A Speculative White Paper on the Aesthetics of a Black Swan World

Penny Rafferty

The Art world is not a success. It is not progressive, it is not beautiful, it is not just, it is not virtuous, it is not unbiased – and it frequently misses opportunities to perform better. The art world is a world we dislike, and, in the long term, despise. A machine of accelerated aesthetics, burnouts, precarious living, 24/7 availability and galvanised gossip that is motivated by survival, rather than a common good.

I am partial to the thought that the art world has succumbed to something not entirely human, something which in some circles is referred to as Capitalism. Capitalism is a form of authoritarianism which is ineffective for most of those who use it, but rewards those with an ability for monopolising power positions, which in turn lends them more say in molding any future worlds or speculative thinking. Sound familiar?

Another similarity between Capitalism and the art world is a vested interest in a state of economic crisis. To be sure, post-2008, the capital classes have not been in crisis themselves, but they do require a crisis-at-large to remain in power. Their comparative levels of energy, visibility and security allow them to be both more ambitious and more certain of themselves. There is one difference, however: art has always declared itself to be in crisis. The starving artist, for example, is an archetype that some even suggest is a prerequisite rite of passage within the field. (Ironically, those who claim as much usually have ample free dinners and VIP cocktail party invites.)

And yet, if art world vogues have changed as regularly as catwalk seasons; what if the art world foundations did so too? Many have been asking: what if the users owned this machine, instead of pumping their guts into it? What would happen to art? Would the art world fade out if it started working for its patrons, its producers, its believers, rather than sucking them dry?

Wanted: A Pro-Active Community Owned Support System.

The art community has fallen into the trap of abiding by market rules, which “specialise in poverty”. This is likely due to the fact that the art world does not understand the economy at large, nor how to bring its infrastructure system to work for its own community. The model proposed in this essay is a work-in-progress and speculates on a system of local level economic and emotive systems that could be articulated within Berlin’s art scene. This could be used and allocated by its users in order to “guide the market” by developing new local growth, along with long-term funding opportunities thanks to economic and cultural investors on demand. The beneficiaries would be artists and curators in project spaces. A small niche, to be sure, but this group is the root, to the rhizome. Starting here could lead to infecting the whole machine, as far as poverty lines go...the root is what sees the least sunlight.

The Problem for the Root

It is a common “joke” that blue chip and established galleries allow project spaces and offsite galleries to hone an artist before they enter the art world, finishing schools that “groom” the young artist. And they put in the educational extra time for free. A self-perpetuating cycle is at play, fueled by the promise of becoming a lord rather than a servitor one day. Recursive loops of the kind are infinite cycles of events which trigger

similar events in turn; “traditions” enforced through the soft power tactics of slogans like “it’s the way things have always been” or “business as usual”. And yet, traditions are made to be broken – at least art history claims as much – but what if we refrained from breaking the traditions yet again, and broke the art system itself, in an act of self-radicalized self-sculpting.

Crippling Care inside The Zone

Gentrification and class bias have become the norm in Berlin. As the city moves away from the experimental gallery boom of the early 90s, we see the city running the risk of losing its unique perspective of project spaces, and an overall, vibrant, antagonistic attitude towards the cultural elites. I am not suggesting a process of mourning for more hedonistic times, but a procedure for action which has no name as such just yet. But it may eventually serve as a new protocol for Berlin’s cultural scenes, in which every institution, collection, or gallery are complicit and co-responsible.

Now, if you count yourself among the empowered users, you may to feel aghast by my accusations, and feel the urge to list “potential” funding platforms, beginning with the city senate. But filling out forms and ticking boxes is not sustaining a creative body so much as it is cushioning a few lucky souls. Free markets work because they allow some people to get lucky, and sell discourses of aggressive competition to users who aim to win on a trial and error basis – winner takes all. Although the industry of art by paperwork, this protocol of bureaucratic art, is far from the experimental nature of an artistic gesture, these forms are the new white cube, the only setting for so many artworks that never exist beyond the templated lines of the application.

I do wish to add that even the decision-makers and stakeholders of the system have no real choice in the matter. They too are part of the fight of survival, and many have tried to change things from the inside, but there is always a hierarchy and never enough time. One is reminded of Tarkovsky’s “Stalker” (1979), where the Stalker himself, along with the Writer and the Scientist enter a fiercely protected wasteland know as the Zone. The Zone is a complex terrain filled with traps, subtle distortions and occasional dangers. A spatialized force that seems to know your mistakes, your weaknesses, your paranoias, and with the ability to make your innermost desires come true. As we all know, our innermost wishes may not be what we believe them to be. In a bitter twist, the film’s plot highlights the fact that we are not as altruistic as we believe. After all, we have been educated by the above recursive loops, and the only way to be safe from the inner desires of capital breeding is to omit the singular human in favour of the digital code, and an active horizontal community.

The Black Swan

Former trader and risk analyst Nassim Nicholas Taleb has outlined the concept of a Black Swan, as being a rare and unpredictable event which in effect is a gamechanger. Usually, a Black Swan loses momentum as other narratives feed off its unique characteristics, and use them to their own advantage. A decentralized autonomous organization (DAO), is a good example. Many refuse the concept of a black swan, arguing that the whiteness of a swan is the very essence of anything swanlike; just as many refuse the potential of a decentralised organization, arguing that an organisation needs to be (centrally) managed. For the record, I believe in Black Swans and DAOs.

