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Council aestheticism? Pannekoek, the avant-garde and contemporary art

Abstract

Focusing on the Marxist theorist Anton Pannekoek, this article left communist impulses in 20th and 21st century aesthetic practice. The point of departure is Pannekoek's theory of revolutionary mass action – centred around the general strike – and its aesthetic as well as political implications and repercussions. The text then proceeds to discuss the workers' council as the nucleus of socialist self-organization and the avant-garde's use and indeed fetishization of that concepts, and ends with a more speculative section on the potential contemporary relevance of Pannekoek's writings on epistemology, the history of science, and evolution.

Keywords
Marxism, Council communism, Avant-garde

1. *The "aesthetic turn" in Marxism*

Discussions of Marxism and aesthetics have tended to focus on Western Marxism since the period between the World Wars – with Lukács, Adorno and others initiating an "aesthetic turn" in Marxism. As Perry Anderson has put it, Western Marxism "paradoxically inverted the trajectory of Marx's own development itself. Where the founder of historical materialism moved progressively from philosophy to politics and then economics, as the central terrain of his thought, the successors of the tradition that emerged after 1920 increasingly turned back from economics and politics to philosophy", and to aesthetics: "Aesthetics, since the Enlightenment the closest bridge of philosophy to the concrete world, has exercised an especial and constant attraction for

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its theorists" (Anderson 1976: 52). However, after pioneering works by Lifshitz, Prawer and Rose, recent years have also seen a resurgence of interest in Marx himself as an aesthetic thinker[2].

Marcuse once suggested that Marx's "trajectory" must be inverted to get to the core of "aesthetic Marx": arguing that "the writings of 1844-45 must be read as if they find their theoretical (and practical) place and function *after Capital*", Marcuse emphasized that "they would be an essential part of the projected transition from capitalism to socialism" (Marcuse 2001: 128). It is in these early texts that "Marx develops the notion of a non-alienated mode of production, of an 'aesthetic' construction of the object world, and of individual property as contrasting with private property" (Marcuse 2001: 129). Marcuse maintains that these notions were in no way obviated by the economic analysis of *Capital*; in fact, the latter was in the service of ultimately realizing the former, which "find their place, structurally, *after Capital,* not merely because they convey the image of socialist man, but also because they presuppose Marx's full analysis of capitalist society" (Marcuse 2001: 129). However, *Capital* itself also teems with aesthetic questions and concepts: one need only think of Marx's discussion of commodity fetishism and the relation between the value form and the "natural form" of the commodity, for instance. In fact, capital's lacking sensuous presence and the need to critique the phantasmagoria staged by commodities is the engine that drives Marx's analysis. *Capital* is Marx's work of gothic realism, whereas the "early" writings contain utopian hints on the sensuous fulfilment to come under communism, after the victory over the alienating division of labour: hunting in the morning, fishing in the afternoon, rearing cattle in the evening, criticizing after dinner.

In contrast to both Marx himself and post-WWI Marxists, the generations following Marx in the late 19th and early 20th century seem irredeemable: was it not precisely their narrow focus on "economics and politics" that caused the philosophical and aesthetic turn in the 1910s and 1920s? While there is much truth in this accusation, I want

[2] Mikhail Lifshitz's *The philosophy of art of Karl Marx* was first published in Russian in 1933, and in English in 1938; today, the author's work appears to be undergoing a minor renaissance, with David Riff publishing an English edition of *The crisis of ugliness: from Cubism to Pop-art* (2018). Prawer's *Karl Marx and world literature* is from 1976, and Margaret A. Rose's *Marx's lost aesthetics: Karl Marx and the visual arts* from 1984. For the current *status quaestionis*, see Samir Gandesha and Johan Hartle's *Aesthetic Marx* (2017).

to focus on the figure of Anton Pannekoek to examine the ways in which his thought and practice impacted and intersected with the artistic avant-garde – in the interwar years and then again in the 1960s. Tracing "Pannekoekian" or, more broadly, left communist impulses in 20th and 21st century aesthetic practice, I focus on the activities of artist-activists who at times participated in the same organizations as Pannekoek and other council communists. Taking as my point of departure Pannekoek's theory of revolutionary mass action – centred around the general strike – and its aesthetic as well as political implications and repercussions, I will then proceed to discuss the workers' council as the nucleus of socialist self-organization – a concept that was eagerly taken up by parts of the avant-garde – and the role of time in Pannekoek's vision of a post-capitalist, councilist economy.

Throughout all of this, I aim to delineate the agency of Pannekoekian thought in the context of aesthetic practice – in the 1910s and 1920s, in the 1960s and 1970s, and again in our contemporary condition. At times, artists' responses to left-communist theory and modes of practice have developed a significant degree of autonomy. Rather than charting a master thinker's "influence" over largely passive artists, this is an account of a messier and more active process of appropriation – which includes misunderstandings, missed encounters and opportunities, but also the potential of new "now-times" opening up between Pannekoek and present concerns. In the third and final section, I aim to demonstrate that some less explicitly political writings by Pannekoek – focusing on epistemology, the history of science, and evolution – hold particular interest in the context of today's art.

2. *This ain't no party: new forms of action in politics and/or art*

Being comfortable in the habitus of a late-19th century bourgeois, Pannekoek clearly had no great affinity for the artistic avant-garde of the 1910s or 1920s, let alone with later movements; nor would his precise and elegant, but at times somewhat donnish writing style encourage one to reinterpret Pannekoek in the light of avant-garde literature and manifesto-writing. Nonetheless, Pannekoek stands out for his early and insistent focus on the intellect and on ideology, on the life of the *Geist* as an integral part of material and social reality. Before Lukács, Korsch and Gramsci, and with a significant impact on Lukács,

Pannekoek thus paved the way for an acknowledgement of "the centrality of ideas and consciousness to historical development", to quote John Gerber (1989: xiv). It is true that Pannekoek's scientism sets him apart from the tradition of Western Marxism inaugurated by Lukács or Gramsci; I will return to this issue in the third part of this essay. For now, the key point is that Pannekoek always remained convinced that the proletariat was the prime historical agent, whose development was to be supported and guided – but not directed in a Leninist manner – by intellectuals, leading to the growth of class consciousness and the development of new forms of action, such as the general political strike.

