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## Utopias

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Dan Graham//Alison Green//Thomas Hirschhorn//Pierre  
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Constant Nieuwenhuys//Nils Norman//Hans-Ulrich  
Obrist//George Orwell//Philippe Parreno//Pil & Galia  
Kollektiv//Jacques Rancière//Stephanie Rosenthal//Alun  
Rowlands//Beatrix Ruf//Karen Smith//Superflex//Rirkrit  
Tiravanija//Jeff Wall//WochenKlausur//Carey Young

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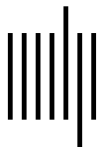
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## Documents of Contemporary Art

In recent decades artists have progressively expanded the boundaries of art as they have sought to engage with an increasingly pluralistic environment. Teaching, curating and understanding of art and visual culture are likewise no longer grounded in traditional aesthetics but centred on significant ideas, topics and themes ranging from the everyday to the uncanny, the psychoanalytical to the political.

The Documents of Contemporary Art series emerges from this context. Each volume focuses on a specific subject or body of writing that has been of key influence in contemporary art internationally. Edited and introduced by a scholar, artist, critic or curator, each of these source books provides access to a plurality of voices and perspectives defining a significant theme or tendency.

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## Richard Noble

### Introduction//The Utopian Impulse in Contemporary Art

Utopian Consciousness wants to look far into the distance, but ultimately only in order to penetrate the darkness so near it, of the just lived moment, in which everything that is both drives and is hidden from itself. In other words, we need the most powerful telescope, that of the polished utopian consciousness, in order to penetrate precisely the nearest nearness. (Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 1954–59)

Utopia is a powerful trope in western culture. In its simplest form, it refers to a better place, a place in which the problems that beset our current condition are transcended or resolved. Yet it also means, or at any rate suggests through a pun on the ancient Greek words for 'no place', a place imagined but not realized, the 'shining city on the hill' that illuminates the limitations of the world in which we actually live, the telescope that allows us to grasp the 'nearest nearness'. The utopian impulse or tendency is present in many of our foundational works of art, literature and philosophy. It has been central to most of the dominant political ideologies of modernity, and if Bloch is to be believed, is present in virtually every future-oriented activity humans engage in, from the aura of hope surrounding the purchase of new clothes or planning a holiday, to the commitment to a better world implicit in medical research, constitution-writing and making art.

This anthology is a selection of writings that record some of the ways the utopian impulse informs and animates contemporary visual art. It includes artists and writers who are utopian, as well as artists and writers who are interested in utopia as a subject without themselves being utopian. As with any attempt to frame a range of current attitudes and practices in visual art, it reaches back into the past. It does so partly as a way of elucidating what I've termed the 'utopian imaginary', the basic architecture of the utopian impulse as it comes to us from the philosophical and literary traditions of the west; and partly as a way of outlining what remains one of the most important legacies of modernism, the utopian hope of radical social transformation as it was embodied within the modernist and neo-modernist avant-gardes. This legacy finds complex and often conflicted forms within contemporary art. It is a cliché that we are no longer moderns, yet the foundational ideas of modernism continue to haunt contemporary art, often in the guise of utopian strategies.

At some level, one might think that the utopian impulse is implicit in all art making, at least in so far as one thinks that art addresses itself to the basic project of making the world better. This may be partly what Adorno meant when he

claimed that 'works of art, even literary ones, point to the practice from which they abstain: the creation of a just life.'<sup>1</sup> This is an idea to which many people involved in the visual arts – artists, critics and curators alike – are in one way or another committed. We think art makes the world a better place. But does this make us utopians? And perhaps more importantly, does it make all art utopian?

