Primitivism through Egalitarian Art Movements

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My master's thesis deals with themes of individual freedom in a new kind of public space. I will show how this space is emerging and how it is linked to my understanding of primitive culture's understanding of the public, as a space without private property. I will also show how these ideas of public and primitive are evident in emerging art movements, and that these in turn work to inform my practice.

I want to first distinguish between the term primitivism used in historical art movements or a sociological primitivism and a primitivism more closely connected to the ideals of anarcho-primitivism or primitivism as a lifestyle. The former remains fixed in a modernist discourse about sublime primal aestheticism that is an associated with a valorizing of the superior psychological state of non-western primitive cultures. My usage the term refers specifically to hunting and gatherers as a society, which I see as a social model and does not draw any conclusions about a primitive persons deep psychological underpinnings. It is used to describe a shared common history, a social model that is use and a model that could be implemented or referenced. It can exist in the past, present or future for my purposes.

On civilization and the Wilderness

In 1929 Sigmund Freud wrote "Civilization and Its Discontents" where he presented his ideas about the relationship the individual has with civilization. He believed the natural tendency for human aggressiveness and self-destruction was in direct conflict with civilization: "The question of the purpose of human life has been raised countless times; it has never received a satisfactory answer and perhaps does not admit of one." This conflict left homo-sapiens with an ingrained dissatisfaction with organized society. Freud also pointed out that the individual option to flee civilization provided little solace due to the fact that the immense power of the natural world is also a great source of human suffering. He believed there was no possible reconciliation between these two realms and that human

contentment could not be achieved.

Ted Kascinsky (the Unabomber) also talks about an unrecognizable difference between humanity and the natural world in his famous manifesto "Industrial Society and Its Future." (I do not condone the author's illegal actions in the efforts to further this technological revolution but I do believe his manifesto provides relevant insight that can work to inform the purposes of this paper.) Kascinsky wrote about the drastic effects the industrial revolution had on the human race and advocated for a revolution against technology on account of the dire consequences he proposed technology would have on future generations of humans in terms of a loss of freedom. "The degree of personal freedom that exists in a society is determined more by the economic and technological structure of the society than by its laws or its form of government". Kascinsky lays out a road map for the "revolution against technology" and described how it would overthrow the technological industrial complex and allow for a return to the "tremendous popular appeal" of nature. Kascinsky's description of a return to nature can be interpreted to mean a return to a more primitive lifestyle.

Kascinsky further sites primitive societies by stating that most of the Indian nations of New England were monarchies, and many of the cities of the Italian Renaissance were controlled by dictators. But in reading about these societies one gets the impression that they allowed for far more personal freedom than our society does. In part this was because they lacked efficient mechanisms for enforcing the ruler's will: there were no modern, well-organized police forces, no rapid long-distance communications, no surveillance cameras, and no dossiers of information about the lives of average citizens. Thus it was relatively easy to evade control. Kascinsky advocates for and believes in a return to this kind of society, with far less interference from technology. Motivating Kascinsky's fear of technology is the fear, also, of a loss of private space to interference by technology.

More recently, Bruno Latour sites a lack of individual freedom in modern society and also refers to primitive societies as an avenue to regaining lost freedoms. In *Politics and Nature*, Latour begins with a discussion about political ecology, which is not the primary concern of this essay, but within his development of this discussion Latour provides a perspective between the polemic roles of nature and civilization that Freud and Kascinsky are preoccupied with. Latour does not write about nature in the same terms as Freud and Kascinsky, he writes rather about 'nature' as the nature of things, as a perceived scientific objective truth. It is this objective truth that is used as a political tool to subjugate the masses. Politics influences science and science in turn defines an incontestable nature. Freud and Kascinsky are using the term nature to define what may better be described as wilderness; Latour uses nature as the indisputable essence of things, not commenting at all on wilderness, he is simply describing a force of political suppression and advocates for change in the form of what he calls a "collective" and a new set of rules for this "collective".

Latour describes a polemic problem between what he describes as nature and the collective. He calls for a "new Constitution" where different individuals can assemble democratically without the definitions of facts and values influenced by current attitudes towards nature and scientific knowledge. He describes an alternate set of rules by which this assembly, or collective as he calls it, might come together and be constituted. The foundational principles that define the collective are referred to as the actor-network theory (ANT), which was developed in parallel to the ideas of scholars such as Michel Callon and John Law.

Just as Kascinsky and Freud have developed a theory that indicates a lack of individual freedom in contemporary society as well as possible resolutions, as does Latour. Although Freud and Kascinsky both agree that there is an ingrained dissatisfaction with civilized society due to the loss of individual will, Latour is neither saying that this dissatisfaction is not irresolvable like Freud, nor that a

return to wilderness, as defined above, is necessary. Latour believes that this situation can be resolved through a shift in perspective within civilized society. What Freud, Kascinsky, and Latour have in common is the assumption that current societal impasses could be resolved through an appropriation of ideas that are commonly found in pre-colonial North American value systems.

