The Relationship Between Art and Politics Is Shifting

AN INTERVIEW WITH

BEN DAVIS

Issues of inequality, class, and exploitation have come to the forefront within the art world in recent years. Marxist art critic Ben Davis believes that the politics of culture are changing as a result.

INTERVIEW BY

BEN KODITSCHEK

Visual art produced during the neoliberal period has become increasingly alien to working-class and middle-class people, while its role as an investment opportunity and social club for the elite has ballooned. At the same time, a current of critical and explicitly political art has emerged and grown within and alongside the commercial art market. In the past decade, this politically charged current has become a central tendency of contemporary art, raising new questions regarding how to think about the relationship between art and politics.

In 2010, Marxist art critic Ben Davis wrote a pamphlet entitled "9.5 Theses on Art and Class" as part of an exhibition called #Class, organized in response to the vapid and money-saturated state of the art world. His book of the same title, expanding on the pamphlet's ideas, was published a few years later, provoking a renewed discussion around the role of class in the world of contemporary art.

Since then, Davis has continued to develop his ideas about art and its political significance, writing in publications like the *New York Times*, *New York* magazine, the *Baffler*, *Jacobin*, *Slate*, *Salvage*, *e-flux journal*, and *Frieze*. Davis has been the national art critic for Artnet News since 2016. In 2019, Nieman Journalism Lab reported that he was one of the five most influential art critics in the United States.

Jacobin art director Ben Koditschek sat down with Davis to talk about his latest book, *Art in the After-Culture: Capitalist Crisis and Cultural Strategy*, and how the relationship between art and politics has shifted in recent years. They discussed recent museum worker organizing in the art world, the artistic value of NFTs, debates around cultural appropriation and solidarity, and the new for-profit art museum culture.

BEN KODITSCHEK Your first book, *9.5 Theses on Art and Class*, was about the importance of class dynamics in the art world. How has the conversation developed since then?

BEN DAVIS It's developed like a house on fire. I think that book was well-timed. It came out in the immediate wake of Occupy Wall Street. I remember, as a socialist, really feeling the sense that people were talking about class all of a sudden. Occupy attracted a lot of artists, and intersected with different kinds of struggles in art, like the Sotheby's art handlers. There was an actual solidarity action with those workers organized out of Occupy. I was involved in the Occupy Arts and Labor working group, and I remember that there would be breakout groups like "artists and gentrification," "organizing art workers," and "creating new forms of protest art for solidarity." Thinking about it now, each of those topics became major threads in the more general art conversation, post-Occupy.

There's also a difference between then and now. The internet and smartphones weren't new then; they existed. But the critical conversation around them was really new. Internet culture and web culture just blew up to such a huge extent in the last decade. As a result, the position of the cultural producer has exploded in significance, and the conversations about the politics of culture have changed, even if people producing on internet platforms have a very different relationship to those institutions than artists have to museums or galleries. "Content producer" is technically the fastest-growing category of small business. These are major cultural shifts that very few conversations in the art world predicted.

I would say one other thing about how the art world's conversation around class has changed since then. The scandal that triggered *9.5 Theses on Art and Class* was this blowup at the New Museum over an art collector on the board who was also going to show his collection there. It's kind of amazing to think back to a time when that was the big scandal. It at once predicts a whole series of anxieties about who runs the institution, who's in charge, who determines the rules of art, and feels a bit small now.

The discussion about the deep problems with the way the art world works is on another level of seriousness. In some ways, this new book is trying to respond to some of the dilemmas that have arisen with the mainstreaming of the political conversation about inequality and class and exploitation within the arts. The conversation has advanced hugely but has also left us with a bunch of new problems.

BEN KODITSCHEK In the original pamphlet, you point out that art serves the interests of the ruling class. Over the last ten years, explicitly political art has become a major part of the mainstream art world. What do you make of that?

BEN DAVIS To understand the work that "political art" is doing, it's important to look at the period of time that we think of as neoliberal — the defeat of the left labor social movements. The art market became really big business in this same period that, in the nonprofit sphere — the biennials, the museum — art got more committed to institutional critique, community-based art, and questions about representation. So, stepping back and looking at the big picture, you can say that what appears as political advance on one level also serves a compensatory role, that it kind of cushions the blow, giving progressive energy a sense of forward movement at the same time that society went backward.

