

The Cart Pulling the Horse

Artists, Capitalists, and Saint-Simon's Theory of the Avant-Garde

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RECENTLY RAN ACROSS A COUPLE OF OLD acquaintances, both leaders at minor British art schools. The conversation quickly turned to the lamentable state of arts higher education. Despite their valiant efforts to reform and defend their institutions, the job of training new artists has become a managerial nightmare. Capitalism's assault on the very idea of art was succeeding. Preparing a new generation for the battle is now harder but more important than ever. If not artists, one of my friends rhetorically inquired, who might ever break the ever-tightening noose of capital?

I was puzzled by this projection. Not because I do not recognize the decline of the art school but because I didn't understand how my colleagues could complain about the institution's rot when it is they who are in charge of it.¹ Who, if not educators, turned art academies into factories of personal debt, gave birth to the myth of the "creative industries," and is seeding demonstrably indefensible political positions in the minds of young artists?

Blaming "neoliberal capitalism" seemed like a cop-out. Turning from detective into prosecutor, I wondered if it were not, in fact,

artists themselves who invited capitalism into their studio, earmarking its every weakness for cooptation, commercialization, and neutralization. This was a slanderous charge, and my colleagues were not amused. Did I mean to suggest that everything that is politically useful in art eventually turns against itself because rather than instead of artists' best intentions?

The mechanism bears re-examining. We are familiar with narratives, popularized in the 20th century by the likes of Walter Benjamin and Herbert Marcuse, that position artists as agents of the common good who battle against the politics of oppression which rages beyond art.² We know, from Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, and more recently Mark Fisher, that capital subsumes art's resistance and turns it into a commodity that entraps both producers and consumers in a vicious cycle.³ Numerous

2 Walter Benjamin, *The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction*, trans. J. A Underwood, 2008; Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978).

3 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, "'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,'" in *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2002); Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Lanham: John Hunt Publishing, 2009), chap. 2.

1 Pierre d'Alancaisez, "Say No to Art School," petitpoi.net, 7 August 2022, petitpoi.net/say-no-to-art-school-manifesto.

artistic accounts, like Hans Haacke's or Hito Steyerl's, critique the corrupting influence that art collectors and patrons have on artists and art institutions.⁴

While multiple accounts of the co-optation of critical artistic initiatives have emerged over the past century, they, broadly, presuppose that the political initiative lies with the artist. Without using the term, they are invested in the notion of the avant-garde, that is the profound emancipatory potential of novel artistic practices. In describing the state of the art world today, they agree that historic avant-garde movements failed when their aesthetics became detached from their politics, or when the politics itself became corrupted. This fracture affects aesthetic movements.⁵ The critic Benjamin Buchloh, for example, condemned neo-avant-garde formations such as Abstract Expressionism for sacrificing their politics to the cultural industry's commercial rewards.⁶ Organizational formations, likewise, are susceptible to perversion. Marc James Léger critiqued the crassly commercial proliferation of international art biennials in 2014 when only a decade earlier, these events had been heralded as critical tools for social and economic development through the popularization of contemporary art.⁷

My art school colleagues are familiar with these accounts, and they are invested in them. The notion that an elite group could lead the social transformation of their field, if not society at large, is compelling,

not least for the elite itself. It doesn't seem to unsettle their commitment that the political successes of art's vanguardist tendencies have been few and far between (Buchloh, for example, looks as far back as Dada and Surrealism for a victory).

The problem with this view of art as politically positive, and capital as the oppressive villain, is that it allows for a friend-enemy separation between the spheres of the art world and beyond. Art liberates, capital oppresses. Art forges new paths, capital bulldozes them. Artists have ideas, capital steals them. This is a death spiral. But when capital's subversion of vanguardist ideas catches up with the artist, the theory spurs him on into another doomed leap.

There have been attempts at nuance, of course. The theorist Peter Bürger, for example, understood vanguardism in quasi-class terms as a challenge to art's bourgeois tendencies, instilling an opposition between political art and what he confusingly termed "autonomous" practice.⁸ The later trend of institutional critique provided an alternative narrative which critiqued the art institution from within, yet somehow evaded responsibility for its conduct. It was epitomized by the artist Andrea Fraser (Figure 1)⁹, who came closer than any of her peers to suggesting that artists were implicated in capital's work. Political theorists like David Graeber, meanwhile, have critiqued the idea of vanguardism altogether, promoting instead horizontal modes of political organizing.¹⁰

Art has been so unsuccessful at outpacing capital's hostile mimicry that the idea of the avant-garde has lost its critical appeal. But even if the terminology has changed,

4 Hans Haacke, *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971, 1971*, photograph, 1971, whitney.org/collection/works/29487; Hito Steyerl, *Duty Free Art* (New York: Verso, 2017).

