

Images and text by MICHAEL BAERS

## IN THE END IT'S NOT A VERY FUNNY PROBLEM: SOME FUTURE SCENARIOS ABOUT ARTISTIC WORK AND LIFE

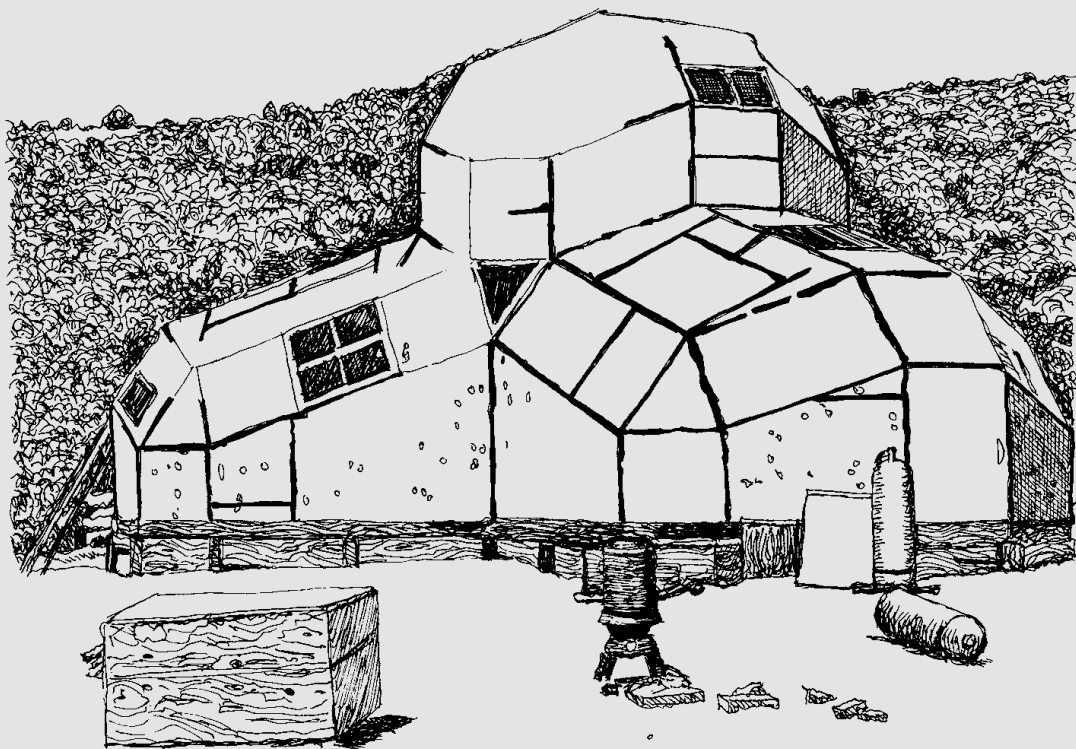
In September of 2014 I was contacted by Erik Krikortz who proposed I develop several scenarios concerning how artists operate in the future as a project for the publication you now hold. The timing of this proposition was in some ways fortuitous as I had only recently published a work in which I had interviewed architects, social theorists and activists about how Stockholm would be effected by climate change, a kind of preliminary conceptual labour for developing a science fiction scenario about Stockholm in the year 2040, and I was eager to continue exploring this topic. The scenarios I was to devise for this publication, as Erik and his co-editors made clear, should concern how artists might respond to the precarity of their professional situation and how the former might be linked to present day struggles for greater social equity – such as the basic income movement. In our several face-to-face meetings and Skype conferences, in which Minna Henriksson and Airi Triisberg also participated, I sought to clarify what was being asked of me, especially how the task of artists working to improve their own working conditions in the future related to re-imagining the social role of artists or to the broader issues all societies will face – not only the continued erosion of the social welfare system but to

climate change and the many different types of conflict and disruption it was likely to occasion. This was one question. Another concerned the manner in which social equity proposals in the northern European countries – which I came to understand was one of the core concerns of the project – related to labour conditions in the developing world. The basic proposition of globalisation is one where, as Fredric Jameson has written, “we can say that if individual experience is authentic, then it cannot be true; and that if a scientific or cognitive model of the same content is true, then it escapes individual experience.” Thus, in a world where the economy of one region increasingly is dependent on the overall world situation, and where prosperity in developed countries remains built on a foundation of exploitative labour practices elsewhere, how do attempts in the First World and the former Soviet bloc to construct a more just economic and political regimen take into account or seek to ameliorate the iniquitous conditions upon which their economies are based?

