

Living in a Global 'Society of the Spectacle'

From Guy Debord to the Economic Crisis
through an Exhibition of Contemporary Art

Bill Balaskas

For the last few years, my artistic work has been characterized by reflection on the global economic crisis and the nature of the capitalist system. Having studied Economics before leaving Greece to become an artist, I always had a strong interest in developing a dialogue between my academic background and my artistic practice. Amid the crisis, this has led to the production of new video installation works (my exclusive medium until 2010), as well as to the production, for the first time in my career, of works in media other than video. Gradually, as the economic crisis deepened, the role of Greece in my works became more prominent, since my home country has been a protagonist in global economic developments. This fact has also provided me with the opportunity to lend a more intimate character to some of my works and to imbue them with stronger elements of self-reflection. Inevitably, this 'inward' process and the investigation into the origins of the crisis brought me to a variety of texts and theoretical approaches. Yet what I was looking for was not simply an explanation of the crisis itself, but rather an elucidation of its context. In other words, the economic causes of the crisis might have been relatively 'easy' to identify; nevertheless, its cultural and social origins bear a much greater significance for any artist who aspires to imaginatively approach the transitional status of our globalized world. The consideration of both the cultural and social elements of the crisis has been crucial to portraying a full picture and in highlighting the contradictions inherent in the present condition. Since 2009 the multifaceted work of French philosopher Guy Debord (1931–1994) has been a creative catalyst in my exploration, not only as a tool for diagnosing the failures of the past, but also as a 'compass' for realizing the potential for true change in the future.

28 December 2011 marked the eightieth anniversary of the birth of Debord, who could be characterized as the last European 'rebel-philosopher' of the twentieth century. His radical political beliefs, his role in the student protests of 1968 and his suicide in 1994 made him, for a long time, a rather controversial figure of the international intelligentsia. However the course of time has established the necessary distance for a more dispassionate assessment, and today it would be very hard to contest many of Debord's arguments as set out in his works; in particular his seminal book of 1967, *La Société du spectacle* (*The Society of the Spectacle*). On the occasion of this 2011 anniversary I was invited by the Institut Français de Thessalonique in Greece, and by the 3rd Thessaloniki Biennale of Contemporary Art, to produce a solo exhibition presenting old and new works influenced by the context of Debord's work. Guy Debord believed deeply in the power of art to stimulate people's political consciousness and to generate change. Notably, apart from being a prominent philosopher, Debord was also a bold experimental film-maker, who aimed to subvert any concept of representation as promoted through television and mainstream cinema. Inspired by this fact, the core of the exhibition at the Institut Français was comprised of three video projects accompanied by a body of four new mixed-media installations and works on paper. The title of the exhibition was 'Le Temps Spectaculaire' ('Spectacular Time') and it referred both to the character of our times and to chapter six of Debord's influential book. In this article I will elaborate on the distinct aspects of spectacle that were investigated in the exhibition, through a brief analysis of each

THIRD TEXT Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Art and Culture July 2013

of the works presented. By connecting *La Société du spectacle* with the global economic crisis of 2008–2012 the article aspires to illuminate the fruitful dialogue between contemporary art and theory, in a time of enduring volatility for our globalized world.

My analysis will begin with the three video installations of ‘Le Temps Spectaculaire’ for two principal reasons: firstly, because video is a time-based medium and the title of the exhibition refers to the concept of time, which has been pivotal in Debord’s work; and, secondly, because I wish to allude to the fact that a dematerialized object, like digital video or spectacle itself, can profoundly affect the ‘real’, physical world. This is a point of particular significance in the Age of Data Capitalism, in which money (and its flows) has been largely transmuted into an immaterial existence. The investigation of this ‘trajectory’ and its associations could – I hoped – lead us from globalized spectacle to a few useful conclusions regarding the nature of the global economic crisis of 2008–2012.

