

Art's Utopian Function

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Over the last year or so I've become intrigued by the links between utopia(nism) and 'contemporary art'. I'm clearly not alone in thinking through these links: the excellent Whitechapel Gallery/MIT 'Documents of Contemporary Arts' series has published an edition on utopia, and I recently attended a really interesting conference at Arken Museum of Contemporary Art near Copenhagen on the relationship between these two fields (which was organised in support of their three year long Utopia exhibition). Nonetheless, I can't help but feel that more could be done to theorise the relationship between art and utopia(nism); particularly from the side of utopian studies, where- despite the continued influence of Bloch (who saw just about everything as utopian), and the spectre of Adorno on the periphery- most research seems to be focussed around Lyman Tower Sargent's 'Three Faces of Utopianism': literature, intentional communities and political theory, with a heavy bias in favour of the former (although the last edition of Utopian Studies was a special issue

on music, and its editor- Nicole Pohl- gave an excellent paper on craftivism and utopianism at the 2010 Utopian Studies Society conference). So this post is a tentative attempt to think through the relationship between contemporary art and utopia which will, I hope, sketch out how the two bodies of thought might resonate, dissonate and modify each other. I'll give particular attention to some of the themes that emerged at Arken and try to situate my concept of the nomadic utopia within these debates. I should add that my knowledge of art theory is minimal at best, though I'm quite comfortable with this position: someone better read (and I intend to get to this position) might not see things the way an 'outsider' might.

Art's Positive Function: Representing Utopia



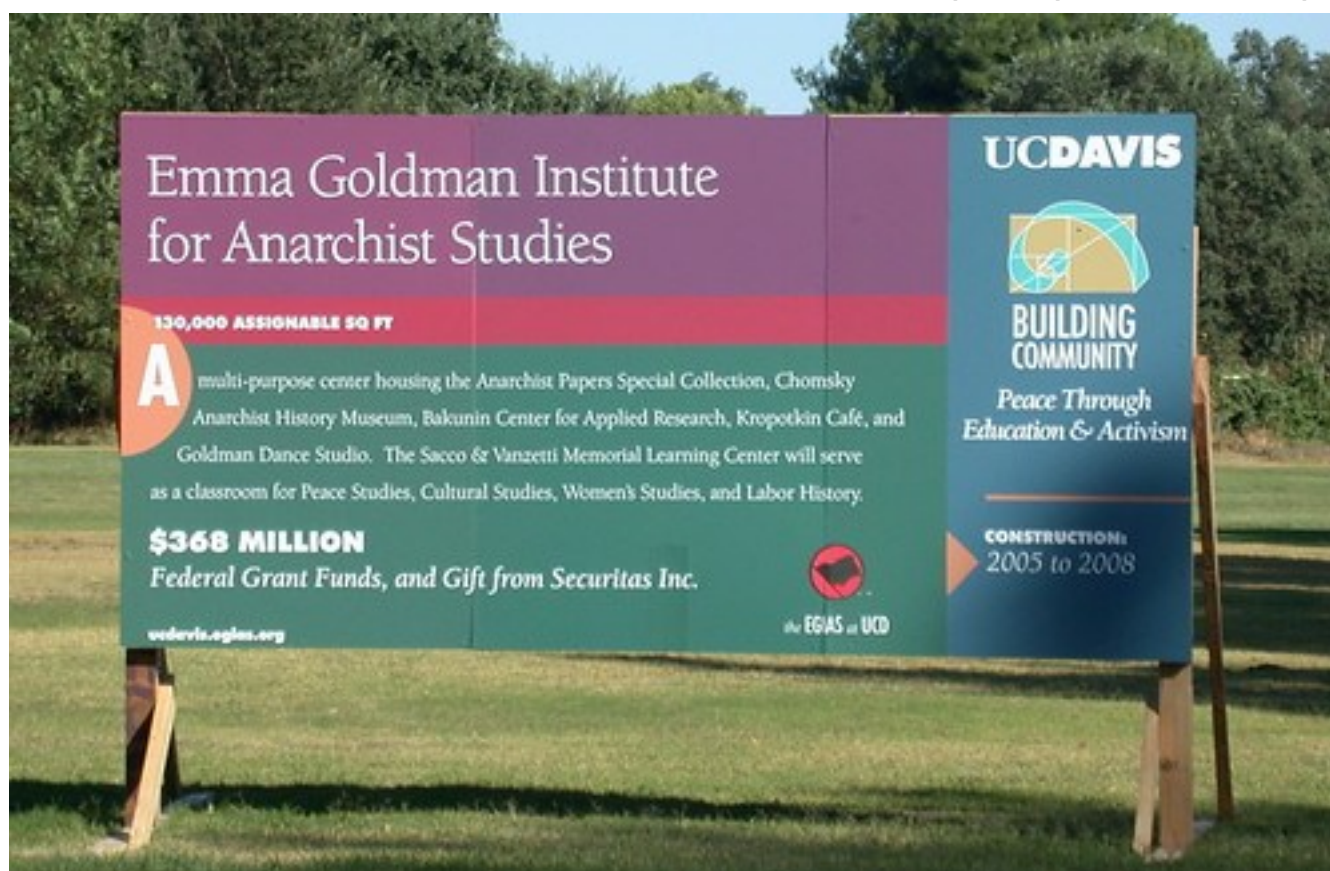
The most obvious (crudest?) way in which art and utopia interact is through art offering representations of utopia; creating great celebrations of the life to come. The function of art here is to inspire us to work for what Fredric Jameson calls 'the utopian program'- a systemic political strategy designed to capture space and shape it in accordance with a utopian design. It might offer a 'realistic' vision of the aesthetics of utopia, or simulate the giddy excitement of life in the good place. It is this kind of utopian expression frequently accused of being orientated to perfection (Jameson, for example, says the program aims at totality and closure), and which is criticised for paving the way to dystopia. No-one likes a grand narrative nowadays.

