

Beyond the Ruins of the Creative City

Berlin's Factory of Culture
and the Sabotage of Rent



25 See: www.22barcelona.com

26 See: www.mediaspree.de

27 See: www.mediaspree.de/Magazin.43.0.html

28 See: www.skulpturenpark.org

29 See: <http://einstellung.so36.net/en>,

http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andrej_Holm, <http://annalist.noblogs.org>.

30 Walter Benjamin, 'A Berlin Chronicle', 1932, in: Reflections, New York: Schocken, 1986: 'Very soon the Romanische Café accommodated the bohemians, who, in the years immediately after the war, were able to feel themselves masters of the house... When the German economy began to recover, the bohemian contingent visibly lost the threatening nimbus that had surrounded them in the era of the Expressionist revolutionary manifestoes... The 'artists' withdrew into the background, to become more and more part of the furniture, while the bourgeois, represented by stock-exchange speculators, managers, film and theater agents, literary-minded clerks, began to occupy the place - as a place of relaxation... The history of the Berlin coffeehouses is largely that of different strata of the public, those who first conquered the floor begin obliged to make way for others gradually pressing forward, and thus to ascend the stage.'

31 Arifa Akbar, "A formaldehyde frenzy as buyers snap up Hirst works", The Independent, 16 September 2008. Web:

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/news/a-formaldehyde-frenzy-as-buyers-snap-up-hirst-works-931979.html>

32 BAVO, "Plea for an uncreative city. A self-interview", in: Geert Lovink et al. (eds), The Creativity: A Free Accidental Newspaper Dedicated to the Anonymous Creative Worker, Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2007.

33 Antonio Negri, Constantin Petcou, Doina Petrescu, Anne Querrien, "Qu'est-ce qu'un événement ou un lieu biopolitique dans la métropole?", Multitudes #38: Une micropolitique de la ville: l'agir urbain, Paris: Editions Amsterdam, 2008; trans.: "What makes a biopolitical space?", www.eurozine.com/articles/2008-01-21-negri-en.html

34 The economist Joseph Schumpeter popularized and used the term 'creative destruction' to describe the process of transformation that accompanies radical innovation. In Schumpeter's vision of capitalism, innovative entry by entrepreneurs was the force that sustained long-term economic growth, even as it destroyed the value of established companies that enjoyed some degree of monopoly power. See: Joseph Schumpeter, Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1942.

35 Antonio Negri, Il dominio e il sabotaggio. Sul metodo marxista della trasformazione sociale, Milano: Feltrinelli, 1977; trans.: Dominion and Sabotage: On the Marxist Method of Social Transformation, in; Antonio Negri, Books for Burning: Between Civil War and Democracy in 1970s Italy, London/New York: Verso, 2005.

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Berlin's Factory of Culture and the Sabotage of Rent

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From Detroit to Berlin:

History of the Underground Culture Through the Paradigm Crisis.

Faster than any other form of art, music is said to incarnate but the unconscious of technology and dominant means of production, and in particular their crisis, the shift from paradigm to paradigm. Whereas Futurism welcomed the age of machines for the masses, punk and post-industrial music, in contrast, paid tribute to the disintegration of Fordism and colonized the relicts of suburban factories as a habitat for new forms of life. Despite their industrial fetish, Throbbing Gristle, the most experimental and filthy of UK punk bands, declared as early as 1976 their drive for "information war"², while in Germany computer music became popular thanks to Kraftwerk (literally, 'power station'). In the late 80s techno music appeared in Detroit: the original sound of the Motor City incorporating the synthetic presentiment of the coming digital machines.³ The term 'techno' was inspired to Juan Atkins by Alvin Toffler's book *The Third Wave*, where the first 'techno rebels' were described as the pioneers of information age.⁴ Detroit techno was the analogue rhythm session of Fordism innervated by the harmonics of the first microchips. Thereafter when digital code became the hegemonic paradigm of information, underground music went even more modular, cognitive and minimal (switching from TR-909 drum machines to Max/MSP software, to simplify it in a technical formula).⁵ After diverse evolutions, the parable of the Detroit techno has found its way today into the Berlin clubs under the mainstream and micro-hedonist genre of 'minimal techno'.⁶ This basic genealogy of electronic music (skipping the predictable theories of sampling and remix culture) is to pose a simple question: where is the underground today? The horizontality of networks and digital matrix seems to have erased hierarchies and authorship but also the old reassuring topological notion of the underground. If the underground was precisely a parasitic form of life in the interstices of dominant mode of production, its urban and electronic infrastructures, where can we find its new incarnations in relation to the contemporary technology and metropolis? If the factories became informational and immaterial like even punks predicted, which relicts is the art underground going to colonize in the next future? Which ruins and material memories will the digital matrix leave behind?

