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FREEDOM AS VIRUS: A CRITIQUE OF THE NEOLIBERAL NOTION OF FREEDOM AND AN ANALYSIS OF ITS CULTURAL CONSEQUENCES

Abstract: The extent to which the COVID pandemic has been shaped by communication is enigmatic as the very term “viral” has become a term of information science as much as of biology. Insofar as sizable populations have become cynical about information regarding COVID, their behavior has accelerated the threat of the virus. This paper proposes that this pandemic is fundamentally a crisis of communication emerging from antagonisms and inconsistencies latent within a general concept of “freedom”. The notion of freedom that has emerged with neoliberalism is one of a lack of regulation. Such a naive idea of freedom becomes particularly problematic when compounded with the classical liberal value of freedom of speech. This paper addresses the impossibility of unlimited speech, particularly on the internet, focusing on the desire such impossibility stimulates. This desire is an economic fuel for social media platforms. Insofar as artists share their practices via social media and generally use these platforms for networking, their practices inherit contradictions that artists must become conscious of to prevent a web-based practice from becoming emotionally exploitive and economically complicit. This crisis amplifies those contradictions that drive the artist to the point of despair.

Keywords: internet, freedom, neoliberalism, speech, social media, expression, censorship, COVID, desire, crisis

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“Freedom is not free.”
Ronald Reagan

In an ironic twist, the voices of Republicans across the United States are decrying the risk to liberty posed by the free market. This is because Donald Trump’s failed reelection was followed by a more consequential defeat: the suspension of his Twitter account. Suddenly, the party that defended a bakery owner’s right to refuse service to a gay couple (*Masterpiece Cakeshop, Ltd. v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission* 2017) doubles back to explain why Twitter’s refusal to host Trump’s words represents an infringement on that value most sacred to liberalism: the freedom of speech.

While it is tempting to dismiss the Republicans for blatant hypocrisy, it is important to realize this is a point on which the left and the right can agree. While interrogating Mark Zuckerberg, Rep. Joshua Hawley, a staunch Trump supporter, referred to tech companies as “modern-day robber barons” (*Breaking the News: Censorship, Suppression, and the 2020 Election* 2020), evoking the language of 19th-century labor movements. This is not to endorse Hawley’s character but simply to emphasize the possibility, however remote, that the seed of class-consciousness implanted by right-wing populism might blossom into a refutation of policies that benefit mainly US-based, globalist corporations to the detriment of the global laboring class. I concur with Belgian political theorist Chantal Mouffe that the problem with right-wing populism is that it constitutes a populace on racism and xenophobia, around identity (Mouffe 2019). It’s not impossible that in crushing the threat of white nationalism in the US and Europe, a more fundamental conflict will be exposed.

The above contextualizes German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s claim that Trump’s Twitter ban is “problematic” (AP 2021). Not wrong per se, but problematic insofar as it presents a problem. The problem is the absence of a common understanding of freedom generally and freedom of speech particularly. The leadership of cynico-authoritarians such as Trump accelerates this problem to the point of crises as their strategies rely on hacking liberal notions of freedom. Trump has consistently employed ambiguity in his utterances to suggest actions to his followers without becoming liable. He relied on the fact that he would never be held accountable for his use of language without inciting a constitutional crisis. Now that he is being held accountable (not by government, but by business, just like market fundamentalists wanted) the crisis has arrived.

How strange is it that this crisis arrived within the context of the COVID pandemic? The two crises have merged, accelerating the destructiveness of the virus by implicating such measures as mask-wearing with fear of big government. The COVID crisis has been, to a considerable degree, a crisis of communication.

The consequences of this compounded crisis are of particular importance for artists. Never before has the functioning of culture so relied on algorithmically governed platforms. In the absence of physical gallery spaces, artists have turned to the same platforms of communication utilized by Trump to cultivate followers. The institutional barrier that quarantines “high” from popular culture has been broken as galleries and museums have clumsily come to realize they cannot naively translate their exhibitions into a digital format. Most importantly, as web-based is the most viable of practices during this time of social transformation, this culmination of events has forced artists to reckon with the romantic idea of artistic freedom that is still the template. The effects of this reckoning will remain even after social distancing ceases to be necessary. “Normal” cannot be returned to.

English collapses two different concepts into one word: free. A language such as Spanish keeps these concepts distinct with the words *libre* and *gratis*: liberty (free from governance) and gratuity (free of charge, or a gift). Ronald Reagan’s famous “freedom isn’t free” line, so effective in convincing Anglo Americans that war is always justified, relies on this act of erasure. Applying Reagan’s truism specifically to freedom of speech gives it a new meaning. The ability to speak “freely” comes at a cost.