But even in the last ten years, since my first book was published, there's been a very rapid intensification. There was a mainstreaming of what they call "social practice art," which is art that's often indistinguishable from social work. It developed its own institutions and alternate art world, sort of a third stream outside the biennials and museums and the art market.

And then, intensifying further, there was a turn toward more direct forms of art activism, which has developed recently into a conversation about museum abolition. To me, this language conflates the prison abolition conversation and another conversation, which is about how you deal with the fraught aspects of the museum, in a way that feels unproductive.

I think the dominant conversation has swung really rapidly from apolitical to hyperpolitical, but in a maximalist, abstract way. People are trying to make social progress on the terrain of art without any sort of sustained, larger organizations or movements. And that produces a very abstract and confusing conversation.

BEN KODITSCHEK Can you expand on how you view the recent wave of museum protests?

BEN DAVIS If you're Marxist, I don't see how you could be against protesting very rich people who are genuinely nefarious. And some of the best and most exciting activity in art has been drawn to this. But things went very rapidly from protesting individual donors to asking, "Well, you know, aren't all rich people bad?" And then you move from that to the idea of abolishing the museum, because its funding makes it structurally compromised. And I'm definitely not a museum abolitionist, just strategically. In my observation, these protests have been best when they're very targeted at a specific person or raising awareness about a specific issue.

Just to be blunt, abolishing the museum is not a cause with any kind of mass support. It reminds me sometimes of demonstrations where you see people with signs saying, "General Strike to Bring Down Capitalism," and you just think that it's more about affirming a radical identity than about whatever the immediate cause at hand is. I think people within museums are really aware of how they're compromised now, but protests of the museum hit a point of exhaustion if you can't answer some of the basic questions. If you say you're here to support the workers at the museum, but you're calling for the abolition of the museum, that's a contradiction. You can't get beyond the contradiction without larger movements that change the calculus in terms of funding and public support for art.

Some of the most exciting activity for me has been the organizing by museum workers. I think that's one thing that could change the calculus. It's been really exciting to me to see how this activity in the museum has intersected with this new wave of labor organizing more broadly. There was this week at the beginning of April when the Amazon warehouse here in New York organized and the Starbucks Reserve Roastery organized, and I got three simultaneous announcements of museum protests. Philadelphia Museum of Art workers occupied their steps. The Whitney Museum workers flyered their benefit, protesting for a contract. And the Anthology Film Archives workers were striking for a better deal.

To me, the most hopeful thing for advancing politics within museums is that you have a larger labor insurgency that completely scares powerful people into making good on some of the liberal civil society promises of the museum.

BEN KODITSCHEK About three years ago, you said you were working on a book about cultural appropriation. In the book that was just published, there's a long chapter about it, but it's not the book's focus. What happened there?

BEN DAVIS I just decided it wouldn't be productive to do a whole book about cultural appropriation. I spent so long working on that essay — I think I started it first and finished it last. It's a subject that's all about who gets to speak, and I decided that it was better not to be the white guy writing a book about cultural appropriation. At the same time, I didn't want to retreat from the subject either. The book is very much about thinking through what happened in culture in the last five years, and the question of representation and authenticity has pretty much been the most dominant topic.

The current socialist position on cultural appropriation seems to me to be to point out that cultural mixing is natural and to hope that the more hard-line critique of appropriation just goes away. But the term "cultural appropriation" — kind of by design, the way the media uses it — is a category so broad that it can sustain limitless discourse. It's a fuzzy concept. Everybody pulls a different image out of it, so that one person hears "defending cultural appropriation" as "defending racism," and another hears it as defending the potential for solidarity against racism. And that's a recipe for producing endless waterfalls of content. I don't think it's going to go away.

The debates about appropriation that opened up in the last decade were very upsetting and alarming. They were at a very high emotional pitch, and they seem to me to be completely destructive of a lot of forms of solidarity politics that are very valuable. But I don't think you want to be encouraging socialists to read anyone who brings up appropriation as a complete anti-materialist. As Marxists, we should be looking at the material factors that shape this conversation, figure out where people are coming from, and ultimately move toward some sort of coalition.

BEN KODITSCHEK How do you propose to do that when the conversation seems opposed to social solidarity and bridge-building?

