

THE LURE OF UTOPIA

Richard Noble, Head of the Art Department at Goldsmiths College, London

What is the lure of utopia for contemporary art? There has recently been a resurgence of interest in utopia, both as a subject for contemporary artists and as a strategy for making art. Whereas twenty, or perhaps even ten years ago, to call a work of art 'utopian' was to dismiss it as idealistic or naïve, even reactionary, the term seems to have recovered a certain respectability within the critical lexicon of contemporary art. Artists as varied as Tomas Hirschorn, Liam Gillick and Jeremy Deller are making works that are in significant respects utopian; while Goshka Mascuga, Nils Norman, Cary Young and Paul Chan are in various ways investigating utopia as both an impulse and as a legacy inherited from modernism. The utopian impulse is now finding regular embodiment in a great deal of visual art that purports to be critical of the social and political conditions we inhabit.

Why should this be the case? Why utopia? Why now? Any answer to this question is necessarily provisional, but I think it has as much to do with the temper of the times, the *zeitgeist*, as it does with the conceptual structure of utopian thought and its relation to artistic practice. A *zeitgeist* is of course impossible to characterise, but perhaps we can point to one general truth acknowledged by the current plurality of perspectives constituting the field of contemporary art, which is that there is no agreement about the nature or significance of political art. We live in a world in which the avant gardist conceptions of aesthetic and political change no longer make sense. Art and politics are now largely divorced from the possibility of revolutionary change, and politically engaged artists must struggle to find effective strategies for resisting or undermining the dominant institutional and political forms. There is a certain freedom in this, no one is anymore coerced into following the 'party line'. But at the same time, none of these strategies can aspire to the ambitions of the avant garde; none presents itself as the next big thing, the new art for the new revolutionary world.

The complexity of making political art in the absence of revolutionary avant gardes is noted by Jacques Rancière: 'The dream of a suitable political work of art is in fact the dream of disrupting the relationship between the visible, the sayable, and the thinkable without having to use the terms of a message as a vehicle... As a matter of fact, political art cannot work in the simple form of a meaningful spectacle that would lead to an 'awareness' of the state of the world.'¹ This is a difficult point, but it suggests that in our current context, art has no direct role to play in the discourses of politics. Indeed, it recalls Adorno's injunctions against 'committed art' (which he claims 'slithers into the abyss of its opposite'), because it suggests that art is formally distinct from, outside of, the day to day discursive field of politics. 'An artist can be committed, but what does it mean to say that his art is committed? Commitment is not a category of art.'² In Rancière's view, art can no longer hope to derive significance from the commitments that motivate it, nor from the potential it has to bear witness, say in the manner of Goya's *Disasters of War*. Still less can it hope to intervene successfully in the debates of the day: economic collapse, Afghanistan, Iraq, Darfur and so on. If art is to be political, if it is to hope to intervene successfully in the political world *as art*, it must find more oblique, more complex strategies than formulating didactic political messages in visual form or representing political activism as a type of visual art. Both cease pretty quickly to be interesting as art, while leaving the political world largely unchanged.

I think this helps to explain the lure of utopia for many artists. As both a subject matter and a formal strategy for making art, the concept of utopia offers a range of possibilities for art to be political without ceasing to be interesting as art. The key to this lies in the meaning of the word 'utopia', invented by Thomas

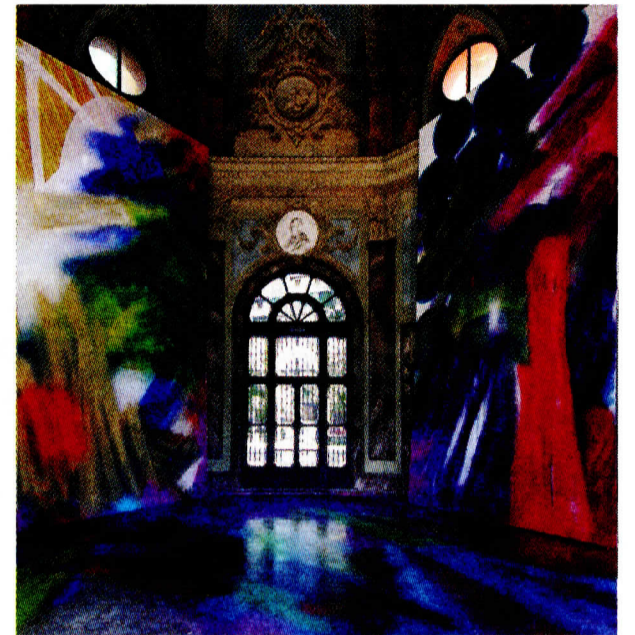
More as the title for his text of 1516, from a sort of pun on the two Greek words for 'no' (u) and 'place' (topos). Utopia is best understood as an imagined place, a vision of perfection in which the contradictions and injustices of our existing worlds have been overcome. Utopias are in this sense both universal and culturally specific at the same time. They generally embody a universal aspiration to social perfection, a vision of humanity released from the limitations that beset it. Yet at the same time, these visions of perfection always reflect the particular cultural and historical circumstances of the worlds that give rise to them; the vision of perfection they offer is always framed within an historically specific set of social and political problems frustrating the realization of human potential.