A lateral question also came to mind: how will the disruptive effects of climate change alter not only the horizon of expectations upon which social movements are based, but artistic activity as such? This was a question that increasingly occupied my thinking: what would change in society in general and cultural production in particular when the ecological future of the planet seems increasingly uncertain. Might this uncertainty redound upon the psychological perspective of artists, or the artistic field’s self-conception of what the proper role of art is, our unstable telos further destabilising artistic activity? After all, the social role of artists has not been fixed since time immemorial but came into being in the late eighteenth century when artists were freed from the patronage of the church, aristocracy, and state. Why should the long

shadow cast by the development of autonomous art be a permanent condition? Why should the role of artists or the types of activities they are engaged in not change in the future to accommodate new developments, especially considering how artists in the last forty years have persistently sought to expand the terrain of artistic practice?

At the conclusion of our preliminary discussions, I proposed a structure where I would set out three scenarios to which Erik, Minna and Airi could respond, and in this way we might develop them together dialogically; a structure where the limitations of our respective positions and our prognostication strategies might be made evident. The editors agreed to this proposition. The resulting text is based on this dialogue.



Peter Rabbit's Launch Pad, an architectural instantiation of a rhombicosidodecahedron, Drop City, Colorado, 1969.

3 November 2014

Dear Erik, Airi and Minna:

Somehow in the last days there was a lot of psychic interference, but recently I've had some time to set down the future scenarios you requested. Hopefully these can be the basis for a fruitful conversation about what possible futures might be envisioned for artists and artistic activity in the social contexts we spoke of previously.

#### Scenario one: self-organised groups/trade unions

MICHAEL: In this scenario, a group of artists have decided to leave their professional milieu to work as labour organisers within the broader society. Perhaps they are doing this within the service industry – fast food, some kind of retail, hospitality, janitorial, call centres, and so on. This is likely to put our hypothetical artists in contact with a diverse range of people – immigrants, young people, old people, people with a high level of education and people with little to no education. Of course, the specific composition of these sub-groups will vary from city to city and country to country.

I think in this scenario, the question of what kind of artistic means are brought to bear in organising is an interesting question; one which I would refer to Thomas Hirschhorn's statement that he does not make political art but art in a political way. As a corollary, we might conceive of these artists as "doing" organising in an artistic way, approaching labour organising as an art form. Certainly they are infiltrating different industries in order to organise, and by working alongside others, disappearing into the labour force – a second way their activities possess an aesthetic dimension. After all, acts of radical negation have a long

history in art practice. One might consider these prior negation strategies as a continuation of artistic practice through strategies of withdrawal: as Judith Butler says – following Hegel – negation effects a “positive reality” being born.

I would like to suggest here that these artists are not necessarily all so-called political artists. Perhaps counted among them are successful gallery artists who have had some kind of revelation about their “real” ideological position within society, and therefore have chosen to leave the artistic field to pursue a desired social end. But maybe, with their more varied resources, these artists are also attempting to organise across national contexts, building confederations in different cities that would increase the potential of staging labour walk-outs, etc.

Of course, some problems and questions immediately spring to mind, to wit: where would extant labour conditions suggest this as likely to take place and how will it relate to the future development of capitalism, with its potentially more destabilised and erratic economic behaviour. Most likely, in all these countries there will exist an expanded surplus of unskilled labour (Marx’s reservoir of Lumpenproletariat), as production moves to those markets where it is least subject to constraint. In northern Europe, the situation for unskilled labour will be one in which workers operate under ever more onerous conditions while remaining incapable of competing with labour markets in the Third World.

Secondly, what kind of new industries will there be that we could imagine our hypothetical artists infiltrating? There are, of course, the remaining heavy industries. But I think it is also likely that municipal services will continue to be privatised, so jobs that were once secure

and offered decent pay to people lacking higher education will become more precarious and exploitative. So, for instance, workers in municipal transportation – train drivers, bus drivers, and so on – might be one sector that is focused on.

