Art, Revolution and Communisation

On the Transcendence of Art as Meaning without Reality

Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen

If the revolution is to take place, mankind has to progress from ten to eleven fingers.

Pierre Guyotat

Attach yourself to what you feel to be true. Begin there.

The Invisible Committee

One of the definitive characteristics of modern art – and after all it is with modernity and capitalism that art becomes art in our sense, severed from religious and feudal institutional contexts – has always been its directly political dimension or its relationship to revolution. As André Breton and Leon Trotsky write in their manifesto ‘Towards a Free Revolutionary Art’: ‘We believe that the supreme task of art in our epoch is to take part actively and consciously in the preparation of the revolution.’1 Ever since German Romanticism, philosophy has furnished art with an autonomous status that has turned it into a sphere in which there has been an intense, unique, critical and self-critical praxis which works with and comments on not only social and political conditions, but also the problems and limitations of art itself. But the autonomy of art is both a blessing and a curse – thanks to it, the artist is on the one hand not subject to externally formulated rules or prescriptions; on the other hand this autonomy also has a built-in limitation, since it means that artistic praxis in reality has limited social impact. As the German literary historian Peter Bürger writes, art is detached from daily life and is therefore without tangible effect.2 Art is only to a limited extent political, or is characterised by limited politics; that is, at any rate, the artistic avant-gardes’ reading of the autonomy of art. It therefore became their project in the 1910s and 1920s to integrate art and life, to question and preferably dismantle the autonomy of art, as an element in an extensive revolutionary transformation in which the differentiations of modern life were redefined,


4. As early as Earliest System-Programme of German Idealism (Das älteste Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus) from 1796–1797 G W F Hegel, F Hölderlin and F W J Schelling formulated such a project, in which art, as a new mythology, is to unite separate spheres of society as though they were siblings of some sort. As a reaction to the bourgeoisie’s rolling-back of one feudal institution after another, art was thus assigned the function of being or creating a new universalist superstructure. In art it was possible to realise the community that the free market did not permit. See Bernhard Lypp, *Ästhetischer Absolutismus und politische Vernunft: Zum Widerstreit von Reflexion und Sittlichkeit im deutschen Idealismus*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt, 1972 and Andrew Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: From Kant to Nietzsche*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2003.

5. For analyses of the avant-gardes as part of a broader Romantic anti-capitalism, see Michael Lowy and Robert Sayre, *Révolte et mélancolie: Le Romantisme à contrecourant de la modernité*, such that it (again?) became possible, as Marx writes, ‘to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic’. The goal of the avant-garde’s romantic anti-capitalism was to transform the differentiations and abolish the parcelling-out of different experiences and the categorisation of human life into the relatively discrete spheres characteristic of life in modern society. But the important thing in this context is that the intense assault on the art institution by the avant-garde movements and the attempts to let art and life fuse together were really only another version of the modern ideology of art, by which art is assigned transformative, even revolutionary powers, such as would allow the avant-gardes still to subscribe to the notion of art as possessing critical potential; this was precisely why it was necessary to break out of the institution and affirm the original Romantic idea of a re-enchanted world. Art was a subversive force, in so far as it was no longer rooted in the art institution. To be true to itself, art had to negate itself and the art institution and take part in an all-encompassing overhaul of bourgeois capitalist society. This was why inter-war avant-garde groups like Dada and the Surrealists were involved in attempts to challenge the art institution; all the challenges took place with a view to permitting the creativity with which the artist had been furnished – as part of the constitution of art as an autonomous sphere – to seep out into everyday life. This was why the avant-gardes ridiculed the role and identity of the artist and tried to abolish it in favour of an activation of the viewer, who otherwise only stood passively contemplating the leavings of the artist, and who thus both pointed towards another society and a cohesive existence, but at the same time confirmed the established order and its divisions into ‘work’ and ‘art’.