Since the examination of the exhibition’s works will unfold parallel to Debord’s assertions in *La Société du spectacle*, I have included in parentheses the paragraph numbers of the book, so that the reader can easily make any cross references needed without depending on any particular translation or edition. Apart from the videos and photographs accompanying this article, further documentation of the works and more information can be found on my website at www.billbalaskas.com.

AFTER THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

Any attempt to investigate the global economic crisis should encompass the very basis of an economic system: the mode of labour. More than forty years ago, Guy Debord was the first to explicitly associate the accumulation of capital with the production of images in *La Société du spectacle*: ‘The spectacle is capital to such a degree of accumulation that it becomes an image’ (34).



After the Society of the Spectacle, 2009, video still, photo: courtesy the artist and Kalfayan Galleries, Athens and Thessaloniki. <http://vimeo.com/14157921>

Today the financial and sovereign debt crises have left the image of capitalism itself more tattered than ever. And the question that inevitably emerges is: can the current crisis truly transform the way in which we perceive our capitalist production system and its most concealed means in the form of spectacle? Can we avoid falling into a vicious circle of ‘imprisonment’ to a false-yet-spectacular image, like the one experienced by the railway worker in the video, who appears to endlessly grind the rails? In other words, do we live in an age after (ie subsequent to) the Society of the Spectacle,

THIRD TEXT Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Art and Culture July 2013

or do we actually live after (ie according to) the Society of the Spectacle? The ambiguity of the term 'after' of the work's title seems to reflect the ambiguity of what Debord calls the pseudo-cyclical time of the capitalist mode of production (148). Pseudo-cyclical time imitates the ancient cyclical time of pre-industrial societies, whose economic activities were based, for instance, on the cyclical change of seasons. However, pseudo-cyclical time cannot become something natural: it is a constructed device and at the same time the principal raw material for the production of industrial and post-industrial commodities (151). It can assume the form of the working week, the eight-hour working day, the summer and Christmas vacations, the bank holidays, etc. It is a form of organizing time that is supposed to make people feel safe within a specific mode of production. However, the principal end result of this mode is, according to Debord, an alienated form of labour, since the latter is employed as a device that merely feeds consumption. This consumption also incorporates the consumption of time, due to which the capacity of truly 'experiencing' the world surrounding us has been lost to a significant extent (150). As Debord argues in the very first statement of his book, 'Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation.'¹

INFO

There is, however, another kind of time also defining our everyday lives: the time that we spend outside labour and our working routines; what we call our 'free' time. So, what do we do with this time in a globalized Society of the Spectacle? One potential use of this time is given in the video installation *Info*. The work attempts to expose the artificial dramatization of reality through the images and sounds of mass media and the subsequent transformation of everyday life into a series of consumable pseudo-events. In the video, the opening musical themes of twenty-five television news bulletins from around the world are brought together, in order to create a single 'chain' of music. This hybrid musical theme constantly introduces the spectacular arrival of the news, but never results in the publication of any information. Instead, throughout the whole video, the screen remains black or simply empty. In this way, the work, also, evokes Debord's first experimental film, *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* (1952), in which, for most of the time, the screen is merely black or white.

<http://vimeo.com/47523680>

Info aims to illustrate how the time that we have gained by working fewer hours than, for instance, a century ago, thanks to technological progress and the attainment of labour rights, has not necessarily brought greater freedom (27). Instead, today 'free' time is predominantly spent in the consumption of images and, most often, those images are of little or no benefit: quite simply, they are 'empty'. In spite, however, of this 'emptiness', the spectacular dramatization of events by the media is capable of transforming their images into products; namely, profitable pseudo-events, waiting to be sold and consumed by a public that is wider than ever before in human history (157). Therefore this process of consumption exacts a well-concealed, but nevertheless heavy, price: the expropriation of 'real' time and the dispossession of the worker/producer on the most existential of levels (159).