Instead of a hierarchical structure managed by a set of humans interacting in person, and controlling property/asserts via the legal system, a decentralized organization involves a set of people interacting with each other according to a protocol specified in code, and normally enforced on the blockchain. The DAO aims to work for a distributed network of autonomous stakeholders, rather than a traditional top-down management model.

DAOs run through rules encoded as computer programs called smart contracts. They live on the internet and exist autonomously, but also heavily rely on hiring individuals to perform certain tasks. Once deployed, the entity is independent of its creators and cannot be influenced by them. A DAO aims to be open source, thus transparent and incorruptible. The rules of a DAO financial transaction record and program are stored on the blockchain for anyone to see – which also means the users have full transparency regarding how the funds have been allocated. A DAO also works via consensus, so in order to withdraw or move funds, a majority of stakeholders have to agree. Decisions are typically proposed by a stakeholder/s and then voted on via the stakeholder group. The rest of this text will aim to outline the beginnings of a potential DAO Swan for the Berlin art field.

DAO Swan

The processes of a DAO can be employed not only for economic monetary transactions, but also to supply users with materials, platforms and connections. The DAO Swan could also split users into two categories: silent and active. Silent users would provide assets for active users. The DAO Swan would facilitate this via a support membership; silent members could pledge a certain sum of assets per year, whether economic in nature or otherwise. This in turn requires a credit system to be laid out by the building team of the DAO Swan. A system that can always be changed retrospectively, even though it is set in code – regardless of the original party’s ideas. This system means the silent stakeholders gain cultural kudos, and the active users gain tools, funding, and connections.

Below is an preliminary example of how credit pledges could work, once built into the software of the Swan DAO.

Certificate awarded: The Room –
50 credits awarded to the DAO Swan per Year

Certificate awarded: The Window –
35 credits awarded to the DAO Swan per Year

Certificate awarded: The Door –
15 credits awarded to the DAO Swan per Year

Naturally, we assume the blue-chip gallery or city-run institution, for example, would be operating on a “Room” certificate. Whereas the young emerging commercial gallery on “The Door” (and let us not forget you are not awarded credits for monetary exchange alone).

So how do the silent stakeholders fulfil their credit obligations?

Each assert is rated on its value via the credit system, so 1000 Euros could be 5 Credits, for example, while using your newsletter to push a project space show could be 2 Credits. The Swan DAO would calculate every transaction pledged, and keep track.

So how are the assets used?

The monetary funds would be used by the active stakeholders to realise specific projects, if the majority of the active stakeholder agree to allocate the funds. In order to do this, anyone seeking funds would submit a proposal in whichever format they wish, whether per a pdf or quadratic voting system. Allowing every active stakeholder to vote on a proposal submitted would create a horizontal network of fund allocation. And to community understanding of others users’ practices and trajectories of thought. This may even lead to new kinds of collaborations emerging from the Berlin scene – in itself a form of payback for the silent stakeholders.

Why quadratic rather than a single vote system?

Quadratic Voting means the user has multiple votes, and can vote on various positions, or abstain until the next round without omitting their vote. This offers collective decisions to be made without the tyranny of the majority, allowing people to vote on how strongly they feel about an issue (as opposed to just Yes or No). Marginalised voices could in effect put all their votes in one place, to see one proposal go through, whereas someone else may distribute their funds equally.

Ok, but what are these gift-giving credits?

In an art world such as Berlin, money is not the only unit to navigate the Zone, and credit is equally available for non-monetary help. This would allow for the start of a decentralised microgrid to be built inside the DAO, one that locally manages a self-sufficient network. Thanks to decentralised sharing of energy at a local level, between multiple households, a Swan DAO’s strength could be seen as...

GIFT GIVING – Offering materials post-show, instead of throwing them away (e.g. when you’re replacing your media department, offer those flat screens to a project space).

HOSTING – Offering space for one-night events, summer break shows, inviting project space directors to gallery dinners and pre-openings.

GOSSIPING – Letting the active user squat your newsletters, social media accounts and fair booths.

CONNECTING – Organising your opening night with your local off-spaces and encouraging your viewers to drop by.

The silent stakeholder would aim to fulfil their quota of credits throughout the year in various ways. And a user with such support could eventually become a silent stakeholder in turn.

But why would the silent stakeholders do this to begin with?

Cultivating a stronger emerging art scene is in everyone’s favour. The Swan DAO doesn’t abolish capitalism, nor the bulk production of art, but it provides adequate incentives to work as a professional community.

The model does not pursue what is most profitable or in vogue, but provides an environment for self-organised funding and autonomy of a small node within the wider art network. The Swan DAO aims for remuneration to be given for intensity, commitment and dedication rather than property, power or status. None of which deflects from art being produced; in fact art should thrive under such conditions. Which in turn could ensure the silent stakeholders’ long-term profit return. A Swan DAO is not a divine savior but a potential micro-grid model for emerging artists and creators.

Now is the time to make the machine work for its users, allowing them to gain strength. The arts are more than purely a market; they’re emotive by nature, and hence even more favoured by tropes of human affection and rapture than most marketplaces. A change in our economic procedures could potentially be harnessed well beyond the DAO Swan micro-grid, and flood the remaining nodes within the network. The Art World is just an idea, as is the Devil, or market value – but we all know ideas become reality if only enough people believe in them.

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