

# Contemporary Art "At Work" in the Interstices of Post-Democratic Dictatorships

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# CONTEMPORARY ART “AT WORK” IN THE INTERSTICES OF POST-DEMOCRATIC DICTATORSHIPS

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**CRISTINA MORARU**

After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the ideological separation between East and West determined a configuration of liberal democracy as a political doctrine that established a post-ideological consensus of *polic(y)ing*<sup>1</sup> rather than politicizing, in which the dictatorship of the market replaced politics as a decision making space. This post-ideological consensus—constituted as a denial of any politics of difference, ignoring freedom and dismissing any dissenting position—revels in the inherent authoritarianism of capitalism. The post-political order of *polic(y)ing* withdrew politics from the social space and substituted the public sphere—as a space for political dissensions—with systems of social regulation such as the police and the local administration. In this context, the market operates as a social phenomenon that generates false needs and structures human behavior, imposing a dictatorship of status, beauty and lifestyle, while determining the end of what is known as “proper politics.”



**Claire Fontaine, *Change*, 2006.**  
Twelve twenty-five cent coins, steel  
box-cutter blades, solder and rivets,  
90 x 40 x 40 cm. Photo: Courtesy  
of the artist and Galerie Neu, Berlin.





Isaac Cordal, *Follow the Leaders*, 2015.  
Installation view, Montréal.  
Photo: © Isaac Cordal.

AES+F, *Inverso Mundus*, 2015.  
Still from the HD video installation,  
38 min. Courtesy of the artists.  
Photo: © AES+F / SOCAN (2020).





The Soviet system's collapse seems to have had a twofold effect: that of defusing political tensions and strengthening relations between countries. At the same time, the end of communism dismissed the old oppositions between "formal democracy and real democracy, and imposed the values of so-called formal democracy"<sup>2</sup>, enabling the ideology of the "rule of law" and the liberal economy to be approved over democratic debates. This consensual post-democratic order determined the end of "proper politics" because, as Jacques Rancière points out, politics can only exist if a context of dissent is asserted. Under the current conditions, the post-democratic strategies, implementing consensus at the level of specific governmental techniques, are those that determine an end for the "political moment" itself.

The post-ideological consensus, criticized by a radical group of post-political theorists such as Jacques Rancière and Slavoj Žižek, reduces "proper politics" to the status of social administration and determines the zero moment of politics: a starting point

for the establishment of a depoliticized, post-democratic and post-political dictatorship. This post-democratic logic betrays a constitutive error: consensus—seen as the supreme democratic value which assumes the dissolution of any counterarguments and the cancellation of any dissident positions—is precisely the one that cancels democracy.

In this context, art could produce a non-consensual space for discourse, since art determines the constitution of a specific politics, a sensible politics, which considers new ways of configuring communities of individuals—in a union of sensible experiences rather than as a coalition subjected to abstract forms of the law. If governance extends beyond the State by promoting experts and affirming their incontestability as a substitute for political debate, art remains a medium capable of bringing to our attention the dangers of post-democratic dictatorships, which are reconfiguring political power as a rhizomatic diagram between the new forces, such as private institutions and corporations. Art can deconstruct the arguments





**Hito Steyerl, *Liquidity Inc.*, 2014.**  
HD video in architectural  
environment, 30 min. 15 sec.  
Installation view at the Art Gallery  
of Ontario, Toronto, 2019. Courtesy  
of the artist, Andrew Kreps Gallery  
and Esther Schipper. © AGO  
Photo: Dean Tomlinson.

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of formal politics, especially those that aim at globalizing the economy; it can reveal our current post-political condition in which our approach to politics is to defer making a political choice and delegate political decisions to technocratic experts.

If art critically orients itself against the Governance-Beyond-the-State,<sup>3</sup> it can expose this post-political regime which is replacing the power of proper-politics with that of financial institutions, including the art market and its actors. Believing in the ability of art to disclose political truth, Spanish artist Isaac Cordal draws attention to this shift of power between the State and the financial sector—paradoxically supported from within, by the State and its connections to powerful international structures, such as the European Union and the World Bank—that enabled the emergence and the proliferation of institutional arrangements of Governance-Beyond-the-State. These provide the administration, civil society and different actors in the private economic environment an important role in the policy making process.