MINNA: But aren't artists often already part of the reservoir of Lumpenproletariat? I think they constitute a special category of workers who, while possessing a degree, work in a field where income is erratic. Many artists are forced to seek employment outside their professional competence, and this often means jobs in the service sector. Maybe it would be interesting to imagine a scenario where artists don't infiltrate the broader society and labour market, but become conscious of



Unidentified workers at a Polish steel mill plan an industrial action in 2006.



Unidentified activists engage in a wildcat art strike some time in the late 1970s.

themselves as constituting a particular group of underpaid workers, and this at a time when politicians increasingly emphasise “creativity” as an economic resource.

Here it could be interesting to discuss basic income proposals, both in relation to artists’ wages and the solidarity artists might demonstrate with other fields of labour or oppressed groups. Of interest to us is how methods common within these other fields of organising might be brought to bear on struggles within the artistic field – for example, strikes. And perhaps it’s unfruitful to categorise artists into political artists and commercial/gallery artists. Nowadays, these categories are often mixing and overlapping. It is possible to be both, and being political has even become a marker of value within the commercial art world. The question is maybe more about the level of engagement with issues rather than whether one is a political artist or not.

MICHAEL: I was thinking in this first section about Walter Benjamin's text, *Author as Producer*, and the traditional role of artists/writers as "ideological patrons" who eschew identifying themselves as members of the proletariat, preferring to assume an arm's length position from the sidelines of class struggle. I was thinking also of Günter Wallraff and his undercover journalism work as a possible template for how artists might choose to act – another way to avoid ideological patronage. But I agree that acknowledging the artist's real role in cultural production would be a first step, and demanding from institutions real compensation as opposed to symbolic fees might have the effect of producing the artist-as-labourer. But the (often) exorbitant time necessary to produce artistic work is a problem here, since artists frequently have a different conception of time than wage labourers, and this perhaps should remain as a necessary problematic – the time of art work (thinking of Arendt's differentiation between work as life-supporting and intrinsically meaningful and labour as intrinsically alienating) versus the time of labour. An Arendtian take on this question might posit artists supporting the abolition of labour in favour of a return to work. Let's put it like this: on the one hand, artists might contribute to class struggle through their specialised training, or artists might use their innate sensitivity to, like Wallraff, "experience" labour conditions and thus remake labour from the inside. But I am most likely cleaving to a utopian position in this formulation. Probably some jobs and some sectors of the economy are intrinsically alienating, and this has been a consistent formulation in both Arendt and Adorno, that reconciling social iniquity also means reconciling the means-ends logic upon which capitalist societies are based.





A composite made of two undated photographs of Hannah Arendt and Walter Benjamin.

AIRI: I have to admit a certain worry over your notion of art workers completely abandoning their professional milieu and going into labour organising in different fields of precarious labour. This may bypass the core theme of our publication, which takes as its starting point the issue of labour conditions and models of organising within the art field. Personally, I don't believe that the trade union model would be very effective if isolated only to the cultural realm. Given this, the question the trade union model raises is certainly connected to cross-sector organising, but I would find it important to address the working conditions within the art sector as well. At the same time, I think an interesting aspect of this scenario concerns the general issue about how trade unionising might operate in the realm of precarious work, where labour relations are fragmented and provisional, making it difficult to find spaces of condensation from which collective agency might emerge. Some art workers' initiatives, such as the Precarious Workers Brigade in London or W.A.G.E. in New York, do

use trade unionist strategies, but in that context it is also interesting to ask what are the actual potentials and challenges related to it. To me it seems that the trade unionist model works in a rather narrow spectrum: it addresses the art workers' subjectivity as workers (for example, when working for various art institutions that commission their work), but fails to address the fact that as independent contractors most art workers do not rely on a single type of remuneration. They may occasionally receive remuneration from institutions or sell their artwork, and they also receive state subsidies in the form of grants, tax breaks or special social security schemes. But these are often insufficient. Most people working in the contemporary art field have combined incomes and a lot of their economic and social problems are related to the issue of falling between two or three chairs.



