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Introduction

Art, 'Enclave Theory' and the Communist Imaginary

John Roberts

What is rarely discussed with the recent rise of relational and post-relational aesthetics is its reflection on communist form and the communist imaginary.¹ Indeed Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* is not just indebted to the aesthetic informalities of post-conceptual postmodernism (aesthetic drift, intertextuality, anti-form), or to the whole gamut of post-1960s sociability in art,² but, more precisely, to the general reflections on communist practice and communist form on the French left in the 1980s and early 1990s. This is a heterodox tradition (Deleuze and Guattari, Nancy, Badiou) in which communist form and practice is both de-Stalinised politically and *re-aestheticised* culturally. In this regard the early Marx's emphasis on the radical and revolutionary function of *Bildung* (communities of collective self-learning) comes to define non-statist and autonomous forms of productive, intellectual and creative community. Accordingly, this political writing, at one level, dovetails with the revival of various autonomist kinds of thinking in Europe during the late 1980s and 1990s which also brings together the critique of Stalinism and neo-liberalism and reflections on cultural form, in particular Toni Negri's political philosophy (although these traditions are by no means convergent). Thus, what Bourriaud borrows from this milieu is a kind of anti-doctrinal communist praxis in which notions of artistic community stand in for a critique of debased public notions of bourgeois community and democracy and the anti-democratic vicissitudes of neo-liberalism as a whole. Suffice it to say, there has been no shortage of this kind of utopian 'enclave' practice and dialogic practice in advanced art from the mid-1960s: the Artists Placement Group, Pete Dunn and Lorraine Leeson, Group Material, Helen and Newton Harrison, and the Critical Art Ensemble all come to mind. But what Bourriaud's writing in the late 1990s codified – certainly within the confines of the international artworld – was the generalised demand and interest in new forms of sociability in art, in a culture that was suffering from neo-liberalism's relentless frontal attack on the remnants of social democracy, and the narrowing of the political. The cultural critique of this new political

1. The exception to the rule being *Make Everything New: A Project on Communism*, Grant Watson, Gerrie van Noord, Gavin Everall, eds Bookworks/Project Arts Centre, London and Dublin 2006.
2. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods, with M Copeland, trans, Les presses du reel, Dijon, 2002

3. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction: Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World*, Lukas & Sternberg, New York, 2000
4. Frederick Engels and Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, Frederic L. Bender, ed, Norton, New York and London, 1988, p 84
5. Frederick Engels and Karl Marx, 'Fictitious Splits in the International', in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol 23, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1987, and Frederick Engels and Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, op cit, 1988, p 84
6. For a recent defence of the utopian imaginary from within the Marxist (Morrisonian) tradition, see Steve Edwards, 'The Colonisation of Utopia', in *William Morris: David Mabb*, Whitworth Art Gallery, University of Manchester, Manchester, 2004. Morris's achievement 'was to accept the Marxist critique of Utopian Socialism while refusing the injunction on thinking about the future: in the process he cast utopianism in an activist mode', p 17
7. See for example, Maria Gough, *The Author as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution*, California University Press, 2005, and Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass, and London, 2005. Both books re-historicise the critical resources and productive aporias of Productivism and Constructivism, as models with ramifications for socialised practices now. That is – certainly in Gough – the factory-based experiments of Productivism in the Soviet Union in the 1920s are shown not to be a finished

settlement was forged, however, as was the libertarian communist writing in the 1980s in France, in conditions of massive political retreat for the working class internationally, particularly after 1989–1990 and the final collapse of Stalinism – despite all the rhetoric of new political times. In this respect Bourriaud's relational theory tends to draw mainly on the utopian-aesthetic motifs of the 1980s libertarian communist turn, at the expense of the tradition's re-politicisation of labour. His model of sociability has little place for artists' collaboration with workers, and art's critique of the value form – a concern of the historic avant-garde (Benjamin and Constructivism) and earlier socially interactive practice – but is grounded in the possibilities of democratic exchange between artist-professionals and non-artistic collaborators and spectators. And this theme, generally, could be said to dominate much contemporary relational and post-relational art practice: 'communist form' – or what Bourriaud calls in the plural a 'communism of forms'³ – is primarily identified with the free exchange of ideas within self-enclosed creative communities. Consequently, in contrast to the classical Marxist tradition with its generalised attack on utopianism,⁴ there is a deliberate braiding here of the communist imaginary with the traditions of a utopian communalism. In conditions of political retreat or 'closure' the function of the communist imaginary is to keep open the ideal horizon of egalitarianism, equality and free exchange; and art, it is judged, is one of the primary spaces where this 'holding operation' is best able to take place. Indeed, this 'holding operation' might be said to be the invariant communist-structure-in-dominance of so much contemporary art that takes its point of departure from relational thinking. As such, there is a bigger picture at stake here.

Any critique of the convergence of the communist imaginary with images of utopian communalism derives, clearly, from the fact that such a convergence is prone to produce all manner of familiar idealisms, substitutionalisms and mystifications in art and politics. This is precisely, and for good reason, the basis of Marx and Engels's critique of communism-posing-as-speculative-utopianism within the First International.⁵ But what is interesting about the status of this critique currently is that the link between the utopian and the communist imaginary is presently far more capacious than any standard or classical ideology-critique of utopianism can neutralise. For, to reverse the usual order of things, utopianism in this current moment actually provides a pathway *through* to communist form and praxis.⁶ This is why we might talk about the burgeoning of a post-Stalinist communist-utopianism across a whole number of cultural practices and theoretical disciplines, in which the redemption of 'communist thinking' and 'communist form' becomes the vehicle for a utopian cultural politics or 'messianic' politics now. Indeed, the utopian imaginary and the communist imaginary converge.⁷ Slavoj Žižek's *In Defense of Lost Causes* (2008) is perhaps the ur-text currently of this reversal: a messianic defence of communist praxis as a utopian disaffirmation of the present:

[T]he eternal Idea of [communist revolution] survives its defeat in socio-historical reality. It continues to lead an underground spectral life of the ghosts of failed utopias, which haunt the future generations, patiently awaiting their next resurrections.⁸

narrative of material failure (as in the standard art-historical and philosophical accounts of the historic avant-garde), but a model of relations between artistic labour and non-artistic labour that remain essentially *undertheorised* for contemporary practice. See also the St Petersburg based, 'new-communist' newspaper/journal, *Chto Delat [What is To be Done]*, which has consistently produced the most invigorating writing on the new relational and post-relational milieu and 'communist' form.

8. Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, Verso, London and New York, 2008, p 207. Indeed, Žižek raises the stakes even further by invoking the eternal revolutionary Idea at the very heart of Stalinism. 'Against the utopia of "mechanized collectivism," high Stalinism of the 1930s stood for the return of ethics at its most violent, as an extreme measure to counteract the threat that traditional moral categories would be rendered meaningless, where unacceptable behaviour would not be perceived as involving the subject's guilt' (p 212). This is why there is a huge outpouring of revolutionary subjectivity during this period despite the purges and oppression; or rather, more accurately, there is a huge outpouring of revolutionary subjectivity *because* of the purges and oppression, in so far as it was beholden on everyone to define their commitments in relation to their comrades and the regime. This is confirmed in Jochen Hellbeck's extraordinary account of the widespread activity of diary writing under high Stalinism, *Revolution on My Mind* (2006). In the spirit of Žižek, Hellbeck sees the generalised practice of confessional and reflective diary

Similarly, in Fredric Jameson's *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (2005) the concept of the 'utopian enclave' in science fiction literature and counter-cultural practices, becomes a covert (discreet) dialogue with the communist tradition:

Such enclaves are something like a foreign body within the social: in them, the differentiation process has momentarily been arrested, so that they remain as it were momentarily beyond the reach of the social and testify to its political powerlessness, at the same time that they offer a space in which new wish images of the social can be elaborated and experimented on.⁹

'Enclave thinking' in art, then, has begun to take on a renewed political significance, in so far as it operates at this conjuncture between utopianism and the communist imaginary, invoking what Lucio Magri has called in a wonderful turn of phrase, 'the stimulus of finding ourselves once again in a crisis of civilization'.¹⁰ In this there is a critical revival of the politics of cultural form that touches on deeper and wider changes within the political economy of art that cannot be dismissed simply as yet another outbreak of speculative artworld silliness and idealism, given the fact that we are witnessing the large-scale production of forms of socialised art work outside the official orbit of the artworld and its mediating institutions.¹¹ Current 'enclave' thinking is the result, not just of a pronounced 'left-shift' in theory and practice, but of the increasing democratic dissolution of the professional boundaries of art production itself, releasing, from below, various microtopian energies and perspectives. In this sense relational aesthetics – a term, it needs to be emphasised, that is far larger than Bourriaud's limited perspective – should be seen as part of a wider and long-term transformation. As Greg Sholette argues, in a fine article on this emergent artistic economy, this shift represents a revitalized convergence between a hidden informal economy of market relations and new forms of extra-artworld sociability:

Unlike the formal economy, this missing mass or dark matter consists of informal systems of exchange, cooperative networks; communal leisure practices; conduits for sharing gossip, fantasy anger, and resentments; and even the occasional self-organized collective that may or not be politically motivated. Within this dark universe, services, goods, information, and in some cases outright contraband are duplicated and distributed, sometimes in the form of bartered exchange and occasionally as gifts that circulate freely, thus always moving and benefiting a particular network or informally defined community. All of this is disconnected, or only partially connected, from the mainstream market. For capitalism to acknowledge this missing mass would require a radical re-definition of the concept of productivity.¹²

In other words, the informal economy of professional non-market artists and non-professional artists and the like presents a growing mass of socialised art activity that, albeit hidden to the art market, now defines the terrain on which art is practised. Relational aesthetics is simply one – disproportionately prominent – response to these new conditions. But, nevertheless, there remains a key question to be answered in response to this new milieu and its extensive range of critical activities: how is art to

writing, in the tradition of *Bildung*, as an 'unending process of work and self-transcendence', carrying with it, in its universal ideal of intense reciprocity between politics and everyday practice, 'relevance to this day'. Significantly, in this sense, there is no mass diaristic culture of *Bildung* under fascism. (*Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary Under Stalin*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass, and London, 2006, pp 335, 362)

9. Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, Verso, London and New York, 2005, p16. See also David Cunningham, 'Architecture in the Age of Global Modernity: Tafuri, Jameson, and Enclave Theory', in Matthew Beaumont, Andrew Hemingway, Esther Leslie and John Roberts, eds, *As Radical As Reality Itself: Marxism and the Visual Arts*, Peter Lang, London, 2007
10. Lucio Magri, 'The Tailor of Ulm' *New Left Review* no 51, May/June 2008, p 56
11. See in particular, Grant H Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community + Communication In Modern Art*, University of California Press, Berkeley and London, 2004
12. Gregory Sholette, 'Swampwalls Dark Matter & The Lumpen Army of Art', *Proximity*, no 1, 2008, p 38
13. See John Roberts, 'Collaboration as a Problem of Art's Cultural Form', in John Roberts and Stephen Wright, eds, 'Art and Collaboration', *Third Text* 71, 18:6, 2005; and Stewart Martin, 'Critique of Relational Aesthetics', *Third Text* 87, 21:4, 2007
14. Karl Marx, 'Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts'