Such art is frequently not autonomous, but is bound up with politics (revolutionary or otherwise), architecture or advertising: it may not even be art at all (but let's not go down that road). And as

Jacob Wamberg reminded us at Arken, it also runs the risk of being kitschy; of having little artistic merit.

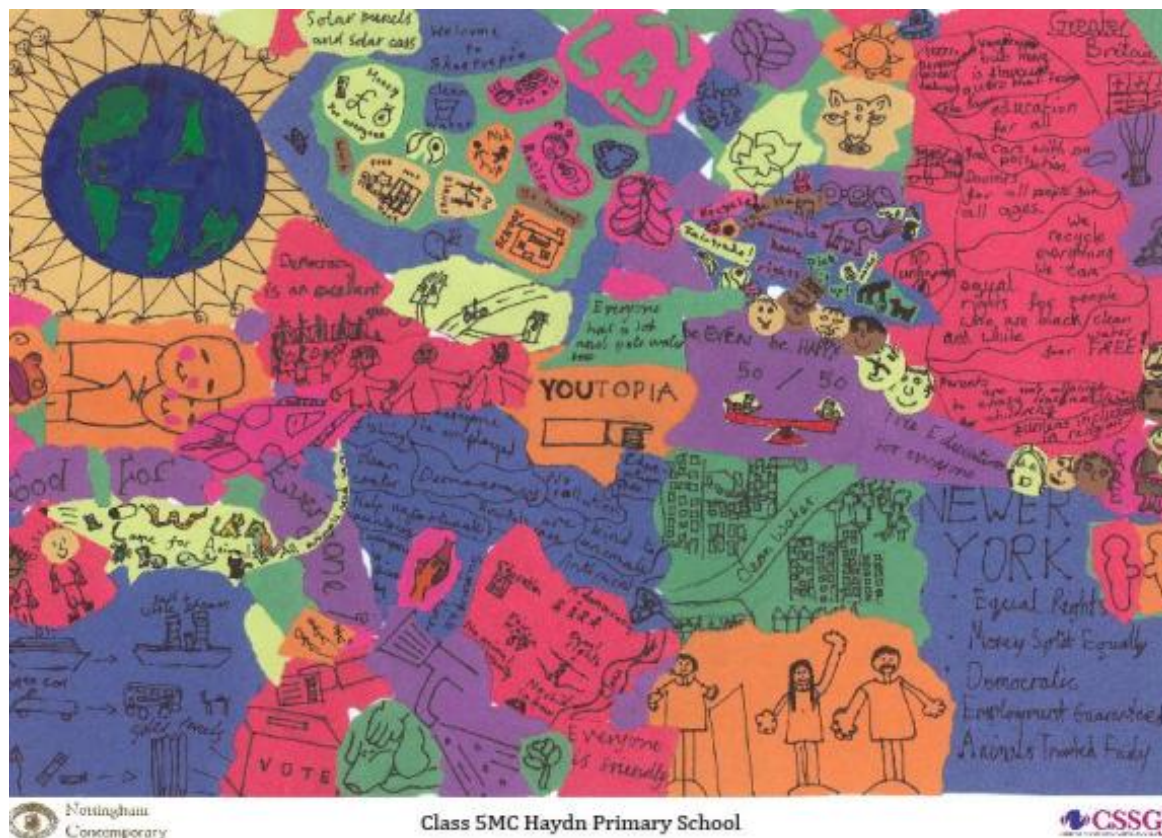
Art's Heuristic Function: Unpicking Dystopia