The answer to the first question is probably yes, but the answer to the second, if the category of the utopian is to be useful for understanding contemporary art, must certainly be 'no'. There are two reasons for this. One is the obvious point that if all art is utopian, the category itself has no critical utility: it won't allow us to distinguish one work of art, or one strategy of making art, from another. It is crucial then, that utopian art be distinguishable from non-utopian art, even if, at some deep psychological or ethical level, much art is animated by some kind of utopian aspiration. The second reason is that the meaning of the term 'utopian' is fundamentally contradictory. It can mean, as I have assumed thus far, the impulse or aspiration to make the world better either by imagining a better way to be or actually attempting to make it so. But equally, following from Marx's historically significant intervention, utopia and utopian can mean naïve, idealistic, pie-in-the-sky dreaming, an imaginary but otherwise futile attempt to escape from immanent reality, which ultimately has the effect of reinforcing the status quo. Marx sought to replace the utopian socialist dreams of Charles Fourier and Robert Owen with a scientific (and hence non-utopian) analysis of historical change. Yet this analysis spawned the most influential utopian (and ultimately dystopian) ideological doctrine in human history. Communism justified itself in terms of a rational, scientific account of historical change, but it relied on the most radical (and irrational) forms of utopian hope to sustain itself politically. In any event, this contradiction is both confusing and productively interesting. The utopian strategies discussed in the texts anthologized here range across it: from the various aspirations to build shining cities on the hill to dystopian imaginings intended to critique current social conditions; from small scale micro-utopian projects to full-on activist engagement with social problems; from detached and often amusing reconstructions of historical utopian moments to parodic manipulations of utopia as an aesthetic form.

What does it mean then, for a work of art to be utopian? The answer to this is perhaps less straightforward than we might think. It is hard to identify a single aesthetic strategy common to all utopian art, but there are nonetheless forms that tend to recur: the use of the architectural model (Constant Nieuwenhuys, Dan Graham, Bodys Isek Kingelez, Nils Norman); the use of the manifesto (Guy Debord, Joseph Beuys, Liam Gillick); references to design and technology (Mark Titchner, Pil & Galia Kollektiv, Goshka Macuga); small and large scale collaborative actions (Beuys, Agnes Denes, Antony Gormley, Jeremy Deller, Rirkrit



Tiravanjia). There are others, but perhaps what defines visual art as utopian is not so much a common aesthetic form as an attempt to model in some way the tension between an immanent critique of the present and a future, radically other condition implied by that critique. In this respect the utopian impulse in visual art is linked closely with the aesthetic strategy of modelling. In one way or another, most utopian art postulates models of other ways of being. This strategy of modelling possible worlds, 'what ifs' and the logical implications of current practices, seems particularly suited to visual art.

Section one of the anthology, *The Utopian Imaginary*, is a selection of canonical utopian texts, Thomas More's foundational *Utopia*, William Morris' nineteenth-century fictional account of a socialist Britain, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' brief and uncharacteristic musings on life in communist society and George Orwell's brilliant account of the language of a utopian political project gone horribly wrong in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. These texts are all utopian in the sense that they embody both the positive, future-oriented aspiration to improve human society, but also in the sense that they are intended not so much as actual blueprints for new social organizations but rather models that allow us to see how far we are from what we have the potential to be. The exception to this is perhaps Orwell's text, but even this, for all its dystopic bile, is intended as a warning against tendencies, like the debasement of political language, that are inherent in the political systems in which we live.

We might, then, say provisionally that for art works to be utopian they need to offer two things that seem to pull in rather different directions: on one hand a vision or intimation of a better place than the here and now we inhabit, and on the other some insight into what Bloch terms the 'darkness so near', the contradictions and limitations that drive our will to escape the here and now in the first place. This suggests an additional feature or tendency in utopian works of art, which is that they direct our attention to the realm of the political. Imagining a better world entails some sort of critique of the existing one, though of course Marx was right to claim that neither activity will necessarily have the effect of changing anything.<sup>2</sup> In this respect, all utopian art is political. It proceeds from an awareness of the imperfections of our social and political conditions towards some sort of understanding of, and possible solution to, what the artist perceives these to be. It is art oriented beyond existing conditions, sometimes to the future, sometimes to the past; it is art that asks us difficult questions about the conditions we live with and the potential we have to change them.