be actually practised in, and as, a form of dialogic or 'enclave' thinking? That is, what is the precise meaning of aesthetic thinking in relation to the socialised claims of relational and post-relational practice? Can the act – the sociability of the artistic exchange itself – carry the aesthetic meaning and value – as Bourriaud and other relational or dialogic theorists such as Grant Kester and Stephen Wright tend to believe – or is aesthetic thinking effective and worthwhile precisely through its *de-temporalising* effects, that is, through its actual distance from the world of everyday social relations? For, how are we to imagine a world free from the constraints and reifications of these everyday relations, when art is beholden to its instrumental forms and effects and, particularly in the case of Bourriaud, content to identify 'enclave thinking' with the most minimalist accounts of democracy and communist form? Consequently, what are the realistic possibilities and, conversely, the *limits* to sociability in the new art, and how does this then affect the future condition and possibilities of practice, and the critical relationship between these practices and the (utopian) communist tradition? The post-autonomous status of the artwork is therefore, still very much unsettled.¹³

In this light, the debate on art's autonomy or post-autonomy – as it is played out, in relational and post-relational practice – brings into view a key theme of the communist tradition developed by the 'new-communist' thinking in the 1980s, and as such relates importantly to the whole legacy of the debate on 'aesthetic thinking' in Marx and Marxism, and to the debate on art now: the relationship between 'communist form' and a 'communism of the senses'. That is, if we identify Stalinism with the retardation of cultural form and conservative foreclosure of the senses, State-Communism produced the very opposite of what Marx imagined as the *re-aestheticisation* of experience under communist social relations. Through the destruction of bourgeois culture, the senses would be released from the tyranny of reified social forms. As he says, famously, in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844):

... the positive transcendence of private property –i.e., the *perceptible* appropriation for and by man of the human essence and of human life, of objective man, of human *achievements* – should not be conceived merely in the sense of *possessing*, of *having*. Man appropriates his comprehensive essence in a comprehensive manner, that is to say, as a whole man. Each of his human relations to the world – seeing, hearing, smelling tasting, feeling, thinking, observing, experiencing, wanting, acting, loving – in short all the organs of his individual being, like those organs which are directly social in their form are in their *objective* orientation, or in their *orientation to the object*, the appropriation of the object, the appropriation of *human* reality... The abolition of private property is therefore the complete *emancipation* of all human senses and qualities, but it is this emancipation precisely because these senses and attributes have become, subjectively and objectively, *human*. The eye has become a *human* eye, just as its object has become a social, *human* object – an object made by man for man. The *senses* have therefore become directly in their practice *theoreticians*.¹⁴

In this sense the release of new social forms from within, and in opposition to, bourgeois culture should be understood as a radical transformation of the relational content of the five senses. In the early writings of Marx this was to a large extent framed by a picturesque naturalism and

artisanal humanism, limiting the content of ‘aesthetic thinking’ to a kind of wan pastoralism, but in the mature writings there is a greater understanding of and sympathy for what capitalist development and socialised labour demands of the senses under post-capitalism: their actual critical embeddedness in the transformative, socialised work of ‘sensuous being’. This is what I take Marx to mean by the theorisation or re-theorisation of the senses. Thus, if the precise content of ‘aesthetic thinking’ in Marx is open to debate (in short, in what sense is Marx’s ‘humanisation’ of the senses compatible with new forms of technological relationality?), nevertheless, as Alberto Toscano stresses, the links between communism and aesthetic thinking ‘have been clinched tight from day one’.¹⁵

... the ‘communist organization of society’ is ... to be understood, aesthetically, as a domain of generalised (or generic) singularity, in which there is no contradiction (indeed no difference) between the *human* and the *unique*.¹⁶

Communism for Marx is precisely the production and collective exchange of singularities, and as such represents a collective aesthetic transformation of social form and the senses.

But before I discuss these arguments and their recent cultural manifestations and their viability I want to first look at the political context of the ‘new communist’ or utopian thinking from the 1980s – in Badiou, Guattari and Negri, Nancy – and its debt to the legacy of invariant communism.

(Third Manuscript), Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol 3, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1975, pp 299–300

15. Alberto Toscano, ‘Destructive Creation, or the Communism of the Senses’, in *Make Everything New*, op cit, p 119
16. Ibid, p 120
17. See in particular Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, Oliver Feltham, trans, Continuum, London, 2005, and Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, op cit
18. For a discussion of the figure of the partisan in contemporary materialist philosophy, see Alberto Toscano, ‘Partisan Thought’, paper delivered to ‘Materialism Today’, Birbeck College, 22–23 June 2007, forthcoming *Historical Materialism*, 17:1, 2009
19. Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, op cit

INVARIANT COMMUNISM AND COMMUNIST FORM

In the wake of the collapse of Soviet Communism, Alain Badiou has set out to rethink and repossess the ideal horizon of the communist project. In this, in contrast to the prevailing reformist and reactive *mentalité*, he repositions the communist project with a Platonic imperative: the notion that it is the universal Idea that endures (and renews itself) against all odds; in Hegel’s terms, the excess of the Idea survives the Idea’s historical defeat. Crucial to this re-theorisation is the reassertion of an old Leninist *dispositif*: that objective knowledge is necessarily partisan and, therefore, that the production and defence of universal truth is always a matter of taking sides with the universal against that which destroys or weakens it, namely atomism and perspectivalism.¹⁷ Yet, for Badiou this ‘taking of sides’ is not conventionally Marxist in its identification of partisanship with the partisanship of the working class. Certainly in Badiou’s recent writing the orthodox notion of the proletariat’s ‘objective perspectivalism’ guaranteeing a universal perspectivalism is missing.¹⁸ In many ways this is why he presently designates his philosophy as post-Marxist, and takes his distance from the actual political legacies of Marxism as such. Similarly, Žižek offers a renewed ‘Leninist’ commitment to proletarian partisan thought – to a defence of the excluded part as embodying the universality of the all – but without any direct reference to the building of a new Party, and to the actual machinery of class struggle from below.¹⁹ In this sense, in both instances this is a *partisanship of defeat* or, less pejoratively, a partisanship of messianic

deferral.²⁰ Yet, if the international proletariat is stripped out of this re-theorisation of materialism, or rather given a deflected or subsidiary position, what distinguishes their writing, and indeed emboldens it, is a renewed commitment to the communist project, and more generally the communist imaginary.