From a group photo of the Carrotworkers' Collective, a London-based group of current or ex interns, cultural workers and educators affiliated with the Precarious Workers Brigade.

ERIK: And in fact, when it comes to remuneration within the artistic field, most artists have very low incomes indeed, where maybe 50 to 90% of their money is derived from “bread jobs.” Some artists make a decent living from art and/or teaching, and another group have very good incomes and maybe even enjoy a jet-set lifestyle. How might these groups develop affinities in spite of these differences, and how might they then come to organise based on propagating a sense of solidarity? What do they have in common?

MICHAEL: Again, I think the question of organising within the artistic field is made complicated by the present conditions of artistic production you have each referred to. It is true artists often fall between several chairs, as you put it. In fact, artists often have to maintain a certain flexibility in order to meet their professional obligations, and this means artists must rely on precarious labour regimes – part time jobs or jobs which they can start and stop at will – in order to continue working in their chosen profession. Artists are not in the same position as wage labourers who are tied to a single industry. Thus they have no definite or stable economic identity around which to mobilise, being forced to rely on serial part-time work or on teaching jobs which, while offering better compensation than most wage jobs, are still highly insecure. Another problem is that many artists don't recognise the disparity between their social and economic position. The vast majority of artists are at an income level that would place them in the lower strata of society, and yet still identify with bourgeois values and make art from a bourgeois perspective. This is a perverse situation. On the other hand, there are also many artists who come from privileged backgrounds and don't need to rely on wage-earnings at all, and there are successful artists who are avowedly political in their work while in terms of property relations and

consumption patterns behave identically to the average upper middle class individual. In each case, there is a structural issue concerning class identification, which inhibits poor and wealthy artists alike from linking political values to concrete social affinities, property relations and personal economic conduct.

Having said this, there is still another question I have regarding the political and social function of artists in contemporary or future societies, and this has to do with how artists relate on an economic level to cultural institutions, and what sort of political role cultural institutions in fact play in society. Are cultural institutions politically neutral, are they redoubts of progressive politics – little pockets of left wing identity within the prevailing climate of neoliberalism – or do institutions that are publicly funded in some way even legitimise the broad economic de-territorialisation apparent in contemporary societies to the extent they operate and produce programming as if a broader social crisis does not exist? If that is the case, when artists organise for better working conditions while working within state-funded cultural institutions, do they not in effect solidify their role as “state” artists? By merely advocating limited and pragmatic demands, they actually keep the whole ideological structure that organises art’s relation to society in place. Maybe the work of re-imagining artistic work is intrinsically tied to reimagining art’s institutions.

So, the kernel of the question can be restated like this: when artists put themselves in the service of the broader society, how do they enact this while still retaining their specialised function? I timidly propose they do this by adopting radical, collective forms of everyday life. Thus, everyday life becomes an important artistic construct.

Another option for a possible, micro-scenario: I can imagine the possibility of a successful artist who has identified with the established art system suddenly finds this identification lacks intrinsic value, experiencing the antinomies in their situation and from this revelation setting off down a different path, which might include negating the social and artistic identifications that formerly made their lives meaningful. What do they do about it? For me, programmatic proposals for transforming the relation art workers have to labour, to society and to production have to anticipate the ontological status of the artist and the relation between ontology and social reproduction – which has been, traditionally, a question addressed to material culture, to “ways of doing.”

AIRI: I think this is the main challenge of organising in the art field – how to find strategies that would address all these modalities simultaneously? And this, of course, relates more broadly to organising in the field of cognitive labour. But it also relates to organising in the field of precarious labour, indicating that forms of trade unionising are in need of being reformed or reinvented in order to operate in the context of contemporary capitalism where the classical (Western) model of wage labour as we know it from twentieth century industrial societies has lost its broad social applicability.