PARTHENON RISING

Quite naturally, if time can become a mere commodity in a globalized Society of the Spectacle, then anything directly connected with the concept of temporality can potentially become a commodity as well. So it comes as no surprise that under such conditions history and culture can also be converted into commodified spectacles. Once again, this is particularly evident in the activities that we choose to engage in outside our working routines: tourism, for instance, may constitute a good example of capitalism's 'gifts' to its producers for their contribution to the accumulation of capital. This assertion could be identified as the starting point of the video *Parthenon Rising*, which was filmed on the only day of the year that the Acropolis in Athens is

THIRD TEXT Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Art and Culture July 2013

open to the public at night. Thousands of locals (Greeks) and tourists climb the ancient hill on this occasion in order to capture images of the relics with their cameras. As all the lights are kept off, the monuments, including the Parthenon, can be clearly seen only when the flashes of the cameras momentarily illuminate them. This spectacle illuminates an aspect of the monument significantly different from that of the familiar icon; it is also a spectacle that reveals much about the photographers: all those diverse crowds from around the world who stand in front of the Parthenon trying to capture its image and, perhaps along with it, a part of its myth.



Parthenon Rising, 2010, video still, photo: courtesy the artist and Kalfayan Galleries, Athens and Thessaloniki.
<http://vimeo.com/1416055>

Interestingly, according to Debord, spectacle is the material reconstruction of religious illusion (20). In the current circumstances of the economic crisis, one might ask what this religion could be. The crowds gathered in front of the Athenian ancient temple might partake in an almost religious spectacle, but can the myth that they are looking for remain the product of a ‘deep’ and ‘real’ symbol? Can the Parthenon be something more than merely a ‘surface’ waiting to be photographed and ‘sold’? And can it avoid the danger of becoming the architectural equivalent of a Hollywood star standing on the ‘red carpet’? Two centuries ago the English poet Percy Bysshe Shelley claimed, on the eve of the Greek Revolution, ‘We are all Greeks. Our laws, our literature, our religion, our arts, have their root in Greece’ (from the Preface to *Hellas*, 1823). Today, the international climate is, arguably, very different. As European politicians and media suggest that Greece should sell some of its most famous islands or even rent out the Parthenon in order to pay back its debts, it is obvious that the depth and the nature of the economic crisis have come to question – even nominally – fundamental elements of the Western world’s cultural identity.

It is significant that in *La Société du spectacle* Debord refers to ancient Greece and – once again – to the critical role of temporality. In contrast to the ancient perception of time, which worked in harmony with human labour and its natural state (as I have already mentioned), today’s labour time has a highly abstract character (155). This could be attributed to the fact that globalization appears to have succeeded in what ancient Greece failed to do: namely, to produce a universal conceptualization of time (134). Global markets function in an increasingly unified manner and stock markets influence one another in real time. One might feel that we are now called to be producers within an economic system that requires even greater intellectual and sentimental investment, since it places much more profound demands on our time. As a result, the *modus operandi* of the markets might appear more unified, but the working mode that we have adopted is, in many ways, more fragmented. In other words, synchronicity does not entail unity. It is important to note that fragmentation and separation are constitutive elements of any Society of the Spectacle, since they facilitate the control of the ruling classes over the rest of the society (25). This process always involves the spectacularization of culture, which leads to a superficial understanding of the current condition through the lack of any criticality towards what people see and hear.