This marks out their writing, certainly in Badiou's case, as a splitting off of a communism that names 'our' defeat from the possibility of a communism which names 'our' future. In this sense there are two critical components to Badiou's post-Marxist communism: the re-historicisation and assessment of communism as 'the real movement that abolishes the present state of society' as a programme of emergence and decline, and communism as the 'invariant' content of a universal emancipatory programme. Only then, by bringing defeat into alignment with the universal Idea, can the recent (defeated) historical forms of communism be separated from the invariant ideal or hypothesis of communism. Indeed, in an essay on this hypothesis,²¹ Badiou offers something like a quasi-transitional programme for the reconstitution of communism as a universal political horizon:

The communist hypothesis is that a different collective organisation is practicable, one that will eliminate the inequality of wealth and even the division of labour. The private appropriation of massive fortunes and their transmission by inheritance will disappear. The existence of a coercive state, separate from civil society, will no longer appear a necessity: a long process of reorganisation based on a free association of producers will see it withering away.²²

But, if this represents some invariant core of a communist programme, its practical and serviceable meanings now exist in a new historical sequence, largely divorced from the past. Indeed, Badiou distinguishes two earlier sequences of the communist hypothesis: 1791–1871 (from the French Revolution and the end of Absolutism to the Paris Commune) and 1917 (from the Russian Revolution to Mao's Cultural Revolution). These sequences, he contests, are over, opening out a new – and as yet unimagined – third sequence. In this sense it is clear, he insists, that this third sequence

will not be – cannot be – the continuation of the second one. Marxism, the workers' movement, mass democracy, Leninism, the party of the proletariat, the socialist state – all the inventions of the twentieth century – are not really useful to us any more.²³

This is a bald, even reckless, assessment, yet for Badiou it is premised on the fact that the collapse of State-Communism as the 'real movement that abolishes the present state of society' hides the collapse of the fundamental ground of communist politics in the second sequence: the Party. The Party may have been appropriate and successful in overthrowing weak reactionary regimes, but it was inadequate in organising the transition from a temporary revolutionary state to Marx's non-state. Thus, whatever forms the communist hypothesis, or imaginary, might take in the third sequence they will not be organised by, or mediated by, the traditional Party form, because it now cannot effect 'effective' organisation in the wake of its revolutionary foreclosure. 'This is why our

20. See John Roberts, "The Returns to Religion": Messianism, Christianity and the Revolutionary Tradition', *Historical Materialism*, 16:3, 2008. In this article I claim that Badiou's philosophy is a 'non-relational cut from within Marxism' (p 24) – but, in the light of his recent writing, this is becoming increasingly hard to defend.

21. Alain Badiou, 'The Communist Hypothesis', *New Left Review*, no 40, January/February 2008

22. *Ibid*, p 35

23. *Ibid*, p 37

work is so complicated, so experimental', he states.²⁴ The tension between a proletariat-less and Party-less materialism, and a commitment to a renewed communism has been noted, not least by those who are sympathetic to Badiou (and Žižek), as a reformulation of various 'anarchist' themes in recent French political philosophy.²⁵ But Badiou has insisted he is not an anarchist, nor is he, he asserts, a speculative leftist, one of those idealist communist mountebanks that Marx and Engels attacked so vigorously in the 1860s.²⁶ Rather he bets the future of his communist third sequence on what we might call a universalism of revolutionary post-Party partisanship, in which small groups and their proletarian allies produce a kind of cellular model of resistance, in which the primary job of revolutionaries is to consolidate the reality of a 'single world' and the emancipatory universality inherent in all singular identities. This is because, in an epoch where the 'real movement that abolishes the present state of society' is stalled, what is at stake, for Badiou, is the very defence of the communist hypothesis – its *universalist axioms*.

If all this sounds vague, ultraleftist and ill-equipped to put a theory of partisanship into action, this is because Badiou's theory of the communist 'invariant' is now situated in a permanent state of uncertainty – historically, somewhere between the end of the first sequence (the bloodshed of the Commune) and the beginning of the second sequence (the ideological battle in pre-revolutionary Europe for revolutionary ideas amongst louche utopians and communist idealists). In the current period, then, communism – the communist hypothesis – is no more than an indeterminate utopian-horizon premised on historical defeat.

But this is perhaps why, in this period of the communist interregnum, there has been such a wide revival and expansion of utopian thinking, particularly in cultural and artistic theory, contrary to all premonitions and doom-saying about the end of politics, and certainly the end of Stalinist State-Communism. Thus, perhaps what will come to define this moment of capitalist crisis²⁷ is less the familiar picture of the continuing implosion and demise of the left than the widespread revival and flourishing of revolutionary 'enclave' and microtopian thinking. Indeed, Badiou's writing on the communist hypothesis represents currently just one philosophical response to the legacy of communist culture within French political philosophy and political theory and cultural theory globally. In fact what distinguishes Badiou's work on the communist hypothesis is that it is part of a specific French tradition of engagement with communist form and the communist imaginary *before the collapse* of the Soviet Union and the final crisis of Stalinism (a philosophical engagement with the vicissitudes of communist form which is largely absent from Anglo-American Trotskyism, too indebted to its inherited 1930s humanist pieties and anti-Stalinist fetishism – whether committed to a state-capitalist theory of the Soviet Union or not).

