The Leonardo Electronic Almanac is proud to announce the publication of its first LEA book, titled “Red Art: New Utopias in Data Capitalism.” The publication investigates the relevance of socialist utopianism to the current dispositions of New Media Art, through the contributions of renowned and emerging academic researchers, critical theorists, curators and artists.
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Red Art: New Utopias in Data Capitalism

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Leonardo Electronic Almanac
Volume 20 Issue 1

8 COMMONIST RED ART: BLOOD, BONES, UTOPIA AND KITTENS
Lanfranco Aceti

13 CHANGING THE GAME: TOWARDS AN 'INTERNET OF PRAXIS'
Bill Balaskas

16 SUGGESTIONS FOR ART THAT COULD BE CALLED RED
Susanne Jaschko

18 WHY DIGITAL ART IS RED
Julian Stallabrass

22 GROUNDS FOR THE POLITICAL AESTHETICS OF CULTURAL COMMONS IN THE POST-MEDIUM CONDITION: THE OPEN SOURCE CULTURAL OBJECT
Boris Cučković

44 POWERED BY GOOGLE: WIDENING ACCESS AND TIGHTENING CORPORATE CONTROL
Dan Schiller & Shinjoung Yeo

58 HACKTERIA: AN EXAMPLE OF NEO-MODERN ACTIVISM
Boris Magrini

72 COMMUNISM OF CAPITAL AND CANNIBALISM OF THE COMMON: NOTES ON THE ART OF OVER-IDENTIFICATION
Matteo Pasquinelli

82 MATERIAL CONDITIONS OF PRODUCTION AND HIDDEN ROMANTIC DISCOURSES IN NEW MEDIA ARTISTIC AND CREATIVE PRACTICES
Ruth Pagés & Gemma San Cornelio

94 GAMSUTL
Taus Makhacheva

124 FROM TACTICAL MEDIA TO THE NEO-PRAGMATISTS OF THE WEB
David Garcia

136 DISSENT AND UTOPIA: RETHINKING ART AND TECHNOLOGY IN LATIN AMERICA
Valentina Montero Peña & Pedro Donoso

148 THE THING HAMBURG: A TEMPORARY DEMOCRATIZATION OF THE LOCAL ART FIELD
Corinna Sollfrank, Rahel Puffert & Michel Chevalier

164 ARTISTS AS THE NEW PRODUCERS OF THE COMMON (?)
Daphne Dragona

174 LONG STORY SHORT
Natalie Bookchin

182 THE DESIRES OF THE CROWD: SCENARIO FOR A FUTURE SOCIAL SYSTEM
Karin Hansson

192 FROM LITERAL TO METAPHorical UTOPIA: INTERCONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE INNER STRUCTURE OF THE NEW MEDIA ART AND THE UTOPIAN THOUGHT
Christina Vatsella

198 THE POINT SOURCE: BLINDNESS, SPEECH AND PUBLIC SPACE
Adam Brown

214 INVISIBLE HISTORIES, THE GRIEVING WORK OF COMMUNISM, AND THE BODY AS DISRUPTION: A TALK ABOUT ART AND POLITICS
Elske Rosenfeld

224 TAKEN SQUARE: ON THE HYBRID INFRASTRUCTURES OF THE #15M MOVEMENT
José Luis de Vicente

232 WHEN AESTHETIC IS NOT JUST A PRETTY PICTURE: PAOLO CIRIO’S SOCIAL ACTIONS
Lanfranco Aceti

251 "IN EIGENER SACHE" (SPEAKING FOR OURSELVES) MAGAZINES, GDR, OCTOBER 1989 – JUNE 1990
Elske Rosenfeld

266 ART WORK / DREAM WORK IN NEW MEDIA DOCUMENTARY
Karen O’Rourke
Commonist Red Art: Blood, Bones, Utopia and Kittens

Does Red Art exist? And if so, who creates it and where can we find it? This special issue of the Leonardo Electronic Almanac addresses these questions and collates a series of perspectives and visual essays that analyze the role, if any, that Red Art plays in the contemporary art world.