In this sense, we can think of the classical utopian constructions as having an important diagnostic element. More, Plato and Rousseau for example, each in their own way holds up a sort of diagnostic mirror to the society they wish to critique. Their visions of utopia show us what they think is wrong with their current world, sometimes pointing to prescriptive solutions (Plato and Rousseau), sometimes not (More). All utopian strategies have this diagnostic element, though it is more pronounced in some than in others. The other important element is the programmatic element, the implicit or explicit prescriptive solutions utopian visions advance. These become more pronounced in the 19th Century writings of Fourier, Owen and Morris, the former two founding actual utopian communities and famously drawing the critical fire of Marx and Engels. Programmatic utopias, particularly actual utopian communities, were powerfully characterized by Marx as a reactionary form of bourgeois idealism; a sort of political fantasy that had little practical value other than to imply a nascent critique of bourgeois capitalism.

Marx's critique of utopians as reactionary dreamers held sway on the left more or less until the 1950s, when critical and political progressive potential of the utopian impulse was theoretically resuscitated by Ernst Bloch, Theodor Adorno and their associates in the so-called 'Frankfurt School'. For Adorno (and also to an extent Bloch), utopia has value as an impulse to imagine human possibility as a totality beyond the anxiety and alienation that characterise the real.³ For both the utopian impulse is implicit in almost all human behaviour; but its potential is crushed under the weight of the ideological construction of reality under capitalism. For Adorno, significantly, art is one of the symbolic forms in which the utopian impulse survives. In his view, it survives in formal innovation, rather than explicit political commitment, but it is nonetheless important for that. As he puts it: 'The moment of true volition... is mediated through nothing other than the form of the work itself, whose crystallization becomes an analogy of that other condition that should be... works of art, even literary ones, point to the practice from which they abstain, the creation of the just life'.⁴

Adorno's insistence on the primacy of formal innovation, like Rancière's refusal to run commitment and aesthetic value together, might seem slightly dogmatic in the current pluralistic condition of contemporary art. Both seem rather more sure of what actually distinguishes art from other activities (such as politics) in the social world than many contemporary practitioners would accept. Nonetheless, their attempts to frame the nature of political art lend themselves to utopian strategies. Utopian art holds out the possibility of art being political without becoming instrumentalised as propaganda or activism or social work.

Utopian art arises as a response to the limitations imposed on us by our existing circumstances. But it differs formally from other kinds of artistic responses to these same situations, such



as documentary photograph or film, direct political activism or institutional critique. Utopian strategies in art tend to be defined by the positing of a possible world scenario; they are wedded aesthetically to the activity of modelling possible alternatives to the current condition. The artist Constant Nieuwenhuis' *New Babylon* (1956-74) models the possibility of an urban environment built on the principle of free labour. Beuys asks the question: what if everyone were an artist? Nils Norman and Cary Young ask us to consider the dystopian implications of the utopian languages of urban planning and management theory. Utopian strategies of this type are invariably more diagnostic than programmatic, but in reflecting back to us dimensions of our current condition that we have suppressed or lost in the fog of ideological reproduction, they can pose significant political questions.

Greater or lesser stress can be laid on either the diagnostic or programmatic elements in a utopian work. Some utopian artists (for example Constant or Beuys) tend to the construction of full scale totalising alternatives to the existing world, others are more interested in creating work that disrupts our assumptions about specific problems (Dan Graham or Paul McCarthy), while yet others want to stage situations in which people can be immersed in the experience of making art, an activity many equate with the utopian Marxian view that unforced, 'self-creative' labour alone enables us to reach our specifically human potentiality (Jeremy Deller or Antony Gormley).

The range of utopian art is therefore fairly broad, but although we might say with Bloch and Adorno that the utopian impulse exists in all art, it only finds form within artistic strategies that formulate alternative possibilities to the existing state of affairs. Utopian art confronts us with some kind of alterity in order to illuminate the darkness of our present reality. These strategies range across a continuum, from revolutionary visions of a brave new world to participatory art works in which the labour of art becomes a way of modelling the possibilities of human potential to micro utopian models that seem barely to depart from the quotidian of the everyday. These strategies also reach back to the modernist avant gardes of the 20th Century, often to model (as opposed to reconstruct) moments in which the revolutionary promise of art was linked to a genuine revolutionary politics. All this has the potential to, in Rancière's words, disrupt 'the distribution of the sensible,' because all of it enters the world as an open possibility mainly designed to get us to look more critically at ourselves. Utopian art asks us if we ask enough of ourselves, if we look beyond the pre-digested platter of clichés about the possible we are fed on, to something better and less safe.

1 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 2004, 63

2 *ibid.*, 60

3 Theodor Adorno and Ernst Bloch, 'Something's Missing' in Richard Noble (ed.), *Utopias* (London: Whitechapel/MIT Press, 2009), 50

4 *ibid.*, 48