In his Maoist reflections in the mid-1980s on the implosion and destructive aftermath of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the restitution of capitalism in China and the political consolidation of neo-liberalism, Badiou argued that the Century of Revolution had already ended, and therefore the need for the work of communist 'reconstruction' in theory had already begun.²⁸ Thus, in many ways Badiou's 'The Communist

24. Ibid, p 37

25. See Peter Hallward, 'Staging Equality: On Ranciere's Theatrocracy', *New Left Review*, no 37, January/February 2006

26. See Bruno Bosteel, 'The Speculative Left', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 104:4, 2005, pp 751–67

27. I write this during the 'credit crunch', the biggest financial crash of the capitalist system since 1929. But what distinguishes this period is the political voiding of the crisis, the fact that for the international ruling class not even the mildest Keynesianism is debated or taken seriously; the market will correct the excesses of the market.

28. See in particular, *Théorie du sujet*, Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1982

Hypothesis' (2008) and *The Century* (2005) are direct heirs to the similar 'communism in reconstruction' thinking of Felix Guattari's and Toni Negri's *Communists Like Us*, published in 1985 and written in 1983–1984 and Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Inoperative Community* (1986). They all presuppose, in the wake of the growing neo-liberal closure of the political process East and West in the mid-1980s, the need for a philosophical and cultural engagement with communist form, the communist imaginary and a (liberatory) communism of the senses. They all present, therefore, work on revolutionary politics, against the grain of its pragmatist and neo-Stalinist interlocutors as the European left moves *en bloc* to identifying living communism with the very failure of the political imagination and the death of politics.

SINGULARISATION AND COMMUNIST FORM

Felix Guattari's and Toni Negri's book is an extended examination of what they determine as 'real communism',²⁹ or the creation of authentic conditions for human emancipation: 'activities in which people can develop themselves as they produce, organizations in which the individual is valuable rather than functional'.³⁰ And central to the accomplishment of this is the collective movement to transform the nature of work itself. Communism implies the redefining of the 'concept of work as the transformations and arrangements of production within the frame of immediate liberation efforts'³¹ and, as such, revolutionary transformation occurs when new forms of subjectivity are born of transformations in collective work experience. Crucial to the production of these new forms of subjectivity, then, is not, as is commonly understood, the de-alienation of the labour process, but the repossession of the liberated meaning of work through the release of new practices and new modes of consciousness. New practices and new modes of consciousness transform not just the relations of labour, but its social form and meaning. In contrast to the false image of communism in Stalinism as the state-ossification of the collective – and this will very much define 'communism in reconstruction' thinking in the 1980s – communism here, in an echo of the early Marx above, comes to stand for the collective *liberation of singularities*. Thus, the labour process is reconnected, not just to political intervention but to 'aesthetic thinking', allowing large-scale collective experimentation at the point of production to 'unglue' the dominant corporate and bureaucratic forms. But this bringing forth of singularisation out of a transformed labour process, its repossession 'in desire' so to speak, is not the outcome solely of any singular break with capitalism identifiable with a future and interruptive revolutionary Event. This is because this politics of the (futural) Event fails to take account of the growing consciousness of 'the irreversible character of the crisis of the capitalist mode of production' now.³² That is, the release of new subjectivities – 'a plurality focused on collective functions and objectives that escape bureaucratic control and overcoding'³³ – is emergent and operative in a range of domains of production and social locations. Indeed, Guattari and Negri assert that this is a '*real* movement' and not in any way utopian. This is, essentially, in nascent form, Negri's much vaunted immanent model of labour-under-capital: in relying on the underlying

29. Felix Guattari and Toni Negri, *Communists Like Us: New Spaces of Liberty, New Lines of Alliance*, with a 'Postscript, 1990', by Toni Negri, Michael Ryan, trans, Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents Series, New York, 1990, p 13

30. Ibid, p 13

31. Ibid, p 40

32. Ibid, p 99

33. Ibid, p 107

resistance to capital built into labour-power under capitalist relations labour already provides the requisite resources and new lines of alliance for communism-in-praxis.³⁴ The severe problems with this position as a theory of labour and of a model of generalised resistance (Negri and Guattari have little sympathy with the notion of historical defeat as having a determinate effect on praxis), will not detain me here, as I have drawn up my criticisms of this position already.³⁵ However, what is significant about this position and for ‘new communism’ thinking overall in the 1980s, and in the present period, is that in reasserting the immanent and continuous subjective resistance to capital within the proletariat, Negri and Guattari draw a political line between socialism and its state forms and communism as such. Here is the theme of ‘invariant communism’ incarnate: communism is the directly emergent and spontaneous form of struggle from within the oppressed and the proletariat. As Negri argues in his 1990 postscript to *Communists Like Us*: ‘As Marx teaches us, communism is born directly from class antagonism, from the refusal of both work and the organization of work’,³⁶ (rather, that is, from inherited and formalised political tradition and Party instruction). In this sense there is an explicit rejection of Stalinist and neo-Stalinist doxa that the proletariat has to pass through state socialism in order to dissolve itself as a class into communism. There are no intermediate stages of development – as the collapse of Stalinism has proved – there is only the ‘re-taking of freedom into one’s own hands and the construction of collective means for controlling cooperation in production’.³⁷ Indeed, socialism, as its history in the twentieth-century East and West evinces, is no more than a form of capitalist statecraft and, as such, as collectivist post-capitalist ideology utterly moribund.

This ultraleftism easily dissolves into a rallying cry for the oppressiveness of all transitional state-forms, absencing politics from institutional mediation, and as such leaving it to the crippling sanctions of a spontaneous purity. Nevertheless, what this kind of thinking bears out in relation to the current flux of ‘enclave and microtopian theory’ after Stalinism is how widespread is this jump of communism’s liberation of singularities over the traditions of socialism directly into ‘communist form’ and the ‘communist imaginary’. That is, the convergence between the communist imaginary and a utopian communalism in enclave and microtopian thinking in current cultural theory is directed precisely, in the spirit of Guattari and Negri, to communism as an *emergent*, living praxis.