**BROKEN PROMISES**

This duality in art had already been mapped by the German philosopher and member of the Frankfurt School Herbert Marcuse in the mid-1930s, in ‘On the Affirmative Character of Culture’. On the one hand art, according to Marcuse, is in possession of or can give form to a utopian dimension; it can create images of another world, although it is a product of this world. It holds out – with a quotation from the French novelist Stendhal of which several members of the Institut für Sozialforschung were very fond – ‘une promesse de bonheur’. Art is, in other words, an expression of humanity’s preoccupation with its own future happiness, and in that sense it transcends society at a symbolic level. It is a kind of sanctuary where a number of fundamental needs that are suppressed in capitalist society are met virtually. The victims of the rationalisation of bourgeois society, which standardises and categorises human life and marginalises mankind’s spontaneous creativity, are given a voice and awoken to life in art, which in this way, according to Marcuse, functions as a refuge or a waste dump for marginalised experiences and modes of expression. Modern art thus possesses a subversive potential in Marcuse’s view.

But in accordance with the Marxism of critical theory, Marcuse applies a perspective to art that stresses its function in a wider context within the framework of the establishment of modern society, where
rationalisation and differentiation are the code words. Within this framework art is a place of hibernation for the anarchistic imagination that is rapidly being eradicated by an accelerated process of rationalisation; but this imagination is also prevented from having any broad social impact precisely because it is confined to the sphere of art. In contrast to the German tradition of cultural scholarship, which tends to analyse art and culture in a kind of social vacuum, and in which art is an isolated – indeed elevated – sphere, Marcuse is interested in the sociality of art, and analyses art, as did the other members of the Frankfurt School, as a language in which social processes come to expression in coded form. This does not mean that Marcuse sees art only as a reflection of social conditions but that he stresses the dual nature of art, the fact that it is relatively autonomous and both protests against capitalist society and its alienating abstractions, and at the same time confirms that society, since it functions as a safety valve whereby society can blow off surplus energy and let marginalised desire come to expression as pointless luxury goods, as meaning without reality, with no risk of real change. In modern capitalist society art is thus characterised by a historically specific duality: it is both an institutionally demarcated ‘free’ sphere and the production of luxury goods. These two aspects are incompatible; works of art that really ‘work’ reject any attempt to reconcile autonomy and market and remain fragmented. Marcuse calls this duality ‘the affirmative character of art’: on the one hand art exposes ‘forgotten truths’, on the other these truths are displayed under the semblance of the aesthetic in a sphere separate from daily life. The paradox is that art stabilises the very conditions it criticises. Its autonomy makes its impact as a neutralisation.


The artist thus has greater freedom of speech and expression than ordinary people in a bourgeois capitalist society, writes Marcuse. ‘What counts as utopia, phantasy, and rebellion in the world of fact is allowed in art’, but only as long as it remains separate from everyday life and appears under the label ‘art’.

Culture affirms and conceals the new conditions of social life.
otherwise it is only a confirmation of the established order, leaving us in dire straits. Marcuse’s concept of the affirmative character of art shows in exemplary fashion how art is furnished with the potential to constitute a kind of aesthetic dissidence that points beyond established reality but at the same time risks confirming established taste and the capitalistically defined world where art becomes a space for experiences that have been marginalised by other parts of human life. It is therefore highly necessary both to maintain the autonomy of art in bad times and to struggle against its respectable incorporation in the culture of the one-dimensional society. But at the same time this is by no means enough when it comes down to it. For this autonomy blunts negative consciousness, and only its transcendence can realise art’s original dream of a non-alienated, coherent life. Art and revolution are in other words closely connected.

CULTURE INDUSTRY, VERSION 2.0

Marcuse’s idea of the great rupture and the avant-garde movements’ revolutionary disregard for the art institution seem to have all but disappeared. If art has ever been able to create a revolution or contribute to one, it looks as if this was a very long time ago. Today art mostly functions as an integral part of an expanded experience economy where art is indistinguishable from other kinds of cultural tourism and city-branding. The autonomy of art is thus under intense pressure. That is why the texts about art by Marcuse and the Frankfurt School have an almost melancholy feel to them today; politically, the counter-revolution has the best cards in its hand, and the culture industry weighs more heavily on art than ever, although this does not mean that the autonomy of art has been totally negated. But it is truly difficult to sustain the notion that there is a crucial difference between art and what T W Adorno and Max Horkheimer, writing in the 1940s, called the culture industry.  

One of the significant examples of this development towards what we can call ‘culture industry version 2.0’ has undoubtedly been the emergence of the idea of art and culture as an important new economic resource. The idea of ‘the creative class’, put forward by American theoretician of urbanism Richard Florida, which analyses the role of art and culture in the creation of value in the city, and in economic development in general, was made visible and hypostatised, and the way prepared for a fusion of urban development and the culture industry.  