In the 1910s and early 1920s, the political vanguard and the artistic avant-garde in the German-speaking world shared a vocabulary centred around notions such as *Aktion* (action) and *Tat* (act or deed); Kurt Hiller founded a monthly titled "Die Tat" in 1909, and Franz Pfemfert the more influential and long-lived expressionist-political journal "Die Aktion" in 1911. The literary intelligentsia's terminology drew on a variety of sources, from Fichtian idealism to Georges Sorel's revolutionary syndicalism – with a heavy dose of sub-Nietzschean voluntarism (see Rothe 1969: 7-11). In the Marxist camp, Pannekoek published articles on *Massenaktion und Revolution* (*Mass action and revolution*, 1912) and *Marxismus als Tat* (*Marxism as act*, 1915). In his characterization of Marxism as act, he emphasized that men do not act unconsciously, but through the medium of thoughts, ideas and goals, the latter are always present in their actions, which is to say that these thoughts, ideas and goals do not emerge on their own, accidentally, but that they are the effect of those same social relations and needs (see Pannekoek 1915).

Thus there is a feedback loop between social circumstances and their active transformation. To quote Pannekoek: "Marxism has two parts: man is a product of circumstances, but man in turn modifies those circumstances", and if they do not want to become the victim of history, the people need to make their own history[3]. During World War

[3] As always with Pannekoek, one can also find passages in his work that seem to betray a more naïve, less dialectical conception; without wishing to sugar-coat his theoretical shortcomings, I generally side with Pannekoek at his most cogent and productive, since there seems little point in over-emphasizing those elements that would turn him into a dusty relic of political theory – which is what certain astronomers, keen on privileging the "scientific" over the "political" Pannekoek, are happy to do.

I, with the proletarians of various countries killing each other for imperialist nations, there was of course a desperate need for action that would wrest back some degree of agency. Hence the perhaps somewhat surprising affinity between Pannekoek and sections of the German avant-garde around 1918. Franz Pfemfert, the founder of "Die Aktion", shared Pannekoek's opposition to the War and underwent a parallel political trajectory, coming to embrace a council-communist position at the end of the War and during the German Revolution[4]. As idealist and voluntarist as many conceptions of *Aktion* were, the notion could be also be reinterpreted in terms of Marxian *praxis,* which is the sense in which Pannekoek uses it. In this understanding of *Aktion*, it is not a matter of a God-like subject expressing itself, but of embodied and embedded, social human activity.

In 1918-1920, this created a constellation in which left-communist and avant-garde activism or *actionism* intermingled and to some extent merged[5]. This occurred on the pages of "Die Aktion" and other periodicals as well as in parties and non-or anti-parties such as the KAPD, the AAU-D and especially in the AAU-E, the Allgemeine Arbeiter-Union Einheitsorganisation, an organization whose existence and program was largely indebted to Pannekoek – even if the latter was at a distance in Holland, and engrossed in astronomy. Here we encounter the fully-fledged anti-parliamentarian council communist model,

[4] This is not to say, of course, that their contribution was always seen as valuable within the revolutionary movement. Joan Weinstein (1990: 29) quotes a sobering letter from George Tappert to Franz Pfemfert, 20 November 1918.

[5] Kurt Hiller used the term *Aktivismus*, and Wolfgang Rothe's anthology *Der Aktivismus* (1969) suggested that this strand had once more returned to the fore in the late 1960 – though the comparison he makes turns out badly for the student movement and neo-avant-garde of the 1960s, which he diagnoses with "puerile autism". In this same period, Adorno analysed the penchant of the young generation to leap into radical *Aktion* without much regard for the consequences; he discerned a proto-fascist element in their activities (see, for instance, Adorno 2003, vol. 10/2: 760-82). The term Adorno used was *Aktionismus* (actionism), not *Aktivismus* (activism). The term "activism" was not in common use in the early 20th century, neither in German nor in English; it was mostly associated with the philosopher Rudolf Eucken's notion of "ethical activism", which is a likely source for Hiller. In this period, *Aktivismus* thus had a specificity which the term has now lost. I therefore prefer to use Adorno's "actionism" to refer to a specific continuum of artistic, intellectual and political avant-garde practice that aim to attack and negate established artistic and political structures through transgressive action so as to force a breakthrough to a post-capitalist society.

whose incompatibility with the Leninist party model was fast becoming apparent. To be sure, In Germany the social-democratic SPD coopted and subverted the councilist movement, making it work towards its own abolition: the *Reichsrätekongress* of 16-21 December 1918 was dominated by Friedrich Ebert's SPD and embraced parliamentary democracy. It instituted a transitional *Zentralrat der Deutschen Sozialistischen Republik* that duly abdicated in favor of the newly elected *Nationalversammlung* after a few months[6].

Nonetheless, the radical left embraced the councilist model with great fervor – and this included intellectuals and artists, which also raised the question of whether there could and should be separate councils for *geistige Arbeiter.* Starting as early as 7-8 November, Kurt Hiller attempted to create just such a council for "intellectual workers", though his conception was ultimately a thinly disguised aristocratic one (the intellectual as visionary leader). Another *Zentralrat für geistige Arbeiter*, around Lujo Brentano, emerged in Munich, where it would participate in the short-lived *Räterepublik* of April, which was violently suppressed in early May (on Hiller's *Zentralrat* and the Munich *Zentralrat* around Lujo Brentano, see Deak 1968). Almost two years later, Pannekoek responded in "Die Aktion" to a letter that Erich Mühsam had addressed to him via that same medium. Mühsam, an anarchist playwright, was in prison for his role in the Munich Council Republic. His missive to Pannekoek stressed their joint opposition to Leninism, but Pannekoek responded in early 1921 in such a doctrinaire and ungenerous manner that Pfemfert felt forced to add a damning postscript to Pannekoek's text (Pannekoek, letter to Mühsam, 1921). Solidarity between intellectual workers was clearly hard to come by.