In relation to the trade union scenario I would be interested in imagining trade unionist politics from the perspective of unremunerated, precarious and unemployed workers. You will recall in our first face-to-face talk that I also proposed a scenario based on the idea of art workers turning their backs on trade unionising in the cultural sector. Rather than forming a trade union and demanding a paycheck within this arena, I proposed a scenario based on

the idea of politicising art workers' subjectivity as unpaid workers. Instead, art workers might develop alliances with the unemployed and other unpaid workers, in order to struggle for a solidarity-based distribution of social resources. Such a scenario might also be linked to the idea of basic income. I find this idea quite appealing as it takes into consideration all the modalities that characterise artistic labour without being limited to the cultural sector alone. Basic income, as a reformist idea offering economic and social security for art workers independent of their income level, would mean the gallery artists could still operate in the market, the biennial artists could position themselves more strongly as workers, the anti-institutional artists would be free to withdraw from both art institutions and the market, while those artists who work in all of these contexts could continue to operate in all three modalities. But basic income can also be thought in more radical terms – as a political perspective that changes social relations, and consequently, transforms the nature of artistic labour as well.

MICHAEL: In this respect, the idea of leaving art for union organising might be a bit archaic, although the obverse situation does come to mind – one where industrial workers themselves might voluntarily leave their field if they believe the industries they work in are environmentally unsustainable or socially deleterious, and might work to formulate more radical forms of economic sustenance and everyday life. As for myself, I would wish for basic income to be a solution to social alienation rather than an attempt to ameliorate the worst excesses of market capitalism – over-production and exploitation of the most vulnerable workers in the world. Could basic income be tied to global labour solidarity and ecological remediation as well?



From a photograph of African workers found on the website of the Equal Life Foundation, a basic income advocacy group.

## Scenario two: communes and separatist communities

MICHAEL: There are two types that are likely to exist in the future: rural communes where carbon neutral farming is practised, with a possible survivalist aspect, and urban scavenger communities. The former might include artists who band together and use their diverse skills (welding, pottery throwing, carpentry, weaving, etc.) to create a self-sufficient, sustainable community. Of course, what kind of relationship they would have with adjacent rural communities or neighbouring farms is potentially problematic. Are they merely interested in living off the grid, so to speak, or are they taking a more active role in their adopted rural milieu by actively promoting organic or biodynamic or permaculture practices? These are open questions. Also, have they done this out of a fear for imminent social breakdown or are they more sanguine about the future and simply prefer to live more independently? In either case, there would be some kind of intention to recreate a culture from the ground up, practising a self-consciously tactical appropriation of various crafts and technologies from across a spectrum of world cultures – a syncretistic approach to organising communal living.



A member of the Rozbrat Roweronia squat in Poznań, a collective dedicated to carbon-free transportation among other things, fixes a bicycle.

The urban scavengers are probably more radicalised, or radicalised in a social way. Perhaps this model would be based on a more extreme version of groups such as Food Not Bombs or the Diggers – socially conscious anarcho-punks who make feeding the homeless and marginalised a life's work – advocating for the precarious in urban regions, having taken a voluntary vow of poverty like the early Franciscan monks. How they would organise their squats and what kind of artistic skills they bring to dumpster diving and other forms of scavenging is an interesting question. Somehow I envision a polyamorous community, living in a space that is nominally off the grid (for instance, in abandoned industrial buildings), or otherwise maintaining some kind of front to conceal the nature of their activities. Maybe alliances develop between the rural and urban communes, who support each other, with the rural communities supplying produce for the soup kitchen



run by the urban communes, and the urban communities supplying the rural groups with scavenged goods. They might also be people who work on social equity issues, trying to maximise their rightful government benefits and teaching others to do the same – like Airi’s friends whom she mentioned when we met at my apartment. In any case, I imagine these groups practising a principled refusal of the capitalist lifestyle, perhaps going so far as sharing all property, and/or acting out of a steal-from-the-rich-to-give-to-the-poor ethos. Maybe in their former guise as artists, they knew collectors, or even worked in art institutions, and practice some kind of specialised form of larceny.

MINNA: In this scenario, the commune structure is only loosely connected to securing the possibility to work as



Graphic employed by United States chapters of the anarchist group Food Not Bombs.