The second section, *Utopian Avant-Gardes*, includes writings from artists, critics and theorists whose conception of utopia is in some sense either grounded in or self-consciously returns to the avant-gardist utopian politics of the mid twentieth century. In the middle part of the last century, as Europe struggled to

rebuild itself in the aftermath of the Second World War, Marxist revolutionary politics achieved huge significance within the art world. Debord and Pierre Canjuers' 'Culture and Revolutionary Politics' or Constant Nieuwenhuys' 'Our Own Desires Build the Revolution' illustrate the total integration of politics and art in the revolutionary project. For both, the practice of making art is given significance by the revolutionary project, and vice versa. As Constant writes: 'As a basic task we propose the liberation of social life, which will open the way to the new world – a world where all the cultural aspects and inner relationships of our ordinary lives will take on new meaning ... Therefore any real creative activity – that is, cultural activity – in the twentieth century, must have its roots in revolution.'<sup>3</sup>

Three highly contestable assumptions underlie Constant's utopianism: the belief that bourgeois capitalist society is producing the conditions necessary for a successful socialist revolution; the view that visual art has a significant role to play within this process, and its logical corollary that art must in some sense be in opposition to the status quo because of its revolutionary potential. Each of these is now 'utopian' in the Marxist sense. Yet despite the disappearance of revolutionary aspiration (at least in the west), the underlying structure of avant-gardist utopian thinking continues to influence us. In the selections from his recent influential book *Archaeologies of the Future*, Fredric Jameson argues that utopia remains politically significant precisely because it retains something of the holistic revolutionary approach to change. Utopian art, as Jameson conceives it, is politically effective because it focuses the mind on the necessity of a radical (revolutionary) break with what is. 'Utopia now better expresses our relationship to a genuinely political future than any current programme of action. It forces us precisely to concentrate on the break itself: a meditation on the impossible, on the unrealizable in its own right. This is very far from a liberal capitulation to the necessity of capitalism, however; it is quite the opposite, a rattling of the bars and an intense spiritual concentration and preparation for another stage which has not yet arrived.'<sup>4</sup>

This is a controversial claim. It rather narrows the utopian project to those who aspire to model imaginary but radically other worlds, and hangs on, one might argue nostalgically, to the prospect of revolutionary change. Nevertheless, Jameson identifies something all utopian artists share, which is the desire to model alternatives to the way things are, in order to force some sort of engagement with them. Equally, in his utopian commitment to revolution, even if, as he admits, a revolution as yet not fully imagined or understood, he identifies a powerful avant-gardist legacy to which many contemporary artists are drawn. How does one imagine or possibly effect radical change when all departures from the liberal/capitalist norm are characterized as dream life? This is the problem to which Thomas Hirschhorn, Pil & Galia Kollektiv, Titchner and WochenKlausur are

in their various ways drawn. Hirschhorn's uncompromising installations express his commitment to make art politically; to challenge his viewers to engage actively with his critique of contemporary life. WochenKlausur, more straightforwardly, adopt art as a practical means of effecting improvement in people's lives. Whereas Pil & Galia Kollektiv and Titchner focus on specific revolutionary moments or strategies within the history of modernism, projects that might be characterized in terms of a desire to reconstitute what we seem to have lost into a new kind of utopian imaginary.

The third section, *Therapeutic Utopias*, considers a somewhat different legacy of the utopian avant-garde, what I've termed 'therapeutic utopianism'. As the promise of full-scale political revolution receded in the last century, the prospect of transformation was not so much abandoned as displaced. In visual art the confidence of modernist avant-gardes in the revolutionary potential of art gave way to postmodern pluralism, and if not to a greater scepticism about the transformative political potential of art, at least a more localized, contingent and open-ended range of strategies for linking art to political change. A work like Agnes Denes' *Wheatfield* is typical of such strategies. Denes grew two acres of wheat on a landfill site in lower Manhattan. Although it had no explicit political point, it offered a kind of utopian counterpoint to the ecological devastation wreaked by Wall Street. As Denes writes, '*Wheatfield* ... was an intrusion into the Citadel, a confrontation with High Civilization. Then again, it was also Shangri-La, a small paradise, one's childhood, a hot summer afternoon in the country, peace, forgotten values, simple pleasures.'<sup>5</sup>