Yet we shouldn't be too quick to dismiss all artistic representations of utopia (not sure I'd want to salvage Kinkadee, mind). Should they really be taken as to be blueprints or representations of perfection? Can they not be read instead as heuristic suggestions that the world could be otherwise: hints at a future whose power lies not in the specificity of their visions but in the fact that they have a vision? Lyman Tower Sargent, Darko Suvin and Tom Moylan and others have made this point about utopian literature (and Ruth Levitas about utopia more broadly), and at Arken Stephen Duncombe made a similar point- arguing that More's Utopia (and works of utopian art) function as 'imaginal machines' (a term taken from Steven Shukaitis) which prevent us from 'returning safely to our own place'. He offered Rob Walker's Hypothetical Development Organisation and the fake building site notices of Steve Lambert as exemplars. By proposing to build 'utopian' structures in the present, their work unsettles our sense of what is normal and- perhaps- of what is possible.



This 'unpicking of certainty' was the impetus behind 'Towards an Even Geography'- a project I instigated with my good friend Rachel Walls when we worked on the Public Programming team at Nottingham Contemporary for the duration of the Uneven Geographies exhibition last year. We published five utopian visions (most of which were commissioned in response to the exhibition) as a small pamphlet and accompanying poster (which appropriated the aesthetic of Öyvind Fahlström's

dystopian Column Two— featured in Uneven Geographies- by a class of 9 and 10 year olds at Haydn Primary School).



Such utopian works may not provide all the answers to the world's ills, but they certainly show us that there's an alternative to the dystopia we currently live in. 'To speak of utopia is always to speak of the present intolerable arrangements', as Kropotkin once said, moving utopia away from a vision of a positive future and towards a critique of a negative present.

Art's Negative Function: Utopia as Process

It's clear, then, that the representation of utopia may not function as a programmatic blueprint, but as the instigator of what Jameson (drawing on Ernst Bloch) calls the utopian impulse: something which acts in the immanent realm rather than calling to us from a transcendent location in the temporal or geographic Great Beyond. For Adorno (who dialogued with Bloch on these issues), this impulse is utopia. Far from being a positive vision of radiance and fulfillment, utopia is inherently negative: a fidgety, eternally dissatisfied force which destroys the conditions of the present. Positive utopian visions are merely for 'bourgeois comfort' (Jameson again); utopia never settles on a particular order but destroys all orders. It is this reading of utopia that Boris Groys identifies in Ilya Kabakov's *The Man Who Flew Into Space from His Apartment*, which:

freed the original utopian energy of the cosmic dream from imprisonment in a particular political and technological system. Leaving behind its empty, ideological and technological shell, the cosmic dream re-establishes its own essence and establishes, post factum, its authenticity, because the essence of a dream is the very fact that its

essence is not fixed, it has no definite form and it is not institutionalised. For it is only longings, desires and indefinable wishes that can now be genuinely collective...Even the act of emigration, leaving Soviet society behind, is not presented as a betrayal of that society but as something nurtured by the same utopian energies that originally led to the birth of this society...Which is why the desire to cross borders, to overcome constraints, can still be regarded as an expression of that original utopia'