Red Art, these two simple words that can generate complex discussions and verbal feuds since they align the artist to a vision of the world that is ‘Red’ or ‘Communist.’

Nevertheless, even if the two little words when placed together are controversial and filled with animus, they are necessary, if not indispensable, to understand contemporary aesthetic issues that are affecting art and how art operates in the context of social versus political power relations within an increasingly technological and socially-mediated world.

Red Art could be translated – within the contemporary hierarchical structures – as the art of the powerless versus the art of the powerful, as the art of the masses versus the art of the few, as the art of the young versus the old, as the art of the technological democrats versus the technological conservatives, as the art of the poor versus the art of the rich... Or it could be described as the art of the revolutionary versus the status quo. In the multitude of the various possible definitions, one appears to stand out for contemporary art and it is the definition of art as bottom-up participation versus art as top-down prepackaged aesthetic knowledge. And yet, what does Red Art stand for and can it be only restricted to Commonist Art?

The contemporary meaning of Red Art is different from what it may have been for example in Italy in the 1970s, since so much has changed in terms of politics, ideology and technology. It is no longer possible to directly identify Red Art with Commonist Art (as the art of the ex Union of Soviet Socialist Republics or of its satellite states and globalized Communist political parties which were and continue to be present in the West – albeit in edulcorated forms) nor as the art of the left, but there is a need to analyze the complexity of the diversification and otherization of multiple geopolitical perspectives.

If today’s Red Art has to redefine its structures and constructs it becomes necessary to understand who is encompassed within the label of Red Artists and what their common characteristics are. Red Artists – if we wanted to use this category – and their aesthetic production cannot be reduced to the word ‘Communist,’ borrowing passé ideological constructs. An alternative to the impasse and the ideological collapse of communism is the redefinition of Red Art as the art of the commons: Commonist Art. If Red Art were to be defined as the art of the commons, Commonist Art, thereby entrenching it clearly within technoutopias and neoliberalist crowd sourcing approaches for collective participation, this would provide a contradictory but functional framework for the realization of common practices, socially engaged frameworks, short terms goals and ‘loose/open’ commitments that could be defined in technological terms as liquid digital utopias or as a new form of permanent dystopia.

The XXIst century appears to be presenting us, then, with the entrenched digitized construct of the common versus the idea of the Paris Commune of 1871, thereby offering a new interpretation of the social space and an alternative to traditional leftist/neoliberal constructs. The idea of the common – as an open access revolving door, is opposed to the concept of the commune – as a highly regulated and hierarchical structure.

The ‘semantic’ distinguo between commons and communes becomes important since both terms are reflections of constructions and terminological frameworks for an understanding of both society and art that is based on ‘likes,’ actions and commitments for a common or a commune. The commitment, even when disparagingly used to define some of the participants as click-activists and armchair revolutionaries, is partial and leaves the subject able to express other likes often in contradiction with one another: e.g. I like the protests against Berlusconi’s government and I like the programs on his private TVs.

I find the idea of the commons (knowledge, art, creativity, health and education) liberating, empowering and revolutionary, if only it was not expressed within its own economic corporative structures, creating further layers of contradiction and operational complexities.

The contradictions of contemporary Red Art and contemporary social interactions may be located in the difference between the interpretations of common and commune – the commune upon which the Italian Communist Party, for example, based its foundations in order to build a new ‘church.’

The relationships in the commune of the Italian communists (axiomorically defined Cattocommunist or Catholic-communist) rests in faith and in compelled actions, in beliefs so rooted that as being as binding as the light of God in the painting The Conversion of Saint Paul on the Road to Damascus by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio.

{...} and from the leadership an aggressive unwillingness to allow any dissent or deviation. ‘That time produced one of the sharpest mental frosts I can remember on the Left,’ the historian E. P. Thompson would recall from personal knowledge of the CP...{...}

It is this blind faith that has generated the martyrs of communism and heretical intellectuals, accusations from which not even Antonio Gramsci was able to escape. The vertical hierarchical structure of the commune and of the Communist Party produced heretics and immolations, but also supported artists, intellectuals, academics and writers that operated consonantly with the party’s ideals: people that sang from the same preapproved institutional hymn sheet.