Joseph Beuys was also significant in this development. Beuys' utopian ambitions for the total saturation of society by art have become hugely influential. For Beuys, art itself, rather than art allied to a political movement like communism, became the agent of revolutionary change. 'EVERY HUMAN BEING IS AN ARTIST who – from his state of freedom, the position of freedom he experiences at first-hand – learns to determine the other positions of the TOTAL ARTWORK OF THE FUTURE SOCIAL ORDER.'<sup>6</sup> The influence of Beuys' utopian aesthetic can hardly be overestimated, not least in contemporary art's current obsession with the importance of participation. Beuys wanted art to be democratic, open and accessible to the participation of all, because this respects the fundamental equality of persons as creative beings, and because art is good for people, it is therapeutic, it can rescue us from the traumatizing and dehumanizing effects of individualism, instrumentalism and competition.

The utopian aspirations of Beuys echo strongly amongst contemporary artists such as Antony Gormley and Ilya Kabakov. The latter's wonderful work *The Palace of Projects* celebrates the human propensity to construct and execute projects. Like Beuys, Kabakov believes art can find its way into the most mundane human

activities, and also that it does so as an agent of liberation, a means of taking every individual beyond the quotidian towards something essentially human. Gormley has also developed a kind of therapeutic utopian strategy in his large-scale participatory works like *Field* and *Domain Field*. For Gormley, the activity of making *Field*, each person following a very simple set of instructions to create a mass of similar yet absolutely individuated forms, models a kind of social contract between artist and collaborators in which everyone is empowered as a creator of the work. More recently, the work of a number of artists associated with Nicolas Bourriaud's term 'relational aesthetics', has developed the therapeutic ideal of participation even further. Liam Gillick's constructions model the utopian possibilities of democratic life, while Rirkrit Tiravanija's shared meal installations attempt to create micro-utopian moments of intersubjective conviviality between participants in an artwork. In all these projects, participation in an artwork is proffered as a utopian moment in which a different kind of human relationship is modelled: equal, non-instrumental, better.

The therapeutic form of the utopian impulse in art is powerful in the contemporary moment, and I would argue owes much to Beuys, but we need to note that neither Beuys nor his contemporary iterations are without their critics. Benjamin Buchloh's important 'Beuys: The Twilight of the Idol: Preliminary notes for a Critique', first published in *Artforum* in 1980, accused Beuys of a kind of subjectivized hubris, which while advocating an egalitarian/humanist social redemption effected through art, was in fact a reactionary symptom of late-capitalist social forms, not a solution to them. Beuys, it is true, inspired a cult-like following and perhaps too easily transferred the transformative potential of economic and political structures onto the utopian possibility of the creative act. In its contemporary forms the therapeutic impulse finds critics amongst those who find it lacking in critical focus. The attempt to model a utopian or micro-utopian possibility within an artwork can, perhaps must, abstract from the oppressive conditions of contemporary life in ways that leave open the question of what precisely the moment of utopian possibility is meant to offer.

But whatever the merits of such criticism, it remains the case that utopian strategies in visual art can and do exercise a critical function. Section four, *Critical Utopias*, contains a number of texts by artists whose utopian modelling, or interest in utopian strategies, is intended primarily as a critical mirror to be held up to society. Dan Graham's *Homes For America* and the *Children's Pavilion* he designed with Jeff Wall explore the dystopic dimensions of social planning and architecture. Graham documents the utopian promise of suburban development in America, where seriality and repetition replace craftsmanship and individuation; where homes are made to identical models quite independent of the needs, personalities or cultural specificities of the people who live in them.

