CADERNOS AA

AFTERWORD. AFTER UTOPIAS.

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Imagine yourself suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, alone on a tropical beach close to a native village. (Malinowski 1984: 4)

Malinowski's picture in the "Argonauts of in Western Pacific" has had lasting effects on anthropologists' imaginations for decades. "A tropical beach": the archetypal field-site of the classical anthropologist, a place removed from the metropolitan world, remote in space and perhaps also in time; hence the denial of coevalness upon which classical colonial anthropology was premised (Fabian 1983). And then "imagine yourself alone" in this place and time, beyond the world of current events. Like a castaway, stranded at sea, facing a strange world, facing yourself, alone. The image recalls the classical archetype of the Western explorer/entrepreneur/pirate: Robinson Crusoe. But also the romantic traveller: Caspar David Friederich's artist, confronting the sublime mountain ranges of the Alps, in their wildness. After Malinowski, generations of anthropologists envisioned themselves as lone travellers who ended up in remote and strange places, facing the greatest challenge: unveiling the exotic, revealing, through their ethnographic work, how the strange can actually be quite familiar. And yet it is quite remarkable that this sense of being alone was so preeminent in ethnographic fieldwork. The ethnographer was conducting fieldwork with people, but at the same time he (he, the man) was alone, confronting himself. Fieldwork was not just a period of data gathering, but a process of self-transformation.

Imagine yourself alone in a remote island, the anthropological call for arms, could also be one of the programmatic points of an avant-garde manifesto of the epoch (1922). Avant-garde movements were utopian in various senses: they didn't simply envision the transformation of art, but the transformation of society, and the transformation of Man, starting with themselves. For this transformation, they had to start from a radical movement of the imagination: imagining themselves as others (Rimbaud's famous "*Je est un autre*"). This other is a "primitive", in the most radical sense of the term, not simply a colonial subject, but a subject without attributes, a primeval subject. "The word Dada symbolizes the most primitive relation to the surrounding reality; with Dadaism a new reality comes into its own" stated the Dadaist Manifesto (1918). Dadaists were not simply interested in the "primitives". They were trying to be "primitives"

themselves, unlearning civilization and academic art, and opening themselves to everyday life anew.

More than a shared interest in the primitive, what the anthropologist and the artist had in common is that they aim to become “primitives”, in the sense of starting from scratch, breaking with tradition, expertise, academicism, erudition: looking at things as if for the first time, as naïves. This search for the naïve has clear romantic roots (Schiller’s “Naïve and sentimental poetry”). However, it should not be understood simply as a search for creative genius, or as being “subjective”, as opposed to the “objectivism” of science; but something very different. The naïve was not a quasi-divine creator, but on the contrary, someone that lets himself be taken by the world, to start it anew, a “restart”. A utopia.

“Imagine yourself alone on a remote island” in fact contains some of the basic premises of modern thought concerning utopias, as the papers in this edited volume show. First, the construction of a separate space and time, the need to imagine or design this other place, and the understanding of this space and time not only (or necessarily) as external, but also internal: as a process of radical transformation of the self.

This volume brings together a group of fascinating papers that address the question of utopia from an anthropological perspective. They draw inspiration from recent thinking about utopias in art, in particular Bourriaud’s notion of “micro-utopias” (2002). In so doing they show how the relation between art and anthropology can go beyond traditional anthropology of art, which addresses art as a social institution to be studied. But it also extends beyond visual anthropology, which has viewed artistic practices as methods to be implemented in ethnographic fieldwork. These papers instead propose that art not only offers an interesting set of methods that can help anthropology become more creative, it also opens up a number of questions that resonate with the deepest concerns of the discipline. If anthropology must rethink itself, art can be a good partner to this effect. The imagination of possible, micro (or macro) utopias in art can help Anthropology understand its own utopian drive. In this process, another concept emerges, as an inevitable counterpart to utopia: “relations” and the “relational”, that also constitute a driving force behind these papers, and in recent Art and Anthropology, in general.

The introduction sets the framework for the collection, tracing a good genealogy of the concept. Its emphasis on utopia as a “drive” that binds imagination and creation clearly sets the problem in terms that go beyond political theory. The focus on Bourriaud’s notion of micro-utopias underpins most of the essays. But we should consider several issues associated to the notion of micro-utopias before we move ahead.