From an undated photograph of the Scott Street Commune, a Digger-affiliated collective in San Francisco, gathered in the backyard of the Redevelopment-owned Victorian which they occupied from 1971 to 1974.

artists. But I like this idea of imagining a structure outside the system or as a parasite to it. This could be developed further to imagine specifically how artists could operate in this kind of in-between state and how it could be beneficial for them. Maybe these artists will make use of their skills in order to forge famous artworks and sell them, earning a living that way, or practice social solidarity by making fake documents for paperless migrants? Maybe they even turn their art towards sabotage or terrorism.

AIRI: I like the idea of imagining separatist communities but I don't think that these communities should be imagined as artistic communities. I even find this idea somewhat alarming. Perhaps when artists form separatist communities, the artistic identity of such communities would dissolve quickly because everyday life in a self-organised community simply demands a profound form of de-specialisation?

And what about other existing and future kinship relations? When artists join a separatist community, do they disconnect themselves from the rest of their existing social network or do they bring along their partners, friends, comrades and relatives? And what kinds of kinship models are being practised in those communities? Will these communities organise family life as something other than romantic couple relationship and "biological" parenthood models? I find it more interesting to speculate about such communities as heterogeneous ones and then ask what kind of creative tools and strategies artists might contribute.

Secondly I find it interesting to speculate on how such communities would relate to or depend upon the capitalist system. The infamous Friedrichshof commune founded by Otto Muehl comes to mind, which even ran



Otto Muehl and unidentified Friedrichshof Commune member, 1975.

a school that gained official recognition in Austria. They were able to fund their activities because some members of the commune were living in big metropolises and worked in capitalist enterprises where their salaries were substantial enough to support both the commune and themselves. In contrast to this, many members of today's radical communes in Western Europe are dependent on unemployment subsidies. But it's not just a question of where the money comes from (for example, I like Minna's idea of forging artworks, although it implies complicity with the market economy), but how to imagine non-capitalist practices in capitalist contexts, regardless of whether they're urban or rural.

What I find interesting to think about is how communal practices sustain themselves through a mixture of non-capitalist, capitalist and borderline practices. Let's take food as an example: how would our imagined separatist communities produce or consume food?

ERIK: I had friends living in collectives in Dresden who I've visited on occasion. Some of their practices speak to this question. These radical housing collectives relied on a mixture of practices. Where food was concerned, a broad variety of practices were employed: members of the collective engaged in dumpster diving, collected fruits and herbs from urban parks and nearby forests, participated in a food cooperative – exchanging food for money but also contributing to the process of sustaining the community by growing food themselves. Everything was conducted with egalitarianism in mind: when the food was distributed, everyone took what they needed, there was no measuring by weight. And not all the food purchased or exchanged stayed in the house – some of it was redistributed. The leftovers from the coop delivery and nearby organic food shops were processed for the weekly *Volksküche*, as well as some food from dumpsters and nearby common gardens, etc.

Here you have ecology and localism, cooperation and solidarity embodied in concrete practice.

However, notions of quality, health and privilege were also involved. When they could, the collective's members bought organic and fair trade food from other self-organised collectives (fair trade coffee, oil, fruits and vegetables from local farmers, some products from Greek factories where workers have taken control after the owners went bankrupt), partly they purchased food from mainstream commercial organic food retail sellers such as Bode, but they also shopped at Kaufland since they could not afford to buy only local, organic or fair trade food.

But despite this conscientious approach to everyday life, the lure of capitalist daily life still exercised a certain



Two unidentified Copenhagen residents try their luck dumpster diving in a Netto Supermarket dumpster.

pull. People sometimes related that they went to McDonald's when they felt depressed, indulging in the kinky pleasure of doing something they have actually chosen to refrain from for political reasons.

AIRI: When I think of my own experience in communal contexts, my recollection is these communities are always negotiating between normative and alternative economic practices. On the one hand, there is the desire to constitute practices that go against the grain of capitalist society; on the other, some choices are also motivated by the desire to enjoy the privileges of living in an urban capitalist society. I think this dilemma relates to discussions about precarious labour in the art field as well, since artists are precarious because they have chosen to deviate from normative capitalist wage-labour relations. And in our networks, at least, some other political considerations are certainly at play. At the same time, art workers' aspira-

tion for social and economic security also connects to a desire to take part in consumer society on equal terms with the working population. J.K. Gibson-Graham write that in order to imagine other worlds and alternative economies, we need to imagine ourselves as the “condition of their possibility,” training our bodies and minds to develop new affective relations to the world and each other. Perhaps this is also something to consider in this scenario: how do separatist structures ramify upon how one “spends” time, and what are the relations of dependency or autonomy to the capitalist system? How do we need to change ourselves and our desires in order to imagine social change? I know quite a lot of artists who have joined self-organised care collectives and/or communal housing projects and as a consequence have undergone a rapid disidentification as art workers.



