

THE DESIRES OF THE CROWD

Scenario for a Future Social System

by

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1. INTRODUCTION

The capitalist system Marx described when formulating his theories was based on nineteenth-century industrial capitalist society. New methods of communication have since changed the conditions for capitalism. Parts of today's network-based creative economy are characterized by the humanistic values some writers claim Marx was looking for when he formulated the theory of alienation. ¹ For instance, Hardt and Negri argue that the new economy of affective labour and networked relations amounted to "a kind of spontaneous and elementary communism." ² This stateless network economy operates in a relational space where the consumer is also the producer, and self-fulfillment, as much as financial gain, is the goal.

In this article, I describe how to alter the functionality of the creative sector and develop institutions allowing for a union of the private and public sector. In doing this, we may approach something resembling Marx's vision of an ideal society as he describes in, for example, *Comments on James Mill*. ³ Here, unlike in his other texts where the communist society is described only as the antithesis of capitalism, he describes his vision more directly, as "production as hu-

ABSTRACT

The micro-financing of artists offers new possibilities for people outside the economic and cultural elite to become patrons of the arts. One might term it a more democratic base for the artistic activity and its varied discursive practices. However, it is not just the economy of art that focuses on people with the particular skills to make things that get called 'art.' Promoting a personal brand in the form of taste, education and social relations is also central to every career in an insecure and flexible labor market, and not only in the creative sector. Accordingly, the crowd funding of humanity, rather than of production of commodities, is a possible and reasonable scenario for a future social system, where people are deeply interconnected in collaborative networks.

*In order to examine what such a system might look like in practice, I have in my project *The Affect Machine* formulated a market place for social relations. Here I show how the principles for a capitalist institution like a corporation can be combined with those of a digital social network, and thus point to a form of merger between the private and public sector. In this scenario for a future social system, we may approach something resembling Marx's vision of a communist society.*

man beings," in which the products of work would reflect human nature, and would be made for reciprocal benefit as a free manifestation and enjoyment of life.

By combining an institution from the public sphere with the private, I show how we can create a scenario for a future social system. In the next part, I give a brief description of Marx's theory of alienation. In part 3, I describe how the art world can be seen as an exception to the mainstream market economy. In

part 4, I describe how changing the production conditions for art creates new opportunities to deepen the relationship between producer and consumer. In part 5, I argue for a broad definition of the artist. In part 6, I discuss how to create institutions that unite the private with the public, by combining a system of online trading with an online social network. In part 7, I draw the conclusion that today we can see the embryo of a communist society.

2. ALIENATION ACCORDING TO MARX

The theory of alienation is central to Marx's analysis of capitalism. During the financial and political conditions of the Western industrial revolution, a division of labour on an unprecedented scale was made possible, which drastically reduced the individual's ability to monitor and control the results of her own work. Marx argued that this created alienation in society that operates on several levels:⁴

1. Alienation between the producer and the consumer. Instead of producing something for another person, the worker produces for a wage.
2. Alienation between the producer and the product of the work. As the production is split into smaller parts and the worker becomes an instrument that makes a limited part of the whole, the pride and satisfaction of work is lost.
3. Alienation of workers from themselves, since they are denied their identity. By losing control over the product of work and thus pride in labor, the worker is deprived of the right to be a subject with agency.
4. Alienation of the worker from other workers, through the competition for wages, instead of working together for a common purpose.

A capitalist society, divided into classes of bourgeoisie and proletariat, stands in contrast to the ideal of communist society where there is no need for the state and class differentiation; instead everyone owns the means of production, and the principle of distribution is famously: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need!"⁵

This has often been interpreted to mean that everything should be shared equally, but Marx says nothing about equality, rather he emphasizes the relationships between people.⁶ A communist society is a society where everyone is linked in a mutual interdependency with others and nature, and self-actualization is the driving force:

*Let us suppose that we had carried out production as human beings. Each of us would have, in two ways, affirmed himself, and the other person. (1) In my production I would have objectified my individuality, its specific character, and, therefore, enjoyed not only an individual manifestation of my life during the activity, but also, when looking at the object, I would have the individual pleasure of knowing my personality to be objective, visible to the senses, and, hence, a power beyond all doubt. (2) In your enjoyment, or use, of my product I would have the direct enjoyment both of being conscious of having satisfied a human need by my work, that is, of having objectified man's essential nature, and of having thus created an object corresponding to the need of another man's essential nature...*⁷

In this perspective, production is a mutual exchange that strengthens individuals. The producers are strengthened by expressing themselves through their work, where the product is an expression of their subject and position in the world, and thus expands their power and range. As this expression of their identity is put into use, and used by other individuals, the producers also get the satisfaction of seeing their products in use, as a response to other people's human needs.