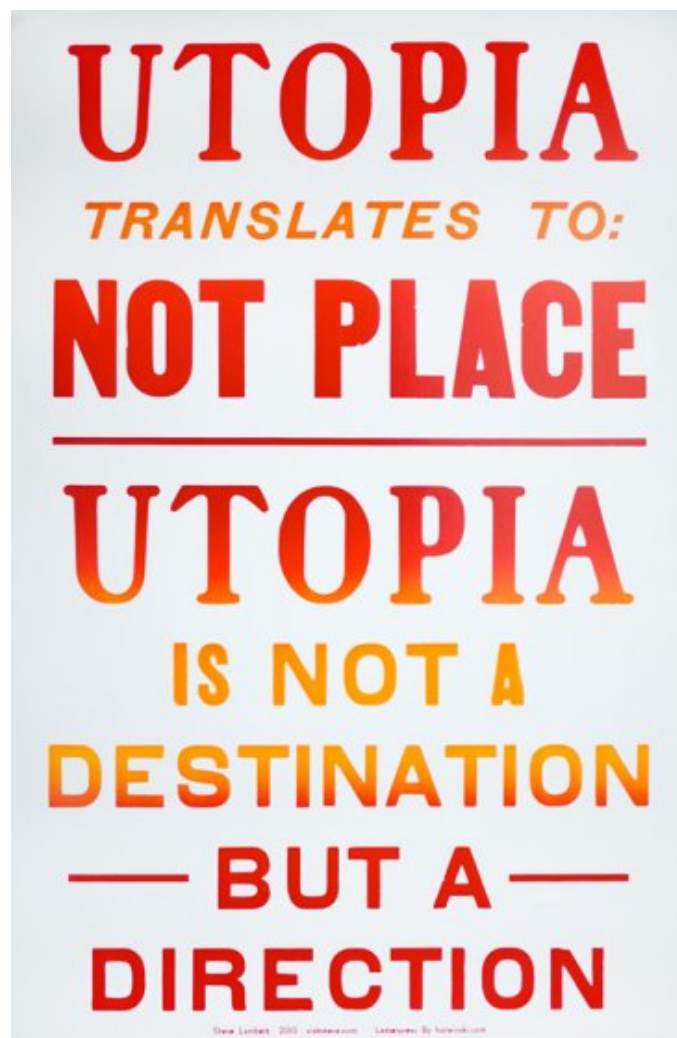


It's this negative concept of utopia which constituted much of the discussion at Arken. Rachel Weiss spoke about new Cuban art, weaving a complex cat and mouse tale in which artists seek to keep the utopian impulse alive in the face of the utopian program (in the form of the Cuban state). In her opening address Camilla Jalving- a curator at the museum- noted that 'utopia is what it is by not being': outopia (no place) rather than eutopia (good place), or 'The Place that isn't', as the title of her short essay in the museum's guide to Olafur Eliasson's Your Blind Passenger (the current work in the Utopia exhibition) puts it. Meanwhile Richard Noble, who edited the aforementioned Documents of Contemporary Art on Utopia, argued utopia is most political when it's being negative, and Nils Norman argued that utopia is an analytical tool which enables us to look at a space and critically reveal what is not there.

Noble also quoted Peter Berger's claim that Adorno sees art as utopian because 'it cannot be absorbed into the practice of life'. The claim here is that from its position of relative autonomy, art provides a space for critical (negative) reflection on life. Without an autonomous art we will lose a vital space for negative critique and the practice of utopia, leaving neoliberalism free to celebrate itself in all its hideous vainglory.

The influence of Marx and Engels is strong on this variety of thinking. There is, of course, the scathing criticism of positive utopianism as bourgeois- but replace art/utopia with communism you're not far off the following, from *The German Ideology*:

Communism for us is not a state of affairs which is to be established, an ideal to which reality will have to adjust itself. We call communism the real movement which abolishes the present state of things.



Now I'm certainly more attracted to this theorisation of utopia than the utopia-as-blueprint model: I'd agree with Wamberg that this is likely to be kitsch and/or totalitarian. But I can't fully embrace this idea of utopia as a direction, impulse or negative force. I'm against blueprinting perfection, but I don't think utopia can do away with the notion of space. To do so is to lose the specificity of utopia: it is to confuse it with radical politics, and when we do that there is no need to call it utopia. What Adorno et al. are calling utopia is, in fact utopianism, and utopianism seems pretty redundant without a utopia. The passage from Groys above seems to understand this- calling the impulse which prompted the man to propel himself into space utopian, but not utopia itself (which remains spatially bound).

This seems to leave utopia's sole function as a heuristic device or imaginal machine unpicking our certainty in the world we currently find ourselves in. But whilst I think this is a really valuable

function of utopia, I don't think it's all utopia can do- utopia doesn't have to be about the 'no place' which forces us to critically return to our present; it can also be about the prefigurative 'good place' which offers an alternative to our present.