One of the significant examples of this development towards what we can call ‘culture industry version 2.0’ has undoubtedly been the emergence of the idea of art and culture as an important new economic resource. The idea of ‘the creative class’, put forward by American theoretician of urbanism Richard Florida, which analyses the role of art and culture in the creation of value in the city, and in economic development in general, was made visible and hypostatised, and the way prepared for a fusion of urban development and the culture industry.  


central role in capitalist-organised production, and where there has been a restructuring of the workplace to make it a more flexible and dynamic working unit, where terms like creativity, autonomy and network play a central role. As the French sociologists Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello describe it in their *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, the postwar Fordist organisational principles in the Western world have been replaced by a network-based organisational structure based on the employees’ initiatives and relative self-management with the goal of producing moods, emotions and atmospheres rather than traditional products; but the downsides are risk, stress and an escalating use of antidepressives. The premise of individual freedom is the structural violence of unemployment, and the individualistic micro-economy functions against the background of an army of the superfluous into which everyone risks being drafted.

According to Boltanski and Chiapello this is a historical process through which a neoliberal management industry has appropriated fragments of the artistic protest of the 1960s against the Fordist-disciplined society of that era and implemented these fragments in a new round of capitalist accumulation. In this development the artworld has played an important role both as an inspiration for new working processes and as a new profitable sector. As the Italian *autonomia* philosopher Paolo Virno writes:

> Within the culture industry, even in its archaic incarnation examined by Benjamin and Adorno, one can grasp early signs of a mode of production which later, in the post-Ford era, becomes generalised and elevated to the rank of *canon*.16

The consequences of this process have been that art and economics have fused more closely together, and that the artist has in many contexts been transformed into a kind of cultural entrepreneur who is able to create profit. The British artist Damien Hirst is of course the most obvious and perhaps most extreme example of this development, where art ends up as nothing but a financial transaction, and the artist cynically over-identifies with capitalism. In the aftermath of Hirst’s vulgar diamond-studded skull, *For the Love of God*, the idea of the revolutionary power of art no longer plays any major role in art; whether in visual art, on the stage or in literature. When revolution does finally appear as a reference or theme in art, it is almost always as a historical reference, not as a future possibility. In the work of artists like Josephine Meckseper and film-makers like Philippe Garrel, the revolutionary is isolated as ‘cool’, and in striking fragments detached from any present-day practice. In such contexts earlier revolutionary events are turned into disconnected and empty forms that can be applied to anything from art and cultural artefacts to fashion with sale in mind. Revolution is thematised or aestheticised, and art is completely emptied of critical content. True, there are artists who plunge into the political events of the day and try to use art as a space for unreasonable and consensus-subverting gestures, but they stand out on a scene characterised by commercial integration and institutional co-option.

Today neither the image nor the word seems particularly antagonistic towards the prevailing order; neither is apparently capable of dissent, not to speak of more extensive subversion. The very limited endeavours of

---

relational aesthetics are a telling indication of this. Here the desire of the avant-gardes for another world has been replaced by the production of ‘social interstices’. According to the French curator Nicolas Bourriaud the relational works enable the viewer to conceive of other ways of interacting and collaborating. The encounter with art now takes the form of a thrift store (Christine Hill’s *Volksboutique*), a bench that emits smoke when you sit on it (Jeppe Hein’s *Smoking Bench*) or a meal at a gallery (Rirkrit Tiravanija’s *Untitled*). The great rupture is quite obviously not the point here. It is a drastic downscaling of art’s revolutionary pretensions when an opening at a New York gallery or a smoking bench becomes the artwork.