However, by then Pfemfert and his comrade Otto Rühle had already been drawn into the council-communist camp, being active in the AAU-E – as were Cologne Progressives such as Franz Seiwert and Gerd Arntz (on Seiwert, see for instance Bohnen 1978: 7-9; Roth 2015: 51-2, 95). Seiwert fully embraced actionist rhetoric, extolling *die revolutionäre Tat*, for instance in the wake of the Kapp putsch, when a Rubens painting was damaged by a bullet in Dresden. In contrast to the KPD press, which had risen to the defense of cultural heritage, Seiwert maintained

[6] In fact, the German state was at no point officially called *Deutsche Sozialistische Republik* – the *Zentralrat*'s name notwithstanding.

that artistic idols had to be smashed in the name of the coming proletarian culture (Seiwert 1920: columns 418-19; in *Schriften*: 16)[7]. More than Pannekoek, this recalls Guy Debord's praise for an alleged action by Bakunin: in 1849, the latter was supposed to have put artworks on the barricades in (again!) Dresden. The text in which Debord discussed this – probably fictional – episode was titled *The situationists and new forms of action in art and politics* and dates from 1963 (Debord 1963)[8]. In the early 1960s, the Situationist International and Socialisme ou Barbarie had been in close contact, and both groups were profoundly invested in the Belgian strikes of 1960-'61, as well as other strike movements of that period (see Berréby and Vaneigem 2014 : 170-1).

At a time when the study of Pannekoek, Paul Mattick Sr. and Otto Rühle was very much part of daily life in these movements, the strike became an old-new form of action whose theorization by early-20th century authors must have appeared of the highest relevance (Berréby and Vaneigem 2014: 174). Even though or *because* Pannekoek refrained from grand Sorelian claims about the general political strike, it is to him that we owe the most considered statements about the strike as a form of revolutionary action, rather than as reformist or trade-unionist strategy[9]. For Pannekoek, what mattered was the prefigurative and, beyond that, educational dimension of the general strike. It is here that a new subjectivity and a new collectivity are first formed, under precarious conditions: "The effects of mass strikes so far appeared destructive only, not constructive. This was not true, to be sure; decisive inner qualities, the basis of a new society, develop out of the fights. But the outer forms in which they had to take shape were unknown; nobody in the capitalist world at the time had heard of workers' councils. Political strikes can only be a temporary form of battle; after the strike constructive labor has to provide for permanency" (Pannekoek 1942-47. See the online text, which is not paginated, here and below).

[7] This is Seiwert's contribution to the so-called *Kunstlump* debate, named after the title of George Grosz and John Heartfield's polemical response to Oskar Kokoschka's plea for protecting art during times of turmoil – a plea that was occasioned, precisely, by the Dresden Rubens being damaged in a gunfight (Grosz and Heartfield 1920: 48-52). See Nachtigall 2016: 43.

[8] The famous story appears to be a myth (see Weir 1997: 40). As far as I can tell, the story gained traction around the time of the Russian Revolution, ca. 1917-20, though it may be older than that.

[9] Sorel's key statement is of course the 1908 *Réflexions sur la violence*.

For the Situationists and many others, May 1968 with its general wildcat strike appeared like the culmination of left-communist praxis. Across Europe, Pannekoek became part of a canon of leftist thinkers who returned from dusty archives and libraries into the broad daylight of new editions and samizdats, creating an apparent now-time with previous (proto-)revolutionary moments. As the publisher Bernd Kramer later reminisced about the late 1960s and early 1970s in Berlin: "Marvelous times: legal and illegal reprints in the leftist bookstores and the bookstalls at the universities: Errico Malatesta, Karl Korsch, Erich Mühsam, Gustav Landauer, Louise Michel, Max Hoelz, Karl Plättner, Otto Rühle, Peter Kropotkin, Anton Pannekoek, writings on the council movement, on anarcho-syndicalism, etc., etc."[10].

Whichever faction of May 1968 one looks at, Alain Badiou – a Maoist at the time – later insisted that they were all united in what he calls "the classic conception" of revolution. "In '68, that conception was broadly shared by all actors, and everyone spoke the same language. […] But the secret truth, which was gradually revealed, is that this common language, symbolized by the red flag, was in fact dying out. There was a basic ambiguity about May '68: a language that was spoken by all was beginning to die out. There is a sort of temporary lack of distinction between what is beginning and what is coming to an end, and it is this that gives May '68 its mysterious intensity" (Badiou 2010: 54-5). One thing that was coming to an end, at least in the Western context, was the general political strike or general strike as a valid political option. With deindustrialization in the West, the "flexibilization" of the labour market and the rise of immaterial and "creative" professions, the conditions for solidarization and collective action erodes. Precisely this state of affairs, however, has led to a resurgence of the idea of the strike in the context of aesthetic practice, of art – a context where the notion of the strike seems utterly misplaced.