First, the relation between the “micro” and the “Macro” (utopia). The micro-utopia may be seen as a “concrete” utopia, as opposed to the unreal ideal. A utopia of proximity, a neighbourhood utopia, as opposed to the tropical island of dreams. And yet the “micro” does not operate solely at the level of the ideal versus the concrete, but also the universal versus the specific. The utopias of modernity were universal in scope: the promise of a “new world”, for example in Dadaism and Surrealism, not to say communism, was general in spatial and temporal terms. A revolution would necessarily lead to the utopian worlds of tomorrow for all, everywhere, at once. The multiple temporalities and spaces of revolution in the twentieth century were in fact a theoretical and practical problem for communism. The micro-utopia on the other hand renounces this universal ambition; one could say in fact that it renounces the very epistemology

of revolution, to replace it with....care, design, art?

Perhaps at this point it would be useful to set Bourriaud's claims against the longer perspective of the aesthetic utopia of modernity. What Rancière (2000) has called the "aesthetic regime" of modernity is, since its origin, a utopian project. Aesthetics emerged as a counterpoint to economics, as a realm of practice based on freedom and play, as opposed to need and utility. At the same time, this separate realm of practice (the "autonomy" of art) was premised in the aspiration to overcome its own separation ("heteronomy"): of becoming a unified form of existence, in which work and life (what we do for a living, as opposed to who we are, praxis and poiesis) would not be separated. The aesthetic utopia and communism shared the aspiration to overcome capitalist alienation, to create a unified life, as it was expressed in different ways in avant-garde movements, such as surrealism, constructivism and situationism. And if the aim of aesthetics is to overcome alienation, to create a unified life, then it is also a process of self-creation, of production of the unified self.

Rancière's notion of the aesthetic regime of modernity is premised on this constant give-and-take between autonomy and heteronomy, between the affirmation of a separate space and dissolution in everyday life. But this tension between autonomy and heteronomy is declined differently by the avant-garde than in contemporary art. For the avant-garde, this project was a general, universal utopian revolutionary project, of which they were, precisely, the troops at the front line, the vanguard, in Leninist terms. This belief in the revolutionary future, if we read contemporary art theorists such as Bourriaud, has ceased to exist in contemporary art. "Relational art" doesn't pretend to provoke a general revolution, but instead modest, local interventions: "social utopias and revolutionary hopes have given way to everyday micro-utopias and imitative strategies" (Bourriaud 2002:31). The utopias of the past, the revolution of the surrealists or situationists have been replaced by the "micro-utopias" of the present. As opposed to the universalist utopias of the avant-garde, these micro-utopias would be more modest and only propose small changes in specific places, in the here and now. The micro-utopia appears as a space of possibility, a social experiment. It is first of all a space that is separated from an outside world. The friendship culture that is cultivated in relational art, for example, appears in radical separation from the society of the spectacle that surrounds it. In these terms Bourriaud seems to take for granted the autonomy of art.

And yet it seems rather questionable whether these relational micro-utopias of art indeed lie in radical opposition to capitalism or have just become one more component of its reinvention. Over recent decades, it may be said, capitalism has reinvented itself in terms of participation, human relations, and creativity. Boltanski and Chiapello (2000) have argued that a "new spirit of capitalism", has emerged precisely in reaction to the artistic critique of the avant-garde. This new spirit of capitalism, the "Californian ideology" of the world wide web, has become an hegemonic discourse, in which workers are invited to identify with their jobs, participate, be "motivated" and "creative", be entrepreneurial and innovative. Work has become the spectacle. Claire Bishop has argued that contemporary art has been used as a sort of "soft social engineering" (Bishop 2012:5), promoting "participation" in the arts, as a form of preventing social exclusion. For Bishop, policies of social "inclusion" using art have been deeply rooted in a neoliberal agenda, seeking to "enable all members of society to be self-administering, fully functioning consumers who do not rely on the welfare state and who can cope with a deregulated, privatised world". (Bishop 2012:12). Notions of "creativity" as a form of innate talent of the socially-excluded, an energy that may be transformed from a destructive to a constructive impulse, are

also quite common in these cultural policies. Invocations to the “big society” by conservative governments in the UK or the “participative society” in Holland only extend these proposals to a much more general political framework, envisioning a society of empowered citizens who participate and self-organize, instead of depending on the welfare state. In the end, one might question to what extent participation in art, as in many other fields, isn’t indeed a device of neoliberal governmentality (Miessen 2011). After all, neoliberalism is also a utopia/dystopia: a project that aims to spawn a “natural” form of society, the market, that may never have existed or will never exist in its pure form. This project is implemented through institutional reforms in different fields of practice: the education system, infrastructures, environmental policy.... And also art. Art as an institution rather than a micro-utopia, in opposition to the society of the spectacle, would be just another heterotopia, in foucauldian terms: an institution that constitutes a particular space-time, at once opposed and reproducing the social beyond it, but at its own pace. The introduction and some of the authors of this collection (in particular Bock) have also presented this foucauldian approach.