**MICROPOLITICAL FUSIONS**

Fortunately, there are still other, less innocuous possibilities for the political potential of art and the issue of art and revolution. The Austrian art theoretician and philosopher Gerald Raunig attempts in his book *Art and Revolution* in 2005 to blaze a trail out of this wretchedness, beyond relational aesthetics and the like. Supported by an open, post-structuralist concept of revolution that Raunig has taken from the author duo Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari as well as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, he proposes an alternative conception of the relationship between art and revolution as temporary overlaps without synthesis. In contrast to the avant-garde’s attempts to fuse art and everyday life in a social upheaval, Raunig offers an understanding of art and revolution as:

\[
\ldots \text{temporary overlaps, micropolitical attempts at transversal concatenation of art machines and revolutionary machines, in which both overlap, not to incorporate one another, but rather to enter into a concrete exchange relationship for a limited time.} 18
\]

Considering events such as the Soviet writer Sergei Tretyakov’s activities in a *kolkhoz* in 1928, where among other things he collected money to purchase tractors and edited the collective farm’s wall newspaper, and the neo-Brechtian Austrian theatre group VolxTheaterKarawane’s antiracist and globalisation-critical theatre campaigns, Raunig analyses how artistic praxis and political activism interact momentarily to create a brief rupture, which he calls a specific fusion of art and revolution.

Following on from Deleuze and Negri he defines revolution as a machinic montage of three interrelated components: revolt, resistance and constitutive power. The important thing about this definition is its distancing from the classic Marxist-Leninist understanding of revolution as the conquest of state power by a cadre of decisive activists who seize power and initiate a transitional phase before the new society becomes a reality. Instead of understanding revolution as a matter of appropriating state power and establishing a dictatorship of the proletariat, it is rather about thinking *around* the state in favour of revolution as an “uncompleted and uncompletable, molecular process, which... emerges before the state”.19 For work and resistance, as Deleuze and Negri emphasise, are original and come before capital and power.20 This ‘primal’ resistance risks being swallowed up by the already constituted power and capital-

---


20. Deleuze adopts the idea of the ‘primacy’ of resistance from Foucault (see Deleuze, *Foucault*, Editions de Minuit, Paris, 1986, p 95; and the translation by Sean Hand, *Foucault*, Continuum, London and New York, 1999, p 74). It was Mario Tronti who developed the idea, so important to Italian workerism and Negri, of the resistance of the workers, which is ‘primary’ in relation to the strategy of capital (see Tronti, *Operai e capitale*, Einaudi, Turin, 1966).
ism, but is in fact constantly creating a new society, new lines of sight, and becoming something else, as Raunig’s source of inspiration, Deleuze, writes.

For Raunig, VolXTheaterKarawane is the model of the possible fusion between revolution and the art machine; this is where the social, the institutional and the self-critical join hands, without any attempt to negate art and politics. It is instead a matter of a movement on the borderline between the two discourses. Raunig’s presentation belongs among the more interesting current political theories of art, but the notion of ephemeral, processual linkages between revolution and art machine tends to make the idea of revolution very airy. Raunig’s explicit conception of the relationship between art and revolution makes it possible to reveal the de facto depoliticisation in so-called ‘political art and literature’ circulating in contemporary art and the literary institution. That is good. But Raunig’s emphasis on the temporary risks attenuating the link with revolution. It is not going too far to say that what we have here is a politicised version of Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics, where micropolitical overlap has to stand in for the dismantling of capitalism, its state form, its monetary economy and its wage labour. It is at all events hard to see how Raunig’s art machines can constitute a true dialectical alternative to anything at all, if they keep simply leap-frogging ahead, cutting off and interrupting, as Deleuze and Guattari write.21 Moving on the borderline is all very well, but it leads to no true critique of art as meaning without reality. There is a danger that the Deleuze-inspired emphasis on the temporary will, in the end, confirm the status quo, now simply peppe up with brief interruptions and a little more schizophrenia – that is, yet another round of pseudo-revolution. And that is exactly what capitalism is: a constant innovation movement where previously established collectivities and life contexts are phased out and replaced with new ones, all mediated by the commodity. How a revolutionary process that dismantles the state and the monetisation in so-called ‘political art and literature’ circulating in contemporary art and politics is more like running on the spot than revolutionary activity. But should we presume it is in the transcendence of both art and the political that the revolutionary perspective is manifested?