While there was the occasional discussion about the (im)possibility of an artists' strike in the context of the historical avant-garde, the idea of the Art Strike really started to gain traction in the context of the

[10] "Wunderbare Zeiten: Raubdrucke und Reprints in den linken Buchläden und an den Büchertischen der Unis: Errico Malatesta, Karl Korsch, Erich Mühsam, Gustav Landauer, Louise Michel, Max Hoelz, Karl Plättner, Otto Rühle, Peter Kropotkin, Anton Pannekoek, Schriften zur Rätebewegung, zum Anarcho-Syndikalismus, usw. usf." (Kramer 1996: 12; author's translation).

upheavals of the late 1960s[11]. It was the artistic component or counterpart of the General Strike. In 1969, in the context of the Art Workers' Coalition, Lee Lozano proposed her General Strike Piece, declaring a cessation of her artistic activities so as to undergo "personal revolution". At the time Lozano received important impulses from Up Against the Wall Motherfucker, formerly Black Mask, which was close to the American section of the Situationist International and the post-Situationist King Mob Group in the UK (on Lozano, the AWC and the Black Mask/Motherfuckers, see Joseph 2010: 133-7). In 1970, Robert Morris put the Art Strike on the agenda when he closed his exhibition at the Whitney Museum early in protest against the war in Vietnam. Subsequently, the AWC declared May 22 Art Strike Day, with protests and occupations at museums in an attempt to strike at capitalism's self-representation and self-reproduction via culture (Bryan-Wilson 2009: 112-21). Cultural representation mattered; artists should refuse to provide the system with prestigious decoration. Some five years later, in the UK, Gustav Metzger proposed an art strike that would last for three years, from 1977 to 1980, and that was to bring down the commercial and institutional art world, and possibly capitalism with it (Metzger 1974: 74)[12].

In order for such an Art Strike to succeed, it would have to be adopted widely. Needless to say, this didn't happen. Even during the heyday of collective cultural activism during the 1960s and 1970s, it was a pipe dream – and in today's "creative economy", the disincentives against joint strike action are massive. When everyone is precariously hopping from project to project, trying to survive as a networked self-entrepreneur, everyone is also his own scab. Nonetheless, art-strike proposals and related notions have the value of articulating the constraints and contradictions of praxis in the art world. Occasionally, Pannekoek has been explicitly invoked in this context – for instance by

[11] Links Richten was a 1930s Dutch group of communist writers and photographers-typographers (including Paul Schuitema and Piet Zwart). In a 1933 issue of the "Links Richten" journal, Alex Booleman raised and immediately debunked the possibility of artists going on strike ("Wie anders dan de kunstenaars zélf zou schade ondervinden, en dan nog slechts moreele schade, van de werk-weigering der kunstenaars?"; Booleman 1933: 12).

[12] In 1979, Goran Dordevic (the future "Walter Benjamin" of the Museum of American Art) mailed around an art-strike questionnaire (see Home *at al.* 1991: 12, 50-2).

pro-situ trickster Stewart Home, who proposed an art strike in the late 1980s, which would last from 1990 to 1993[13]. The amount of discourse and debate this generated showed that at the height of the Reagan-era art boom, the art strike was impractical as ever but all but necessary as an idea, as a blocked escape route – perhaps indeed as a neo-Sorelian myth[14].

The same is true today. A poster for Home's 1990-93 art strike shouts "No more beautiful pictures", but what would it mean to strike when art is no longer primarily concerned with producing such pictures? If art is a form of praxis that has merged with one's life, how can one quit? For Pannekoek, the general political strike was valid in so far as it was a form of action that could actually *work* to bring about radical change. In contrast, today's strike proposals from the field of art – for instance calls for an art strike on the day of Donald Trump's inauguration, or the "time strike" (*huelga contra el tiempo*) that has been proposed by the Mexican collective Cooperativa Cráter Invertido – seem to function as performative interventions within a regime they cannot hope to overthrow[15]. This is the anachronistic contemporaneity of the general strike in the cultural economy.

3. *In the time of councils*

If Pannekoek's name resonated politically after WWII, it was mostly as a theorist of workers' self-government in the form of councils. For Pannekoek, the forming of a strike committee, however improvised, is also the beginning of workers' control. The strike committee is a workers' council *in statu nascendi*. Thus, it can help make the transition from oppositional action within capitalism to socialist self-government. As a political thinker Pannekoek is of course almost synonymous with council communism, and it is as such that he attained renewed prominence in the wake of May 1968 – in part through his (reprinted) writ-

[13] Home references Pannekoek in *Eating, fucking & occultism: Stewart Home Interviewed by James Marginalised*.
[14] Part of the discourse generated has been collected in *The art strike papers*.
[15] On the Trump inauguration art strike, see Fusco 2017.

ings, in part also through the continuing activities of council communists who had studied his work and worked with him, such a Cajo Brendel and Paul Mattick.

In 1969, artist Tjebbe van Tijen disrupted an Amsterdam performance of Tankred Dorst's play *Ernst Toller,* together with former Situationist Tony Verlaan and ex-Provo Rob Stolk, among others[16]. On his website, Van Tijen invokes Pannekoek in the context of this "Toller action – Revolution is no theatre"[17]. For van Tijen and his comrades, Dorst's play was an inacceptable artistic farce about the Bavarian Council Republic of 1919, presenting it as a bohemian shambles. Its protagonist, the expressionist playwright and "Die Aktion" author Ernst Toller, is presented by Dorst as being almost as much out of depth as his comrades. The actionists' pamphlet notes that "Toller may not be performed because 'power to the (workers) councils' is impossible on stage and contrary to the idea of 'working councils' itself" – an idea, as they also note, which "has already been corrupted by trade unions and the bosses". For this grouping of avant-garde artist-activists from the slipstream of the SI and Provo, what mattered was the development of new forms of action that would be both political and aesthetic – that would overcome or sublate the alienating distinction between art and politics.

In its early phase during the late 1950s, the SI had proposed a lived art or an aesthetic life consisting of constructed situations. The interrelated figures of the strike and the council were the more explicitly politicized forms of such a constructed situation, gaining in prominence during the 1960s. However, the Situationists' councilism remained rather sketchy and spontaneist. Both the SI's and Provo's spontaneism contrasts rather markedly with Pannekoek's more bureaucratic-technocratic elaborations, or those by Franz Seiwert. Seiwert, a key member of the AAU-E, illustrated a 1932 article with a *Schema des Rätesystems* which the Situationists would not have found terribly inspiring (Seiwert 1932: 107). If anything, their idea of the Council society is closer to the disruptiveness of Van Tijen's "Toller Action": the council as (de)constructed situation.