Stefania: This young generation horrifies me. Having been kept for years by this state, as soon as they discover to have two neurons they pack and go to study, to work in the US and London, without giving a damn for who supported them. Oh well, they do not have any civic vocation. When I was young at the occupied faculty of literature, I oozed civic vocation. {...} I have written eleven novels on civic duty and the book on the official history of the Party.

Jep Gambardella: How many certainties you have, Stefania, I do not know if I envy you or feel a sensation of disgust. {...} Nobody remembers your civic vocation during your University years. Many instead
remember, personally, another vacatio of yours that was expressed at the time; but was consumed in the bathrooms of the University. You have written the official history of the Party because for years you have been the mistress of the head of the Party. Your eleven novels published by a small publishing house kept by the Party and reviewed by small newspapers close to the Party are irrelevant novels [...] the education of the children that you conduct with sacrifice every minute of your life ... Your children are always without you [...] then you have - to be precise - a butler, a waiter, a cook, a driver that accompanies the boys to school, three babysitters. In short, how and when is your sacrifice manifested? [...] These are your lies and your fragilities.

To the question, then, if Red Art exists I would have to answer: YES! I have seen Red Art in Italy (as well as abroad), as the Communist Art produced in the name of the party, with party money and for party propaganda, not at all different from the same art produced in the country, with party money – having both adopted and co-opted the same institutional obstacles. Gramsci would perhaps say that Communist Art is a redefinition of symbolic culture, folk art and traditional imageries that processed and blended through digital media and disseminated via the Internet enable Red Art to build up its own languages and its own aesthetics without having to be institutionalized in some cases and instead of high and rich ‘exclusivity,’ which as such is unattainable and can only be celebrated through diamond skulls and gold toilets?

Commonist Art – the art that emerges from a common – is a celebration of a personal judgment, partially knowledgeable and mostly instinctive, perhaps manipulated – since every ‘other’ opinion is either manipulated by the media or the result of international lobby’s conspiracies or it can be no more than a reinforcement of the society of the simulacra. Conversely, it may also be that the image and its dissemination online is the representation of a personal difference towards systems of hierarchical power and endorsement that can only support ‘their own images and meanings’ in opposition to images that are consumed and exhausted through infinite possibilities of interpretation and re-dissemination.

If Commonist Art offers the most populist minimum common denominator in an evolutionary framework determined by whims, it is not at all different from the minimum common denominator of inspirational/aspirational codified aesthetics that are defined by the higher echelons of contemporary oligarchies that have increasingly blurred the boundaries of financial and aesthetic realms.

Commonist Art – if the current trends of protest will continue to affirm themselves even more strongly – will continue to defy power and will increasingly seek within global trends and its own common base viable operational structures that hierarchies will have to recognize, at one point or the other, by subsuming Commonist Art within pre-approved structures.

Red Art, therefore, if intended as Commonist Art becomes the sign of public revolts, in the physical squares or on the Internet. It is art that emerges without institutional approval and in some cases in spite of institutional obstacles. Gramsci would perhaps say that Communist Art is a redefinition of symbolic culture, folk art and traditional imageries that processed and blended through digital media and disseminated via the Internet enable Red Art to build up its own languages and its own aesthetics without having to be institutionalized in some cases and receive hierarchical stamps of approval.

Red Art can also be the expression of people whose blood and tears – literally – mark the post-democracies of the first part of the XXIst century. Non-political, non-party, non-believers, the crowds of the Internet rally around an argument, a sense of justice, a feeling of the future not dominated by carcinogenic politicians, intellectuals and curators, that present themselves every time, according to geographical and cultural spaces, as Sultans, Envoys of God, or even Gods.

Red Art, the Commonist Art that perhaps is worth considering as art, is the one that is self-elevated, built on the blood and bones of people still fighting in the XXIst century for justice, freedom and for a piece of bread. Art that rallies crowds’ likes and dislikes based on the whims of a liquid Internet structure where people support within their timelines an idea, a utopia, a dream or the image of a kitten.