YOU ARE LEAVING THE FANTASY SECTOR

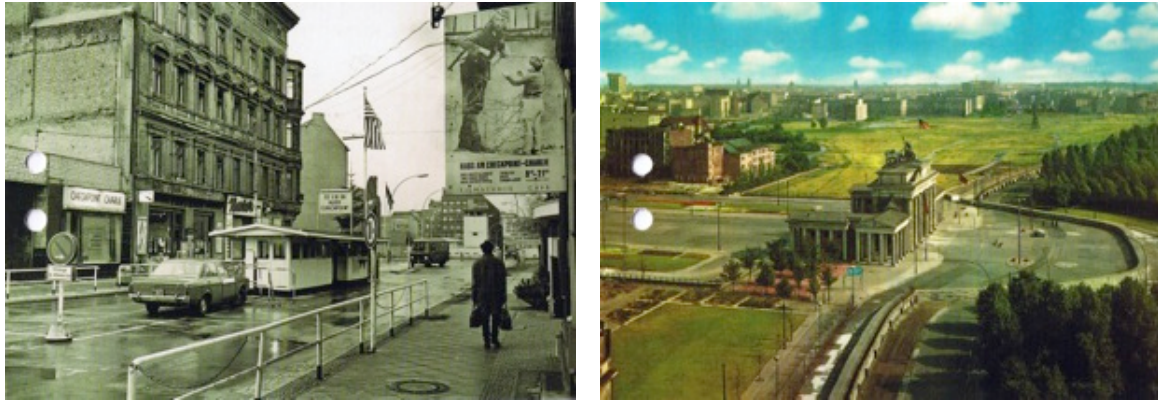
In the three video projects briefly analysed above the idea of repetition is prominent. In *After the Society of the Spectacle* and in *Parthenon Rising* it adopts the form of the loop (namely, a repeated circle), whereas in *Info* it is manifested as a constant suspension of time: an unfulfilled wait for something to finally arrive. In the installation *You are Leaving the Fantasy Sector*, the concept of cyclical time is given a material form, through the symbolic use of the circle created by the railway tracks. The train of History appears to be driven by an apprentice wizard, Harry Potter, one of the most successful and profitable franchises of the twenty-first century.

The way in which Potter is driving the train (without even standing at the wheel of the engine) is perhaps similar to the method adopted by the ‘apprentice wizards’ of neoliberal capitalism, who led the world economy into an unprecedented crisis. Thinking that they have ‘done away’ once and for all with the ‘ghosts’ of the past (represented, in this case, by a piece of the Berlin Wall), they anticipated that the global ascendancy of capitalism would entail the establishment of a universal History (145).



You are Leaving the Fantasy Sector, 2011, mixed-media installation, floor: Lego plastic toys and piece from the Berlin Wall, photo: Contantin Paschou, courtesy the artist and Kalfayan Galleries, Athens and Thessaloniki





Above: *You are Leaving the Fantasy Sector*, 2011, mixed-media installation, frame: certificate of authenticity of the piece from the Berlin Wall, accompanying postcards, metal shield of authenticity, reproduction of the sign of exit from Berlin's American sector, photo: Contantin Paschou, courtesy the artist and Kalfayan Galleries, Athens and Thessaloniki

Below: detail of *You are Leaving the Fantasy Sector* showing accompanying postcards, photo: Contantin Paschou, photo: courtesy the artist and Kalfayan Galleries, Athens and Thessaloniki

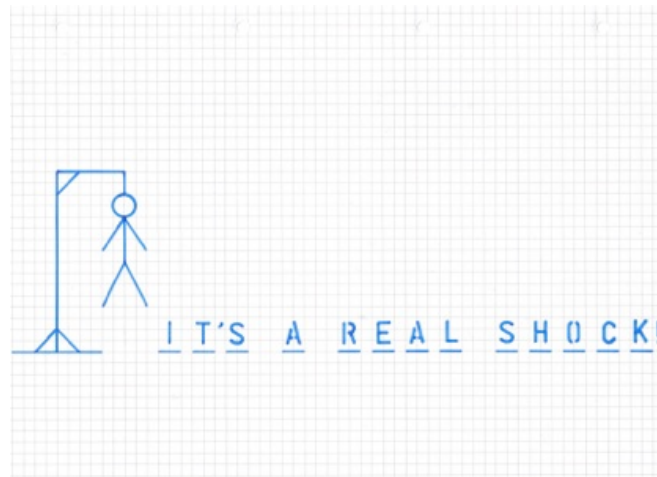
And even history itself can become a marketable and superficial product, as evidenced by the sale of the pieces of the Berlin Wall. The Fall of the latter in 1989 has been one of the most spectacular symbols of the passage to the dominance of the neoliberal economic model on a truly global scale: universal History going hand in hand with universal spectacle.