The notion of the underground belongs obviously to the age of industrialism, when society had a clear class division and was not

society, between society and the state, become more and more organic. At the highest level of capitalist development social relations become moments of the relations of production, and the whole society becomes an articulation of production. In short, all of society lives as a function of the factory and the factory extends its exclusive domination over all of society".

13 See: Lawrence Lessig, *Free Culture: How Big Media Uses Technology and the Law to Lock Down Culture and Control Creativity*, New York: Penguin, 2004; Benkler, Yochai. *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006.

14 'The spectacle is capital to such a degree of accumulation that it becomes an image', in: Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, New York: Zone Books, 1995, thesis 34. Orig.: *La société du spectacle*, Paris: Buchet-Chastel, 1967.

15 Henri Lefebvre, *La Révolution urbaine*, Paris: Gallimard, 1970; trans.: *The Urban Revolution*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

16 Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, Amsterdam: Querido, 1947; trans.: *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972).

17 For a definition of 'biopolitical machine' see: Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000.

18 Carlo Vercellone, "La nuova articolazione salario, rendita, profitto nel capitalismo cognitivo", in *Posse: Potere Precario*, Roma: Manifestolibri: 2006; trans. by Arianna Bove: "The new articulation of wages, rent and profit in cognitive capitalism", www.generation-online.org/c/fc_rent2.htm

19 Ibid.

20 Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier. Gentrification and the Revanchist City*, New York/London: Routledge, 1996.

21 Ibid., p. 67: "The rent gap is the disparity between the potential ground rent level and the actual ground rent capitalized under the present land use... Once the rent gap is wide enough, gentrification may be initiated in a given neighborhood by any of the several different actors in the land and housing market."

22 David Harvey, 'The Art of Rent: Globalization and the Commodification of Culture', in: *Spaces of Capital*, New York: Routledge, 2001.

23 Sharon Zukin, *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982. In a similar way, the role of artists and bohemians in the gentrification of New York's East Village in the 1960s has been highlighted also by Christopher Mele in *Selling the Lower East Side* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000). Not to mention Manuel Castells' work on the particular role of gay men as 'gentrifiers' in San Francisco during the early 1980s (Manuel Castells, 'Cultural identity, sexual liberation and urban structure: the gay community in San Francisco', in: Manuel Castells, *The City and the Grassroots: A Cross-Cultural Theory of Urban Social Movements*, London: Edward Arnold, 1983). These studies are just a few examples that introduce the theoretical context hijacked by Richard Florida two decades later and transformed into banal marketing strategies for provincial towns, re-labelled as 'creative cities'.

24 Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan, "The Fine Art of Gentrification", October, Vol. 31, (Winter, 1984), pp. 91-111.

1 This piece was originally presented with a Rebecca Solnit quote, however it has been deleted for this pamphlet because of her more recent reactionary comments.

2 V. Vale (ed.), *RE/Search #6-7: Industrial Culture Handbook*, San Francisco: RE/Search Publications, 1983.

3 See: Dan Sisko, *Techno Rebels: The Renegades of Electronic Funk*, New York, Billboard Books, 1999.

4 Alvin Toffler, *The Third Wave*, New York: Bantam, 1980: "The Techno Rebels are, whether they recognize it or not, agents of the Third Wave. They will not vanish but multiply in the years ahead. For they are as much part of the advance to a new stage of civilization as our missions to Venus, our amazing computers, our biological discoveries, or our explorations of the oceanic depths".