[16] See the folder on the "Toller Action" – and its re-enactment in December by a group with a somewhat different composition – in the collection *Documentatie Documentatie Sociale Bewegingen* (CSD), folder 466, at the IISH in Amsterdam.
[17] See http://imaginarymuseum.org/imp_archive/AAA/index.html#15.

The Situationists sided with Paul Lafargue's condemnation of labour: their early slogan was *Ne travaillez jamais. Travail* of course refers to alienating capitalist labour, but the SI was also wary of communist glorifications of work as anthropological constant. Even in 1969, at the height of post-May 1968 councilism, when the language of councils indeed appeared to be spoken by all, René Riesel noted that "it is known that we have no inclination toward workerism of any form whatsoever" and that his comments on workers councils refer to "workers who have 'become dialecticians'" (see Riesel 1969). Much as the Situationists were allergic to any cult of the worker and of work, the council seemed to be the only remotely viable post-capitalist organizational form out there. In a harsh but not exactly unfair judgment of the Situationists' councilism, the American zine "Not Bored!" accuses the Situationists of a failure of critical nerve, and a descent into dogma: "the power of the councils remained a simple article of faith, a totally unexamined assumption" (see "Workers' Councils, Cornelius Castoriadis and the SI").

The notion of the council did indeed become rather autonomous from any actual political perspective, giving rise to a kind of council aestheticism. If, as Oskar Negt has memorably put it, councils are *the concrete utopia of the 20th century*, the question is how to make this utopia regain the degree of concretion that it lost during the long winter of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s (Negt 197: 119)[18]. In his film *Die Artisten in der Zirkuskuppel: Ratlos* (1968), Negt's frequent collaborator Alexander Kluge has suggested that "utopia keeps getting better while we're waiting for it" ("*Die Utopie wird immer besser, während wir auf sie warten*"). But as utopia keeps getting better, the landscape in which we wait, like so many Vladimirs and Estragons, only atrophies further. How to make utopia as concrete and tangible as possible, as a potential that demands to be more than mere potential? How to let its plane intersect with that of actual social existence and struggle?

Artists Doris Denekamp and Geert van Mil (Informal Strategies) foreground this painful disjunction in their installation *Your order Is built on sand* and the accompanying free photocopied reader *If you*

[18] Rotdruck is a post-68 *Raubdruck* publisher, presented as the imprint of a certain van Eversdijk or van Eversdijck in The Hague; this is in all likelihood a fiction, as indicated by the wavering spelling of the publisher's name, and the misspelling of 's-Gravenhage as s'Gravenhage.

work it, you own it! The installation consists of a walk-through herbarium with plants collected outside the Leipzig distribution centre of Amazon, and the reader – copies of which are available in the installation – contains "redacted" pages from a collection of books ordered from Amazon.de, and shipped from the Leipzig distribution centre. Containing quotations by Rosa Luxemburg and Paul Mattick Sr. as well as Pannekoek (via a book by Noam Chomsky), the reader is "an incomplete attempt to activate the potential of this contemporary library of Alexandria, with the aim of making conceivable an alternative, workers controlled economy" *(Informal strategies*, preface in *If you work it, own it!*, published as part of the exhibition "Motion, labour, machinery", 2015-16). As Franz Seiwert once put it in a striking turn of phrase, "*Alle Stabilisierung ist Schwindel*" ("all stabilization is a con; Seiwert 1929: 1). The thought, if not the phrasing, is very Pannekoekian. This also applies to political tactics and models, from strikes to councils, that ossify into unquestioned articles of faith. Like the art strike proposals, this "activation" of Amazon as a contemporary library of Alexandria may seem painful in its anachronism and inefficacy. But one should take care not to succumb to a quantitative fallacy and demand some instant mass effect from art; and the term anachronism here should be stripped of its common pejorative, negative connotations. In their very *Unzeitgemässheit,* the books purchased by the artists reveal their potential. There is a real need for these gestures, which drive home the extent to which history has indeed been claimed by the 0.1 percent.

But what could the contemporary relevance be of Pannekoek's councilism, which had already become an ossified dogma by the 1960s? It should be noted that Pannekoek cautioned against treating them as a "natural" organizational form; they were a *transitional* form. What is key to his understanding of the transitional council period is the abolition of money in favour of a direct calculation of labour time. Pannekoek's council society relies on an immense bookkeeping apparatus:

> Capitalist management of enterprises also knows mental control of the production. Here, too, the proceedings are represented by calculation and book-keeping. But there is this fundamental difference that capitalist calculation is adapted entirely to the viewpoint of production of profit. It deals with prices and costs as its fundamental data; work and wages are only factors in the calculation of the resulting profit on the yearly balance account. In the new system of production, on the other hand, hours of work is the fundamental

> datum, whether they are still expressed, in the beginning, in money units, or in their own true form. In capitalist production calculation and bookkeeping is a secret of the direction, the office. It is no concern of the workers; they are objects of exploitation, they are only factors in the calculation of cost and produce, accessories to the machines. In the production under common ownership the bookkeeping is a public matter; it lies open to all. The workers have always a complete view of the course of the whole process. (Pannekoek 1947: chapter I.3)

The 19th century had seen various attempts to introduce time-based remuneration systems that cut out money as the middle man, such as Robert Owens's National Equitable Labour Exchange. In his *Critique of the Gotha programme*, Marx argued that the first phrase of communism, still stamped with the birthmarks of the old society from whose womb it emerges, would function economically through certificates indicating labour-time: "with this certificate, [the worker] draws from the social stock of means of consumption as much as the same amount of labor cost. The same amount of labor which he has given to society in one form, he receives back in another". Marx acknowledges that here the same principle prevails as that which regulates the exchange of commodities, as far as this is exchange of equal values. Content and form are changed, because under the altered circumstances no one can give anything except his labor, and because, on the other hand, nothing can pass to the ownership of individuals, except individual means of consumption. But as far as the distribution of the latter among the individual producers is concerned, the same principle prevails as in the exchange of commodity equivalents: a given amount of labor in one form is exchanged for an equal amount of labor in another form (see Marx 1875).