COMMUNISATION

By contrast, an intense interest in such a questioning of art and politics is under way in a number of marginal art-institutional projects which in various ways perpetuate the critiques of everyday life undertaken by Surrealism and the Situationist International. The Invisible Committee and the milieu around the now dissolved periodical Tiqqun build further on the radical part of the avant-garde’s critique of everyday life in the direction of what they call ‘communisation’, which is the direct destruction of the capitalist production relations and a rejection of the identities of the spectacle, including ‘worker’, ‘artist’ or ‘writer’.22 This is an attempt to
wholly anonymous – for example *Call*, which had neither authors, publisher nor imprint – or signed collectively as The Invisible Committee or Tiqqun. Most of the written traces of the group are available online at http://www.bloom0101.org/page1.html. Tom McDonough provides a useful contextualisation of the milieu as a continuation of the Situationist International in ‘Unrepresentable Enemies: On the Legacy of Guy Debord and the Situationist International’, *Afterall* 28, 2011, pp 43–55. Unfortunately it was published after the writing of this text.

On 11 November 2008 the French anti-terror squad stormed a farm in the village of Tarnac and arrested the occupants, a group of young people between twenty-two and thirty-four years old, who had bought the farm and started a farm shop. The action was the focus of the media as a continuation of theSituationist International in *Unrepresentable Enemies: On the Legacy of Guy Debord and the Situationist International*, *Afterall* 28, 2011, pp 43–55. Unfortunately it was published after the writing of this text.

The Invisible Committee takes on as its own this critique of everyday life that rejects the commodity’s mediation of the means by which we reproduce, acquire knowledge and relate to one another. They inscribe themselves in a long Romantic anti-capitalist tradition that extends from Charles Fourier to Marx to Georg Lukács and onwards, which condemns capitalism as a civilisation of sexual poverty, individualism, herd mentality, alienation from nature, the destruction of the sense of community, and the mediation of all social relations through agencies of money and technology. The Invisible Committee’s analysis has remained more or less the same over the years, from the highly speculative and theoretical texts in *Tiqqun* to the referenceless and ‘easier’ *The Coming Insurrection*; in essence that we live in a politically and economically fragmented world.
that we attempt to piece together at the level of the image. As The Coming Insurrection says:

There will be no social solution to the present situation. First, because the vague aggregate of social milieus, institutions, and individualised bubbles that is called, with a touch of antiphrasis, ‘society’, has no consistency. Second, because there is no longer any language for common experience.28

The spectacle creates alienation, separates people and empties them of content. In Tiqqun the empty human being that is the result of this process is called ‘Bloom’ after the protagonist of James Joyce’s novel Ulysses.29 The Bloom of the spectacular commodity society is a spectator to his own life and lacks the agency to do anything or change society, which in addition does not cohere, but is falling apart; depression, stress and loneliness are the characteristics of this society.

‘I AM WHAT I AM’. This is marketing’s latest offering to the world… Decades of concepts in order to get where we are, to arrive at pure tautology. I = I. He’s running on a treadmill in front of the mirror in his gym. She’s coming back from work, behind the wheel of her Smart car. Will they meet? ‘I AM WHAT I AM’. My body belongs to me. I am me, you are you, and something’s wrong… Diffuse schizophrenia. Rampant depression. Atomization into fine paranoiac particles… The more I want to be me, the more I feel an emptiness… The injunction, everywhere, to be someone’ maintains the pathological state that makes this society necessary. The injunction to be strong produces the very weakness by which it maintains itself, so that everything seems to take on a therapeutic character, even working, even love.30

The inspiration of Giorgio Agamben, who at the end of the 1990s was part of the milieu around Tiqqun, is clear: spectacular commodity capitalism is constant production of exchangeable commodified identities, and these limit or directly cancel out humanity’s potential to be something else or not to be defined at all by membership of classes and predicates. The spectacle has taken possession not only of our productive, but also communicative, skills and in that way has effectuated an unprecedented degree of alienation. The Invisible Committee’s diagnosis is thus an updated version of the Situationists’ Marxist analysis of the ‘society of the spectacle’, but it also draws on Giorgio Agamben, Martin Heidegger and Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse, early Jean-François Lyotard, the Italian workerism philosopher Mario Tronti and ultraleftists like Giorgio Cesarano. The Invisible Committee furthermore clearly inscribes itself in a dark art-political tradition that includes figures like Charles Baudelaire, Alfred Jarry, the Surrealists and the Situationists, all of whom are characterised by a particularly black, even satanic humour that consistently rejects optimism as a cynical reflex of the bourgeoisie.31