5 The TR-909 Rhythm Composer is a partially analog, partially sample-based drum machine built by the Japanese Roland Corporation in 1984. Max/MSP is a graphical development environment for music written by Miller Puckette in the mid-80s, but it became renown only in the late 90s. A more intuitive and crucial software for the latest generation of DJs and digital musicians is Ableton Live, whose first version was released in 2001.

6 For a definition of minimal techno see: Philip Sherburne, "Digital Discipline: Minimalism in House and Techno," in: *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, New York: Continuum, 2004.

7 See: Rosalind Williams, *Notes on the Underground: An Essay on Technology, Society, and Imagination*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990.

8 Underground Resistance (commonly abbreviated to UR) is also the name of a legendary musical collective from Detroit that has had a seminal role in the history of techno music. They are the most militantly political example of modern Detroit Techno with an anti-mainstream business strategy. See: www.undergroundresistance.com

9 See: Brian Ladd, *Ghosts of Berlin: Confronting German History in the Urban Landscape*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997; Philipp Oswalt, *Berlin - Stadt ohne Form. Strategien einer anderen Architektur*, München: Prestel Verlag, 2000.

10 Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life*, New York: Basic Books, 2002; and: *The Flight of the Creative Class: The New Global Competition for Talent*, New York: Collins, 2005.

11 These notions have a different genealogy: respectively originated and conceptualized by the Frankfurt school ('culture industry'), UK Government Department for Culture, Media and Sport ('Creative Industries') and Richard Florida ('creative economy', 'creative class', etc). If these notions are based on the exploitation of intellectual property or cultural capital, the 'social factory' reclaims the common as an autonomous force of production.

12 Mario Tronti, *Operai e capitale*, Torino: Einaudi, 1966: "The more capitalist development advances, that is to say the more the production of relative surplus value penetrates everywhere, the more the circuit production-distribution-exchange-consumption inevitably develops; that is to say that the relationship between capitalists production and bourgeois society, between the factory and

yet atomized into a multitude of precarious workers and free-lancers.
7 For decades, the innervations of the industrial apparatuses formed the machinic imaginary of subcultures, also providing many urban interstices to populate. If the underground culture was the by-product of Fordism, such a spatial and political dimension seems to evaporate in the age of the network society, the well-educated 'creative' commons and corporate Free Culture. Where is the underground resistance in the age of financial capitalism and volatile stock markets?⁸ The contemporary phenomenons of financialization and gentrification are examples of new techniques of valorization (based on speculative rent) still to be comprehended by cultural activism and art world. Today the global credit crisis affected specifically these new models of business and has suddenly shifted many political and cultural coordinates. Gentrification as it has been experienced in Berlin and the European 'creative' cities may encounter its doppelgänger. Today's American nightmare is paradoxically the \$1 house and 'detroitification' is the neologism that describes this vertical collapse of the industrial sector, the real estate market and the very social fabric of US cities. Before knowledge economy and gentrification processes were fully understood, cultural production found itself in the new scenario of financial and credit crisis. In a city like Berlin the underground has become a 'factory of value' (mainly for real estate speculation and city marketing), but now the destiny of cultural production has to be rethought within the current global crisis.

The Invisible Skyline of the Cultural City:

The Frictions of the Immaterial

In Berlin the colonization of the relicts of Fordism is still a fascinating and complex history: not only the vestiges of previous totalitarian regimes, but also the schizophrenic stratification of failed urban plans form the geology and the humus of the cultural world.⁹ Today this stratification includes a thick immaterial layer of cultural and symbolic capital, which is catalyzing the 'creative city' buzz and well-known processes of gentrification. There is therefore an immaterial architecture yet to be uncovered, or more specifically, an economy of the immaterial that is fed unconsciously by the art world and underground subcultures. This issue is related once again to the question: what kind of underground culture is possible in a time of spectacular economy? What looks like a nostalgic question points in other ways to the political autonomy of the 'social factory' of culture and to new coordinates for cultural agency that may be more effective on the economic ground. The hypothesis advanced here is that the contemporary form of 'underground' has to be found along the new chain of value accumulation - along the new ruins of financial crisis. The good old underground has become part of the cultural industries and the spectacular economy, as well as our life has been incorporate by a more general biopolitical production (that is the whole of our social life has been put to work). On a cynical note, this question of the neutralization of the underground concerns also business. What's the future of gentrification if there are no more subcultures that produce 'added value' and make it circulate across the city? The literature which promotes the 'creative cities' (such as the work of Richard Florida)¹⁰ or denounces their hidden neoliberal agenda and social costs is extensive. This text approaches the ideological construct of the 'creative city' (and similar models) from a different angle in order to attempt a reverse engineering of its economic mechanism. Usually both liberal partisans or radical critics of 'creative economy' employ a symmetrical paradigm, where the material and the immaterial domains are defended in their autonomy and hegemony against each other. Therefore, the metropolis is respectively described along the urban fabric or the symbolic capital, the good old material economy or the supposedly virtuous economy of 'creativity'. On the opposite, this text tries to underline the conflicts, frictions and value asymmetries that occur along the material and immaterial domains; the material accumulation of value triggered by cultural

exploitation, or else it remains an ephemeral gesture. In the case of cultural and urban gentrification then, the only hypothesis left is the sabotage of rent - a sabotage of the value accumulated by exploiting the common domain of the cultural and symbolic capital and its redistribution.

Since the 'creative destruction' of value characteristic of stock markets has become the political condition of current times, a redefinition of the cultural commons is needed too.³⁴ A purely imaginary fabrication of value is a key component of the financial game as well as gentrification processes. Stock markets first taught everybody the sabotage of value. Sabotage is precisely what is considered impossible within the postmodern parlance (where each gesture supposedly reinforces the dominant regime), or conversely what Negri himself considered a form of self-valorization during the social struggles of the '70s.³⁵ What might occur if the urban multitudes and the art world enter this valorization game and recover a common power over the chain of value production which these days is revealing its inherent fragility? The new coordinates of the underground in the age of cognitive and financial capitalism can be found along these intangible vectors of value, along these invisible 'ruins' of the Creative City, just as once the music underground started to colonize the industrial relicts or to the invisible architecture of the first microprocessors. The punk underground grew out of the ruins of the suburban factories and now we experience a so-called creative economy parasitizing the underground itself: it is time to imagine the factory of culture getting organized within the ruins of value that the 'creative cities' are ready to leave behind.

production; the autonomy of the social factory of culture against the skyline of the 'creative' cities. Hopefully in this way the invisible motor of the cultural city can be grasped, possibly re-engineered and effectively inverted. Conceptually, three notions are introduced here. First, the concept of the factory of culture, that is the social production of culture versus the established Creative Industries and the institutional policies of the 'creative cities'. Second, the profound asymmetries of cultural commons and the accumulation of value between the two layers of symbolic production and material economy (as it happens for instance with gentrification: such conflictive concretions of value can be considered as the very 'ruins of the Creative City'). Finally, the notion of creative sabotage of creative rent is suggested as a political response to gentrification and exploitation of cultural capital (such a sabotage of value is 'creative' as it builds over the financial and real estate 'ruins' and is constitutive of the common).