This piece of writing and this whole volume is dedicated to the victims of the economic and political violence since the beginning of the Great Recession and to my father; and to the hope, hard to die off, that some utopia may still be possible.

Laurent Aceti
Editor in Chief, Leonardo Electronic Almanac
Director, Kasa Gallery
Changing the Game: Towards an ‘Internet of Praxis’

There is a new spectre haunting the art world. Not surprisingly, it has been put forward in recent articles, panel discussions and books as the ‘ism’ that could, possibly, best describe the current dispositions of contemporary art. The name of the spectre is “post-internet art”. Unlike, however, its counterpart that was released in the world by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in 1848, this contemporary spectre has not arrived in order to axiomatically change the established order of things; conceivably, it has arrived in order to support it.

Post-internet art refers to the aesthetic qualities defining today’s artistic production, which is often influenced by, mimics, or fully adopts elements of the Internet. At the same time, the term incorporates the communication tools and platforms through which contemporary artworks reach their intended (or non-intended) audiences. Notably, in his book Post Internet (2011), art writer Gene McHugh suggests that regard less of an artist’s intentions, all artworks now find a space on the World Wide Web and, as a result, “[...]

Thus, there are inevitable contradictions and challenges in the role that post-internet art is called to fulfill as a movement and/or as a status of cultural production. Firstly, there is an easily identifiable ‘anxiety’ to historicize a phenomenon that is very much in progress: the Internet is changing so rapidly, that if we think of the online landscape ten years ago, this would be radically different from our present experience of it. Furthermore, the post-internet theorization of contemporary art runs the danger of aestheticizing (or over-aestheticizing) a context that goes well beyond the borders of art: in the same way that we could talk about post-internet art, we could also talk about post-internet commerce, post-internet dating, post-internet travel, post-internet journalism, etc. Therefore, the role and the identity of the post-internet artist are not independent of a much wider set of conditions. This false notion of autonomy is quite easy to recognize if we think, for instance, of ‘post-radio art’ or ‘post-television art’ or, even, ‘post-videogames art’; and the inherent structural and conceptual limitations of such approaches.

Most importantly, however, any kind of aestheticization may readily become a very effective tool of depoliticization. The idea of distributing images, sounds and words that merely form part of a pre-existing system of power, inescapably eradicates the political significance of distribution. The subversive potential inherent in the characterisation of a network as ‘distributed’ was systematically undermined over the 1990s and the 2000s, due to the ideological perva-
To the question: could the Internet and new media at large become true ‘game changers’ in the current historical conjuncture? What does ‘red art’ have to propose, and how does it relate to the previously described ‘post-internet condition’?

Interestingly, the term “post-internet art” was born and grew parallel to the global economic crisis and the Great Recession of 2009. One the most important objectives of the social movements that were engendered by the crisis has been the effort to “reclaim” and “re-appropriate.” This aspiration referred not only to economic resources, but also to social roles, democratic functions, human rights, and – of course – urban spaces. Syntagma Square in Greece, Puerta del Sol in Madrid, Zuccotti Park in New York, as well as some of the most iconic public locations around the world saw diverse, or even ‘irreconcilable’ in some cases crowds demanding change. Within the reality of Data Capitalism and its multiple self-generated crises, people increasingly felt that they have now been totally deprived of a place (“topos” in Greek).

It is worth remembering that the coined of “utopia,” Thomas More, chose an island as the location on which people are called to stand and build. According to More, the emergence of a culture of “post-net participation” in which digital media transcend physical space by consolidating it (instead of ‘merely’ augmenting it), may allow us to explore “concrete utopias” to a greater extent than ever before in recent times. It is by actively pursuing this objective that we would expect to change the rules of the game. Artists are often the first to try.