Interestingly, as Debord notes, in times of crisis, the universal and unified spectacle is employed as a technique of power in order to secure the perpetuation of the presiding system. This is an observation of particular relevance to the current condition in globalized politics. However, as the installation implies, the course of the 'apprentice wizards' of neoliberal capitalism might not be as easy as they would have liked, for there are still pieces of history that can stimulate people's sense of justice. The violent imposition of a single truth or a single economic logic could perhaps, like the piece of the Berlin Wall lying on the railway tracks of the installation, lead some day to the violent derailment of the train of neoliberal History.

IT'S A REAL SHOCK!

But what about violence itself? In *It's a Real Shock!*, the increasing spectacularization of violence in our visual culture (both in its physical and psychological form) has acquired the character of a 'game': literally, the form of the famous game of 'hangman'. In the work, the number of the letters of the (ironic) phrase 'It's a Real Shock!' corresponds perfectly with the number of the dashes and shapes needed in order to draw the figure of the hanged individual. Significantly, there is no element that could identify the executed person: no indication of gender, culture, ethnicity, religion or any other special characteristic.

Violence, through spectacularization, becomes a hegemonic power and, like any hegemonic power, it can only lead us to a single, 'universal' reality. This is an undoubtedly fascist practice, which defends conservative ideology and infuses people with fear against the ruling socioeconomic and cultural order (109). Thus the violent imposition of spectacle is integrated with the spectacle of violence itself, producing a dual tool of manipulation and control. The use of graph paper for the creation of the work alludes to the 'measured' and systemic character of this exercise.



It's a Real Shock!, 2011, ink on graph paper, 21 x 29 cm, photo: courtesy the artist and Kalfayan Galleries, Athens and Thessaloniki

GUIDELINES FOR A REVOLUTION

Nevertheless, any kind of violence – be it the violence exerted by dictators or the economic violence experienced by low-paid workers – always produces some form of reaction. The economic crisis of 2008–2012 coincided with a sharp rise in the role of social media in the pursuit of political endeavours. The ‘Arab Spring’ has proved to be an ideal example of public political mobilization through a tactical use of new media. Building – to a certain extent – on this experience, the Indignados and the Occupy movement managed to raise various socioeconomic issues in the heart of the political agenda of Western democracies. By focusing on problems such as increasing wealth inequality, the culture of bonuses in the financial sector or the influence of corporations on government, they managed to bring capitalism’s morality back into public debate. At the same time, through the extensive use of social media networks and the adoption of forms of direct democracy, such as their general assemblies, these movements called for a deeper and wider democratic culture in the way that our globalized world is governed.

However, this is only part of the picture. The spectacularization of social media can also present a danger to the values that the new social movements of the early twenty-first century are fighting for. On the one hand, the ‘Facebook Revolutions’ of the Middle East might constitute a historic moment of change for the region and the world, but on the other hand all social media remain huge corporations that have the same single goal at the core of their activity: the pursuit of maximum financial profit. At the same time, as corporations, they are heavily regulated through a legal framework that, in effect, delimits the freedom of the user and, in many cases, raises serious questions around ownership, copyright, privacy and censorship. *Guidelines for a Revolution* aims to emphasize this ‘double’ nature of social media. Through the use of US legal paper, the work