BEN DAVIS I wish I had an easy answer to that, but I don't, because my starting point is that these are not just intellectual errors. I think that the way the cultural appropriation conversation has emerged in the recent period is a symptom of the new levels that the commodification of culture and the instrumentalization of culture by politics have reached. That's what I try to lay out, and those are objective factors. They are going to affect the starting points of lots of people entering politics. You can't just wish them away.

There's a stereotypical "woke" side, and now there's a stereotypical "anti-woke" side too, but I see them as mirror images of each other that are being trained by our media and political culture to read each other for superficial signifiers. And, consciously or unconsciously, that's the product of an agenda to divide people. I don't think you can just concede an essentialist politics either, to pretend that only conservatives or bigots object to the way the cultural appropriation conversation functions, or to only focus on points of agreement. Because there's a backlash coming, and it's been the right wing mainly that's been picking up massive amounts of energy from being the dominant critical voice when people who are confused and alienated google "Why is cultural appropriation bad?"

You need to create some form of political culture that slows down the conversation. It's not a satisfying answer, because the problems are so immediate, but I don't think there's another way. This also comes up in the book in the section on online organizing. You need to be online for range and reach and visibility. Politics has to care about those things — but social media inherently puts you into destructive structures where the most inflammatory forms of argument are what dominate.

This is also a problem that might be helped if there were outside movements with concrete objectives. For instance, during the Bernie Sanders campaign, some of these debates cooled down, because people were on the same page for a little while. And that just put some of the bullshit into perspective.

BEN KODITSCHEK You mentioned a right-wing backlash a moment ago. What do you see coming?

BEN DAVIS Before Donald Trump got elected, there were these right-wing provocateurs and memelords, who had this rallying cry that the right wing is the real punk rock now. And everyone, including me, made fun of them. But the art world has done a really good job of making that look true. And the way that the recent politicization of art has unfolded, I think, feels neither satisfying to people as political culture nor satisfying as artistic culture.

The mainstream cultural conversation now feels very inhospitable to an awful lot of people. From the left and right *and* from the center. And the Right is clearly benefiting most from that. I don't think people realize how widely the "virtue signaling" critique has circulated, and it's a result of putting so much emphasis on advancing progressive values on the terrain of commodified culture, which over time naturally causes people to view them as inauthentic, as branding or PR. There seems to be this idea that progressive ideas are winning by making cultural consumption more and more politicized, when actually I think they are losing, getting more and more hollowed out.

There is a question of displacement — asking culture to do something it can't do. Culture is not structurally disposed to solve the political problems it has been tasked with. As a result, you get a very strange conversation that feels overcoded with moralism.

There are a lot of younger people who are really alienated from mainstream culture now. And what happens to that alienation is not clear. I personally know artists who are trying to find a way to politicize that alienation in a left or socialist direction. But there are much bigger — diffuse, but sometimes organized — right-wing cultural entrepreneurs who've set up sophisticated conveyor belts to take that alienation in their direction.

Just as an example, for the last year, there's been this whole conversation about NFTs. There's the hyper-speculative casino side to NFTs, but they also hook a large audience because a lot of NFT art presents itself as just fun and as self-consciously irreverent — everything museum culture isn't. Art people look at this stuff and are like, "This is completely worthless garbage culture." And a very deep part of me agrees with that. But then I go to a biennial, and I see a pile of carpet samples, and the label says it's about fighting colonialism. And I can inhabit, in my head, the mental space of the young guy who goes to the show and says, "You say *my* culture is talentless and phony?"

People walk by a Bored Ape Yacht Club NFT billboard in Times Square in New York City. (Noam Galai / Getty Images)

I'm more interested in the conversation at the edge of art than the conversation at the center. That was how I picked the subject matter in the book. I think the conversation between inside and outside is more important than the conversation within the art world itself.

BEN KODITSCHEK You take a lot of cultural developments on the outskirts of art very seriously. I was especially intrigued by your discussion of Big Fun Art — like the Museum of Ice Cream, the Museum of Sex, or Meow Wolf.

BEN DAVIS Yeah, the new for-profit art museum culture.

BEN KODITSCHEK And then you have traditional museums on the other side, which, as you describe, are increasingly moving toward that model.

BEN DAVIS The Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam just opened its own Van Gogh immersive experience.

BEN KODITSCHEK Why do you think that is such a generative idea?