One can define this cost in several ways, including the cost of the medium of communication. Publishing is not free. One must have sufficient capital to publish a book. Self-publishing online is cheaper, but still not free. During the COVID crisis, the value of the United States’ tech stocks has surpassed the value of the entire European stock market (Wink 2020). As the tech market booms and public spaces close, the internet becomes the locus of civic activity. As always, not having access to capital amplifies class division. This digital divide exists between wealthy and poor countries (Lucas and Sylla 2003) as well as between wealthy and poor citizens generally (Anderson and Madhumitha 2019). One’s ability to communicate to the masses via access to these platforms is not a gift.

Insofar as the tech companies that have come to colonize the internet have programmed their algorithms to prioritize attention, an amalgamation of utterance and economics emerges.

The discrepancy between pro-market and liberal values is evident where speech is transformed into a commodity. Internet media researcher Renee DiResta claims “these opaque algorithms with their singular purpose – ‘keep watching’ – coupled with billions of users is a dangerous recipe,” pointing out that disinformation flourishes in this environment (DiResta 2018). The commodification of speech is generating awareness that freedom of speech should not imply freedom of reach.

While speech is not free in the sense that it is economically regulated, technology does tend towards becoming increasingly affordable. Thus, platforms of speech

tend towards becoming ever more accessible. If we choose to organize social forces equitably, the cost of self-publishing should become less of a barrier over time. However, speech is fundamentally not free insofar as it is grammatically regulated. Language is implicitly governed by rules, some as arbitrary as the organization of nouns and verbs, which differs between languages, others as fundamental as the very notion of presence. There is an inherent limit, or lack, embedded in speech.

In keeping with the terminology developed by Derrida, there is an inherent process of writing, *arche-writing*, that traces the *différance* between all terms. There is no speech without writing and no writing without this fundamental trace. No signifier ever communicates its signified directly, but functions within a network of traces. Thus, meaning is always deferred. This *différance* is the basis of presence, as an object only ever appears against a background from which it is differentiated. A signifier is defined by what it is not, by limit. Unlimited communication, or free speech, is a contradiction, a sort of bad faith that undermines the role of *différance* in language.

Freedom of speech, in the neoliberal sense of speech without limitations, is speech without writing, speech that is not given a temporality/spatiality. The search for unlimited speech is akin to the search for the absolute. This is a sort of alchemical quest in which the word (*logos*) is the thing: the transcendental signified at the heart of ontotheology, the presence without lack, the experience of unlimited pleasure. Yet Lacan asserts another limit: *joissance*. Pleasure has a limit past which it becomes pain. The quest for the thing-in-itself leads to death, the erasure of difference.

The old meme song “The Internet is for Porn” from Avenue Q here takes on a whole new meaning. The internet is where regulated language is used to find the unlimited presence of the *logos*, to transcend the limit on pleasure. The internet accelerates desire. Corporate platform providers are those forces that capitalize on the exploitation of this desire. Artist Cauleen Smith cautions in her COVID Manifesto, Tenet #1: “The Internet is not the answer” (Cauleen Smith 2020).

This more fundamental issue becomes practical when we recognize that the internet is a medium of writing. Like Sol LeWitt’s drawings, even images are written. This writing is translated by computers such that it is made invisible unless a user adopts unusual browsing habits. This written internet is not always invisible in the sense of redacted; much of the internet’s writing can be accessed and languages of web design such as HTML and CSS are not difficult to understand. They are not so much like foreign languages as they are hyper-regulated versions of the user’s familiar language.

This is not to say reading the internet is intuitive, particularly when one ventures beyond HTML and CSS. Insofar as communication is innately a guessing game, in which utterances are made, interpreted, and evaluated via feedback, communicating with a computer is communicating with a partner who has an extremely limited capacity to guess, who can only understand literal declarations. As demonstrated

by the practice of Harold Cohen and AARON, a computer is not a tool but a collaborator. To communicate with this inflexible partner, grammar must be regulated to the extreme. As these languages become more fundamental arche-writing becomes evident. The regulated quality of computer languages is used to convey inflexibility in the film *War Games*, when Dr. Stephen Falken tells the protagonists to get off his property by instructing, “Path. Follow path. Gate. Open gate. Through gate. Close gate” (Badham 1983, 1:18:45 to 1:19:06).