The Invisible Committee thus conjures up the image of a sociality worn thin and a hollow humanity standing peeled to bare life, surrounded by escalating masses of commodities. And the attempts to fill the void only intensify the alienation. The social isolation is therefore constantly increased when ‘Bloom’ takes refuge in the endless series of available identities: homosexual, artist, racist, father, excluded or Christian. He desperately attempts to relieve the pain of Bloomishness and the


24. As is well known, Breton and the Surrealists tried to escape from the purely literary field by establishing a collaboration with the French Communist Party, which never really succeeded both because the Communist Party saw it as its primary task to defend the ever-less-revolutionary developments in the Soviet Union and because Breton, with good reason, never accepted the Communist Party’s ‘economism’: the revolution cannot only consist of a material and economic improvement of the factual inequality; it is also about a whole range of other areas, not least the destruction of the rational.


27. Although the Situationists reject the idea that communism can be the workers’ control of the means of production, they still operate with an idea of an immaculate proletarian essence that can be brought to light in the form of the council.


29. In Théorie du Bloom ‘Bloom’ is presented as follows: ‘Last man, man on the street, man of the crowds, man of the masses, mass-man, this is how THEY have represented Bloom to us: as the sad product of the time of multitudes, as the catastrophic son of the industrial era and the end of enchantments. In these designations we also feel a shudder, THEY tremble before the infinite mystery of the ordinary man. Everyone senses that the theater of his qualities hides pure potentiality: a pure power we are supposed to know nothing about.’ Tiqquon, Théorie du Bloom, La Fabrique, Paris, 2000, pp 16–17

30. Le Comité invisible, op cit, L’Insurrection qui vient, pp 13–14; The Coming Insurrection, pp 29–30

31. Baudelaire calls laughter satanic: ‘Laughter is satanic; it is therefore profoundly human. In man it is a consequence of his idea of his own superiority; and in fact, since laughter is essentially human it is essentially contradictory, that is to say it is at one and the same time a sign of infinite greatness and of infinite wretchedness.’ Charles Baudelaire, ‘De l’Essence du rire et généralement du comique dans les arts plastique’ [1855], in Œuvres complètes, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade series, Gallimard, Paris, 1976, p

absence of community with intense, short-lived over-identifications with the commodity identities offered, which turn out every time to necessitate a new ‘identity fix’. In a special left-Heideggerian synthesis of Guy Debord and Heidegger with the aid of Agamben, The Invisible Committee thus operates with a notion that Bloom is the result of the disintegration of a kind of primal sense of community. This why Bloom is the homeless Ulysses, cast out into the desert, doomed constantly to affirm and pointlessly overcome his individuality, destined to repair his atomised monad-existence with more of the same: commodified ‘differences’ that every Bloom sooner or later buys into.

The opposite of this atomised non-life is not the creation of a new collectivity. By extending a special idea of community found for example in Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot and Agamben, The Invisible Committee offers a kind of workless collectivity, The Imaginary Party, a collectivity one should not join, cannot applaud, which always already exists, but which is hollowed out and denied in the glistening fitness-bodies of the spectacle that see themselves producing themselves in the mirror at the gym. If one were to look for earlier similarly anti-programmatic projects that attempted to combine a radical critique of existing ‘false’ collectivities with a holistic endeavour that cannot take the form of a work or political or religious essence, one could point to the mystical Nietzschean community Acéphale (meaning headless, or without chief), which Bataille promulgated at the end of the 1930s.32 Whereas Acéphale – as far as we know from the few preserved testimonies and sporadic documents – met beneath a lightning-struck oak tree in a forest outside Paris, refused to shake hands with anti-Semites and planned a human sacrifice, The Invisible Committee has among other things preached sermons on the Place de la Sorbonne where they tried to provoke the passers-by:

The most refined among you will condemn the domination and tyranny of a handful of corrupt leaders, and wink knowingly. But indeed your submission is the whole reality of the world of domination. It’s not you and the ‘system’, its dictatorship, its poor people, and its suicides. It’s just you in the system, subjugated, blind and guilty.33