5 Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, 12. print (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1985).

6 Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "'Theorizing the Avant-Garde,'" *Art in America*, November 1984.

7 Marc James Léger, "'Art and Art History After Globalisation,'" *Third Text* 26, no. 5 (September 2012): 515–27, doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2012.712767.

8 Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, [1984], 2016).

9 Andrea Fraser, "'From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique,'" *Artforum International*, 2005.

10 David Graeber, "'The Twilight of Vanguardism,'" *The Anarchist Library*, 2003, theanarchistlibrary.org/library/david-graeber-the-twilight-of-vanguardism.



Figure 1 Andrea Fraser, *Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk* (1989), video still of performance. Courtesy Galerie Nagel Draxler, Berlin. Copyright: Andrea Fraser. Photo: © Tate

the understanding of art and capital as antagonists prevails. This is the assumption, in my colleague's description of the art school's downfall, to which I objected. To challenge it, I want to rehabilitate the idea of an avant-garde from a different source. Not the avant-garde of Constructivism or Dada promoted by Buchloh, but the often-misremembered 1825 origin of the term in the writings of the social theorist Henri Saint-Simon.¹¹

Two centuries on, Saint-Simon's historical circumstances bear some resemblance to the conditions that drive aspects of the art world today. Working in the shadow of the French Revolution and at the dawn of industrial transformation, the theorist attempted to construct a technocratic state

socialism that would cater to the interests of a broad industrial class which included workers and capitalists. Like many thinkers today, he wanted to dissolve the barriers between art, politics, and life and reserved a special leadership role for artists in designing the social settlement.

For Saint-Simon, artists would be the avant-garde—literally the advanced reconnaissance branch—of a triumvirate of artists, scientists, and industrialists that shaped the state. In his view, the cooperation of all these three spheres was necessary for sustainable human development. Artists would be the essential visionaries who ensured that knowledge and industry followed the path of progress, providing inspiration and creativity in the service of knowledge and action. In this utopian integralist vision, the avant-garde was not opposed to capital: it was industry's most trusted partner.

¹¹ Claude-Henri de Saint-Simon, *Opinions Littéraires, Philosophiques et Industrielles*. (Paris: Bossange père, 1825), 341, ark.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb31285249m.public.



Figure 2 documenta fifteen: Jatiwangi art Factory, New Rural Agenda Summit, June 21, 2022. Fridericianum, Kassel, Germany. Photo: Martha Friedel.

Saint-Simon's master plan is rarely invoked today but his vision of the willing synergy between art and capital has, indeed, come true. The 2022 edition of Documenta, the art world's most significant event held every five years in Kassel, vindicated the French thinker. This show was an ambitious attempt to introduce vanguardist new forms of practice in the global art community. Without admitting so, it oriented art to capital in ways envisaged by Saint-Simon.

The exhibition was organized along ostensibly non-hierarchical principles by the Indonesian collective *ruangrupa* who invited countless other artists and collective to join them in a project named *lumbung* after a practice of collective agriculture (Figure 2).¹²

Many participants came from parts of the so-called Global South which are not yet formally incorporated into the infrastructure of the global art world.¹³ The 100-day, city-wide project promised to workshop novel ways of political organizing, friendly cooperation, and artistic co-creation that might inspire self-governing development in the formerly unincorporated parts of the art world. The vision promised to make real the political horizontality championed by Graeber.

Marking the peak of the Western art world's obsession with decolonization, *lumbung* hoped to induce a grassroots-democratic shock in the art world. Reception at the opening in Kassel, however, was mixed and reflected the amorphous project's confused

12 Samanth Subramanian, "A Radical Collective Takes Over One of the World's Biggest Art Shows," *The New York Times*, 9 June 2022, sec. Magazine, www.nytimes.com/2022/06/09/magazine/ruangrupa-documenta.html.