That things (nouns or variables) can only exist as objects of language after their meaning has been declared is not something one needs to consider while communicating customarily. The declaration “let” in JavaScript reads somewhat biblical, as if the programmer creates a world out of the most fundamental of materials: presence. JavaScript is not the most fundamental of computer languages, but binary, a writing that isn’t translated for human readability. Even here, communicating is about declaring presence (1 or “on” is the most basic presence and 0 or “off” is absence) and then regulating that presence. These rules seem minuscule on their own, but they combine into complex systems of government.

Almost every custom of the internet is arbitrary. Some technical attributes are innate, such as hypertext. The visual signifiers and spatial metaphors of the internet, however, are particularly arbitrary. The dominance of some web services over others is even more arbitrary. Visiting Web 1.0 websites reveals how many customs were not yet agreed upon only two decades ago. Provided different sets of rules, by different regulators, the internet becomes unfamiliar.

Users might perceive themselves as having liberty, but the computers, the ones reading the internet, definitely do not. They are algorithmically governed. Their governance serves the interest of their programmers. Artists and content producers take for granted that computers will faithfully reproduce the instructions that are their images, ignoring those other routines running underneath and around their images, over which they express no agency. To use the internet with the type of freedom associated with neoliberal ideology, as an informed, rational agent entails speaking the computer’s language, and graphical user interfaces make learning this language unnecessary. C++ is the new Latin. As with Christian art, images represent the word to the illiterate.

Communication, like competition, is never unregulated. In the case of computer communication, this is evident. Yet the meaning of “freedom of speech” might be contained somewhere in the ambiguity of the term “liberty” specifically.

Imagine you’re playing a game of Monopoly with a friend. Every time they pass GO they demand the bank give them \$600 so long as they have the most properties (their “too big to fail” rule). You explain that this isn’t a real rule. They insist that you’re trying to regulate their freedom to play the game, punishing rather than rewarding their merit. Free competition means that the right to write the rules is rewarded to the winning player. Moral deliberation becomes irrelevant when we can apply the simple formula: might makes right.

Where there are social interactions, there are limits that define those interactions. There are rules in a neoliberal economy, but ideology camouflages these rules to appear as conditions of nature. Economists pretend to be scientists to conceal that their diagrams of economic activity are arbitrary. “There is no alternative,” says Margaret Thatcher, as if neoliberalism is innate. Yet despite their insistences, economists are not scientists. They are programmers. This point is effectively argued by economist Kate Raworth, who systematically dismantles the diagrams of neoclassical economics, pointing out the extent to which these diagrams design rather than describe (Raworth 2017). What neoliberals push is not Freedom with a capital “F”, but a specific definition of freedom not unlike Hobbes’s state of nature: solitary and brutish. Unlike Hobbes, neoliberals consider this freedom more desirable than others.

In the merchant-induced absence of democratic government, we have inherited forms of privatized governance. Twitter is such a government. Trump was never speaking “freely” on Twitter but was arbitrarily limited to utterances of 280 characters. This constraint benefited him by discouraging nuanced discourse and encouraging attention-grabbing dysphemisms, somewhere between the languages of advertisement and school-yard bullying. Marketers refer to such content as “snackable”, operating on the belief that internet users’ attention spans are less than that of a goldfish. More succinct and desire-satisfying (or is it desire-inducing?) content is superior (Digital Marketing Institute 2014). Their recommendation algorithms are set to share attention-grabbing content, regardless of political consequences (Newton 2019). Bans on right-wing accounts are superficial, intended only for public relations. Twitter is arbitrarily demanding its users have tact after punishing users for having tact. In a sense, right-wing anger over censorship is justified. They are being punished for playing the game in the way it was designed to be played.

Though Twitter limits speech, perhaps it does not limit expression. Regarding “freedom of speech” as equivalent to “freedom of expression”, the difference between terms is erased. This difference must be restored. Free-market capitalism, even with the inequality that emerges as wealth becomes concentrated, still allows for a maximum of expression so long as expression is a resource that can be exploited. Expression becomes a competition, camouflaged as romanticism. Artistic self-expression plays a role in neoliberal ideology. In the context of the neoliberal US, Trump is a multi-media artist whose self-expression has yielded him great power.