Stephanie Rosenthal explores Paul McCarthy's bizarre alternative world, a sort of dystopian take on Disney's utopian vision of American life. If Disney represents the utopian superego of American culture, McCarthy releases the dystopic potential of its cultural id: Dionysus unchained and spewing condiments everywhere! Nils Norman and Carey Young take a somewhat more detached and critical perspective on utopian strategies. For instance, Young explores the way the language of business management employs the rhetoric of revolution. Young's project *Revolution: It's a Lovely Word* examines the way the utopian language of revolution is debased within contemporary management culture. Her work is not itself utopian, but her performances enact a certain ironic critique of the utopian aspirations of business organizations. As Alex Farquharson writes, her recent 'corporate works relocate Beuys' notion of social sculpture within the modern business environment; its "soft" yet didactic techniques of training, brainstorming and skills workshops displacing Beuys' charismatic proselytising, and with it, by implication, his utopian vision for society.<sup>7</sup>

The final section, *Utopia and Its (Im)possibilities*, contains a number of contemporary commentaries on the current uses, and abuses, of utopian modelling and utopian perspectives in contemporary art. Alison Green argues that the utopian legacy in contemporary art that matters most is more or less free of the grand narratives of modernism, more pragmatic and grounded in the materiality of sensuous experience. On her reading certain types of contemporary sculpture might be understood as utopian in so far as they activate an immediate sensual experience around which, or through which, people can find a direct, possibly non-verbal experience. Another model is Atelier van Lieshout, which builds utopian objects and installations based directly on existing social problems such as migration and over-dependence on non-renewable resources. Catherine Barnard explores the utopian political potential digital media offers, for example, to resistance movements in the developing world, and more generally how digital space itself becomes utopian when it opens up freedom of expression, equality of status and an environment of perpetual innovation. 'Second Life' where one can recreate a utopian version of one's life in cyberspace, is one example of this. Dermis P. Leon examines the utopian impulse behind the art biennial system, focusing on the Havana Biennial. While noting the success of the biennial system in shifting the balance of power in the art world away from the metropolitan centres, she also notices a kind of creeping homogeneity in this process, such that what distinguishes the Havana Biennial from many others is no longer so clear. Finally, the texts discussing the work of Paul Chan, Bodyz Izek Kingelez and Paul Noble present different ways in which the idea of utopia, rather than any particular form of utopian solution, is adopted as a subject by these artists.

The utopian strategies anthologized here represent a range of iterations of the ways contemporary art engages with the realm of the political. Despite its diversity, utopian art carries on an important part of the legacy of the modernist commitment to social and political transformation. It offers provisional visions or models of transformation without the dystopic consequences attendant upon the actual attempt to bring them about. In this sense, the utopian impulse finds a largely negative or critical articulation in contemporary visual art, even in its therapeutic forms. It holds up a critical mirror to the world; a glass through which the darkness of the future illuminates the present.

- 1 Theodor Adorno, 'Commitment', first published in *Noten zur Literatur, III* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1965); trans. Francis McDonagh, 'Commitment', in Ronald Taylor, ed., *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso 1977); extracts reprinted in this volume, **xx**.
- 2 Karl Marx, Thesis IX, *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845), in Marx, *Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977).
- 3 Constant Nieuwenhuys, 'Our Own Desires Build the Revolution', *Cobra*, no. 4 (Amsterdam, 1949) 304; reprinted in this volume, **xx**.
- 4 Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future* (London and New York: Verso, 2005) 232–3; extracts reprinted in this volume, **xx**.
- 5 Agnes Denes, 'Wheatfield: A Confrontation. Battery Park Landfill, Downtown Manhattan, Two Acres of Wheat Planted and Harvested', artist's statement (New York, 1982); extracts reprinted in this volume, **xx**.
- 6 Joseph Beuys, 'I Am Searching for Field Character' in the group exhibition catalogue *Art into Society/Society into Art*, ed. Caroline Tisdall (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1974) 48.
- 7 Alex Farquharson, 'The Avant-Garde, Again', in *Carey Young Incorporated* (London: Film & Video Umbrella, 2002); extracts reprinted in this volume, **xx**.