Exactly how this state is achieved is, however, controversial, and the self-proclaimed precursors of Communist society, the socialist states of the twentieth century, fell far short of these high ideals. Yet the problem of alienation has not dissipated, and may indeed have got worse as capitalism lost its socialist other. However, in a description of the alienation in American society, social scientist Fritz Pappenheim points out the strategy that many feminist theorists have focused on:

*If our goal is to overcome alienation by fostering bonds between man and man, then we must build up institutions which enable man to identify his ends with those of others, with the direction in which his society is moving. In other words, we must try to reduce the gulf between the realms of the private and the public.*⁸

Thus, that the differentiation between people should be avoided, and that the gap between what is seen as private and what is seen as public should be reduced.

3. AN EXCEPTION TO THE MARKET ECONOMY

Today, Marxist scholars claim that we are living in a hypercapitalist era where more and more relationships with other people are converted into commodities without contact with the specific needs and expressions of the people who produce or consume them.⁹ But a small creative class of people has resisted the temptation of capitalism, and refuses to participate in the regular market. This creative class consists of an art avant-garde that plays in another arena, what the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu calls the field of restricted production.¹⁰ Here the game is not to sell as many products as possible to a broad mass, but a few to a limited audience of other cultural producers and colleagues. Your access to this market depends on your social relationships more than your financial capital. The products are an expression of the producer's individuality and the result of a desire to participate in the arts collective. They are a reflection of other individuals' need to understand themselves and their contemporaries, and to be acknowledged as unique human beings.

It may be argued that the global art world can be seen as a market like any other though with the peculiarity that it has a small and affluent clientele who use

art as a way to launder their economic capital with cultural capital.¹¹ But even though this market exists, economic capital is not usually the main motive of the art world's participants. What is most pursued by the producers in this field is not profit, but self-realization and peer recognition.¹²

Others argue that since modernism and the breakthrough of industrial capitalism, it is peer recognition that is most important for artists, more important than recognition from gallery owners, collectors and a wider audience.¹³ To sell their art 'commercially' is seen as a necessary evil, as a way to get money for studio rent and the necessities of the life as an artist. This has similarities with the work ethic of today's so-called open source communities, where the driving force is primarily to achieve fame and acknowledgment from peers.¹⁴

4. NEW PRODUCTION CONDITIONS FOR ART

Yet even artists adapt to new conditions of production, and must somehow finance their fulfillment, which, after all, takes place within the framework of capitalism.

For instance, the British artist Tracy Emin sold options on her future work for £10 in the early 1990s.¹⁵ In recent decades, financial crises, digital technology and a new form of network economy have stimulated a search for alternative forms for financing the visual arts. Crowd funding is one of these forms. Internet sites like Kickstarter and Crowdfunder make it possible to gain small, but potentially numerous, contributions from large groups of people.¹⁶ Some sites provide the sponsors with an opportunity to ask questions and propose a change or development of the project. The investors / consumers can therefore be in direct communication with the artist, which might develop into a more sustained relationship. This crowd

can also function as a loyal audience and PR-support for realized projects; if you have invested in something, you probably also want it to be successful.

Coming up with a good idea for an artwork is not too difficult, and arguably the the art lies in carrying it out. This demands skill, experience, contacts, and legitimacy. For this reason, the artist as a person is often more important for the artwork than the idea. Following the logic of the dominating western modernist concept of art, one cannot alienate the work of art (the commodity) from the artist (the human being).

Art is also about much more than producing artworks. Art sociologist Nathalie Heinich shows in her study of Van Gogh how art in modernism is a belief in the special, the uniquely human, and in this belief system the artist is an embodiment of this idea of the singular and special person, and indirectly of all people.¹⁷ The artwork can be viewed as a way of mediating this singularity, a proof that we are not interchangeable cogs in a machine without significance, but that our particular experience of the world is important and unique. The art world is therefore more about belief in the singular artist rather than in the artworks. Some sites, for example, SonicAngel and ArtistShare have concentrated on this aspect of the arts.¹⁸ In this context it is no longer only the artwork that is central, but the existence of the artist. The micro-financing of artists rather than works of art also offers new possibilities for people other than the economic elite to become patrons of the arts. One might term it a more liberal democratic base for the artistic priesthood and its varied discursive practices, as it makes the patronage of art more easily accessible to people without large financial means.