In its early years the group is said to have engaged in various classic avant-gardist actions such as unloading several kilos of shit in front of the offices of the women’s magazine 20 Ans, or writing anti-Badiou slogans opposite the philosopher Alain Badiou’s apartment in Paris. The Tiqqun group was also involved in the more militant and uncompromising part of the alterglobalisation movement of the 1990s, which rejected negotiations with the state and, in connection with the mass anti-summit protests occurring in, among other places, Seattle, Prague and Genoa, destroyed the shops and offices of multinational firms. The more burlesque actions against various Parisian competitors, its aversions and the militant street actions seem, however, after 9/11 and the subsequent ‘war on terror’, to have been superseded by a life in the countryside without mobile phones, TV and other modern technology. The criminalisation of the alterglobalisation movement and the emergence of a new spectacular image of the enemy in the form of Islamic terrorism, from which it was necessary to distance themselves without supporting capitalist democracy and its structures of exclusion, necessitated new measures. Fourieresque
exodus and Luddism now became the group’s praxis outside Paris and the anti-summit protests in an attempt to reject all already-articulated political classifications and create a space where the workless and non-activity become the site of potentiality. The semi-obscure activities now became almost invisible; anonymity was said to be the way out of the neutralising visibility of the spectacle. To be unseen, according to The Invisible Committee, is to escape from power and slowly subvert it, to slide out from under its identificatory logic and become opaque. This does not mean an existence on the margins of society, for that is not possible according to The Invisible Committee; it is necessary to reject the state and all the political, social and economic institutions that sustain commodity and wage labour. The move to invisibility is in this way conceived by The Invisible Committee as a further escalation of the struggle against subjugation by the spectacle. It is not necessary to live with the state anywhere, and it is illusory to imagine that things will one day become different without struggle. The point is of course that this is already in progress, that the spectacle is constantly being challenged, relentlessly, by all means and from all sides. In *Tiqqu* this state was described as a war and a generalised state of emergency. As the text ‘Thèses sur le Parti Imaginaire’ says:

It is in applying... the fundamental axiom according to which what is unseen does not exist – esse est percipi – that the Spectacle maintains the exorbitant and planetary illusion of a fragile civil peace, of which the perfection demands that we leave it to spread in all domains its gigantic campaign of the pacification of societies and of the neutralisation of their contradictions. But its foreseeable failure is logically inscribed in the simple fact that this campaign of pacification is still a war – certainly the most terrible and destructive that ever was, because it is waged in the name of peace.34

Society is so worn and fragmented that all means will be used to avoid total collapse. But The Imaginary Party and The Invisible Committee are already subverting the spectacle and ‘coordinating in silence sabotage on the grand scale’.35 This comprises all possible forms of ‘asocial behaviour’, such as ‘unmotivated’ outbreaks of violence, strikes, shoplifting, depression, riots, hacking and terror. All of these, according to The Invisible Committee, are in reality expressions of resistance to the spectacle:

Precisely to the degree that catastrophe is truth in this state of fulguration, the people in the Imaginary Party work to hasten the advent of this by any means... They are besides freer to choose what will be the theatre of their operations and act at the point where the smallest forces can cause the greatest losses. The most troubling thing is that they know all of this, without however knowing that they know it. Thus, an anonymous worker at a bottling plant pours cyanide ‘just like that’ in a handful of cans, a young man assassinates a tourist in the name of the ‘purity of the mountain’ and signs his crime ‘THE MESSIH’ [sic], another ‘without apparent reason’ blows out the brains of his petit-bourgeois father on his birthday; a third opens fire on the wise herd of his school comrades; a last one ‘gratuitously’ throws bricks at cars launched from the bridge above the highway, or burns them in their parking lots.36
There is a clear messianic dimension to these analyses of The Invisible Committee; the widespread acts of destruction are the solution. As with Agamben, we have a variant of the idea that the threat and salvation are closely connected, that violent negation is followed by grace, but of an unbearable kind. The misery of the spectacle is pregnant with redemption. As the first line of The Coming Insurrection has it: ‘From whatever angle you approach it, the present offers no way out. This is not the least of its virtues.’

Capitalism is in deep crisis, economically, ecologically and socially, a crisis it cannot get out of, so it makes no sense to wait: the war has already begun.

The Invisible Committee is thus not content to excoriate spectacular commodity capitalism; it also considers what has to be done. The emphasis on praxis has become clearer, from the earlier, more metaphysical prophecies in Tiqqun to The Coming Insurrection, where the farewell to the capitalist city and its technology is presented as a revolutionary measure.

