economy, of life, of invention persist no matter what the paradigm.

8. Save Our Social Innovation

'Social innovation' is a great buzzword in the global consultancy class. In spite of its rhetoric, it means imposing innovation through market and semi-marketization mechanisms. Design thinking is hauled in to solve problems that the existing political class is unable to deal with. Concept maps are drawn, emptied of aesthetics. Social innovation is not so much a class war instrument to destroy rebellious militants but rather a smoke screen, a theatre play. It amounts to 'social solutionism' – a Baudrillardian performance in which the signifiers are no longer autonomous, living entities but have progressed into diligent workers exhausting themselves in fervent gymnastics of simulated salvation. We should not think of Artaud or Beckett, but rather of a bureaucratic variation of a reality TV show featuring best practice examples as positive change heroes. Instead of this performative project focus on processual management we should celebrate the mystery of the social as event.

9. Creative Political Recovery

Let's conclude that the market cannot respond effectively to the challenges presented by the Creative Question. Substituting democratic politics with collaborative design solutions exacerbates the problems. Taking 'social innovation' seriously means to think about the design of non-scalable communities, creative save-havens and post-digital makers. These are emphatically political challenges. Circumventing politics by way of social design is a dead-end. It repeats the technocratic mistakes that have lead to

the incapacitation of politics in the first place. To regain efficacy requires a shift into high risk politics, a politics that has the guts to take decisions about our injured future. No more matching. No more outsourcing of liabilities to third parties. We need a creative political recovery that dreams up new organizational forms able to confront the Creative Question.