The papers in this collection reflect these dilemmas and contradictions using different case studies. Tinius’ complex and subtle work on a project involving refugees at the Theater an der Ruhr places a very strong focus on two central questions: on the one side, utopia as a process of re-imagining the self, and on the other hand the institution as a particular space-time that enables this process in the long run. Bağcıoğlu’s essay on artistic labour maps how different contemporary art practices are addressing the precarious labour conditions of the art world. Bağcıoğlu’s main example is Ahmet Öğüt’s “Intern VIP Lounge”, at the Dubai Art Fair 2013. The artist built a lounge for the art fair’s temporary workers, thus exposing the unfair work conditions that undermine the very environment of the Dubai Art Fair, built upon an image of exclusive luxury. It would be interesting, in fact, to think about the Art Fairs and Biennales that have multiplied around the globe as heterotopias – rather than microtopias: particular space-times that embody a model of a certain possible reality that doesn’t fully exist outside this context, a world of “art” as the ultimate measure of value, luxury and exclusivity, a world of “art lovers”. Öğüt’s intervention scratches the (wafer thin) surface of this heterotopia, by building another one inside, which describes the opposite – the misery that exists behind the luxury. It may be interesting to think of (micro or hetero) utopias within utopias: the inverted lounge inside the Dubai art fair, which is in fact, also nested, or trapped, inside a larger utopia: Dubai itself, a self-contained world, a “miracle”, a paradise of tall, shiny skyscrapers with air conditioning, built on the fragile foundations of petroleum and oil money extracted from the desert; a possible future, whether we like it or not. Like the Art Fair itself, Dubai’s paradise is erected upon the misery of many.

Utopias trapped within utopias. But how effective are they as devices of subversion, if they are contained within the institution or world they aim to question? Can their very containment limit the reach of their critical potential? What would happen if we were to build a “workers’ lounge” outside — in the streets of Dubai, instead of within the Art Fair? Would that be possible? Or is self-criticism a privilege of the “autonomous area” of art?

Bock’s paper explicitly addresses the question of public space, in relation to the current predicament of the city of l’Aquila, in Italy, which was severely damaged by an earthquake in 2009. When he conducted his ethnographic work, the buildings in the historic city centre remained derelict. L’Aquila’s city centre was built on the principles of the Renaissance’s ideal city, as an ordered set of palaces around scenic piazzas that served as the locus of public life. The

earthquake disrupted this public life, and now the piazzas, surrounded by abandoned buildings, have become fields of experimentation for different socialities: some driven by art projects, that consciously try to rebuild the social ties that were severed by the earthquake, but also recreational spaces, with bars playing loud music all night because there aren't any neighbours to complain. Both models, although radically different, share a need to fill a literal void.

Flynn's essay on artistic interventions in Brazil underscores the continuity between contemporary art and social movements, in particular through what he calls the "subjective turn", where subjectivity is diverse, ephemeral and transient, as opposed to the grand objectivist ideals of modernist politics and art. His use of this term is not far from Ranciere's understanding of politics as the emergence of new distributions of the sensible, which also was conceived in reaction to the transformations in political activism in the late twentieth century. With Tinus, Flynn emphasizes the ethnical component of micro-utopia, as a process of construction of the self.

And yet it is unclear to what extent these politics of subjectivity are so far apart from their supposed foe, neo-liberalism, in their praise of the ephemeral, the transient...and the subject. Again we witness the paradox of a micro-utopia trapped inside another utopia, which it is supposed to counteract...but does it?

Floris Schuiling's fascinating work on the Instant Composers Pool collective poses some very interesting questions about the process by which music is produced. The utopian aim of avant-garde art was to unify art and life, and artists therefore had to forget their skills and embrace ignorance, in Ranciere's terms. And yet, this utopian drive is counteracted by the institutionalization of practice. In twentieth century music "improvisation" emerged as an avant-garde antidote to academic training and composition. But as Schuiling shows, following the practice of a well established, music group that works with "instant composition", the differences between composition and improvisation are thinner than they may seem from the outside; in fact they presuppose each other. Improvisation does not emerge out of the blue, but as the result of an acquired skill, a *habitus*, we may say. In fact, that is the reason why some avant-garde composers such as Cage, ended up questioning improvisation, because it still entailed the agency and ability of the artist to make music. The complete obliteration of artistic agency would not lead simply to improvisation, but to chance. And yet as Schuiling argues, it is quite questionable whether Cage himself would concur with this withdrawal of agency, given that he was very particular about what he wanted from performers, on how his pieces should be performed.