To further explain this I will have to describe in greater depth Latour's Actor Network Theory, which guides his rules for the collective. ANT maps relations that are simultaneously material (between things) and 'semiotic' (between concepts). Actors describe what Latour calls "human and non-humans", which both have agency within the networked system. He defines these actors as "black boxes" (we have no way of determining if there is an essence) where the significance of connections between the actors have equivalent value. This framework mirrors the thinking of the hunting and gathering societies, where by there was no perceived separation between people and their environment. Latour confirms this by directly citing primitive values to back up his own Actor Network Theory. "We now see a reversal of perspective: the savages are not the ones who appear strange because they mix what should in no cases be mixed, "things" and "persons"; we Westerners are the odd ones, we who have been living up till now in the strange belief that we had to separate "things" on the one hand and "persons" on the other into two distinct collective, according to two incommensurable forms of collection."

Latour appropriates the primitive when he advocates for a common world for both "things" and "persons" through a collective. What Latour is also advocating for through ANT is a representation of the world through a collective, nature that is not socially constructed and creates a political order without "due process of individual will". In other words it is the collective that defines the "nature of things" and not politicians. "No members of the collective wants to have an opinion that is personal and disputable about an indisputable and universal nature. They all want to decide about the common world in which they live." This emphasis on a

public discourse also mirrors the values of primitive hunting and gathering societies, where belief systems were forged through communication between tribal members to develop myth.

From this analysis is that Freud, Kascinsky, and Latour we see that they share a common interest in the conflict created by a lack of individual freedom within civilized society as opposed to primitive lifestyles, and they reference primitive lifestyle when suggesting methods to recreate personal freedom.

A visual map of the reasons for lack of individual freedom in contemporary society and what can be done according the Freud, Kascinsky, and Latour:

Conflict		Resolution
Freud		
Civilization	Ecological ecology	Nothing
Kazcinsky		
Technology	Ecological ecology	Techno revolution return to the primitive.
Latour		
Science	A Lack of Connections	Reintroduction of the primitive perspectives to civilized life.

Instruments of suppression, re-introduction of primitivism as resolution

There are several other valuable perspectives from which to examine a reappropriation of primitive values. John Zerzan, philosopher and author, describes the concept of anarcho-primitivism in his 1994 book *Future Primitive* as an anarchist critique of the origins and progress of civilization. Zerzan shares both Latours concerns about the distorting power of science and Kascinsky's concern about the destructive power of technology, but also sites several other forms of suppression that civilized society has created: the domestification of livestock which developed into patriarchal structures, the division of labour and

specialization, industrialization, the institution of a collectivized and monolithic world-view based on morality, the impossibility of creating a sustainable, humane mass society and a symbolic culture that separates us from direct interaction with one another. All these forms of suppression are, according to Zerzan, interrelated causes for the lack of individual freedom in civilized society.

Zerzan, and other anarcho-primitivists, do not believe that a "mass society" can be free. He argues instead that industry and agriculture inevitably lead to hierarchy and alienation and that the division of labor required by techno-industrial societies to function forces people into a reliance on factories and the labor of specialists to produce their food, clothing, shelter, and other necessities. This dependence, in Zerzan's view, forces them to remain a part of this society whether they like it or not. This constitutes the definition of a systemic lack of the individual's free will.

It is important to state here that I do not share Zerzan's utopic view of tribal society. Tribal cultures were extremely ethnocentric, leading to a great deal of conflict between tribes. Tribal life itself was not (and is not) the same for all tribes and the natural environment has an especially important influence on social behavior. Also, critics and proponents of anarcho-primitivism generally agree that if everyone lived as a hunter-gatherer, the earth would be able to support far fewer people than today's population of over 6.5 billion. This said, there is great value in a cross-analysis of primitive societies and civilized society because it provides insight into models of individual freedom.

John Zerzan admits that primitivist ideals are difficult even for the convinced to put into practice: "It's a huge challenge. You've got these great grandiose ideas, but the rubber has to hit the road somewhere, and we know that. I don't know how that's going to work. We are a long way from connecting with that reality and we have to face that. You start off with questioning things and trying to enlarge the space where people can have dialogue and raise the questions that are not

being raised anywhere else. But we don't have blueprints as to what people should do."