Is it fair to say that Pannekoek's bookkeeping apparatus is in fact a thinly disguised form of capitalism? Marx criticized the time-banking operations and proposals for time-based tokens of his own day because they operated under capitalism, without changing the relations of production. In this case, the time-tokens do indeed become a poor man's money. However, as David Adam notes, Marx has also argued that a communist economy of time would in the end not amount to the calculation of value in time-money, but to the *abolition of value itself* (see Adam 2013). The terms in which he cast this dialectical transition were rather sketchy:

> On the basis of communal production, the determination of time remains, of course, essential. The less time the society requires to produce wheat, cattle etc., the more time it wins for other production, material or mental. Just as in the case of an individual, the multiplicity of its development, its enjoyment and its activity depends on economization of time. Economy of time, to this all economy ultimately reduces itself. Society likewise has to distribute its time in a purposeful way, in order to achieve a production adequate to its overall needs; just as the individual has to distribute his time correctly in order to achieve knowledge in proper proportions or in order to satisfy the various demands on his activity. Thus, economy of time, along with the planned distribution of labour time among the various branches of production, remains the first economic law on the basis of communal production. It becomes law, there, to an even higher degree. However, this is essentially different from a measurement of exchange values (labour or products) by labour time. (Marx 1993: 173)

For the past fifteen years or so, Marx's phrase of the "economy of time" (with its play on the double meaning of "economy" in the sense of a mode of production and of thriftiness) has resonated in the art world (an exhibition titled *Ökonomien der Zeit* was shown at the Museum Ludwig in Cologne, the Akademie der Künste in Berlin, and the Migros Museum in Zurich, in 2002-2003). In a project-based event culture marked by just-in-time-production in which artists vie for attention (from viewers, curators, buyers), time is both vexing problem and the primary artistic medium. With precarity stalking the land, the cultural sector has also seen a revival of interest forms of time-banking, for example with e-flux's *time/bank* project; you'll edit a text for me, and I'll bake you a quiche. Within the post-Fordist economy of time, time-based currencies do indeed amount to little more than the "primitivist rebirth of money" (see Lütticken 2012). But while they are no solution, no way out of capitalism, they do articulate the problem. As aesthetic proposals, they do not provide a road map so much as they estrange the productive relations and intervene in the economy of time.

The art world is of course a favourite playground of the 0.1 percent, and spaces of alterity, of criticality and collective practice, tend to be marginalized or worse. Jeronimo Voss's exhibition *Inverted night sky* at Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam (SMBA), with its mappings of Pannekoek's astronomical works and their political unconscious, was the final show in that semi-autonomous project space. The Stedelijk Museum's then director decided to close down the semi-autonomous SMBA project space in spite of protests from the field, from below.

SMBA had become particularly known for allowing post-colonial and other projects that were incompatible with the Art Basel and private collector-driven agenda of the Stedelijk mothership. Self-organizing and protest in the art field started too late. The critical situation of another key art space in Amsterdam, De Appel, led to a crisis meeting during the week of the Pannekoek conference at the KNAW in Amsterdam where a first version of this paper was delivered[19].

This general assembly – including employees of De Appel, but also other concerned parties (including the author) – wrested back some degree of control over the institution's tentative future from a cabal of policy makers and professional art managers who sought to impose a top-down approach, and their own questionable services[20]. The assembly could have been the nucleus of a more structural self-constituted council, but the need to create a broad coalition meant that it was compromised from the beginning. It never aimed to institute a permanent dual power structure and was happy to self-abolish after selecting a middle-of-the-road interim director and new chairman of the board; these, in turn, soon opted for a "back-to-normal" approach of backroom dealing and cosying up to neoliberal managerialists. Nonetheless, this prevented the looming appointment of neoliberal arts manager Melle Daamen as director, and afforded De Appel a new beginning in a different location. That the far from radical Amsterdam art world had to resort to such measures shows that councilist concrete utopia keeps imposing itself when all else fails. At such a moment, the council becomes an offer to fail better, to open up different histories – histories that at present must appear as counterfactual[21].

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[19] The meeting at De Appel (downstairs, in restaurant Moes) took place on June 7, 2016. The conference *Anton Pannekoek (1873-1960): ways of viewing science and society* was at the KNAW on June 9-10.

[20] On the failed manoeuvre to appoint Daamen, see www.parool.nl/kunst-en-media/melle-daamen-zal-wankel-kunstcentrum-de-appel-niet-edden~a4322501.

[21] To be sure, where there is a historical consciousness in contemporary activism, the main impetus is rarely council communist. It is far more likely to be post-Operaist and Autonomist; from the political movements of the late 1960s and 1970s, it is *Operaismo* and *Autonomia* that have provide the most cogent and innovative accounts of changing class composition (beyond Pannekoek's traditional reliance on the industrial working class), the importance of new forms of labour and technology, and resultant "new forms of action". Fundamentally, however, the latter still remain indebted to older models such as the strike and the refusal of work, and to self-organization from below.

4. *Can dialectical monism break bricks?*

The same is true of today's academia, where occupations such as that at the University of Amsterdam's Maagdenhuis have sought to take back control from a Stalineoliberal managerial class, but attempts to realize forms of students' and teachers' control have predictably been funneled into forms of fake democracy – *inspraak,* in Dutch. On the whole, however, academics must be among the most docile, depoliticized and easily intimated subjects capitalism has ever produced. The cleaners at my university (who have, of course, been outsourced) are more organized, politically savvy and vocal than the academic staff. Clearly the edu-factory isn't working, but the *Verelendung* still hasn't reached the point where sustained collective action becomes a necessity and hence a reality. The concrete utopia keeps getting more beautiful while the wasteland continues to dry out and erode.