Bill Balaskas

REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. The term ‘post-internet art’ is attributed to artist Marisa Olson. See Gene McHugh, Post Internet (Brescia: LINK Editions), 5.
3. Gene McHugh, Post Internet, 6.
4. The etymological comparison between the terms ‘post-internet art’ and ‘postmodern art’ could also highlight this context. Notably, in the case of this juxtaposition, ‘post-internet art’ puts a tool (the Internet) in the position of a movement (Modernism). If we were to consider the Internet as a movement, then, the natural historical link that would be established through the term ‘post-internet art’ would be with net art. Nevertheless, such a decision would assign net art to a status of ‘legitimization,’ towards which major museums, curators and artists have shown a rather consistent hostility. In this instance, historicization becomes a foe, since it would refute a ‘neutral’ relationship of the Web with art. This perspective is closely connected with the formation of an abstract notion of universalism, to which I refer further down (see footnote 8).
5. Thomas More’s Utopia was first published in 1516, in Belgium. There are several translations of the book.
8. For more on the concept of ‘concrete utopias’ see Ernst Bloch, The Principle of Hope, tr. Neville Plom, Stephen Plous, and Paul Knight, 3 vol. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986). Bloch differentiates between ‘abstract utopias’ and ‘concrete utopias,’ associating the latter with the possibility of producing real change in the present. ‘Concrete utopias’ should not be confused with seemingly similar theorizations such as Nicolas Bourriaud’s ‘microtopias,’ which structurally aim at preserving the existing status quo. Bourriaud asserts in Relational Aesthetics (2002) that “It seems more pressing to invent possible relations with our neighbours in the present than to bet on happier tomorrows.” Quite evidently, this approach stands far from the universalism that he advocates in his Aftermodern Manifesto (2000) as a direct result of new technologies and globalization. At a time when neoliberal capitalism was entering its worst ever crisis, Bourriaud chose to largely ignore this context and build on a concept that – in the end – is apolitical and counter-utopian. ‘Post-internet art’ appears to follow a comparably dangerous trajectory.
Suggestions for Art That Could Be Called Red

What is Red Art? Or rather: what could Red Art be in today’s post-communist, post-utopian world, a world shaken by conflicts engendered by contrary beliefs and ideologies which have little to do with communism? A world in which countries and societies are disrupted by territorial disputes, and by bloody fights about questions of religious identity, national identity, and ideology? Where communism has been overrun by capitalism with rare exception; where the European left movement is weak. Where the post-industrial era has produced an economic reality that is orders of magnitude more complex, transnational and therefore more difficult to control or change, than history has ever seen. In this situation, can there (still) be art that deals with ideas of communism constructively, or does contemporary art look at communist ideals only with nostalgia?

And let’s be clear: is art that simply speaks out against capitalism, globalisation and neo-liberalism from a leftist position – is this kind of art ‘red’ per se? Do we expect Red Art to be ‘red’ in content, for instance, in directly addressing topics such as class struggle, the negatives of capitalism and a new neo-liberal world order? And if it does, is it enough to be descriptive or do we want art to be more than that, i.e., provoking, forward-thinking or even militant? In 1970, Jean-Luc Godard drafted a 39-point manifesto Que faire? What is to be done? that contrasted the antagonistic practices of making political films and making films ‘politically.’ It called unequivocally for art that actively takes up the position of the proletarian class and that aims for nothing less than the transformation of the world. With his legacy, what kind of objectives do we request from Red Art? Do we really still think that art can change the world or is that another idea from the past that has been overwritten by something that we like to call reality? Can art that is for the most part commercialised and produced in a capitalist art market be ‘red’ at all, or does it have to reject the system established by galleries, fairs and museums in order to be truly ‘red’?

Decades ago, when artists started to use new media such as video and the computer, their works were ‘new’ in the way they were produced and distributed, and changed the relationship between artists and their collaborators as well as between the artworks and their audiences and ‘users’ respectively. Most of this new-media-based art circulated outside the ordinary market and found other distribution channels. The majority of works were inspired by a quest for the ‘new’ and consistently broke with old aesthetic principles and functions. Much of it was also driven by a search for the ‘better,’ by overthrowing old hierarchies and introducing a more liberal and inclusive concept of the world, based on self-determination and active participation. Last but not least the emergence of the Internet brought us a fertile time for new and revisited utopias and artistic experiments dealing with collaboration, distribution of knowledge, shared authorship, and appropriation of technologies. Today we know that neither the Internet nor any other new technology has saved us, but that the hopes for a more democratic world and alternative economies sparked by it have come true, if only to a minor degree.