Freud, Kascinsky, Latour, and Zerzan all examine issues to which I often refer in my own work and what connects them to each other also connects them to my art practice. I believe that in each proposition put forward above there are clear possible "realities", however only Latour and Zerzan provide any attainable solution. Freud simply states conflict between wilderness and civilization. Kascinsky's revolution against technology, although implausible, may be the only option for human salvation, but leaves little room for experimentation. Latour and Zerzan's proposition to reintroduce elements of primitive perspective is not only reasonably attainable within today's existential paradigm, it also activates my work as a cultural producer; it provides me with a functional framework for reintroducing value systems from primitive societies because Latour and Zerzan suggest working within the system to create change.

technology, primitivism, and the public realm

The various theories examined above about why civilized society has led to the lack of individual free will because the primary focus of my work lies in how the concept of private property and how technological invention influences individual freedom in civilized society. The concept of private property did not exist for many hunting and gathering societies, it emerges when societies shift to an agricultural subsistence. When nomadic tribes become sedentary it becomes possible to accumulate objects to define identity, the idea of the private is born. The concept of private property in turn leads to the domestification of animals, patriarchy, and eventually to civilization, as Zerzan clearly illustrates in his work. I would like to take this a step further and ask whether the lack of individual freedom in civilized society is more closely connected to the idea of private property. Private property precedes technology, science or even civilization itself, and is integral to the repressive characteristics of each.

Technology in particular has a long history of manipulation and repression of the masses, alluded to in dystopian novels from the early 20th century like *1984* and *We*. Kascinsky astutely points out that "the degree of personal freedom that exists in a society is determined more by the economic and technological structure of the society than by its laws or its form of government." Technology's use as a tool for enslaving and controlling the masses has become overwhelmingly obvious today in the way news media conglomerates are responsible for 85% of mainstream news coverage, just to name one example. But Kascinsky misjudged the enormous scope of both the internet and a potentially unlimited digital storage of information, the copying and recopying through the web which makes the transmission of information effectively uncontrollable. These factors all have the potential to counter technology's use as a tool, the potential to democratize it. The democratization of technology would shift its role from product of the private sphere to product of a public realm, which in turn would slow the privatization of an increasingly capitalist economy, an economy shifting from a system based on commercial capital to an interest bearing capital economy (where the use value of an item has been replaced by its advertising). This shift has already increased the amount of economic traffic on the net. If the information ceases to be fully controlled, it shifts into the public's hands as we are beginning to see with such websites and companies like Skype, Piratebay and MySQL.

As computational power increases, wireless strength will also increase leading to the possibility of open source computer networks and to a secondary world wide web. Rapid-prototyping machines, already in use and decreasing in price, are capable of printing out physical objects, allowing for the public economy of the internet to move into the physical world. They are also capable of reproducing themselves to create a looped system of technology, re-tooled online and re-distributed among a global public. The potential here is a self-generating public system within the next 15 years, one beyond government restriction. This leads

back to the original point of interest, how technological invention influences individual freedom in civilized society. If we are moving towards a model of internet based production, if this new realm is understood to represent a new iteration of the public, and if the public is born of an older, primitive notion of a space without private property, has the emergence of the internet sparked a transition into a more primitive sensibility? These are the questions I ask in my practice.

Relational aesthetics, post-production and participation

The fields of relational aesthetics, post-production and participation are discourses that allow for an increased awareness of the public realm; by their definition they are concerned with the relations between people in the public sphere of the art world and the implications of these relationships beyond it. These dynamics in the art world attempt to address the fundamental alienation of contemporary society, precisely that which was absent in a closely interdependent, fully public primitivist society. The internet as a platform for a renewed iteration of the public sphere on today's terms serves to highlight how we are re-using elements from our primitivist past, and mirrors the way art discourse has appropriated these same elements.

These art movements mark a shift in economic systems from a privatized capitalism, which represses individual free will as we have seen demonstrated above, to a public economy reminiscent of primitivism, where the individual free will is enhanced. In *Participation* is a collection of essays edited by Claire Bishop, Jaques Ranciere remarks that "the signs of capital behind everyday objects and behaviors risks inscribing itself into a perpetuation of a world where transformation of things into signs doubles the very excess of interpretative signs that make all resistance disappear."

Edward Glissant refers to a Deluze and Guattari's theory of deterritorialization

analysize identity vs. rooted identity in Participation as well. Deluze and Guattari point to nomadism as an endorsement of relational identity, as "not hidden in a violence, (it) does not devise any legitimacy as its guarantee to entitlement (no private), does not think of land as a territory from which to project toward other territories but as a place where one gives-on-and-with rather than grasps." Deluze and Guattari go on to draw interesting conclusion concerning the positive aspects of pre-agricultural society, which speak directly to the points made by theorists in the first part of this paper: "There is, no pain of exile bearing down, nor is the wanderlust of errantry growing keener."