For the founder of ArtistShare, Brian Camelio, crowd funding is a way to create deeper and more direct links between those who produce art and those who

consume art.¹⁹ Camelio argues that digital technologies are gradually destroying capitalist production conditions, especially in the music industry, as it becomes increasingly difficult to sell music as a commodity when it is too easy to copy in its commodity form. Therefore, the focus on the crowd-funding site is on the process and the technology to enable consumers to be with the artist and participate in the artistic process, rather than merely buying some end product of the process. By donating money on the site to the artists you like, you get special privileges to be in the vicinity of the artist, for instance, as a participant in pre-concert activities, and to meet others who share the same passion.

Perhaps it is mainly the music industry that fits into the concept of crowd funding, since it is already built on relationships with big fan groups. But even more traditionally oriented artists can use technology to establish a contact with potential customers on a deeper level. Painter Laura Greengold used an online crowd-funding service to ask people to sponsor a project that was about sharing dreams and stories.²⁰ The contributors not only sent money but descriptions of their dreams, and Greengold used these as the starting point for a series of paintings. For the artist, this was not just a way to finance a project, but also a way to create a relational space for her art that she lacks in the traditional gallery setting. It thus worked as a way to establish a deeper discussion about the content of the artistic process, rather than focusing only on the end product. Art that emphasizes the relation to the audience, and art as a platform for a wider discussion do not necessarily have to be restricted to digitally mediated art. The participatory aspects of art were emphasized by Fluxus and the Situationists, to take just a couple of examples, and so-called relational art has been a marked trend in contemporary art from the 1990s onwards.

Is it possible then to widen this relational functionality of the art world to other parts of society? To answer this question, we first have to examine the concept of the artist.

5. THE CONCEPT OF THE ARTIST

In an institutional view of the definition of art, what gets called art and who gets called an artist is defined by the powers within the art world. But even with this approach, important participants in the art world are left out: namely, those who themselves do not think the term 'artist' is interesting, but who the art world still categorizes as an artist.

You can also broaden the concept of the artist to include all members of the creative class, that is, often highly educated people working with creative industries and problem solving. Needless to say, even this is far too limited, and I would propose a different and broader way of looking at who the 'artist' is by looking at how such a person is placed on a map of production conditions. Here the individual can be seen as either placed in a structure that she cannot overview or affect, or as someone who has agency and manipulates, navigates and changes to realize herself. In the first position, social relationships are not important, and the individual is alienated from herself and her work. In the other position, relationships are central, and the individual is the one who creates the production conditions. The artist is someone who is in the more active position, where maintaining relations and communication is central to the work.

According to Chris Mathieu, the editor of an anthology of research on creative industries, particular features of the art field make for distinct conditions for artistic production.²¹ First, there are no real permanent jobs, but a life-long competition in which the rules are con-

stantly changed. Moreover, it is not a competition on an open market; instead, participation is determined by the relationships you have, and how close or far there are work opportunities in the production network of relationships. The judges of the competition are colleagues, not some faceless market. The competition is not only individual, but can be seen as a team sport where there is uncertainty about who your partners are. Here, everyone gains if someone in the network is successful, and everyone is pulled down if someone does not succeed. A great deal of time is thus spent not only on making artistic things, but on behaving as an artist and being in places artists are, to be present when there is a new market opportunity.

However, it is not only artists of various types who operate in an uncertain and ever-changing labor market, or who are constantly forced to transform and express their identity to be recognized. Having a lifelong permanent job is increasingly scarce, and social skills are in demand in all areas.²² Promoting a personal brand in the form of taste, education and social relations is thus central to every career in an insecure and flexible labor market, not just in the creative sector. Here you can see the popularity of networks like LinkedIn and Facebook as a general expression of the need to maintain a personal brand and many social relationships.²³

These networks are not only central to the individual's ability to act as producer and to navigate an uncertain job market. They are also important channels for the individual as consumer when the abundance of information increasingly makes us rely on recommendations from people we have a personal relationship with.