Alexandrine Boudreault-Fournier's paper reflects upon the "Echo" research project. "Echo" is an ethnographic initiative that aimed to unite Cuban musicians living in Canada and Cuba by means of video recordings. Using filmic montage, the videos produced the illusion that although located far apart, the musicians were actually playing together, in "counterpoint" - a term that makes reference both to musical dialogue and to the slave trade between Africa and Cuba (after Ortiz's "Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar"). Montage, as an avant-garde technique, produces a space-time that lies beyond the limitations of regular space and time. Under these terms, cinema produces a reproducible utopia, which prior to its existence could only have been envisioned in our imagination - in dreams.

Sophie Reichert's essay introduces the performance group *Every House has a door* and their work, *9 Beginnings*, focusing on the process of reenacting and reimagining a performance. In

her careful ethnography, Reichert addresses the different kinds of “relations” that *Every House* enacts. Reichert poses important questions regarding the limits of a relational approach. In her own words: “Why is relationality as form already good, even democratic?”. Indeed. The very term “relation”, as the work of Marilyn Strathern has shown (2014), has a long history, and we shouldn’t take it for granted. Anthropology has long described social relations that are not egalitarian but hierarchical, which do not presuppose free individuals but on the opposite, entangle them. Moreover, as we have seen before, terms such as “relations”, participation, collaboration are not solely used by one side of the political spectrum. They have become widespread, a new hegemony of sorts.

Another notion has appeared in many of the previous papers, but it is in the final, concluding paper, by Sanchez Criado and Estalella, where it receives closest attention: that of the experimental, as in “experimental collaborations”. The classical space of experimentation – the scientific laboratory, is clearly a heterotopia, a world enclosed in itself, a separate space-time that re-enacts an original condition, a pure world. And yet the “experimental collaboration” is very different from the classical laboratory of modern science: it is closer to experimental art, design and architecture laboratories, spaces of open experimentation, where the difference between objects and subjects of experimentation is perhaps not so well designed. Following Marcus and other authors, this concluding chapter argues that we need to rethink anthropological ethnography as a process of experimental collaboration, as an epistemic device. In these terms, the objective of ethnography is not just to represent a site, but rather to collaborate in its construction.

The concept of utopia in its different incarnations, as micro-utopia, or hetero-topia, can be an intriguing way of looking at the proliferation of specific sites, institutions, projects that delimit specific space-times, proposing a re-inscription of the world, a new distribution of the sensible, a new start for society and for the self. And yet how these “micro” utopias are integrated within, contest, or reproduce larger projects and imaginaries is subject to contention. One could argue, in the end, that the very concept of a micro-utopia is a contradiction in terms. If a utopia implies a new world, a restart, there is no appropriate yardstick other than the absolute: either it’s universal or isn’t. Either it’s a revolution, or it’s not a new world, but simply a compromise.

In the last decades, as the papers in this volume have shown, in different realms of social practice, from art to social movements, different alternatives have been sought to universalist discourses of modernity, utopia and revolution. And yet, paradoxically, we have been living through a revolution: a conservative revolution, that has proposed a general form of life, that can be applied to all forms of practice: neo-liberalism and management. Neoliberalism is indeed a totalising utopian (or dystopian) project without regret. And in the end many of the forms of micro-utopia that react against are trapped within it, and they can also be viewed as transfigured versions of it.

But on the other hand, some think that these other spaces contain the seeds of the destruction of the trap that contains them, precisely by bringing it to its ultimate consequences. And these micro-utopias are proliferating and networking, to the point of becoming “macro”. This would be the thesis of different strands of contemporary utopian thinking, from its more journalistic, middle-brow versions – such as Paul Mason’s *Postcapitalism* (2015), to more neo-

avant-garde, techno-activist manifestos, such as “Accelerationism”¹. The main contention of accelerationism is precisely that neoliberalism has to be brought to its last consequences to overcome it: it is necessary to abandon the primitivist, localist and communitarian illusions of the left, embrace technological change, and bring forth the destructive forces of capitalism. In these new theories and manifestos, the claim for a “future” that has been lost in neoliberalism is strong: a future that has to be constructed, say the accelerationists. The micro-utopias of the left have to abandon their localism and nostalgia for the past, understand their bondage to the trap of capitalism, and turn it upside down, contribute to its end by making it go further.

Regardless of the credibility of these predictions and images of the future, we seem to be living in a moment in which we can ask general questions again, and even, propose global answers. Maybe the time is coming to use the big words again: future, utopia or revolution.

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1 [Http://criticallegalthinking.com/2013/05/14/accelerate-manifesto-for-an-accelerationist-politics](http://criticallegalthinking.com/2013/05/14/accelerate-manifesto-for-an-accelerationist-politics).