Trump is a particularly prevalent case study not because he is unique as a cynico-authoritarian (in fact Putin is a significantly more relevant figure in this regard) but because he came to power specifically through his capacity to hack the rules of social media and governance until he reached the limits of both. It was a failed attempted coup, unimaginable in the US just a few years prior, that resulted in his being impeached a second time and in his expulsion from Twitter. Trump is important because he hacked the country that has, since the Cold War, proclaimed

itself the leader of the free world. Of course the contradiction of freedom reached its boiling point in the United States. Now that it has, an electronically-connected world must confront this crisis.

Twitter's censorship is problematic not only because it challenges us to question the limits of freedom, but because it treats the symptom and not the virus. The primary reason why extremism is programmed into social media is economic. Extremism attracts attention, and attention is the basis of social media's economic model. The extremism encouraged by social media is not localized to the US nor specific to a single ideology. ISIS (Alfifi et al. 2018), European right-wing extremists and (predominantly south) European left-wing extremists (Europol 2020), and US left-wing extremists (Finkelstein et al. 2020) join the white nationalists of the United States in gaming these platforms strategically for recruitments in ideologically-driven militias. Social media presents its user with a free market of ideologies. "All that is solid melts into air" (Engels and Marx 1848).

A website like Twitter provides the user "free" access and consequently must extract a value from the user to turn a profit. The internet relies on a material infrastructure that is not at all free (*gratis*). Twitter pays to host users, so it expects in exchange that their use of the platform will ultimately generate valuable attention. As with the Fordian model, the product is consumed by the producers. The companies that constitute this oligopoly turn civic engagement and cultural production into a covert form of labor. We are not customers, but employees.

For this reason, we should celebrate that US congressional Republicans are reviving 19th-century union rhetoric and are investigating social media companies for anti-competition practices. Of course, they are doing so to defend the abusive speech of white nationalists and the "liberty" to share misleading information. They are not fundamentally offended that social media platforms have been programmed to cultivate extremism. They are offended that they are being denied a winning strategy. It is up to the left to maneuver around Republicans' superficial concerns and to address the underlying problem: that freedom has been hacked.

US Republicans were pleasantly surprised when *A Letter on Justice and Open Debate* was published in 2020 with signatories including prominent leftist thinkers. While some denounced the letter, treating it as an expression of privilege (Yang 2020), it's hard to invalidate the signature of a figure like Noam Chomsky, whose career has been devoted to exposing and fighting US global hegemony. It's hard to invalidate the signature of a figure like Salman Rushdie who has experienced the implications of free speech more deeply than perhaps any of the letter's critics, having evaded a fatwa against his life for having published *The Satanic Verses*. Republicans found themselves unlikely allies in this argument against cancel culture.

It's important to acknowledge that this "cancel culture" that is being denounced is a reaction to a lack of government oversight, a lack of protection for vulnerable citizens. It is a system of governance in the absence of representation. Users have to cancel because platforms host extremists. This apparent illiberalism has emerged in

response to a radical concept of freedom that naturalizes exploitive social relations. If we want to preserve free speech, we must realize that speech is not free.

As we proceed, we must be careful to avoid implementing more versions of Article 13, which limits the speech of citizens in favor of big business. A list of more than 70 computing experts including Vint Cerf and Tim Berners-Lee signed their letter advocating free speech titled Article 13 of the EU Copyright Directive Threatens the Internet, stating: "Article 13 takes an unprecedented step towards the transformation of the Internet from an open platform for sharing and innovation, into a tool for the automated surveillance and control of its users" (O'Brien, Malcolm 2019). There is a Scylla and Charybdis scenario in play between the dangers of regulating speech online and those of leaving speech "unregulated". This scenario changes, however, when we stop focusing on content and begin focusing on how the platforms are written. We can regulate the writing of the internet.

How can we write a social media platform that doesn't function by the algorithms of competition? This is like asking to make a social media equivalent of PBS, the Public Broadcasting System. For all its virtues, PBS does not generate desire. Compare PBS to TLC. Before the 1980s, The Learning Channel was a public station that provided educational content. When it began to operate with the profit incentive, it slowly began a shift in its content. Now it provides shows like Here Comes Honey Boo Boo, exhibiting and exploiting a little girl and her family. Trump is the Honey Boo Boo of the internet. There is something in these cultural products that generate desire right up until the pleasure principle is surpassed and the desired object becomes refuse. We get tired of winning.