After May 1968, the Situationists maintained that for the time being the workers continue to be the *central* force capable of bringing the existing functioning of society to a halt and the *indispensable* force for reinventing all its bases, and that the number of intellectuals in councils must be limited – which is slightly more generous than Pannekoek's assertion that no parasite, i.e. nobody without a proper job, is allowed on a council (see Riesel 1969). An academic as well as a theorist of revolution, Pannekoek largely kept his politics and his astronomy apart. This itself reflects the status of the university as a relatively autonomous domain within industrial capitalism – a relative and instrumental autonomy that has been abandoned now that knowledge has been incorporated much more fully into the productive sector, which results in a focus on impact and on "societal relevance" in the humanities, as defined along neoliberal lines[22]. As the Indian collective Vidya Ashram has put it: "Now the global order is reinventing itself. In the information age, there is not going to be a privileged set of knowledge producers who will be allowed an autonomous space, a safe haven to explore and invent. Knowledge will be harnessed from the whole cultural field and subjected to regimes

[22] A key element of neoliberal academia is also a perpetual struggle for funding; as in the art world, dubious funds are gratefully taken. The KNAW, which hosted the 2016 Pannekoek conference, collaborates with a foundation whose capital comes from appropriated pension funds (1 billion euro in total) of Rotterdam harbour workers. The Stedelijk Museum likewise is a frequent benefactor of Ammodo. See Smit 2014a and 2014b.

of cognitive measurement, knowledge management, and information enclosures" (Ashram 2009: 166).

Pannekoek's auto-compartmentalization did not prevent him from establishing productive resonances between his political and astronomical works: Zachary Formwalt's video film *An unknown quantity* (2014) contains an uncredited quotation from a 1903 text by Pannekoek in which he characterizes the communist movement as a fiery comet coming down from the sky (De Bruyn 2015: 70. The Pannekoek quotation is from *Een belangrijk oogenblik*, 1903: 162-71). This, of course, is a mythical – astrological rather than astronomical – image, harking back to premodern days when "astronomy was not a limited branch of specialist science but a world system interwoven with the whole of [its practitioners'] concept of life" (Pannekoek 1961: 13). This remark assumes an irreversible process of specialization, in the course of which science may develop ever further and expand its reach, while also being reduced to an arcane field accessible only to experts. Such a view of science as progressing in linear time is itself modern, as Pannekoek stressed, and it is intimately linked both to the development of modern science and the ways in which science conceptualized development: "Hegel's philosophy had already presented the world as a 'dialectic' process of unfolding of the Absolute Idea", which in biology was complemented by "the doctrine of the development from lower to more highly organized forms" (with its classic formulation in Darwin) and in physics this "idea of progressive development" was expressed "in Clausius's Second Law of Thermodynamics: all autonomous processed in nature go in one direction; the entropy of the world can only increase, never decrease" (Pannekoek 1961: 398-9).

In his attempt to theorize the relation between mind and matter and between science and society, Pannekoek maintained with Joseph Dietzgen that "[the] entire world, the spiritual as well as the visible and tangible world, is object to our thinking. Things spiritual do exist, they too are really existing, as thoughts; thus they too are materials for our brain activity of forming concepts. […] Such a doctrine where spiritual and material things, entirely interdependent, form one united world, may rightly be called monism" (Pannekoek 1938: chapter 3). Recent theory does not share Pannekoek's high opinion of Dietzgen. McKenzie Wark has stated that "the dialectic is an idealist residue within an otherwise active and materialist theory", and that "Dietzgen's achievement, like Marx's, is neither the dialectic nor materialism, but the *labor point of view*" (Wark 2014: 22-3). Others argue that Dietzgen in fact

abandons a properly dialectical method for a positivist and empiricist approach[23]. Dietzgen, then, appears variously as *too dialectical* and as *insufficiently dialectical*.

While the latter seems to me to be closer to the truth, it is important to note that Pannekoek is not always as Dietzgenian as his claims would have one believe; his appropriation to some extent re-dialectizes Dietzgen. Certainly, there are plenty of passages in Pannekoek's writings that can be adduced as evidence of a relapse into positivism or scientism, following Dietzgen's lead. These tend to occur more frequently in his earlier and in his shorter texts. Yet, even while expressing hope that "the method of natural science will conquer the humanities", Pannekoek still insisted that while the "significance of Marxism is often expressed, by saying that it presents, for the first time, a natural science of society", this expression has to be taken with a grain of salt, as due to the "immense complication of social relations 'laws' of society are much more difficult to discern, and they cannot now be put into the form of exact formulas. Still more than in nature they may be said to express not the future but our expectation about the future" (Pannekoek 1938: chapter 3).

While Pannekoek at times expressed hope that the humanities would one day become more like "proper" science, on the other hand he rejected ideological attempts to blend social and natural science. His is in the end a dialectical and historical monism; like the universe, like life, the intellect has a history, and planetary movements mean something different for Babylonian priests than for twentieth-century astronomers. Yet this does not mean that the planets or the natural world exist in splendid isolation from the mind, and vice versa. As Fredric Jameson argues, the inassimilable is itself part of a dialectic "'between the non-dialectizable and the dialectizable'"; in other words, the act of drawing a dividing line between nature and society or culture itself creates a dialectic (Jameson 2009: 26). This, to me, seems precisely what Pannekoek struggled to articulate, failing and succeeding to various degrees in different texts.