This reflection on community as a reflection on communist form is also the subject of Jean-Luc Nancy’s *The Inoperative Community*. As in Guattari and Negri, community under the name of communism is theorised as an emergent category, and stands in opposition to an ossified and repressive notion of community in Stalinism and capitalism. Indeed, Nancy declares that the communist ideal of community has been betrayed in ‘real communism’³⁸ and therefore needs to be put back into play. But this notion of community ‘most often unknown to communism itself’³⁹ (unknown to Lenin, Stalin and Trotsky that is) is Marx’s notion, derived from the tradition of *Bildung*, of communist community as the collective exchange of singularities. In this sense Nancy is one of the few French theorists of the ‘new communism’ to make explicit the link between aesthetic experience and thinking and communist form in

34. See in particular Michael Hardt and Toni Negri, *Empire*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass and London, 2000

35. See John Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art After the Readymade*, Verso, London–New York, 2007

36. Antonio Negri, ‘Postscript, 1990’, *Communists Like Us*, op cit, p 166

37. *Ibid*, p 168

38. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, Peter Connor, ed, Christopher Fynsk, Foreword, Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland and Simone Sawhney, trans, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and Oxford, 1991

39. *Ibid*, p 7

Marx's writing. This connection remains Marx's 'distant' 'secret'.⁴⁰ But in keeping with the general inversion of the socialism/communism dyad in Negri and Guattari, this aesthetic 'communion to come'⁴¹ is not to arrive in any deferred, teleological sense. There is no 'community', in any full or fused sense, 'to come'. On the contrary the production and exchange of singularities continually tests and revokes the meaning of community as such; 'community' is not something the proletariat possesses or works towards in its liberated completion, but rather is a continuous, unfolding space of possibility.⁴² If community as the realisation of intersubjective transparency never arrives, this is because 'sharing ... cannot be completed'.⁴³ In this Nancy moves beyond the meaning of Marx's release of the re-theorised senses under communism, to insist that it is the very production of singularity that secures the possibility of communist community. Yet, for Nancy this does not mean that in dissolving community the production, release and exchange of singularity is ultimately opposed to the idea of community (as if community inhibits singularity). In this he takes his distance from two opposed solutions to the 'aesthetic' critique of fixed community in Georges Bataille's libertarian communism of the 1930s and 1940s: the *dichotomous* (the opposing of singularity to community), and its opposite, the *fusional* (the conjunction of singularities as an *ecstatic* community).⁴⁴ The first position repeats the Romantic mythos of non-identity as truth, and the second simply aestheticises the fusional drives of capitalist and Stalinist community. Both positions in this sense overlook the philosophical specificity of Marx's debt to *Bildung*: singularity under communism is a *socialised* singularity. That is, singularity is itself the result of a transformative, social, collective process. But for Nancy, in addition – or with greater emphasis – it is precisely singularity that disrupts and extends the boundaries of community. Thus we might say, if Nancy moves beyond Marx, in insisting that the release of singularity is not to be deferred to a 'community to come' (although Marx does say that communism is not the *goal* of human development),⁴⁵ he remains with Marx's non-dualistic account of communist singularity: singularity is socialised reflection on, and the exchange of, singularity.

INAUGURAL COMMUNISM

In this light Nancy adopts this model of 'unworked'⁴⁶ community to propose a particular kind of cultural communist practice that is compatible with, and extends, this socialised singularity, what he calls literary communism. Literary communism – and art, as much as literature would fall within this model – is the name for the irrevocable powers of artistic practice and writing to *inaugurate* community. This is because writing/artistic practice for Nancy inscribes being-in-common as a form of unworked community in the very core of its praxis and reception. In moving outward to 'touch' the other – the singular – writing/the artwork constantly resists and interrupts the notion of a community known or hoped for in advance. In this sense the interpellated community of readers and spectators is a community of articulated singularity, rather than a group of singularities in search of the confirmation of a shared experience, and, as a result, engenders an infinite reserve of meaning and

40. Ibid, p 7

41. Ibid, p 13

42. For similar (and Nancy-indebted) discussion of the 'community to come' and non-state communism, see Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community* [1990], Michael Hardt, trans, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1993. 'What the State cannot tolerate in any ... is that singularities form a community without affirming an identity', p 85

43. Nancy, op cit, p 35

44. See Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, Leslie Anne Boldt, trans, State University of New York Press, New York, 1988

45. Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* (Third Manuscript), op cit, p 306. Nancy seems to have missed this point.

46. Nancy, op cit, p 31

communication, continually exposing the limits of community as an imagined or hoped-for and settled conjunction. Accordingly, writing and the artwork set in play the conditions of socialised singularity *as such*: a community that comes together in a process of shared articulation, to produce a whole of articulated singularities. ‘Community means here the socially exposed particularity, in opposition to the socially imploded generality characteristic of capitalist community.’⁴⁷

Nancy says bluntly at the end of the section on literary communism, however, that his model does not determine any particular *mode* of class politics, social practice, artistic practice or writing. Rather it refers to that which ‘resists any definition or program’.⁴⁸ In one way, this is to be expected and is in keeping with writerly ‘deconstructive’ custom. Yet, as a figure of communist community Nancy’s model of literary communism sets down an ideal marker for the reversal of the socialist/communism dyad in ‘new communist’ thinking, and the re-aestheticisation of communist form. It would be strange therefore not to conclude in saying that Nancy’s hypothesis makes a broader claim on post-Stalinist communist form. Indeed, in identifying Marx as a theorist of socialised singularity, Nancy declares that,

it is not an exaggeration to say that Marx’s [post-capitalist] community is, in this sense, a community of literature – or at least opens out onto such a community of articulation, and not of organization.⁴⁹