The Factory of Culture and the Metropolis

The concept of factory of culture is opposed to notions like culture industry, Creative Industries or 'creative cities'.¹¹ The contemporary production of culture is far more complex, machinic, social and conflictive than what the fashionable and institutional models of creativity promote: it is indeed a 'factory'. The old notion of subculture was developed as a alternative to the paradigm of dominant culture with a deep concern for a positive and productive identity. Postmodernism came to destroy the reassuring dialectics between highbrow and lowbrow culture, but never developed a proper economic model or value theory. The figure of the factory of culture addresses on the opposite a key productive role for the cultural world within what Mario Tronti described as 'social factory'.¹² There are many social factories of immaterial labour in today's economy and each would deserve specific attention: education, art, digital networks, and so on. Underlining culture as a factory means also to show the machinic complexity of economy and to criticize the dominant reading of the commons as a territory virgin of any capitalist exploitation. Contrary to the interpretation of Free Culture apostles like Lawrence Lessig and Yochai Benkler, the commons of culture are not an independent domain of pure freedom, cooperation and autonomy, but they are constantly subjected to the force field of capitalism.¹³ The commons of culture are a form of life, always productive and conflictive, and often also easy to exploit. In particular, at the twilight of the society of the spectacle, a dense material economy is discovered at the core of cultural production. Debord's controversial aphorism can finally be reversed: "The capital is spectacle to such a degree of accumulation that it becomes a skyline of cement".¹⁴ After decades of parallel evolution, two strata of recent history have converged in a unique dispositif: the urban revolution (as Lefebvre described the city in the 1960s, a motor of autonomous production and capital accumulation)¹⁵ and the cultural industry (as the Frankfurt school inaugurated the transformation of culture in business and 'deception').¹⁶ The name of this newborn chimera is 'creative cities' - an asymmetrical chimera, as the mask of culture is used to cover the hydra of concrete and real-estate speculation. The chimera of cultural cities is a complex machine, no longer based on the opposition between high and low culture that was central to the Frankfurt School canon of the culture industry. Specifically, culture production is today a biopolitical machine where all aspects of life

The Underground and the Sabotage of Rent

The most extreme incarnation of the artistic mode of production is the figure of Damien Hirst whose art has become a purely financial performance. A former student at Goldsmiths, Hirst ironically embodied the university's karma (it emerged from a heritage of a medieval guild of goldsmiths and jewelers!) and radicalized the PR machine provided to all the Young British Artists by the art department. His most recent artwork is a modern version of The Golden Calf that has been sold at Sotheby's for 10 million pounds just after its completion.³¹ This piece will be recorded as a milestone only for one reason: it's the first time an artwork has accessed the open market by completely skipping the usual mill of galleries and art dealers. Indeed Hirst started to build over the 'ruins' of the financial mania. Yet is this cynical over-identification with capitalism the only destiny left to the underground? Maybe, in the same way the underground started to colonize post-industrial relicts, it is time to visualize the post-financial ruins which to build upon.

However, many proposals coming from politically correct activism or so-called radical thought still sound quite ineffective. For instance, the plea 'Be uncreative!' addressed recently by the collective BAVO represents quite a paranoid attitude. Here we are still in the typical postmodern cul-de-sac, where each act of resistance is supposed to reinforce fatalistically the dominant Code.³² This Lacanian paranoia about a Spectacle able to co-opt any spontaneous production of culture results eventually in the self-castration of the living energy of the metropolis. Similarly, also the idea of sustainable art or sustainable gentrification, where artists are supposed to be concerned about their production of symbolic capital and rent value, is simply naïve. One of the contradictions of cognitive capitalism is that once symbolic capital and value are accumulated, it is quite difficult to be de-accumulated. All these models lack a proper understanding of the economic model of cognitive capitalism: it is not possible to advance a proper political response without affecting the accumulation of surplus-value and ground rent must be confronted with a different strategy. Recently, Antonio Negri has criticized the forms of 'soft activism' in the metropolis, or those who believe that the 'political diagonal' can escape the trap of the 'biopolitical diagram' and so it would be possible to build 'temporary autonomous zones' like it was fashionable once.³³ In other terms, Negri underlines the fact that the political action has to affect the economic production and

are witnessing the condensation of a peculiar form of cultural capital as the leading force behind real estate and the 'creative cities' strategy of city councils eager to attract both investments and highly skilled workers. As a result, the real estate business, has established a perverse machinery in alliance with the art world and cultural producers. Even if for decades the counterculture has been feeding the spectacle and culture industries with fresh ideas, for the first time, the current generation of urban subcultures have to face the immediate concrete by-products of their symbolic labour.

are integrated and put to work, where new lifestyles become commodities, where culture is considered an economic flow like any other and where, in particular, the collective production of imaginary is quickly hijacked to increase the profits of corporate business.¹⁷

The Asymmetries of Value in the Cultural Sphere:

The 'Artistic Mode of Production' and the 'Collective Symbolic Capital'