In his work *Follow the Leaders* (2011-2013), Isaac Cordal criticizes this post-democratic consensual condition that creates a paradox of democracy in which only the illusion of a society governing itself is constituted, when, in fact, the established governmental minority is the one that decides for the masses, in accordance with the financial strategies they seek to implement. Reflecting critically on the current post-democratic dictatorship, Isaac Cordal creates small-scale installations, composed of over 2000 miniature sculptures, which question our inertia as a social mass and criticize the abnegation with which we follow our leaders, even if we're following them into the ground.

By drawing attention to our leaders, Isaac Cordal highlights the innovative ways of current policy making, which are invariably associated with the emergence of new institutional structures that ensure a greater involvement of social actors, as experts, in both civil and economic society. Therefore, Isaac Cordal is actively criticizing the current post-political order, structured in



agreement with the transnational economy and in accordance with the governmental arrangements that consensually configure society according to the dreams, tastes and needs of the cultural elites. By uncovering these regimes of Governance-Beyond-the-State that intermingle social actors, cultural elites and institutions, the series of sculptures *Follow the Leaders* attests to the interdependence of the political and economic spheres, showing how part of the political power is being taken over by the power of economic institutions.

In this paradigm, Fulvia Carnevale and James Thornhill, an Italian-British artist duo working under the pseudonym *Claire Fontaine*, consider that in a society in which politics are carried out in relation to—or even in favor of—economic agencies, art must be used as a symbolic tool to deconstruct these relations. In their work *Change* (2006), the artists unmask the financial market's true face, creating a visual metaphor regarding “the dangers hidden behind the financial industries whose effects can cause profound anxieties,”<sup>4</sup> concerning security and economic status in societies where Governance-Beyond-the-State is established. The work *Change* was part of the *Uncertain Spectator* exhibition, held in New York at the Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center, for which Claire Fontaine proposed an assisted ready-made, consisting of a series of twelve coins to which they attached the steel ends of can openers. In this way, Claire Fontaine visually expressed the threats of the economy's uncontrollable expansion that invades the private, social, cultural and political spheres.

The title, *Change*—a polysemic word, which refers both to the metal coins circulating as a monetary convention, and to a possible economic and political change—criticizes post-democratic governance that extends beyond politics into the field of economics. Here, the post-democratic governance follows the Foucauldian thesis on “the conduct of conduct,” which is described as enlarging the governmental sphere by including other power structures which are actually conducting, while the political space becomes narrower or even suspended, and the governmentality seemingly conducts what is in fact already conducted. This is the moment when the need to rethink politics and to reevaluate the possibilities of returning to the original values of the “proper politics”—of searching for the common good, in the Rancièrian sense—is felt.

The current vibrant activity in the contemporary art market is obviously an effect of capitalism's ascent, even more as contemporary art is specially attractive to financiers, given that it allows them to shorten the usual processes of value creation—art being a field in which the mediation that intervenes, naturally, between the proletarian world of material production and the detached universe of fictitious capital is essentially dismissed. As Jean Baudrillard states, there is no divergence between contemporary capitalism and contemporary art, considering that art has always reflected the social and economic contexts. Therefore, “nothing now distinguishes contemporary art from the technical, promotional, media, digital operation.”<sup>5</sup>

In this context, contemporary art must find a way to end capitalists' financial speculations and to configure a space that is not a replacement for capitalist logic, and does not work in terms of capitalized labour, since art has the power to become an instrument of change in the capitalist system.

In this respect, Hito Steyerl's work *Liquidity Inc.* (2014) envisions a post-economic parable about the fluidity of capital and its circulation. Following an eclectic narrative scenario, the video refers to global financial trading, new digital technology, financial markets, economic forecasts, mixed martial arts and mass media, with the intention of capturing the inherent violence, but also the vulnerability that exists in all these systems. By creating an abstract metaphor that alludes to liquid assets, Hito Steyerl identifies liquidity as the nature of the capitalist system, projecting *Liquidity Inc.* as an allegory referring to the waves in each system that come crashing down. Referencing the 1970s left activists group The Weather Underground, *Liquidity Inc.* includes terrorists presenting weather reports, describing “weather as water with attitude” and insinuating the possibilities of a stronger capitalism that might subjugate even natural processes. As well, the weather report refers to digital clouds, alluding to the torrential circulation of digital images and to the transnational treaties that regulate data security and information flow.