CULTURAL COMMUNISM OF THE THIRD SEQUENCE

It is not surprising then that Nancy’s inaugural communism has played a part in the debate on the new forms of sociability in the new art. His model of mutual articulation has proved to be a useful theoretical ally in the emergence of a new form of ‘enclave thinking’ in the current conjunction of a utopian communalism and cultural communism. His ‘literary communism’ has provided a language of community-in-development that resists the (sorry) history of community art’s statist assimilation and socialist reification as virtuous intervention.⁵⁰ Articulation and over organisation press all the right buttons at the moment about non-identity and self-representation. However, what is of primary concern here is the actual viability of the prioritisation of singularity as the core of a new communist imaginary in cultural practice. Because testing this proposition means evaluating more broadly the claims of new communist thinking – invariant and inaugural – and its relations with the new forms of artistic sociability on the historical terrain of the avant-garde and the revolutionary tradition. In other words, what is at least striking about Nancy’s model is the way in which it focuses many of the political problems and hiatuses that now confront art and cultural practice under the communist Third Sequence, and as such should be seen as paradigmatic of the post-Stalinist *durée*.

Socialised singularity or communist singularity is that which ties communist form to the aestheticisation of politics. The production, release and exchange of singularities *in* community, *as* community, as a communism of the senses, traverse the notion of community as the end-state of State-communist praxis. This ‘new communist’ theory borrows

47. Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, op cit, p 74

48. Ibid, p 81

49. Ibid, p 77

50. See for example, Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass, 2002

deeply from early avant-garde practice itself: the production, release and exchange of singularities is the outcome of creative community in motion, in struggle. An interesting cultural conflation is currently in operation therefore: ‘new communist’ thinking borrows from the defensive operation of the historic avant-garde (under Stalinism and State-Communism) in order to release communist thinking and practice from Party inertia and historicist closure. In turn, the new forms of relational sociability in art borrow extensively from this aestheticisation of politics in order to re-politicise aesthetics (in fidelity to the historic avant-garde). Thus, for instance, Badiou’s current model of cellular politics (L’Organisation Politique)⁵¹ has an avant-garde character similar to any number of activist, relational groups one cares to name; and he takes a certain pride in this, just as much relational and post-relational activity crosses the border into politics proper.

This conjunction of an aestheticised politics with a politicised aesthetics is, of course, a consequence of the Third Sequence as an emergent utopian-horizon premised on historical defeat. The conditions of emergence of a new ‘communist hypothesis’ and the avant-garde are essentially *suspensive*. This means that recourse to the production, release and exchange of singularity within community as an oppositional stance tends to get caught up in its own aestheticist presumptions and compensations.⁵² That is, if the future production, release and exchange of singularities reveal the true potential of community, in as much as it discounts or destroys measure under the force of capitalist abstraction, it also runs the risk of blurring its claims about the destruction of measure with capitalism’s own destruction of measure. As Jameson puts it: ‘decentred thinking and art reinforce the new social and economic forms of late capitalism more than they undermine it’.⁵³ This is reflected at the political level, for instance, in Badiou’s withdrawal from the advocacy and theorisation of a Party of a new type – a primary concern of his in the 1970s to the mid-1980s – to post-Party politics generally; and, at the cultural level, in the widespread tendency in relational aesthetics to defer politically and culturally to the ‘other’ and to the politics of ‘difference’. With this abdication comes the privileging of the temporal ‘enclave’ community as an idealised version of Nancy’s articulated community in the making: in comparison all other communities appear fixed and bounded. Hence, this is where the force of ‘indeterminate meaning’, ‘infinite community’ and ‘unbounded exchange’ become liabilities, because in their self-declared advanced or vanguard state they easily ontologise the gap between articulated community and messy, slow-changing communities, the communities we all actually live in most of the time. The historical idea of the revolutionary Party as an ideal community embedded *in* the bounded community of the proletariat is lost.

Interestingly this political question gets played out in a relational register, in a critique of Nancy’s influence on the new sociability in art, in Grant Kester’s *Conversation Pieces*. Kester attacks Nancy for his community-in-production being Manichean. Nancy’s work, Kester argues, invokes a series of ‘oppositions that accord an intrinsic ethical value to rupture over stasis, incoherence over fixity, ambiguity over predictability’.⁵⁴ In this Nancy fails to make a methodological distinction between bureaucratised and fixed communities that rely on an

51. ‘Politics, as we conceive it in the OP, promises nothing. It is both without party and without program.’ Alain Badiou, quoted in Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth*, foreword Slavoj Žižek, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, 2003, p 227

52. See Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*, C Lenhardt, trans, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1984

53. Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, op cit, p 165

54. Kester, *Conversation Pieces*, op cit, p 158

authoritarian coherence, and stable communities that rely on their coherence through custom and tradition. It is the latter formation of community – as in the day-to-day struggles of the working class – that continues to have a progressive and defensive identity. Accordingly it is not the job of the relational artist to work to produce a productive uncertainty *without distinction*. On the contrary, the greater challenge, for Kester, is to produce ‘unanticipated forms of knowledge ... through a dialogical encounter with politically coherent communities’.⁵⁵

What Kester blocks here is the subsidence of the new forms of sociability in art into fetishisation of the utopian ‘unformed’ community. Such a model, he contests, produces an enclave mentality that prefers the idealised production of aestheticised singularity, over and above work that enriches already existing lines of communal dialogue (specifically through class and race). In a way, this is an old debate about how and where artists position themselves in relation to a given community. Do they work alongside the community, athwart it at some distance, or submerge themselves into it? Indeed, there is an assumption – anthropological in origin and tacitly assumed by Kester – that the best results occur when artists actually go and live in, and become, part of a given community. But, despite these criticisms of Kester’s, both relational/dialogic practice and ‘new communist’ thinking actually share a similar vision: *the necessary dissolution of representation*.