From an undated photograph of Katherine Gibson and the late Julie Graham who published under the pen name J.K. Gibson-Graham.

ERIK: This reminds me of how the hegemonic portion of the art world links consumption with artworks. Today museums are housed in landmark buildings that inevitably contain not only a fancy gift shop, but also an upscale eatery. These amenities implicitly connect art with a socially produced desire for luxury and status. Even in more alternative or peripheral parts of the art scene, one finds the same mind-set. I recall feeling really out of place when we, the incoming students, were supposed to celebrate our first day at the art academy by drinking champagne. Many artists or culture workers feel that exclusivity is a positive aspiration, and the structure of the art world reinforces this. The ideology upon which the art sector is predicated – one that few art workers manage to avoid – corresponds to the way in which the capitalist system creates distinctions. This is in sharp contrast with the progressive, egalitarian ethos many people in the art scene imagine they possess.

### Scenario three: underground secret societies

MICHAEL: In the event of repressive totalitarian regimes coming into power, or situations where overt political organising work has become dangerous, perhaps artists maintain a normative artistic identity and begin to make work that, out of necessity, contains a coded form of social critique. This might be reminiscent of the situation in the late eighteenth century when Freemasonry was instrumental in circulating revolutionary literature and organising military and political support for the liberal revolutionary ideologies of the period, or when the project of proselytising for the Protestant Reformation fell in part to sympathetic printers who clandestinely published work by Reformation authors, sometimes at considerable danger to themselves. I am also reminded of groups from the 1970s and 1980s, like Denmark's Blekingegadebanden, who emerged out of a context in which solidarity work with Third World revolu-



tionary groups like the PFLP and Marxist Eritrean rebels had widespread acceptance. The Blekingegadebanden split off from more mainstream groups out of impatience with their grassroots funding tactics, such as selling used clothing at flea markets (in fact, they split from a group called Clothes for Africa Løgstør [TTAL]). Perhaps in this scenario, artists appear to have adopted a quiescent approach, but in reality work clandestinely, thus assuming a covert role. What they are doing in actuality is using the art system as a means of fostering networks to provide mutual aid and funding across borders, making exhibitions into occasions for radical cells to meet and coordinate in person. This might become more important if monitoring of Internet and mobile phone communication increased in Europe. This was standard practice in the Mafia – sensitive discussions only took place face-to-face, preferably in situations where bugs or other types of audio surveillance could be frustrated. Secret societies are not only rendered secret by adopting cloak-and-dagger strategies, but through operating in



Blekingegadebanden member Torkil Lauesen is led into court to answer charges of killing a post office employee in 1990.

plain sight, using different social contexts as camouflage. The art system actually provides a lot of opportunities for this.

Of course, there is a danger in attempting to resuscitate strategies that do not match contemporary conditions. And yet, as the examples of WikiLeaks and Edward Snowden make clear, being secretive is sometimes not only prudent but necessary. Among the most radical grassroots groups at work today are clandestine hacker groups. Maybe one could imagine hacking groups who raise money through bank and wire fraud, and perhaps other commissioned hacking jobs, or maybe a fourth scenario might look at artists with programming skills, who use these skills to help fund the people working in any of the three scenarios above.

MINNA: This scenario calls to mind the stereotypical notion that “banning” only exists in Russia and elsewhere in the East but not in Western democracies where dissidents don’t need to go underground. But there are different strategies current in the “free” West that make labour organising very difficult – not through outright prohibition but blackmail and other types of pressure. And a characteristic of the capitalist system, as was mentioned previously, is the presence of huge reserves of workers, placing recalcitrant or independent-minded labourers at great risk since they are easily winnowed from more docile workers.