Therefore, *Liquidity Inc.* can be read as an actual description of contemporary art, culture and society, which unveils the technological and social changes of the early 21st century. By setting the action in 2008, when the financial world collapsed and the global operating system of consumerist cyberspace was established, Hito Steyerl criticizes the materialization of contemporary art as an alternative currency in our post-political time of rapid technological change. This evokes the thought of art historian Julian Stallabrass when he notes that contemporary art is “bound to the economy as tightly as Ahab to the white whale.”<sup>6</sup>

If the entanglements of contemporary art and capitalism are undeniable, how can we still trust the Rancièrian belief that “art, as a revolutionary politics of the sensible”<sup>7</sup> can redefine the relations between politics and sensibility, and can generate a particular form of freedom that is inaccessible at the level of governmental politics, but is manifested through the politics of the sensible? The answer is given by Slavoj Žižek who believes that, in the constitution of a post-democratic dictatorship, an interstitial social space is inevitably created, given the inconsistencies, violence and contradictions of the contemporary political order. At the level of all these political incongruities, spaces of interstices are configured and can be occupied in order to create a new environment that allows the constitution of a “political moment” as a state of dissension and antagonism.

For Žižek, this “political moment” can appear when society members—who don't have a precisely determined position within the social hierarchy—rise up against those who have power and social control, and demand a recognition in the public sphere, asserting themselves as a voice that needs to be heard. In Žižek's



words: “those excluded, although they present themselves, paradoxically, as representatives of the whole society, of the true Universality [determine] the empty principle of Universality”<sup>8</sup>—insofar as the void, the non-social segment, the non-power of the demos, becomes the one who dismisses the order; the unstructured part of the whole is, now, destabilizing the structured social body.

In this paradigm, the group of Russian artists AES + F explores the interstitial space of the post-political order—which is produced creatively, alternatively and utopically in favour of the “political moment” as a state of dissension—intending to represent a possible social utopia in which the excluded, those who do not have a determined position within the social hierarchies, can supersede those who occupy privileged positions. In this regard, the multi-channel video installation *Inverso Mundus* (2015) accurately illustrates Žižek’s “empty principle of Universality” inasmuch as the non-power, non-social—represented here by the poor people—destabilizes the internal rules of society and places the privileged classes, the elite, in vulnerable positions. In this respect, it appears that contemporary art needs to infiltrate the interstices of post-democratic dictatorships and restructure its order from inside, positioning itself as part of the consensual space, thus impossible to exclude. In this interstitial space, only contemporary art is capable of generating a specific type of creativity that is measured neither in terms of capital, nor as a neo-liberal value that can be capitalized, but as an attribute of “the third social space: a space, simultaneously, real and imaginary, material and metaphorical, a space, in equal measure, of order and disorder;”<sup>9</sup> a space where the utopia of the “political moment” can still be constituted.

1. *Politic(y)ing* is a concept introduced by Erik Swyngedouw in his post-political critique texts, referring to the politics carried out with the support of police control.
2. Jacques Rancière, “Introducing Disagreement” in *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, vol. 9, no. 3, Routledge, London, New York, 2004, 3.
3. Erik Swyngedouw, “Governance Innovation and the Citizen: The Janus Face of Governance-Beyond-the-State” in *Urban Studies*, vol. 42, no. 11, 1991–2006, October 2005, Routledge, 1992.
4. Emily Berçir Zimmerman, *Uncertain Spectator*, exhibition statement. [On line] : <http://uncertain.empac.rpi.edu/>.
5. Jean Baudrillard, *The Intelligence of Evil: or, The Lucidity Pact* (London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 83.
6. Julian Stallabrass, *Contemporary Art: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 14.
7. Jacques Rancière, “The Aesthetic Revolution and Its Outcomes”, *New Left Review* 14, March-April 2002, 133.
8. Slavoj Žižek, “Carl Schmitt in the Age of Post-Politics,” in Chantal Mouffe (ed.), *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt* (London, New York: Verso Books, 1999), 28.
9. Edward Soja, “Thirdspace” (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), and Gerry Stoker, “Public - Private Partnerships in Urban Governance” (1998) in J. Pierre (ed.), *Partnerships in Urban Governance: European and American Experience*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, and Erik Swyngedouw, “Post-Democratic Cities. For Whom and for What?.” [On line]: [bit.ly/2zOmSON](http://bit.ly/2zOmSON).

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