

Sylvère Lotringer in conversation:

Marginal at the Center

On May 2nd, 2010, Sylvère Lotringer gave a lecture at KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin, titled Theory in Art and addressing the conditions of today's art world in comparison with the New York art scene of the seventies. Lotringer concluded his talk with a call for a different kind of art practice—an art practice not geared toward the production of art commodities. We requested an interview to find out how such an “art” might be imagined in our contemporary world and how he would conceptualize it.

The Ivory Tower: *You started Semiotext(e) in 1974 around the same time that you got interested in the art scene—both out of a frustration with academia. What was the reason for this frustration?*

Sylvère Lotringer: After arriving in New York in 1972, I looked for the kind of intellectuals I was working with in France, people who felt concerned with society at large, and were not just ensconced in their own specialties—post-68 philosophers like Deleuze, Guattari and Foucault who tried to devise new strategies to confront from the inside the latest advances of capital. I didn't find their equivalent in American academia. Let alone among armchair Marxists who had history on their side and become another island, a self-contained bubble within the academic establishment! Besides, they were hostile to any idea that could shake their belief in the working class.

The Ivory Tower: *But wasn't the art scene also very insular at that time?*

Sylvère Lotringer: This is true, but its reach was much wider. And it was also true for New York. At the time Manhattan was an island floating on the American continent. Being there felt like living in some kind of laboratory, being part of a cultural crash test that would benefit the rest of the world. Americans then hated New York and everything that it represented, but New York artists were very well received in Europe, even envied there. It was an ideal situation: they had enough recognition abroad to go on working on their own stuff, and very little pressure from the commercial world at home. It took me two or three years to meet people in the downtown art world, like John Cage, William Burroughs (just back from England), Jack Smith, Steve Reich or Richard Foreman, who were far more experimental and open-ended in their approach and often managed in a round-about-way, via chance, Buddhism or transcendentalism, to raise the same questions as their French intellectual counterparts. New York artists were elitists then for a simple reason:

there were few of them, and they deliberately stayed away from the marketplace, which wasn't very interested in what they were doing anyway. They were mostly conceptual artists and they didn't produce sellable objects. They were exploring various artistic paradigms opened by Dada and Duchamp at the beginning of the 20th century and were satisfied contributing to an ongoing research called art. The real question for me wasn't to trade academia for the art world, but to stay in between, playing one against the other (and a few others as well) in order to clear some space for thinking.

***The Ivory Tower:** When and how did that scene change?*

Sylvère Lotringer: It mutated in the early eighties. Back in the mid-seventies, there were only a handful of galleries in SoHo and some two hundred artists in New York. It was so small that young artists coming to New York were unable to find a place in their midst, so they turned to the new music, the vibrant Max Kansas City and CBGB acid rock scene, and somewhat later on punk and graffiti culture. They became aware of European neo-expressionism before it arrived on the American shore. Others, more conceptual, worked with films or photography. What tipped that delicate balance was the massive arrival in New York in 1980 of German and Italian neo-expressionist paintings and their ephemeral cartoonish East Village sequel. But it didn't matter much at bottom what kind of painting it was, or even what kind of art, the big change was the return of the commodity. Up until then painting was considered obsolete, even shameful.

***The Ivory Tower:** How did this affect the art scene?*

Sylvère Lotringer: The change was mostly triggered by the neoliberal turn of the economy—Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher unlocked the flows of capital. The five-year rescue package prepared by the mayor and the banks suddenly kicked in and money started fueling real estate speculation. It was as if the entire city had been in the eye of a storm, and suddenly capitalism unleashed all its might, washing away anything that resisted, glossing over everything. In just a few years New York became a theme park, just like the South Street Seaport which opened at the time. It forced “elitist” artists out of their SoHo hideouts, ending their quasi-communal life. A new generation of art school-trained artists landed in New York, gallery-hopping downtown became fashionable for the enlightened bourgeoisie, art intermixed with luxury shops. Being an artist was becoming desirable. New York artists had been intellectual in their own way, but diffident of anything “intellectual.” The newcomers, much less seasoned, needed fresh ideas to hang on to. *Semiotext(e)* happened to introduce poststructuralist philosophers at the time in its new series of little black books (Baudrillard, Deleuze/Guattari, Virilio) and the young artists recognized themselves in them, or believed they did. French theory suddenly became

their lingua franca, their password to the expanded art world, and a direct access to an artistic career. Art ceased to be elitist in order to be plugged in to the market. Neo-conceptualist photographers merely confirmed that move. Their critical take on the media only served to attract its attention, projecting the art scene even further into the mainstream.

***The Ivory Tower:** So what happened was a process of professionalization?*

Sylvère Lotringer: Exactly.