It’s useless to wait – for a breakthrough, for the revolution, the nuclear apocalypse or a social movement. To go on waiting is madness. The catastrophe is not coming, it is here. We are already situated within the collapse of a civilization. It is within this reality that we must choose sides.

While the Feuerbach theses of Karl Marx are close by here (‘The philosophers have only interpreted the world differently; the point is, to change it’), we are far from Slavoj Žižek’s recent mantra that the revolutionary must think and for God’s sake not act. In the face of such a position, The Invisible Committee points out that it is possible and necessary to act. Although the spectacle covers everything, it is possible to intervene and interrupt the subjugation. As it says in Call, places must be established where those who desert can seek protection and establish exchange-free relations beyond the spectacle. Such places, which The Invisible Committee calls communes, do not already exist, and must not be created; they are established in what already exists. They are mutations of the available. The commune is thus not a new ‘work’ around which people can rally; it is a place where a radical dissolution of the self takes place, where identities of the spectacle such as Muslim, artist, woman and rocker no longer mean anything, where the personal choices of the dominant existential liberalism are dismantled in a desubjectification, where all identities are broken up, and the false desires are pressed out of the body. It is a place where new kinds of subjectivity are developed, where it is possible to satisfy the desires that the present situation always forbids and represses. The commune is thus a kind of fusion of the communist gesture that already rejects capitalism now and is creating a different world. ‘A commune forms every time a few people, freed of their individual straitjackets, decide to rely only on themselves and measure their strength against reality.’

The struggle towards complete separation cannot take place through established milieux, whether militant and cultural, or within the framework of political organisations. These are in reality, according to The Invisible Committee, only an endless deferral of the struggle. In the art-world the revolutionary energies run aground; this is where the still
unstifled intensities are put. ‘Literary circles exists to smother the clarity of writing.’

For The Invisible Committee revolution is a communisation process which is already in progress as a destructive praxis within the spectacle, a process where things are done in common, used and extracted from the cycle of capital. ‘To communize something means to liberate its use and on the basis of this liberation to develop refined, intensified and more complex conditions.’ It is thus not about first seizing power and then creating communism. The Invisible Committee firmly rejects such a notion of a programme that has to be realised, or a goal that lies far into the future. Communism cannot be deferred. *Hic Rhodus, hic salta!* as Marx writes, ‘Here is Rhodes, here jump!’ Following on from ultraleftists like Jean Barrot, The Invisible Committee emphasises that communism is a movement that already exists, that the commune is both means and end, as in the Paris Commune, in which the social experiments were in full swing immediately and not deferred until after the war against Louis Adolphe Thiers and the provisional French government in 1871. 

There can be no notion of a post-revolutionary condition or happy mornings when the workers have finally come home and become themselves. The worker must, like the Dane, and all the other identities, be blown up. Only if you empty your head of images of how a better life could look can the future be possible. If there is hope in this scenario, it is thus a kind of empty nihilist hope with no specific content.

That is the perspective for The Invisible Committee: to affirm nihilism, to find the point where passivity becomes activity, where there is a rupture and we become a kind of collective revolutionary subjectivity beyond the separation between art and economy, politics and everyday life, theory and praxis. In this way The Invisible Committee continues with the Situationist avant-garde’s critique of everyday life and tries to destroy art as a
separate sphere, as meaning without reality. It is not good enough that art possibly involves a promise of happiness – it has to be fulfilled now. The separation has to be *fucked up*: Bloom smashes his exercise bike, rushes out into the open, finds a guitar, gives it gas, and the commune manifests itself in a Fourieresque punk thrash: ‘Don’t know what I want. But I know how to get it.’

The anthology *Communication and its Discontents: Contestation, Critique, and Contemporary Struggles*, Minor Compositions, New York, 2011, edited by Benjamin Noys, is an attempt to analyse this debate about communisation and the discussion between the Invisible Committee and Théorie Communiste. Unfortunately all contributions are rather one-sidedly in favour of Théorie Communiste and tend to misrepresent the analysis of The Invisible Committee. The book came out after this text was written.

46. Tiqqun, ‘Comment faire?’, in *Tiqqun: Organe de liaison au sein du Parti Imaginaire* 2, 2000, p 278; ‘How is it to be done?’, in *Introduction to Civil War*, Alexander Galloway and Jason E Smith, trans, Semiotext(e), Los Angeles, 2010, p 197