13 Artnet News, "Thousands of Artists Are Participating in Documenta 15. Here's the Most Comprehensive List to Date," Artnet News, 15 June 2022, news.artnet.com/art-world/artist-list-documenta-15-2130911.

and poorly articulated political principles.¹⁴ *lumbung's* subaltern masses were to be at once inspiring indigenous sages and debtors in the bank of Western liberalism. A public relations crisis soon unfolded over accusations of antisemitism in a small number of the show's thousands of artworks.¹⁵ The scandal was so severe that despite playing host to hundreds of art activists and dozens of events and actions, *lumbung* realized little of its vanguardist promise.

Examined from the perspective of capital, however, the project was an unmitigated success. Gossip had it that *ruangrupa* was once supported by the Ford Foundation and that, therefore, its supposedly grassroots, non-Western political instincts were the fabrications of a culturally imperialist NGO. This kind of arrangement isn't unusual, but the issue didn't stop there. I discovered that *ruangrupa* and other *lumbung* participants were closely tied to the Dutch grant-giving foundation DOEN. This NGO seconded its program manager Gertrude Flentge to Documenta 15's curatorial board, and the foundation itself appeared on the project's website as an artistic collaborator rather than a sponsor.¹⁶ The relationship between the funder and the artistic groups had been nothing short of incestuous for years, with the

artists and the funder taking turns singing each other's praises.¹⁷

The most insidious aspect of the project was the difficulty of discerning whether *lumbung's* core ideas originated in *ruangrupa's* Jakarta art center or DOEN's corporate headquarters in Amsterdam. Was the exhibition in Kassel a cruel opportunity for Global South art aspirants to market their vulnerabilities to Western capital in return for their incorporation into the liberal art canon? Were Indonesian intellectuals foregoing their sovereignty in the name of progress mapped out by the West?

The problem with the view of art as politically positive, and capital as the oppressive villain, is that it allows for a near-Manichean separation between the spheres of the art world and beyond.

The relationship between *ruangrupa* and DOEN entirely discredited any reading of *lumbung* as non-hierarchical. The antisemitism scandal, however, entirely occluded these aspects of the project. Hardly anyone noticed that *lumbung* was the apex achievement of Western cultural imperialism. Contrary to the organizers' statements, Documenta 15 was not a radical political art project devised by artists and merely sponsored by benevolent capitalists keen to "artwash" their reputations. No, *lumbung* was a research mission mounted by a consortium of artists from the Global South and their Western counterparts who are experts in the development of grassroots

14 Pierre d'Alancaisez, "Decentralised Non-Autonomous Organisation," *Petitpoi.Net* (blog), 19 June 2022, petitpoi.net/decentralised-non-autonomous-organisation.

15 Catherine Hickley, "New Antisemitism Scandal Hits Documenta as Panel Member Resigns," *The Art Newspaper*, 14 November 2024, www.theartnewspaper.com/2023/11/14/new-anti-semitism-scandal-hits-documenta-as-panel-member-resigns.

16 "Artistic Team: Gertrude's Story," *documenta fifteen*, accessed 5 October 2022, documenta-fifteen.de/en/news/artistic-team-gertrudes-story. "Announcement of Further Invited Participants by the Lumbung Members and Artists of Documenta Fifteen," *documenta fifteen*, 2022, documenta-fifteen.de/en/press-releases/announcement-of-further-invited-participants-by-the-lumbung-members-and-artists-of-documenta-fifteen.

17 *Walkie Talkie #2* (Gudskul, 2020), www.youtube.com/watch?v=GeJeV3_ugYA.

infrastructures for ideological propagation. Their work was underwritten by quasi-charitable organizations whose *raison d'être* is the expansion of capitalism as the ideology of human development. The project's key outcome was the extension of Western cultural capital hegemony to many previously unenfranchised constituencies.

What if avant-garde artists are the master planners of capital hegemonies and not merely conformists?

Such talk is off-limits in the art world, however. As I unsuccessfully pitched my critique of *lumbung* to art and cultural magazines in 2022, I remembered Documenta's track record of promoting new artistic paradigms that later revealed themselves to be in full accord with capitalism (the 1955 edition included a display of Abstract Expressionist painting covertly sponsored by the CIA).¹⁸ One editor outright told me that "artists are not this stupid." Perhaps. But how does one theorize the project's uneasy marriage of art and capital? Indonesian contemporary art is still too young to have been subsumed by the cultural industry in the manner described by Adorno. The members of ruangrupa could hardly be portrayed as sell-outs for accepting the invitation to curate the world's most prestigious art event. To call Gertrude Flentge Documenta 15's greatest artist was gratifying, but somehow tenuous, given that both she and her employer refused to answer questions about their role in the project.