Social networks in combination with crowd funding create a situation where we are linking our social being to economic investment, thus creating direct personal relationships between producer and consumer, in which the consumer is also co-producer.

6. THE AFFECT MACHINE

When this networked social being is paired with economic investment the division between the private and the public sphere is disrupted. The private sphere usually consists of members of a legal statutory family, which for the family members means mutual rights and obligations enshrined in law but also in norms. The public sphere is typically composed of adults that compete within a market, where the production of goods and services is performed on a commercial basis. This market is maintained and governed by collective institutions that dictate the rules of participation. Here, a collective of individuals can come together in companies in which the market temporarily does not apply, but where everyone instead collaborates for the collective good. There is also a capital market, where companies' profits for surplus production can be used for investments in new businesses.

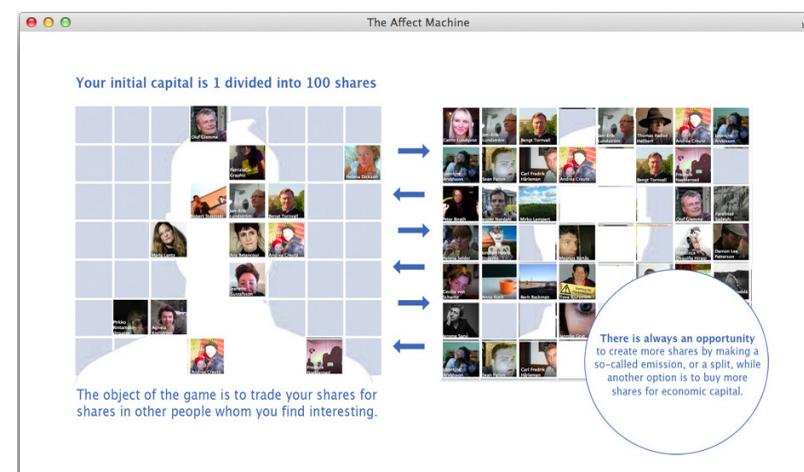
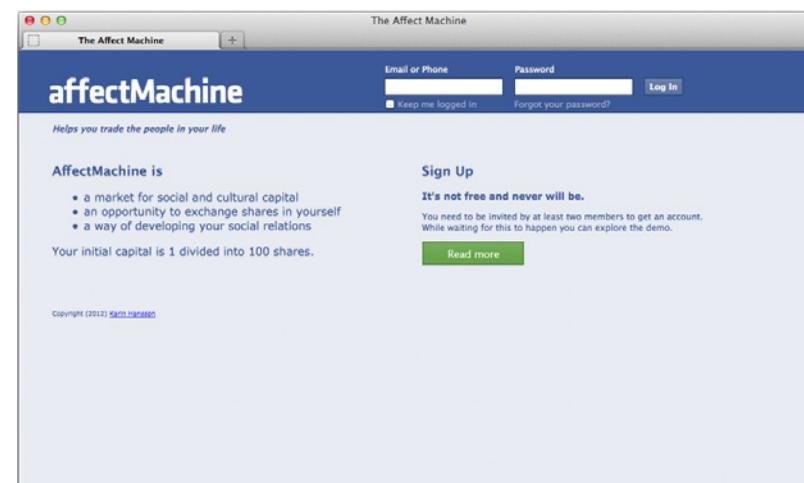
Naturally, there is a fuzzy border between the private and the public sector, which is in constant negotiation. But must activity be either private or public? What if, as Pappenheim proposes above, we unite the private with the public? In order to examine what such a system might look like in practice, I have in the project *The Affect Machine* formulated a marketplace for social relations by combining the principles for trading shares with those of a digital social network (see figure 1-X). Here you can develop your social capital by acquiring shares in interesting subjects. Instead of being dependent on inflexible and unreliable bourgeois constructions like the family, *The Affect Machine* is a dynamic and much safer way of creating a family that is built on micro-desire rather than a sense of duty and routine. With a carefully composed Affect Family, you spread your risks and create surplus value, thanks to synergies between different shares in the network.

If I am a corporation and want new capital, I can divide the company with a share issue, and sell ownership on to those who are interested. If I want to invest in a corporation, I must wait until the shares are for sale on the open stock market. If, as a corporation, I need more capital, I can issue new shares; that is, splitting the company into even smaller parts in the hope that more people will want to invest.