Art's Positive Function #2: Being Utopia

The concept of the nomadic utopia- which I'm developing in my PhD- seeks to retain Adorno's utopia's negative, immanent rejection of the present without doing away with the 'positive', spatial aspect of utopia. It agrees with Stephen Duncombe, who argued at Arken that criticism is now pretty ineffectual: using art/negative utopia to blast away false consciousness/dystopia is not sufficient; it must create spaces which offer positive alternatives. The nomadic utopia is spatially situated, but it remains a place of becoming; a place-in-process (and yes, I need to read Lefebvre). It remains a utopia only to the extent that it is open to change, and to the extent that that change is open to change. The utopia is constituted by the utopianism which created it and continues to create it. Heraclitus' river that can't be stepped in twice or Deleuze and Guattari's 'schizophrenic object' (an object which continues to be defined by the forces of production that brought it into being) might be considered as analogous philosophical concepts.

Taking the immanence of Bloch and Adorno's thought, nomadic utopianism accepts that any static order of things will be unacceptable; dystopian (a site of fulfillment/closure/totality I call a State Utopia, but that's for another post). It is, therefore, a negative movement. Yet this negativity does not sit in splendid isolation from society, but transforms society (or a quantity of it) into a utopian space. Thus, the relationship between utopia and utopianism is inverted. Rather than the former calling the latter into being (here is the way to live, now you must create it), the latter creates the former. The utopia is made by the utopianism. It is a prefigurative political action. The positivity implicit in Adorno's negative critique is made explicit and topos is returned to utopia.

Anarchism's influence on the concept of the nomadic utopia is strong, as is that of Gilles Deleuze (from whose work with Felix Guattari the concept 'nomadic' is taken). In order to remain open to the future a space must be nonhierarchical and constituted by difference-in-itself. It is this which makes it both a good place and a no place: the good coming from Deleuze's reading of Spinoza and Nietzsche (where it is a self-willing force seeking to maximise its capacity for puissance, or productive power); the no coming from the fact that the nomadic utopia can never announce its victory, can never say 'this is utopia for all time', but must say 'no' to any attempt to ossify the social relations of the space.

Elsewhere, I have suggested that the spaces created by improvising musicians function as nomadic utopias. But what of art?

There are two questions here. On the first: 'what art catalyses or empowers a nomadic utopianism?' I would point to the heuristic utopian programs mentioned above. The utopias they depict might not be nomadic (or we might not have enough information to know), but their function is to help us go

beyond the present; to open up the present to the future. The second is harder to answer. E.P. Thompson's pronouncements on class hold true for the nomadic utopia: we cannot understand it, or represent it, by taking a snapshot of its make-up at a particular point in time. Rather, we must observe it over a period of time. Only then can we assess its nomadism: the extent to which it remains open to the future; remains defined by forces which seek to go beyond it (This is not to say that the nomadic utopia is in a constant state of ecstatic flux. Such a situation would hardly be utopian at all. Angela Carter's *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* can, perhaps, be read as a nomadic dystopia. Change may be relatively slow- what matters is that the space is not closed to change; has not ossified into a form which it regards as fixed, or ceases to consider as a form that could be changed).



Representing nomadic utopia through art may not be possible. It might look like a painting by Hundertwasser; it might spring up in an abandoned tower block. Or its spaces might be invisible, such as the spaces created in the practice of collectively improvising music. But perhaps art can help us create a nomadic utopia? That is to say, can the artwork itself can be a nomadic utopia? Bourriaud's concept of the relational aesthetic can perhaps be of use here. Of particular interest is his assertion that 'contemporary art resembles a period of time that has to be experienced, or the opening of a dialogue that never ends' (though I have to say- much of the art he celebrates leaves me rather cold). Joseph Beuys- an influential figure for Bourriaud- is also interesting here. His short essay 'I Am Searching for My Field Character' speaks of:

‘A SOCIAL ORGANISM AS A WORK OF ART.

This most modern art discipline- Social Sculpture/Social Architecture- will only reach fruition when every living person becomes a creator, a sculptor or architect of the social organism. Only then would the insistence on participation of the action art of Fluxus and Happening be fulfilled; only

then would democracy be fully realized. Only a conception of art revolutionized to this degree can turn into a politically productive force, coursing through each person and shaping history.'