***The Ivory Tower:** Couldn't that be seen as a good thing? Could one not say, maybe at the risk of sounding cynical, that this development allowed artists to make a living?*

Sylvère Lotringer: Artists had been privileged to do what they wanted to do. They had an interesting life. It didn't take long before career, money and glamour changed everything. That was another spiral in the assumption of capitalism, the introduction of a neoliberalism that aggravated social disparities under the guise of individual initiative. Suddenly artists were forced to spend half of their time doing self-promotion. The art world used to be mostly horizontal, tribal and autonomous; the new, expanded scene quickly became professionalized, diffused and hierarchical, a pyramid with specialized agents at every floor (critics, gallerists, curators) struggling to assume creative power at the expense of their colleagues just below, artists included, and money trickling up in reverse proportion. We don't live in the same world anymore, let alone in the same art world, and art right now doesn't respond to the same necessities that it used to. Art has become some kind of irrepressible social excretion, just like Facebook, a way of being everywhere for lack of being anywhere at all. So we can't expect art or artists to behave in the same way they did before. We don't experience the same time-space coordinates anymore. Wasting time, for instance, was part of being creative; now we live in "real time," which is no time at all since it is instantaneously devoured by the new technologies. Space has become commutable and time inhabitable. And this is not just true of the art world, of course.

***The Ivory Tower:** How would you imagine an alternative artistic practice today, considering your call for art as opposed to the art world?*

Sylvère Lotringer: Let's start with art. For nearly a century, it had been a sort of self-defined experimental laboratory where artists could invent different paradigms of thought or perception, in which society could only recognize itself after the fact. In a sense, art was working pretty much like science. Even Freud remarked that art was endopsychic, it was a way of grasping from the inside what scientists or philosophers understood from the outside. Art took an active part in the transformations that shaped the culture, also in the understanding of those transformations. Think of Paolo Uccello at the cusp of two eras tinkering with perspective instead of subjecting himself to it or making a career out of it. Cubism happened in the cracks of the

Renaissance and at the dawn of modernity. Art today has mostly stopped being experimental in that way to become part of a single continuum. It is everywhere, connected to everything, and there is no gap left that isn't instantaneously filled, and filed away.

***The Ivory Tower:** In 1978 you participated in Kathryn Bigelow's experimental short film The Set Up. Shortly thereafter, Bigelow, like many other artists in the seventies, left the art world. She left for Hollywood and became an Oscar-winning director. If art is everywhere and connected to everything, as you say, is it possible then, from your perspective, to understand her work in Hollywood as art? In other words, is there really any difference left between making Hollywood films and making works for the art world?*

Sylvère Lotringer: Jeffrey Deitch denies that there is any. In 2008, he famously claimed that the art world now was assuming the role that Hollywood had held for previous generations. Art had become the platform from which the top ten artists can address the entire society. He was right about Hollywood, of course, which provides the ultimate recognition for one's achievements in American society. Kathryn Bigelow would certainly have had more freedom as an artist than as a filmmaker. Just to make a film possible, you have to hold so many cards in your hands (producers, actors, pre-distribution rights, etc.) that your film, if it ever happens, can hardly be called your own film anymore. Kathryn likes the fact that she first was an artist, and even had a smatter of French theory, before becoming a Hollywood filmmaker. At most she is able to have a scene or two that really belong to her in a film that belongs to the industry. Artists certainly have more leeway because the pressure to win the general audience is not as intense or as immediate.

***The Ivory Tower:** Even if it is everywhere and connected to everything, the professional art world is still special insofar as it provides more freedom?*

Sylvère Lotringer: Art is a way of scrambling the codes—of perception, of acceptability, etc.—and pushing the boundaries, producing something that hasn't been conceived of before. But this is also what capitalism does. The question then is whether you are capable of redirecting its flows, or get carried away by them. You could say that artists are the vanguard of capital, but on their own terms.

***The Ivory Tower:** Artists are the vanguard of capital? Can you elaborate?*

Sylvère Lotringer: It is part of the same movement. Capital is experimental too, but not in the same way. It doesn't really care for humanity. It is fluid to the extreme, recklessly ebbing to and fro, taking advantage of all the obstacles it runs against in order to jump ahead. It's not just true for the art world. Take the switch from Fordism to post-Fordism. It wasn't invented by capitalism, but by young workers in Italy who rebelled against the assembly line. Their resistance forced capitalism

to make a technological leap and invent instead post-Fordist factories, factories without walls disseminated throughout the entire “social fabric.” They embraced capital against the cynicism of capitalism, freeing work from traditional slavery. By the same token they cleared the way for something else, yet undefined, new forms of life using techno-intelligence creatively—but also fluid forms of alienation that didn’t exist before. Non-stop work, zero-life. Voluntary servitude on a global scale.