On the other hand, a digital social network is about collecting and developing social relationships in a workable way. At best, this network formalizes contacts with a group of people I like and trust in one way or another. This digital platform can facilitate my communication with this group, and be used as a way to develop and deepen the relationship by exchanging information. In this way, you can, for example, easily get hold of someone who can help out with something, or knows where to find a certain type of information.

There are interesting similarities in the structuring of a corporation with the structuring of a digital social network. But while one is based on legally viable contracts between people that do not need to know each other, the second is built on relationships between people who know each other and which have no legal validity. If we combine the idea of a corporation with a digital social network, this would open up a legal opportunity for people to act as a corporation on a social market.

Suppose that each player initially has 100 shares. They may exchange these shares for shares of other people, provided that both parties are interested. In this way social networks are established that are legally valid and cannot be waived without compensation. Unlike in a social network, the relationship does not need to be exactly reciprocal; you can exchange shares with people who have not exactly reciprocal shares in you, so the value of different people's shares will shift. The sum of your network is your total capital, and this capital increases or decreases depending on how well the individuals in your network perform. If I do not feel good about a relationship with someone in my network, I can either try to exchange my shares if possible, without too much loss of value, or work on improving the relationship, thus strengthening my social capital. Likewise, it is in my interest to promote my social network and help my relationships with their needs. Just like in a family, you simply help each other, without thinking about exactly what you get out of it all, but safe in the knowledge that a long-lived loyalty is being inculcated, in part through a binding legal contract. Unlike a family, which usually is not very large, and in practice can be quite unreliable, here risk is spread across a larger number of people. In practice, this legal institution can replace and merge institutions



Figures 1, 2 & 3. *The Affect Machine*, Karin Hansson, 2012. Web page, <http://affectmachine.org/>. © Karin Hansson, 2012. Used with permission.

that are now divided between a private and a public sphere, and thus create a legal support for the development of a communist society. Here, maintaining and developing relations are central to the work, and the individual navigates and changes the structure to realize herself.

This model shows how, by joining the functions in a capitalist institution with the functions in a digital social network, we can sketch a form of how the private and public sectors can approach each other.

7. CONCLUSION: AN EMBRYO OF A COMMUNIST SOCIETY

In practice, a lot of institutions, laws and norms need to be recompiled in order to legally and socially replace the current system of norms and laws with ones that better reflects the dynamic organization of the network society. But it is possible to see phenomena such as digital social networks and crowd funding as an embryo of a communist society in which all are bound together in mutual economic and social relations. Here we cannot, of course, ignore all those without the possibility of operating on digital networks, and those who produce the wealth that makes this sector possible. But the examples in this article show how other people besides artists can set personal fulfillment as their objective before economic profit, and how crowd funding and digital social networks can support people's active role as producers and consumers.

Here technology may be a way to allow for the extension of the social network to more than the biological family and closest friends, and the means that bring the social/private and economic/public sectors closer together. Communications technology brings about the possibility of reducing the alienation between producer and consumer by establishing direct links without any tangible intermediary. The product can be seen as an expression of the talent of the producer and the needs of the consumer, but also as an act of recognition between humans, that is, a social relationship. Information and communication technology here may reduce the need for the mediation of commodities as symbolic capital like fashion or other status

symbols as a way of signaling group affiliation and hierarchy will become less important, thus reducing the need for commodities and the exploitation of natural resources.

To translate this into Marx's terminology, instead of alienation, stronger relationships are created:

- » The relationships between the producer and the consumer. Instead of producing work for a wage, a direct relation is produced to another person.
- » The relationship between the producer and the product of the work. As the product and the producer is one, the artist/artwork is one, and the producer has total control over her own self-image and can feel proud of the image created.
- » The relationship with herself. When production is mainly about realizing oneself and creating one's own market, the worker is no longer a stranger to herself.
- » Relationships between workers. By not competing for the salary, but working together for the common network that everyone depends on, relationships are strengthened.

In this perspective no one can own anyone else's work, or even their own work, as their own subject is dependent on all the others, and cannot therefore exist outside of this relationship:

Our products would be so many mirrors in which we saw reflected our essential nature. This relationship would moreover be reciprocal; what occurs on my side has also to occur on yours. ²⁴ ■

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