BEN DAVIS Well, there are two reasons. I really like an essay by Raymond Williams called "Culture Is Ordinary." One of the things he talks about in that essay is that you have to have some kind of belief, as a Marxist, that people know what they want. They might not get what they want, but at some level, people are after what they want. And so, if there is something like the Museum of Ice Cream that is very popular, I think you should be critical of it, but not without answering the question, "What about it gives people what they want?"

My first impression of some of the Big Fun Art experiences is, "This is really dumb culture." And not just dumb, but almost deliberately medicated — as if you're in an environment that's removed itself from any negative thoughts, and it is here to celebrate you. The reaction to that from the sort of people interested in defending museum culture is basically, "Those fucking self-obsessed millennials."

Meow Wolf's House of Eternal Return, a large-scale, permanent, interactive multimedia installation in Santa Fe, New Mexico. (Courtesy of Meow Wolf)

But look, why is that particular kind of experience so popular at this particular moment in history? It's very likely somehow connected with the fact that rates of depression and anxiety are so high. There is just a lot of ambient negativity, and there is a reason why a large number of people want to turn their brains off and be in a place without negative thoughts.

The second answer has more to do with the tension between aesthetics and politics. These are for-profit art experiences, and there's an interesting history to be written about how our ideas of what art should be grow alongside the history of nonprofit forms. The emergence of charities of various kinds runs along the history of aesthetic ideology and the degradation of the life world under capitalism. Rich people tried to create little islands that save these churchy virtues from the noisy, dirty, degraded industrial metropolis. So art is meant to not be popular. It's meant to defend things that don't necessarily appeal to the broadest audience, that are difficult. And difficulty can be an important virtue to defend.

But when it comes to politics, your goal is actually to reach the biggest crowd, so aligning cultivated taste with radical politics is a trap. If your goal is to advance the project of spreading ideas, you cannot be too much of a snob — you have to try to make a space for people of different cultural backgrounds to come together. You can defend certain values, certain ways of thought that are preserved within museum culture. And I do. But on the other hand, you actually have to be in dialogue with the popular in some kind of way.

BEN KODITSCHEK That's the central tension of the book, between the political activist world and the world of high art. Who's the key audience? What is the book doing in the world? What would an activist, for instance, get out of reading it?

BEN DAVIS The demographics of the socialist left and the demographics of the art world have some of the same problems, or some of the same limitations. They both draw from downwardly mobile professional and college-educated people. I know lots of people who aren't professionally identified as artists, who are labor activists or organizers of different causes, who are just creative people and artists or who think about art in their free time. That's maybe the audience I'm most interested in, and a good portion of the book is not about art as narrowly defined by institutions. I know the book will have an audience from people who know me from my writing about art. But I hope to convey them toward a more rooted socialist conversation.

BEN KODITSCHEK The book is framed by two sci-fi or speculative fiction stories. Why is that?

BEN DAVIS Well, one chapter, "Art and Ecotopia," is about the role of art in speculating about the future, so I thought it was appropriate.

I thought the first story captured some of the critical themes of the book, taking the trends in technology and political breakdown and looking at what a near future for art looks like if we follow these threads to a logical conclusion. And the second one, which is more about what we might hope for from art even in the face of crisis, led me to an important thought. Being a socialist, there's this assumption that there is plenty to go around, if only it was better distributed. But a lot of the discourse about the environment that I talk about in "Art and Ecotopia" is about how there will just be a shrinking amount of habitable land to live on. Even in a socialist world, you can't honestly promise people the same consumption patterns.

That's a problem for building a radical politics, because what do you promise people in terms of an expanded, better way of life in a world where some level of austerity is probably baked into the future? And the thing that you can offer people is more free time, more autonomy, which is also the precondition for a more rewarding and creative life. That's a really important point to me. It squares the value of a noninstrumental idea of art with a very practical question about eco-socialist politics. For Marx, human labor was the magic commodity that could be purchased that also created more value. I realized that actual creative autonomy is the magic luxury that you can have more of while consuming less.

You may say many bad things about capitalism, but it does not starve people of culture. There's more culture to consume than ever, and there are more tools to make culture. What it starves people of is free time and the ability to think about their cultural consumption in a way that's freely determined, outside of just coping, of just getting through the week. There's not enough of that to go around. But by de-commodifying lots of areas of life, people could have that kind of freedom.

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