So how do artists respond to this post-communist, post-utopian condition? What can be discussed as Red Art in the recent past and present? In this issue of Leonardo we have gathered some answers to these questions in the form of papers, essays and artworks, the latter produced especially for this purpose. Bringing together and editing this issue was challenging because we decided from the start to keep the call for contributions as open as possible and to not define too much. We were interested in what kind of responses our call would produce at a moment when the world is occupied with other, seemingly hotter topics, and it is fascinating to note that the resulting edition quite naturally spans decades of art production and the respective ‘new’ technologies as they related to ideas of social equality and empowerment – from video art to net art to bio art. This issue shows that the search for alternative ideas and perspectives, and an adherence to leftist ideals is neither futile nor simply nostalgic. But that this search is ever more relevant, particularly at a time when European politics is seemingly consolidating and wars around the world are establishing new regimes of social and economic inequality.

Susanne Jaschko
Why Digital Art is Red

The divide between the art shown in major museums and art fairs and that associated with the new media scene has been deep and durable. Many critics have puzzled over it, particularly because there is much that the two realms share, including the desire to put people into unusual social situations. Yet some of the reasons for the divide are plain enough, and they are about money, power and social distinction. The economic divide is across competing models of capitalist activity: the exclusive ownership of objects set against the release of reproducible symbols into networks with the ambition that they achieve maximum speed and ubiquity of circulation. The social divide is between a conservative club of super-rich collectors and patrons, and their attendant advisors, who buy their way into what they like to think of as a sophisticated cultural scene (Duchamp Land), against a realm which is closer to the mundane and more evidently compromised world of technological tools (Turing Land). Power relations are where the divide appears starkest: in one world, special individuals known as artists make exceptional objects or events, with clear boundaries that distinguish them from run-of-the-mill life; and through elite ownership and expert curation, these works are presented for the enlightenment of the rest of us. In the new media world, some ‘artists’ but also collectives and other shifting and anonymous producers offer up temporary creations onto a scene in which their works are open to copying, alteration and comment, and in which there is little possible control of context, frame or conversation.

This description of the divide has been put in extreme terms for the sake of clarity, and there are a few instances of the split appearing to erode. Yet its persistence remains one of the most striking features of the general fragmentation of the fast-growing and globalising art world. That persistence rests on solid material grounds, laid out by Marx: the clash of economic models is a clear case of the mode and relations of production coming into conflict, and is part of a much wider conflict over the legal, political and social aspects of digital culture, and its synthesis of production and reproduction. Copyright is one arena where the clash is very clear. Think of the efforts of museums to control the circulation of images and to levy copyright charges, while at the same time surrendering to the camera-phone as they abandon the attempt to forbid photography in their galleries.

So where is Red Art and the left in this scenario? Amidst the general gloom and lassitude that has beset the art world, some ‘artists’ but also collectives and other shifting and anonymous producers offer up temporary creations onto a scene in which their works are open to copying, alteration and comment, and in which there is little possible control of context, frame or conversation.

Thirty years ago, to find out what was happening in Gaza, you would have to have had a decent short-wave radio, a fax machine, or access to those great newsstands in Times Square and North Hollywood that carried the world’s press. Not anymore. We can get a news story from Gaza or Ramallah or Oaxaca or Vidarbha and have it cut to a world audience in a matter of hours. It is hard to ban social media, it has been claimed, because it entwines video fads, kittens and politics (and banning kittens looks bad). So the insight attributed to some to Lenin – that capitalists will sell us the rope with which to hang them – is still relevant.