Both ‘new communist’ thinking and relational or dialogic art practice prioritise the fluidity of reciprocal exchange, beyond and in opposition to notions of the artistic subject or collective artistic subject speaking to, and speaking on behalf of, the ‘other’. That is, both models take it as axiomatic that representational forms of petitioning, explication, appellation, narrow or even destroy art as a space of resistance and democratic co-articulation and cooperation. In ‘new communism’ thinking this finds its cultural expression, paradoxically, in a high-modernist commitment to non-representation or anti-representation (as a space free of the exchange of alienated appearances),⁵⁶ and in relational or dialogic practice in the commitment to the multiple, temporal, unstable, interactive space of the extra-gallery or gallery installation. Singularity and the dialogic function as a counter-space and counter-cognitive to the fixed, hierarchical representational logic of the capitalist sensorium. The critique of representation, then, is very much a rejection of the idea that political practice lies in the production of a counter-symbolic archive that stands in contest with the capitalist sensorium. For relational practice and ‘new communist’ thinking alike, these counter-symbolic possibilities are now historically otiose: (1) because, presently, there is no working-class movement to underwrite this counter-symbolic process and connect its disparate motivations and energies; and (2) because the political subjects of such a representational economy refuse to be named as the empathetic victims of this counter-symbolic process (the ongoing crisis of the documentary ideal). There is much to agree with here: too many representational practices claim a political identity for themselves that in reality does not exist; any politics of representation worthy of the name has to acknowledge ‘who speaks’ and to ‘whom’. Yet, the attack on representational objectification brings with it a loss of knowledge derived from what we might call *corrective distance*. That is, corrective distance results from those forms of knowledge that are produced from a

55. Ibid, p 163

56. See Alain Badiou, ‘Third Sketch of a Manifesto of Affirmationist Art’, in *Polemics*, Steve Corcoran, trans and Intro, Verso, London and New York, 2006, pp 133–48

theoretical encounter with the subject's objective place in the social totality. This, however, is not to *oppose* corrective distance to the free flow of exchange of subjectivities in 'new communist' thinking and relational practice, but to put a brake on the notion that dialogue and the exchange of singularities *in themselves* are socially transformative. Interestingly both Bourriaud and Kester admit as much. As Kester says, the dialogic/relational model is easily reducible to a kind of 'dialogical determinism':

... the naïve belief that all social relations can be resolved through the utopian power of free and open exchange ... [this model] overlooks the manifest differentials in power relations that precondition participation in discourse long before we get to the gallery.⁵⁷

Similarly, in *Postproduction* Bourriaud moves away from the largely dialogic model of *Relational Aesthetics* to a counter-representational model of practice. It is important, he says, that art sustains a level of counter-representational activity in the face of the onslaught of mass culture.

No public image should benefit from impunity, for whatever reason: a logo belongs to public space, since it exists in the streets and appears on the objects we use. A legal battle is underway that places artists at the forefront: no sign must remain inert, no image must remain untouchable. Art represents a counter-power. Not that the task of artists consists in denouncing, mobilizing or protesting: all art is engaged, whatever its nature and goals. Today there is a quarrel over representation that sets art and the official image of reality against each other.⁵⁸

The broader argument here is that the aestheticisation of politics in 'new communist' thinking and the repoliticisation of aesthetics in relation to practice reach a similar internal impasse around the dilemma of representation. The production, release and exchange of singularity dissolve the need to re-symbolise and re-historicise. In a way this is one of the reasons why Badiou is so insistent on separating a communist Third Sequence from a Second Sequence and a First Sequence. By tying cultural commitments to the revolutionary legacy of the past, revolutionary practice and cultural practice ties praxis to the obligations of the past – to the archival work of a dusty mnemotechnics – and, in turn, to the wretched, tedious, ineffective work of sustaining a corpus of anti-capitalist imagery. Yet, despite this separation, and despite Badiou's continuing debt to a Maoist politics of the break, his periodisation has the virtue actually of clearing a space for re-symbolisation and re-historicisation. For in its sequentiality it makes clear that we are still, so to speak, inside the mnemotechnic horizons of communist history and practice. This means – as Guattari and Negri, and Nancy, demonstrate in the 1980s and 1990s – that what is at stake is what *kind* of communism is appropriate to its defeated legacy, not the fetishisation of the name 'communism' itself. And crucial to this, certainly for advanced cultural practice, is, indeed, the meeting between the aestheticisation of politics and the politicisation of aesthetics on the terrain of an inaugural communism or enclave thinking as a fluid (avant-garde) space of experimentation. Because in the current period this is where 'thinking the future' will be done at the meeting

57. Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces*, op cit, p 182

58. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction*, op cit, p 87

between a utopian communalism and an inaugural communism (indeed the only place). This is why the new forms of sociability in art are significant. They may aestheticise their own conditions of production; they may fetishise the dialogic as transformative activity; they may devalue and misconstrue the emancipatory potential of artistic autonomy (and, as a consequence, as Žižek puts it in his discussion of Hardt and Negri, mimic the frictionless ‘communism’ of Bill Gates’s virtual capitalism),⁵⁹ but at a material level they strive to unblock the reified and dismal social relations of contemporary artistic production. And, in this sense, they underwrite and expose something productive and unmarked within the Third Sequence: the examination of community, reflection on community, extension of community across various artistic forms and practices, as an engagement with notions of collectivity and democracy *outside* their inherited (capitalist and socialist) state forms.

59. Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, op cit, p 352