It becomes apparent that there is a correlation between Nicholas Bourriard's *Relational Aesthetics* and previously mentioned theorists, both in similarities between his definition of contemporary art practice and Latour's Actor Network Theory, and in the way tribal members communicate to develop myth. Bourriaud writes, "There are no forms in nature, in the wild state, as it is our gaze that creates these, by cutting them out in the depth of the visible. Forms are *developed*, one from another. What was yesterday regarded as formless or "informal" is no longer these things today. When the aesthetic discussion evolves, the status of form evolves along with it, and through it." Both Relational Aesthetics and the Primitivists relies heavily on Situationalist theory for their development. Zerzan, for example, claims primitivists owe much to the Situationists and their critique of the Spectacle and alienating commodity society. Bourriard also repeatedly refers to the Situationists as crucial to the evolution of Relational Aesthetics. He goes on to remark that "it is evident that today's art is carrying on this fight, by coming up with perceptive, experimental, critical and participatory models, veering in the direction indicated by Enlightenment philosophers, Proudhon, Marx, the Dadaists and Mondrian." Furthermore, Bourriaud's ideas of postproduction correlate clearly with the Situationists' heavy use of detournement, as both reappropriate pre-existing art work in order to create a new work.

Egalitarian art movements, their historical nuances and differentiations, is a wide topic; my aim here is to briefly put my work into a contemporary artistic context. They are not, however, the primary purpose of this paper, which is to examine a public resonant with primitivism emerging from these art movements, and how in turn this public informs my practice.

<u>My practice</u>

I am essentially interested in the relationship between primitive value systems, contemporary society and technology. I draw elements from both contemporary and ancient customs and fuse them to develop alternate historical narratives. These narratives often represent areas of conflict between new and old ways of thinking - by fusing them together I question the possibility of reconciliation. I use technology in both defining each of the juxtaposed timeframes and as a mechanism for questioning the possibility of a reconciliation.

<u>The Stone Age Electronic Calculator</u>

"The Stone Age Electronic Calculator" (SAEC) is a collaborative wiki website where anyone can participate in developing a manual that can be taken into a wilderness to create an electronic calculator. SAEC is a working title which allows the possibility that the goal may shift through collaborative participation; the project is open-ended, it will develop through the participation and therefore can not be said to have a static goal beyond my initial framework for it.

SAEC questions the perceptions of modern computational instruments, and information based societies in general, by providing an instruction manual that restricts the building of an electronic calculator to the modes of physical production available during prehistoric times. An electronic calculator is the focus because it is comprised of technologies that form the foundation of a computer based society. A collaborative website is used as a tool to develop the manual as

well as a device to examine if modern computational instruments could provide rapid information production in primitive societies.

Furthermore, SAEC positions itself with in a central argument developed by Ted Kascinsky. While he advocates for a revolution against technology, it would be plausible to say such a revolution is actually possible. Kazinscky is emphatic: "the only points on which we absolutely insist are that the single overriding goal must be the elimination of modern technology" he further states that it is claimed "throughout history that technology has always progressed, never regressed, hence technological regression is impossible. But this claim maybe false. " He points to the difference between "small-scale technology", used by communities without outside assistance, and "organization-dependent technology", necessitating social organization. If we succeed in returning to a wilderness it would never be possible to rebuild organization-dependent technology without tools and specialists needed to create the object. The technology would quickly be lost. The SAEC provides an alternative solution to Kascinsky's problem with technology (there are many others). It is possible to move from an "organization-dependent technology" to a "small-scale technology" through the internet, which rebinds specialization across a wide range of an organization-dependent technology production process, bringing together different cultures and classes in a productive and mutually beneficial activity capable of opening up unlikely discourses. In effect, the internet provides a hybrid of small and large scale technologies, enabling solutions to the socially destructive force of technology Kascinsky did not see - the SEAC is the proto-type of just such a solution.
The SAEC is contextualized by egalitarian art movements based in primitivistic ideals of a common public, it is participatory as production method and as form of discourse. Egalitarain art movements, such as relational aesthetics and collaboration, also support the SAEC's ideology, it's purpose to create a holistic narrative and political work in action that is in line with pseudo-primivism. It follows Bourriaud's edict succinctly: "Otherwise put, the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realties, but to actually be ways of living

and models of action within the existing real, whatever the scale chosen by the artist."

Conclusion

I have developed my understanding of a new kind of public space, one with a strong connection to primitive societies notion of space without private property. I have shown how egalitarian art practices are linked to primitivism through more recent philosophies of anarcho-primitivism, and I have gone on to show that in an emerging technological public space, some of the contradictions between a primitive society's version public space and a modern society's version of public space may be resolved.

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