18 Mirl Redmann, 'Beyond Nationalism? Blank Spaces at the Documenta 1955', *Art@s Bulletin* 9, no. 1 (2020): 29–43.

Galit Eilat, one of the few critics who reflected on the exhibition's complex relationship with its funders and animators, described the exhibition as pioneering a "friendship industry." This idea encapsulates the project's conflicts of interest, but doesn't account for their willing alignment.¹⁹ An industrial settlement would allow ruangrupa to insist that *lumbung* was a radical proposal for the reorganization of social, political, and material relationships between actors in the West and the developing world, with art as the center for innovation. DOEN would claim that its work, which involves numerous small arts organizations from the Global South, is an exercise for learning, and the fact that the foundation holds all the cash is of no consequence.

If "learning from *lumbung*" (as ruangrupa described their work) addresses the role of the artist and the savant in Saint-Simon's model for technocratic statecraft, the industrialist was quick to catch up. A 2023 video work by the Turkish artist Köken Ergun provided a bizarre counterpoint to *lumbung's* soft power play directed at Indonesia. Ergun's musical skit *China, Beijing, I Love You* lampoons the country's attempts to gain control of Indonesia's natural resources such as lithium and bauxite under the guise of international friendship. The video is a catchy and effective piece of propaganda aimed at protecting Indonesia from China's imperialism (Figure 3).

China, Beijing, I Love You! was presented in Berlin in an exhibition concerning seafaring and imperialism in the Global South, unconnected to Documenta.²⁰ Its outlook, as well as its funding and commissioning,

19 Galit Eilat, "Ruangrupa: Contemporary Art or Friendship Industry?" *TripleAmpersand Journal* (&&&), 24 March 2024, tripleampersand.org/ruangrupa-contemporary-art-or-friendship-industry.

20 "Indigo Waves and Other Stories: Re-Navigating the Afrasian Sea and Notions of Diaspora," Gropius Bau, 2023, www.berlinerfestspiele.de/en/gropius-bau/programm/2023/ausstellungen/indigo-waves/ausstellungstexte.

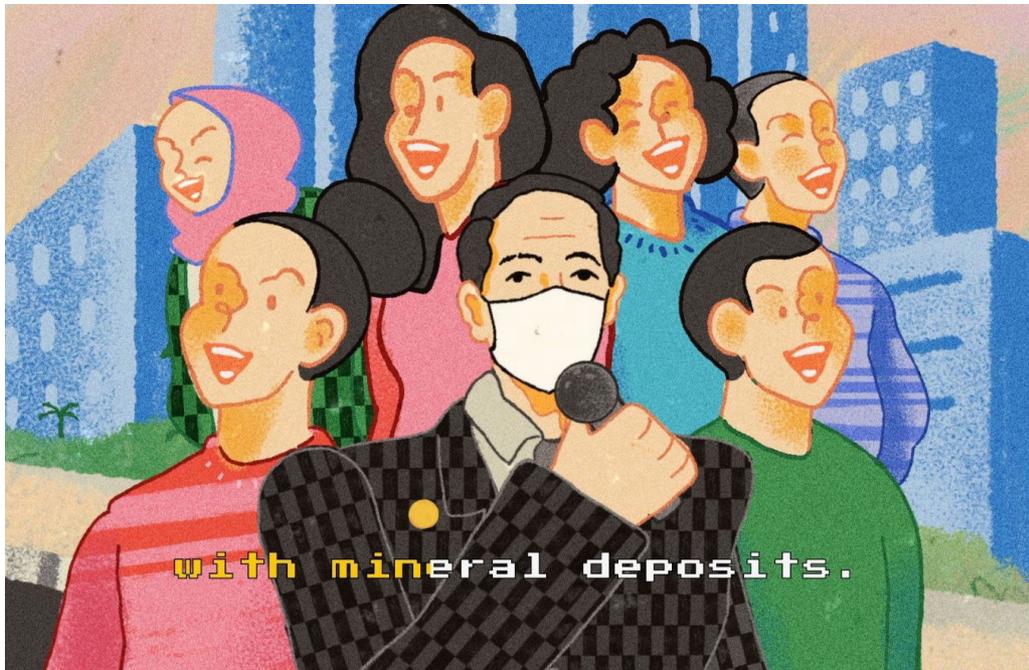


Figure 3 Köken Ergun, *China, Beijing, I Love You*, 2023 (still from video). Courtesy the artist.