For Beuys, art no longer occupies a sphere of critique autonomous from society, and this is central for nomadic utopianism. If social relations are to be truly open to difference, then all must be considered as artists: not those deemed artistic by galleries and collectors (a point which rather makes a mockery of art's supposed autonomy, surely).

Art, then, merges with that society and seeks to transform it- not through some hierarchical, vanguardist resculpting of society, but through everyone being an artist, and repeatedly experiencing (everyone else's) art. 'Society as a work of art', as the title of Malcolm Miles' Marcuse-inspired paper at Arken put it, or Jon Dewey's concept of 'art as experience', perhaps. I'll stick to more familiar ground, however, and draw on the arguments of musicologists Adam Harper and Christopher Small, for whom music should not be seen as some autonomous entity separated out from the lifeworld, but as a part of that lifeworld itself. Here's Harper, on precisely that point:

You see, there are many languages throughout the world that don't actually have a word for music. This is usually because a culture has no concept of music as an abstract noun that needs to be signified. These aren't the languages of societies and civilisations that don't have any practices we in the West might interpret as musical – such activities are found in varying forms throughout the world's populations – far from it. For centuries, Westerners have grown up with the idea that music is an abstract thing. This handling of musical activity gives rise to the belief that music is separate from, and floats above, everyday life – at best reflecting it, reminding us of it, rather than residing in the real world and embodying it.

If we replace 'music' with 'art' here, then you arrive at what Nils Norman spoke of in Copenhagen: an art that constitutes a praxis which runs through all the artist's activities as a human being. So for Norman- a teacher as well as an artist- teaching becomes an artistic practice, as evidenced by two projects he's instigated: The Exploding School and The School of Walls and Space; and by his work for the exhibition Utopia and the Everyday in Geneva from 2009-10. Interestingly (for me, at least), the Exploding School and the School of Walls and Space are both influenced by critical pedagogy and anarchist theories of education. I think it's possible to see the anarchist 'classroom'/critical pedagogical space as a nomadic utopia (I've written on improvised music and critical pedagogy here), and Bourriaud states that Guattari poses 'the ultimate aesthetic question' when he asks '[h]ow can you bring a classroom to life as though it were an artwork?'.



I was also excited by Norman's talk of the adventure playground movement (he's written a book on adventure playgrounds in London) and thought this was- perhaps- a potential realisation of the nomadic utopia: a space made and remade by those who inhabit it without any form of hierarchical ordering (I'm postulating here, I haven't read enough to know for sure), whilst his cheeky suggestion to create 'zones of disorder' in North London (where health and safety and planning laws are foregone; giving the community a space they can utilise as they see fit) reminded me of the Eastside Island Utopia Project I'm establishing in an attempt to collaboratively think through how a nomadic utopia might look in reality.

Heuristics, Positivity and the Future of the Art Museum (as best I can manage in a couple of hundred words)

Yet perhaps we're getting ahead of ourselves here. Whilst creating and uncovering nomadic utopias (through art or otherwise) offers a much needed positive political vision, it leaves our capitalist dystopia largely intact. The marginality (and relatively apolitical- or 'amacropolitical' nature) of many such practices is unlikely to have much effect on this fucked up world because the needs for such ways of living don't make themselves apparent to many. And so we're left with the conundrum Marcuse expounded back in 1970, which Malcolm Miles quoted at Arken:

'[F]or new, revolutionary needs to develop, the mechanisms that reproduce the old needs must be abolished. In order for the mechanisms to be abolished, there must first be a need to abolish them. That is the circle in which we are placed, and I do not know how to get out of it'.

So I think we do still need some art that operates in a sphere of relative autonomy: art galleries/museums are some of the most frequented sites of (potential) opposition to the current order we have, and we shouldn't treat them as the enemy, structures to be abandoned as art and life dissolve into one another. If a nomadic utopia managed to flourish on a large scale, I'm not sure what kind of spaces for the display of art would be needed. I'd like to think it would be an integral

part of everyday life, but I'm tempted to say that there would still be a need for art galleries: spaces where art did have some kind of autonomous space and where it could continue in critical function. Perhaps what we perhaps need is an 'Exploding Museum' to go with Norman's Exploding School (and on this note, I must get myself a copy of this: Arken's book on 'utopic curating'); the art gallery/museum as a space for art, education, life and utopia which critiques its society, but also transforms that society into a work of art. Into a utopia