Guidelines for a Revolution, 2011, site-specific installation (inkjet on US legal paper), Facebook terms and directly referenced regulatory and legal framework, 178 x 345 cm, photo: Contantin Paschou, courtesy the artist and Kalfayan Galleries, Athens and Thessaloniki. <http://vimeo.com/36059221>

underlines the fact that despite their global reach, social media are still largely regulated on a national basis and influenced by the interests of the country where they are formally based. The visual ‘translation’ of the computer’s spectacular images into a wall of ‘humble’ printed papers employs this aesthetic contrast in order to call for a deeper awareness of the challenges lying in front of the pursuit of true change. Debord locates this challenge on the level of quality, by claiming that in a Society of the Spectacle any kind of commodity, like social media, is developed only in relation to itself. In other words, it develops exclusively within the quantitative and that, inevitably, leaves quality on the margin (38). Through this theorization, we are allowed to consider another, less revolutionary point of view of the Arab Spring and Occupy: will those movements and their offspring secure real change, or could they be manipulated through limited reformist initiatives which will only perpetuate ‘social sleep’ through the use of spectacle? (21) And, in a time of crisis, could the rise of ‘messiahs’ of all kinds (material and immaterial) amount to, in effect, just another form of deceptive millenarianism and ‘social sleep’? (138)

ÉCANOMIE

In my mother tongue, Greek, the word ‘anomia’ is used to signify the lack of laws in a society and the lack of regulations and order in the life of people. Interestingly, the English (and French) translation of anomia goes a step further toward revealing the causes of this disruption by associating ‘anomie’ with the lack of ethical/moral standards in an individual or a group of people. The combination of the two significations provides a very plausible explanation for the global economic crisis that emerged in 2007–2008. The incapacity to operate and legislate on a robust ethical basis or to implement the legislation/rules already in place, were both critical factors that allowed the growth and then the inevitable bursting of the twenty-first century’s first economic bubble.

The site-specific installation *ÉCANOMIE* is a contemplation of this moral context. On the gallery wall, the word ‘ÉCONOMIE’ (‘Economy’) is written in black paint, yet, the first ‘O’ of the word is used to reproduce the well-known ‘A’ symbol of anarchy. Although all the letters of ‘ÉCONOMIE’ have been neatly designed, paint from the anarchist ‘A’ is spilt all around it. Also, a white bucket and a brush have been placed on the floor in front of each letter. Each brush has been used to paint a single letter. The buckets and brushes that lie in front of the wall are almost



ÉCANOMIE, 2011, mixed-media site-specific installation (plastic paint, brushes, plastic buckets, wooden plinth), photo: Contantin Paschou, courtesy the artist and Kalfayan Galleries, Athens and Thessaloniki. <http://vimeo.com/36058184>

completely clean, suggesting that they were used minimally. In contrast, the bucket and the brush that were used to create the anarchist 'A' are both completely covered in paint and placed on a plinth opposite the symbol. The plinth itself is also covered in paint, suggesting that the bucket lying on it has proved unable to constrain the paint within.

But can some form of anarchism be identified as the principal cause that generated the global economic crisis? And is anarchy merely a danger, or could it also be the 'solution' in some respects? In other words, could the repudiation of all systems of political organization be the escape route from capitalism's disintegration? Debord is absolutely right to underline the inherent contradictions characterizing such a dilemma (92). Change cannot come by simply rejecting a structure; it can only come by knowing it in depth and by acknowledging the way it functions. Deprived of this knowledge, we are at risk of reaching a dead end and repeating the same mistakes. Spectacle contributes towards this ramification, by imposing a surface visual (and audio) language, which eliminates criticality. At a time when the economic crisis has itself become a profitable spectacle sold every day through television and computer screens and the front pages of newspapers, art's contribution towards the spread of this knowledge could be of palpable importance.

Complete video documentation of the exhibition 'Le Temps Spectaculaire':
<http://vimeo.com/36053592>

Bill Balaskas is a London-based interdisciplinary artist, a doctoral candidate at the Royal College of Art, London, and an editor at the *Leonardo Electronic Almanac*. His work has been widely exhibited internationally. In 2012 the Global Board of Contemporary Art pronounced him one of the four most important emerging artists around the world.