The problem is that the culture of capitalism is sexy. I know that a Nike shoe is, ultimately, just a collection of dead material stitched together to cover my foot. I know they are unethical in their production practices. I know all this yet I still find Nike sexy. It is so sexy that I feel compelled to ignore the ugliness of its production. I'd rather treat the shoe as if it has no genesis. I want to have proximity to the noumenal. I excuse exploitation because in taking responsibility for my desire I run the risk of annulling that desire. My identity must always be deferred to be desirable. I find myself in striving to express myself. Even left-leaning artists incorporate this sex appeal into their work and self-promotion. Desire is viral.

Despite the consequences of how social media platforms are governed, will we always regard them as sexy? Or like Honey Boo Boo and Trump, have they passed the limits of pleasure, revealing themselves as refuse? They now appear to remain sexy not because they promise individual empowerment – the general experience of using these platforms is rather one of being made to feel inadequate – but rather because they operate as a game. They promise a means to overcome the lack they induce. They are not programmed to promote civic discourse, but to offer the chance to transcend the social, to become a real individual rather than an imitation. Expression is gamified.

These "services" fundamentally respond to the aspect of the psyche that desires.

We carry within us a desire that searches for an object, a desire that desires desire. Effective capitalism provides that object most potently by representing the subject as one who lacks. You never knew you lacked “likes” until Instagram invented them. In this sense, Nick Srnicek’s platform capitalism is just an accelerated and ever more pervasive form of capitalism. Data becomes a resource, identity becomes a commodity.

The problem with a democratic social media platform is that it cannot provide the object of desire because it makes the object available. One never reaches the Nike object, which is why one wants it (want here explicitly referring to its Old Norse root *vant*, meaning lacking). If one does transcend lack, the object of desire becomes just an object, just refuse. Desire is a paradox... the paradox on which the economy of (platform) capitalism runs.

Has freedom become a virus? When South Korea was able to keep Coronavirus under control because of measures their citizens consented to, measures that offend Western notions of individual liberty (Stancati and Yoon 2020), the antagonisms embedded in the word “freedom” became evident. We see the problem of Western citizens, particularly in the US, spurning masks as an aesthetic statement expressing an anti-elitist attitude. We see the aestheticization of mask-wearing, that wearing a mask becomes a visual statement about the model of freedom one ascribes to.

Indeed, consenting to take seriously the threat of COVID and to follow the recommended precautions is a surrender of freedoms, but not necessarily to so-called “big government”. We surrender a tolerable degree of freedom for the safety of society. Our networks of neighbors are the people we allow to govern us. What we ask in exchange is that they do the same. This surrender is intolerable from the standpoint of neoliberalism. As articulated by Margaret Thatcher, neoliberals believe there is no such thing as society. Why surrender your freedom to something that doesn’t exist?

The contradictions of freedom are most expressed in the practices of artists. Artists, who so often rely on public space, but whose typically liberal leanings cause them to concede that public exhibitions should be limited into the unforeseeable future. Artists, who work in the intersection of the Renaissance genius, the capitalist brand, and the Marxist cultural critic. At the site where culture is produced, its contradictions are made visible.

Sympathetic though they may be, many artists felt compelled to somehow capitalize on COVID, to demonstrate the extent to which they take the social threat seriously for personal gain, to be the first to post on Instagram that one had done something clever with the face mask, to be the first to author a project named “Social Distance”. The same impulse infects art “about” the Anthropocene. Those who express themselves the most visibly and publicly feel compelled by competition-in-

duced anxiety to make a resource out of a crisis. In this state of anxiety, freedom of expression reveals itself as a clever form of self-imposed slavery.

If platforms yield profits by inducing a feeling of lack in their users, are artists who participate on these platforms not complicit? Artist and writer Adina Glickstein articulates the problem thus:

“The signifiers that we adopt to actualize creative intentions are just as readily hoovered up by the platforms where we share them, collapsed into capital as our ostensible leisure is rendered an extractable form of labor” (Glickstein 2020).

Our images are only ever the same image: the image as the object of desire. Such a cultural product amid a global health pandemic appears cruel. The consumer passes a point, like Shinji screaming at the sight of Asuka’s mutilated Eva in *Evan-gelion*. The alienation induced by such a culture passes the limit of pleasure when we know that people are dying without a hand to hold. All the glitter and dazzle feels like an expression of a unique form of slavery, micro-plastics polluting our bodies. It becomes evident that your culture is there for you when you are buying, not when you are dying.

This is sad. And yet the free market does not relent; sadness becomes a commodity. Lovink refers to our social media platforms as sad by design. The sad girl and sad boy aesthetics and vaporwave replicate the language of advertisement with a self-conscious horror. Selfies of oneself crying are published on Instagram where “the willingness to publicly perform your own mental health is now a viable strategy in our attention economy” (Lovink 2019). The logic of exploitation is here internalized: I don’t just cry, I cry as a public statement. I perform crying in an economy where care is limited through quantification. My cry is measured. This is the image of freedom we have inherited.