The fourth example you mentioned is more attractive to me than the secret society prototype. It connects especially with the second scenario and “Robin Hood” strategies in general.

AIRI: As for scenario three, I have some issues similar to Minna. The problem with considering totalitarian situations stems from the difficulty in gathering accurate information from the outside. I think this scenario only makes sense if

it prognosticates for a very specific context. However, what I do find interesting is the proposal to use contemporary art as a buffer zone for political activism, because the liberal democratic notion of artistic autonomy opens the possibility for that.

MICHAEL: In any case, the purpose of our dialogue is to indicate that to the extent that whatever scenarios are put forward, it is within the context of their various problematics. For me it is a question of engaging in the process of conceptualising their defects.

AIRI: Agreed. But to reiterate, I am most interested in thinking about how ideas concerning a “good life” and social change could be constructed from within the ambiguous position that art workers inhabit in the context of present-day labour relations – falling between chairs by having to adapt to different employment schemes. It is not about ascribing a special position to art workers, it is more about constructing political imaginaries from a specific experience that is not necessarily limited to the art field. For example, Marina Vishmidt suggests that due to their ambiguity in present categorisations of labour, artistic practice and domestic space could both be considered as potential sites for concepts and practices that anticipate post-capitalist social relations.

ERIK: I agree with this, although I think it could be a mix of the two. But, as Airi writes, one focus should be on working and living conditions for artists, since this is the focus of our publication.

MICHAEL: I think imagining the “good life” is basically the political question. What do we imagine the hypothetical artists are doing if they are not proposing in one way or another a model for how they wish reality to be? To the



London-based writer Marina Vishmidt from an undated photograph.

extent art is utopian it is due to retaining this possibility as a line of flight alongside other practices, like critiquing the present social order – a parallel strain of thinking which might even be considered the affirmative project to imagine new social realities’ flipside. In both cases, what is brought to bear on the future is not only the contingent present, but the historical past. The future is always imagined from within the trajectory of past time – what Benjamin termed the “dialectical image,” a notion corresponding to Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus*.

One thing I am pretty sure of, whatever we imagine will be a function of the context in which we imagine it happening – political, economic, environmental. And this brings up a paradox that I advance with some trepidation. In confronting our possible futures, whether for artists or for the broader society, there is a negotiation I continually find myself making between an anticipated and a hoped-for outcome. The problematic is this: on the one hand, no one who really thinks about it would advance chaos and social disintegration as a desirable future. On the other hand, there are so many aspects of present-day society that are patently unsustainable that I find in myself a resistance to positing their continuation as desirable. Capitalism is like a drug addiction: it produces pleasures, but these carry with them enormous costs. If I am to hazard a prediction, it would be the oscillations between economic growth – upon which market capitalism is based – and concomitant market contractions attending growth will become more frequent and more severe, and this will exacerbate the social displacement produced by climate change.

So, how will this paradox shape the world in which our future scenarios take place? For me, the questions we’ve asked about the possibilities for artistic labour, activity and organising are intrinsically connected to the contingent

and the everyday; more specifically, a sort of everyday in need of radical rethinking. The ideas of degrowth advocates such as Serge Latouche might then find broader social acceptance and be adopted, perhaps as a last resort. But will such a transformation – which is at once ideological and practical – take place in the absence of conflict or repressive interventions on the part of nation states? We haven't yet talked about a specific time in which our scenarios take place, situating them in some nebulous immediate future. I envision our scenarios occurring in an in-between time when – imagining whatever we imagine as taking place within the horizon of expected economic uncertainty and flux – considered attempts by small groups to discover alternative (low carbon, more self-sufficient) ways of living will become increasingly common. In this regard, artists might bring their varied skills to bear, making life under difficult conditions into a kind of Gesamtkunstwerk. In any case, it won't be up to us. I am reminded of the conclusion of Godard's film, *Le gai savoir*, where the protagonists, having reflected upon the question of what exactly constitutes a revolutionary cinematic practice, conclude it will emerge dialectically, an invention of others. We are somehow in the same boat. The practices we are discussing will emerge out of a collective enunciation.



Still from Jean-Luc Godard's 1968 film, *Le gai savoir*.