however, bore an uncanny resemblance to the Kassel exhibition's. The ideological link between ruangrupa's pro- Western friendship industry and Ergun's backer's dig at China's less nuanced deployment of the same techniques is difficult to unsee. In both, art and capital exist in a symbiosis that gives artists the leading edge, at each step encouraging technocratic industrialists to reaffirm their positions. Both endorse Western imperialism as vehicles for human progress. Both are wrapped in xenophobia (condemning antisemitism, encouraging Sinophobia) spearheaded by artists. Ergun's piece had European art world insiders nodding along. It failed, however, to inspire even a hint of reflection on the West's industrial interest in Indonesia's rare earths.

What if avant-garde artists are the master planners of capital hegemonies and not merely conformists? Aren't they the cart tugging on the horse of capitalism, and forward? Contemporary art has finally implemented

Saint-Simon's 19th-century ideas, proving his belief in their socially benevolent effects to be somewhat naïve. The Frenchman's designs did consider the risk of artists becoming uncritical mouthpieces for the industrial class's excesses. But in his view, the risk wasn't that proximity to power would corrupt artists. Instead, Saint-Simon feared a collective failure to uphold a vision of human progress.

For Saint-Simon, preventing such a collapse was a shared responsibility of the triumvirate. In ascribing it, he understood the industrial class as composed of wage workers and industrialists alike. Their shared lot was the theory's key safeguard because it necessitated the consideration of both the groups' interests—and the interests of artists as internal to that class, too. One of those interests was the cultivation of a certain liberty for innovation, and therefore for critique, as a necessary condition for the triumvirate's work.

A world vision shared by all classes isn't unappealing. Perhaps it is also unattainable.



Figure 4 Les moines de Ménilmontan ou les capacités Saint-Simoniennes. The Verville-Martenet press, 1832. Public domain.

In his later life, Saint-Simon played host to a quasi-religious salon-cum-colony of worker intellectuals. His guests were referred to as "monks" in the press because they each contributed to the project practically- as cooks or carpenters- in accordance with their capabilities. The internal workings of this commune had more than a passing aesthetic resemblance to the communal living (Figure 4).

The trial aside, Saint-Simon's more serious proposals for artists, and his articulation of their relationship to capitalism, never received a fair test. His ideas were superseded in no small part by a far broader vision of the avant-garde that emerged from the work of Karl Marx. The Communist Manifesto

separated workers from the industrialist class and critiqued Saint-Simon triumvirate as authoritarian.²¹ Marxism neither privileged artists the way Saint-Simon did, nor did it condemn it alongside capitalists. The artist class, therefore, could earn its position within the revolutionary elite on ostensible merit. It could do this either on material grounds, or by denouncing the capitalists and siding with the workers.

Despite being inextricably linked with the professional-managerial class, if not the bourgeoisie, today's artistic cadres do not

21 David Cottingham, *The Avant-Garde: A Very Short Introduction*, 1st ed, Very Short Introductions 342 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), chap. 1.

recognize Saint-Simon's description of their social role. Delusionally, they prefer still to identify with Marx's proletariat. Their neglect of Saint-Simonian principles has allowed them to remain blind in the dance between art and capital which they often lead. Understandably, they do not wish to be reminded of their responsibilities. This is why my art school colleagues see themselves as capitalism's conscientious objectors, despite occupying elevated management positions within its institutions.

Are artists, to respond to that editor, "this stupid" after all? This cliffhanger has no answer. Pressed for a practical example of his model triumvirate contributing to human progress, Saint-Simon was forced to look as far as ancient Egypt and Persia. It is unlikely that his vision could today inspire a radical change in the art world, and even less so that it could decisively redirect the course of capital. His description of the artist's role in shaping the world today, however, should inspire some painful introspection. ㄹ