



Intellectual Generals of General Intellect

Pierre Guillet de Monthoux

Three times we met, the artist and me. She was planning a performance, and I was to be part of it. In retrospect, perhaps I should refer to the event as an ‘installation’ instead of a performance. But I get ahead of my story. As a scholar – or at least trying hard to be one – I was as happy as a Dutchman on a cocoa box! I had sent the artist my latest book¹ and she had called it interesting, *en passant*. In return she added me to her mailing list, which entitled all of us to information on her shows. My God, I thought. She certainly is active: one show in London followed by a show in Amsterdam, in Krakow, all over the place. Soon she will be a global phenomenon. Finally, despite our busy schedules, we were able to find time to meet to plan *the* performance.

Our meeting was like a business meeting: you know, a meeting where you feel someone expects something you are supposed to deliver, something for which the client has very special expectations. Still it was not quite a business meeting. The difference between a business meeting and this somewhat strained conversation was the lack of forms, standards, and specifications. I was to be part of this artwork, or performance, or installation, and she would tell me what to do. And that was that. End of discussion. Soon we began talking about the common topic of art and business.

“I like your book,” she began, “but do you realize what it means to have a recommendation from a guy from Harvard Business School on the jacket? Do you realize that your book will never be read by any serious artist?” After an appropriate silence, she went on. “I don’t agree with that kind of simple judgement, of course, but it is a fact. I know what I am talking about. I have worked in management consultancy myself. In fact, I loved that world; it still continues to inspire my work.”

She used to spend long hours in the office, she continued, gaining inspiration from the things going on around her. And always she kept her artistic work out of the business. She realized how her work as a management consultant would hamper her career as an artist. “It’s much the same way the recommendation of someone from HBS would repel most artists from even touching your book,” she pointed out.

1 Guillet de Monthoux, P. (2004) *The Art Firm: Aesthetic management and metaphysical marketing*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.

Some time later she asked me to come to the bar for a drink before the performance. I arrived and got acquainted with the team she had flown in to cover the show. There was an art critic deeply concerned with the problem of finding a spot 'outside capitalism' in our time of global capitalism! A Benjamin scholar, she lived in Berlin and was a very interesting person. There was also a 'facilitator' from the UK, a smart and interesting man who accompanied an artist who was to create commentary drawings during the performance. His job was to draw a huge cartoon on one of the walls of the gallery. Some local art students, obviously impressed and happy to be part of the event, completed the team.

I too was delighted to be there. This was fun, I thought, although I felt a little anxious about having had no real discussion about what was to come. As nice as the meeting was, I really needed further details. No one said a thing, though, and I remembered that the only instructions I had were those she had given me at our first meeting. She had asked me to tell the audience about a case in my book, and the story she wanted me to tell was about Jacques-Louis David and his work organizing a revolutionary feast in Paris during the terror of the 1790s.

I honestly don't know what happened next. What I do know is that I really did not want to do what she had ordered me to do. Only the devil knows for sure why, but I wanted to sing a little song instead. Seems irrational, doesn't it? Singing a song... and I can barely carry a tune. But there I was. I said a little something and then opened my mouth and delivered my little ditty. Since the piece was not long, I don't think people minded too much. At the beginning of the program, the critic had spoken, then I had spoken and sung, and if I remember correctly, the artists next presented, using the templates from a standard PowerPoint program. The whole program was managed by the facilitator while the draftsman drew his big cartoon in the background. Then everyone enjoyed a drink, as usual, and a very few people asked questions, also as usual.

I left the session with mixed feelings, at least one worth mentioning. Why in the world did I sing my little song? Why not give this professional lady what she wanted: the story of Jacques-Louis David? Why not accept and comply with the orders of the client, who had even included a budget item to provide me with a fee for my work. Had I asked for money? I later felt badly about what I had done, but damn, it felt right at the time. As I sat in that particular environment, directed by that particular facilitator, and listening to that particular critic in quest of an Archimedean point outside what she called global capitalism, I had no choice. Jacques-Louis David, that second-rate painter turned opportunistic revolutionary, no longer was relevant. Or was he perhaps too relevant? Anyway, I had to do something other than perform as the business professor telling the story of a mediocre painter turned political activist. I am accountable. I did what I did, and I am sure I will never again be asked to do something in an art context.

Maybe I should ask the artists to perform to my business students. They would not be a terrifically good audience, though. They are slowly but surely abandoning PowerPoint aesthetics and are feeling less and less compelled to comply with a corporate culture that is eroding and disappearing. They have picked up bits and pieces of Negri and Hardt, and they agree with Boltanski' and Chiapello's diagnosis of project-manic neo-

management sucking the aesthetic energy out of the art world.² They are out there in the labour market and dream of getting the protection and privileges their parents got as corporate condottieris. To the new generation seeking employment, corporate culture is at best a peregrination into rosy nostalgia. Corporate culture, with its set roles, clear cut functions, and methodological success orientation has become dusty history. Regardless of how it is defined, culture in general now constitutes the foundations for aesthetic leadership.³ Oldfashioned management, with its facilitators and PowerPoint graphics, is today best enjoyed at Putin's Russian and Deng Xiaoping's Chinese Cadre-Academies, where the guardians of the wall between art and business defend the domain of the pure political power recently witnessed in the Chodorkovski show trial.

When management, performing as the rites and religion of big business, becomes a well-documented piece in museums of contemporary art, some want to replace it with general intellect, in the service of which artists can then pretend to be Intellectual Generals. And will there really be room for more Jacques-Louis Davids in the Multitude?⁴ Or shall we just forget it all and warble our guileless songs in this strange post-fordist, or better, post-corporative era.

the author

Pierre Guillet de Monthoux is Professor of General Management at Stockholm University and Fellow Adjunct Professor, Centre for Art and Leadership at Copenhagen Business School.
E-mail: pgm@fek.su.se

2 Boltanski, L. & E. Chiapello (2005) *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. London: Verso.

3 Guillet de Monthoux, P., C. Gustafsson & S.-E. Sjöstrand (eds.) (forthcoming) *Aesthetic Leadership: Managing Fields of Flow in Art and Business*.

4 Virno, P. (2002) *Grammaire de la multitude*. Nimes: Conjonctures & L'éclat.