For all his shortcomings, which we should acknowledge but not fetishize, Pannekoek provides important tools for thinking through contemporary upheavals. Pannekoek's weak moments as a historical thinker usually occur when he imposes a schema on history rather than

[23] Eric-John Russell argued this in the text of his lecture for the KNAW Pannekoek conference, which he did not deliver as he was unable to attend.

working with and from historical contradictions, repetitions and revolutions. However, even his penchant for linearity and teleology can be of surprising anachronistic contemporaneity:

> But the earth is a globe, of limited extent. The discovery of its finite size accompanied the rise of capitalism four centuries ago, the realization of its finite size now marks the end of capitalism. The population to be subjected is limited. The hundreds of millions crowding the fertile plains of China and India once drawn within the confines of capitalism, its chief work is accomplished. […] Then its further expansion is checked. Not as a sudden impediment, but gradually, as a growing difficulty of selling products and investing capital. Then the pace of development slackens, production slows up, unemployment waxes a sneaking disease. Then the mutual fight of the capitalists for world domination becomes fiercer, with new world wars impending. (Pannekoek 1947: chapter II.6)

The ecological dimension is left implicit in this proto-anthropocenic scenario; nonetheless, in our current global reenactment of the year 1933, in which migratory movements are instrumentalized by resurgent xenophobic and neo-fascist forces, these words ring all too true. While Pannekoek's resort to an overly linear Marxist conception of history is often problematic when he presents the triumph of communism as inevitable – after the failed revolutions of 1918-1920, he had little to back this up with –, his diagnosis of the inevitability of breakdown, of capitalism finally meeting its limits, reads as uncannily prescient. Waxing unemployment manifests itself in the proliferation of surplus populations for which there is no place in the capitalist workforce, in an economy subject to stagnation or stagflation even as the maintenance of its current level produces a not-so-creeping ecological and social catastrophe. The combination of stalling economic growth and ongoing ecological devastation conspires to form a perfect storm in which various economically, socially or politically threatened populations are actively turned on each other.

Early on, in 1912, Pannekoek critiqued both bourgeois and socialist attempts to arrive at a social Darwinism, insisting that human society is qualitatively different and that "Marxism and Darwinism should remain in their own domains" and that "[when] men freed themselves from the animal world, the development of tools and productive methods, the division of labor and knowledge became the propelling force in social development" (Pannekoek 1912). Even if his focus on the mind, on ideology and culture can be seen as inaugurating the Western Marxist tradition founded by Lukács, Korsch and Gramsci, in a crucial

respect Western Marxism effected a break with Pannekoek: it reduced dialectical materialism to a narrowly conceived conception of human history. To be sure, Pannekoek's speculations on hominization and the role of tools and labour in the transition from ape to humans can be critiqued as ahistorical and universalizing. However, I would suggest that a more productive interpretation is that they constitute a sketch for a *different historicization* of labour.

Pannekoek's *Anthropogenesis* – written during WWII as a more fully developed version of the 1912 *Marxism and Darwinism* – is among his most accomplished writings. Here, he returns to the issue of toolmaking and the interconnection between tools and language, and the distinction between the animal and the human. If, in the years around 1970s, there was an all to indiscriminating and uncritical use of Pannekoek the council communist, today there seems to be a missed encounter with the anachronistic contemporaneity of this side of Pannekoek's work, which is relegated to occasional footnotes in works by authors such a John Bellamy Foster or Fred Spier (Foster 2000: 291, note 47; Spier 2015: 207, note 20). Based as they are in early and mid-20th century readings in primatology and anthropology, Pannekoek's observations on tools and on the transformation of the human brain and human body are certainly dated in many respects. Or, to put it positively: they are historical, deserve to be analysed in relation to Engels's earlier work, but also to theories of hominization contemporaneous with Pannekoek's, such as Georges Bataille's. For Bataille, as for Pannekoek, the human race was essentially defined as *homo faber*, though of course Bataille came to a radically different evaluation (see *inter alia* Bataille 1973: 36-42). Bataille regarded tool-making and work as having instituted a tyranny of utility and productivity that was to be negated at every turn, whereas Pannekoek speculated on the future liberation – the quantitative transformation – of work itself, albeit in abstract terms.

While nothing comparable to Engels's account of the rise of patriarchy and slavery can be found in his work, it opens up a vastly different temporal horizon than more academically acceptable forms of Western Marxism. Pannekoek's focus on historical transformations and leaps, twists and turns is sorely needed at a moment when post-humanist faux radicalism is ripe. Our historical juncture is marked, on the one hand, by a revalorization of the animal; apes are shown to have

"culture" and to deserve non-human personhood rights[24]. On the other hand, we are bombarded with speculations on a posthuman future that may already be well underway; authors such as Fukuyama develop scenarios that have the "human race" split into two or more species, with an "apish" underclass no longer interbreeding with the elite, which has access to advanced genetic improvements (Fukuyama 2002: 9; *Human species may split into two*, 2006). This reads like a mere parody of Pannekoekian historical anthropology, projecting merrily way whilst refusing to acknowledge the contested present as a site of action and intervention.

5. *Conclusion*

In his account of tool use and its consequences, Pannekoek notes that "from observation to action thought follows a detour. Between sensation and action many links are inserted; various chains of linked-up perceptions form themselves spontaneously, each preceding one evoking the next one. In the process of conscious thinking they are connected into orderly series" (Pannekoek, 1944). Like theory and science, art formalizes this process and intervenes in it. At times, it may appear as though all artistic iterations of Pannekoekian thought conform to a rather banal theory of depoliticizing aestheticization. It is, indeed, not uncommon for radical political projects whose moment of realization has been missed to enter an afterlife in art. However, as we have seen, left communist theory and practice had an aesthetic component – and had literary and artistic counterparts – from the start. Aesthetic practice needs to be distinguished from aestheticism. It does not have to take the form of direct social action, or calls for action; it is not automatically discredited when it takes more reflexive and muted forms. Curiously, some Marxist theorists are eager to attack art for its lack of direct agency but fail to extend the same line of critique to their own theoretical production. Art *detourns* the detour that is thought. It may be at its most potent when it sides with potentiality over actuality; when it is not instruction, but prefiguration.

[24] *Ape culture* was the title of a major exhibition at the HKW in Berlin in 2015.

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