In an era in which the political and artistic avant-gardes have faded, the affiliation of the art world that is founded upon the sale and display of rare and unique objects made by a few exceptional individuals – in which high prices are driven by monopoly rent effects – tends to be with the conspicuous consumption of the state and the super-rich. Here, the slightest taint of the common desktop environment is enough to kill aesthetic feeling. The affiliation of at least some of new media art is rather to the kitsch, the populist, and to the egalitarian circulation of images and words, along with discourse and interaction. New media artists who push those attachments work against some of the deepest seated elements of the art world ethos: individualism, distinction, discreteness and preservation for posterity (and long-term investment value). It should be no surprise that they are frequently and without qualification denied the status of ‘artist’.

It is also clear why the death of leftist ideas in elite discourse does not hold in new media circles, where the revival of thinking about the Left, Marxism and Communism is very evident. The borders of art are blurred by putting works to explicit political use (in violation of the Kantian imperative still policed in the mainstream art world). Very large numbers of people are continually making cultural interventions online, and value lies not in any particular exceptional work but in the massive flow of interaction and exchange. In that world, as it never could in a gallery, the thought may creep in that there is nothing special about any one of us. And this may lead to the greatest scandal of all: think of the statements that artists who deal with politics in the mainstream art world are obliged to make as their ticket of admission – it’s art has no political effect. They have to say it, even when it is patently absurd, and they have to say it, even as the art world itself becomes more exposed to social media, and is ever less able to protect its exclusive domain and regulate the effects of its displays. So at base, the divide is economic, but at the level of what causes the repulsion from digital art – that puts collectors and critics to flight – it is deeply and incontrovertibly political. They run headlong from the red.

Julian Stallabrass
INTRODUCTION

REFERENCES AND NOTES


3. See Domenico Quaranta, Beyond New Media Art (Brescia: Link Editions, 2013), 4-6. Quaranta’s book offers a thoughtful and accessible account of many of the aspects of the divide.


6. According to Paul F. Boller, Jr. and John George it is a misattribution. See They Never Said It: A Book of Fake Quotes, Misquotes & Misleading Attributions (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 64.


The viewer observes a man performing what seems to be a ritual dance among the ruins of the abandoned Avar village of Gamsutl, situated in the Caucasian mountains. In the past, this village has been famous for its skilful jewellers and armourers. Since the seventies, however, Soviet agricultural and industrialisation policy has led to its rapid decay. The dance symbolically re-enacts poses and gestures from 19th century battle paintings, from Soviet socialist propaganda imagery of collective farm brigades, and also from the everyday life of the villagers. The human body attempts to physically merge with its surrounding, acting as an agent of re-connection with the “then” and “now.”

— Ilina Koral’eva


Gamsutl


Screenshot from White Gold of Our Country, directed by V. Belyaev. Central Documentary Film Studios, 1958. Courtesy of The Russian State Documentary Film and Photo Archive at Krasnogorsk (RGAKFD). Used with permission.
Screenshots from *Path Leading Downhill*, directed by P. Finkelberg, North Caucasian Film Studio, 1962. Courtesy of The Russian State Documentary Film and Photo Archive at Krasnogorsk (RGAKFD). Used with permission.
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Screenshots from *Path Leading Downhill*, directed by P. Finkelberg, North Caucasian Film Studio, 1962. Courtesy of The Russian State Documentary Film and Photo Archive at Krasnogorsk (RGAKFD). Used with permission.

"Dagestan fight for freedom against Iranian occupation."

Information display outlining the defeat of Nadir Shah in 1741 near Gamsutl. Courtesy of Dagestan State Museum of History and Architecture. Used with permission.
In the mountain villages of Northern Ossetia, where the famous Lezghinka and Kabardinka originated, a new dance has acquired great popularity—the Dance of the Brigade Leader, portraying collective farm life. The dance is usually performed to the accompaniment of a popular folk tune, a phrase of which is continually repeated by an accordion to accent the movements of the dancers, which convey in graceful rhythm and striking realism various phases of their new life.

Cropped from Soviet Folk Art, Moscow, 1939.

Gamsutl was abandoned in 1960s, as a result of a Soviet program of relocating highlanders to collective farms.
Antique postcard, Karachai, Kislovodsk area. Bermamit, Southern steep: 2607 meter above the sea level, with the view of Elbrus (h. 5633 m.), MKOI Kislovodsk. Collection of the artist. Used with permission.

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