The Ivory Tower: How is such an “art” as that of the Italian workers, a dynamic and fluid process, different then from the dynamic and fluid process of the art world itself?

Sylvère Lotringer: It is not simple to conceive, and I will maintain the distinction as a provocation for thought since the two are not the same and there will always be a tension between them. Art and art world were pretty much identical to start with, but the art world has embraced capitalism in a big way, abolishing every boundary and replacing them with its own. Since the seventies, the art world has expanded tremendously, absorbing in the process photography and architecture, fashion, then design, while art critics and curators have assumed some of the functions attributed to artists. The art world adopted corporate lines everywhere, staging art fairs, auctions, biennales, conferences, etc., in order to achieve cultural supremacy. Art has become art for the art world, and the art world itself the art of the market. Now capitalism is showcasing itself through the art world as it does through everything else. And it is true that artists themselves have bent over backwards to adopt all the rituals and rewards of the art corporation. Until the beginning of the eighties, artist mostly learned from other artists; now making art has become a profession with a prescribed pilgrimage—group shows, solo shows, mid-career retrospectives, etc. It is an individualistic enterprise which requires funding, expert guidance and exclusive pedigrees. Art schools—and students’ debt—have become a necessary appendage to the art world, and graduate studies in art, even doctorates in art, are now being offered to artists, blurring even more the borders between art world and academia. We are pretty far from the idea of “self-valorization” advocated by the Italian workerists. Self-valorization wasn’t just an idea, or an individual option, it implied creating a new social environment that would make this kind of shift possible. In other words, it could only be achieved as part of another conception of life, one not exclusively based on profit or competition.

The Ivory Tower: Could this be changed?

Sylvère Lotringer: Recently, in the wake of the Italian post-Fordist theorists, the art world has been rife with claims for the commons and communality. Artists have eagerly seized upon the concept, but no real attempt has been made to challenge art institutions and create another context in which this radical idea could be tried out and expanded. And there is a good reason for that: the art world is so totally

indexed to the market and its system of valuation that even those who oppose it remain entirely dependent on it. Artists are free to “critique” anything, including and especially the art world, as long as they toe the line of their careers. Wall Street was occupied, but artists are totally occupied by the art world because, at bottom, Wall Street and the art market are the same. They are the only institutions that came out unscathed from the financial crisis, and that even thrived from it. Needless to say, no one dared occupy Chelsea, pitch their tents in the MoMA, sell garbage at art fairs or—God forbid—mob art auctions where “the art world happens in real time,” as Amy Cappellazzo of Christie’s superbly said at the “Art and Money” Artforum panel just before the financial market collapsed in real time. I’m sure that the Occupy movement will provide a stimulating “theme” for enterprising curators to come. Actually, they are busy pre-curating it as it is happening. As Jack Smith said, what art means is what it is used for, and art is being used by the market and by the 1% of the population that can afford to speculate on this kind of high-price commodity. All this preempts any attempt to conceive of art and life differently, as artists are more than ever exposed to the pressure and the lure of neoliberalism. Many live precarious lives from the onset, chained to the system by pedigreed art degrees and cynical student debts that ensure they won’t budge. They will remain totally dependent on the art system anyway to select and distribute their work. And the mass of artists who are not given the royal entry into the art world only make the prospect of a successful career even more desirable. As long as artists have no other alternative than the established structures that provide them with validation and security, the idea of an art distinct from the criteria of the art world will remain marginalized.

***The Ivory Tower:** What would such an alternative to the established structures—an alternative that would rescue the idea of an art distinct from the criteria of the art world—look like?*

Sylvère Lotringer: Artists often don’t understand that theory isn’t just theory, it is a chance for thought to permeate one’s life in a very concrete way. It is not something that can be applied, let alone illustrated, but something that informs your perception and allows you to see things differently. And isn’t that after all what art is supposed to be about? In any case, this is what we have been trying to encourage in our own way, give people special tools to understand the world they live in. We never looked for a profitable corner in the market—we don’t believe in profit and competition. We don’t want them to rule our life and our work. This is the way we have been working quietly for the last three or four decades, Chris Kraus, Hedi El Kholi, myself and friends close and far who have helped us remain “marginal at the center.” This was a motto of the Autonomia movement which I particularly like. *Semiotext(e)* is a discrete project, but it may be paradigmatic in that way. Not moving to the center,

but marginalizing it. Using the art market itself in order to create another art culture in which artists could be “successful” on their own terms and work for something less crude than career, money or fame. It would mean setting up a multiplicity of hybrid “laboratories” where ways of doing art and self-valorizing it collectively would be experimented in parallel with the evaluation provided by paid experts and the professional art hierarchy. Because it is so directly indexed to the reckless creativity of capital and increasingly disseminated throughout society, the art world would certainly be the place to start.