What these trends communicate is a feeling of hopelessness. Digital self-betrayal as the only valid strategy of cultural participation. “Look at how well I’m doing capitalism! Do you love me yet? Have I destroyed myself thoroughly enough to warrant your empathy?” The density of images published by “creatives” on the internet, all increasingly more novel than the last, seems to dissolve into a larger pattern, forming into a thing. This thing looks like the sound of a cry. What is a cry for attention if not a cry for love or help? The cry precedes articulation, precedes the objects of language (Derrida 1984, 242). “Love me!”, “Help me!” As cultural theorist Mark Fisher says, “in the 21st century, there’s an increasingly sad and desperate quality to pop culture hedonism” (Fisher 2013).

When we condemn social media, we risk ignoring how useful it has been in the fight for racial justice (where the cry is undeniably justified), in revealing police brutality, and in mobilizing social movements. Yet one could point out that the killing of an unarmed black man goes viral next to a story about Kim Kardashian.

Social media has empowered BLM and MAGA all the same. Censorship ignores the underlying problem: the written algorithm serves the interests of its author. Insofar as we engage, we are serving platforms that thrive by transforming their users into producers, competing with one another. Insofar as we publish content, we provide the images their writings can hide behind. As with the Brazen Bull, our cries are translated into something like-able.

Writer Caroline Busta's article *The internet didn't kill counterculture – you just won't find it on Instagram* acknowledges the problem that countercultural activity has been harvested and neutered in the Web 2.0 landscape. "Actual power," she asserts, "is controlling the means by which lesser power can be displayed" (Busta 2021). Political activism on these platforms cannot be activism against the hegemony of the platform, thus counterculture style is emptied, performed for public approval.

Of course, we can elect to use the internet differently. One does not need to use social media. Busta's article explores this possibility. She points to the abundance of countercultural activity that can be found off the "clearnet" and on the "darknet" or "deep web". In this space, one does not perform counter-cultural politics for the sake of self-promotion. One's IRL identity is concealed from the public. Busta explains,

"Now 'selling out' is tying your online identity to your IRL life and real name. In part, this is because one of the biggest impediments to countercultural activity is the fact that the internet doesn't suppress expression – it forces you to express and then holds you accountable for whatever you say for years" (Busta 2021).

This sounds like a return to the logic of Web 1.0; a return to the rural after having seen the spiritually corrosive effects of the city. On the one hand, we should feel excited by the possibilities available to us when we abandon the platforms that have colonized the internet. On the other, the idea of returning to an idealized past is dangerous. Plus, it seems that the desire to "cancel" social media itself expresses a more disturbing fact: we have zero confidence that elected officials will adequately govern these corporations.

Another problem worth attending to is that social media is where people are. According to DataReportal, over half of the world's population now uses social media (Kemp 2021). As Lovink asks, "How can we address this topic without looking down on the online billions, without resorting to fast-food comparisons or patronizingly viewing people as fragile beings that need to be liberated and taken care of?" The great justification for art is that it is for the people. The private collections of the European elite were transformed into the first art museums with Europe's enlightenment revolutions. Whereas the objects of art once signified the divine right that justified pre-Enlightenment structures of exploitation, in the public museum they

came to deify the movement of history. It is this that soothes the tension between the individualistic, careerist ambitions of artists and their leanings toward Marxist cultural critique. Without the justification of serving a public, art risks dissolving into petit-bourgeois self-delusion, if not also the indulgent production of fetishes, regardless of content.

Not to mention, artists have very real interests in getting attention directed at their work because their survival as artists depends on doing so. What other model is presented to artists? Art is ground zero for the competition embedded in free-market ideals of free speech. What other way do we know of to perpetuate the production of art than to receive financing as a consequence of differentiating oneself? One must get attention. One is free to avoid social media in the same way that one is free to starve.

How do we contend with this tension, between perpetuating a praxis of self-betrayal and sharing with a community? Regardless of the answer, we will continue to express and share via the broken platforms we have at our disposal. Perhaps to experiment with freedom is to experience freedom. We will continue to allow social media to exploit our efforts at political mobilization because we can only put out one fire at a time. We cannot participate on social media, however, with the belief that it is an adequate supplement for what we have lost.

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