Under different respects, the hegemonic business model of cultural economy is rent. "Rent is the new profit", as Carlo Vercellone has put it.¹⁸ To be clear, rent is the motor of valorization behind gentrification, for it exploits the common resource of land or cultural capital without being particularly productive. Forms of rent are also monopolies over software patents, communication protocols or network infrastructures (Microsoft, Google, Facebook just to bring few examples from the digital sphere). If profit and wage are the vectors of capitalist accumulation under industrialism, monopoly rent and exploitation of the cultural commons are the business models specific to knowledge-based economy, or cognitive capitalism.¹⁹ Behind the new forms of gentrification there is a significant link between real estate speculation and cultural production - a link that is still not enough clear in many art circles. Neil Smith was the first to introduce gentrification as the new fault line between social classes in his seminal book *The New Urban Frontier*.²⁰ In his principal model the gentrification of New York is described through the notion of rent gap: the circulation of a differential of ground value across the city triggers gentrification when such a value gap is profitable enough in a specific area.²¹ David Harvey further expanded the theory of rent to include the collective production of culture as a terrain that the market exploits to find new 'marks of distinctions'. In his essay *The Art of Rent* that describes the gentrification of Barcelona, Harvey introduces the notion of collective symbolic capital: real estate business exploits the old and new cultural capital which has gradually sedimented in a given city (in forms of sociality, quality of life, art, gastronomic traditions, etc.).²² Harvey's essay is one of the few texts to underline the political asymmetries of the much-celebrated cultural commons. Harvey links the intangible production and accumulation of real money not through the regime of intellectual property but along the parasitic exploitation of the immaterial domain by the material one. The collective symbolic capital is another name for the capitalist exploitation of the commons - a form of exploitation that does not need violent enclosures (a sort of 'capitalism without private property' that many activists of Free Culture do not recognize).

The notion of collective symbolic capital is crucial to reveal the intimate link between cultural production and real estate economy.

The collective symbolic capital is accumulated in different ways. In a traditional way, it is the historical and social memory of a given locale (the case of Barcelona covered by Harvey). In a modern way, it can be produced exploiting urban subcultures and the art world (describing the rise of the loft culture in the New York of the '80s, Sharon Zukin defined a specific artistic mode of production oriented to making neighborhoods more attractive for business).²³ Or, in a more artificial way, it can be generated by the PR campaigns of city councils eager to join the club of the creative cities (according to the strategies of Richard Florida). Already 1984 Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Ryan explained similar techniques in their classic article "The Fine Art of Gentrification".²⁴ Despite their different urban latitudes, Berlin and Barcelona share a similar destiny. The old underground of Berlin attracted and then boosted gentrification, just as in Barcelona. Later, over this cultural milieu, a second-order strategy developed large urban plans related to the media industries. In Barcelona the 22@ urban plan was designed to regenerate the former industrial district of Poble Nou under the fashionable concept of 'knowledge city'.²⁵ Similarly, in Berlin the project 'Media Spree' aims to transform a big area on the Spree River into a new pole for culture industries.²⁶ The area is well known for its underground music scene, and there is a stark contradiction that reveals more than a hundred analyses: to promote this area, the magazines of the investment companies are using the imagery of the same clubs that they put under eviction.²⁷ Also the Berlin Biennale showed interest for the urban battlefield: the 2008 edition featured the project *Skulpturenpark Berlin_Zentrum* as one of its main venues. *Skulpturenpark* is an "urban void" owned by various private companies and individuals, formerly part of the "Mauerstreifen" (the militarized zone within the Berlin Wall) and now overgrown with weeds.²⁸ It started not simply to host public art projects for the biennale but also to question the controversial role of artists in relation to the urban space. The arrest of Andrej Holm in July 2007 for his research on gentrification occurred in this broad urban context - an arrest that made clear to a wide audience the scale of economic interests and police attention around the new G word.²⁹ Considering that even Walter Benjamin complained about bohemian bars being invaded by the new rampant middle class (in the 1930s!), a century-long conflict could be traced in Berlin alone as a continental case study.³⁰

Today the 'artistic mode of production' has become an extended immaterial factory. Throughout Berlin and the whole of Europe, we