

# Society's Richer Yet She's Thin as a Rake.

## A Discussion between Franco 'Bifo' Berardi and Penny Rafferty

The estimated end of resources on planet earth is set at 2050<sup>1</sup>. We walk or scan/flick through the devastation everyday—soaring rent prices, dilapidated buildings, underfunded schools, higher taxed resources, crippling debt, police violence, and privatised health-care. We have become alienated from the planet on which we live and set the task of martyrdom via a society from which we are estranged. Yet through the abrasive scars of capitalism we have entered into our most creative point of human history and “the artist” is everywhere. Throughout 2014, we saw the crowning ceremony of Anthropocene and the knighthood of Apple as the most profitable business on planet earth and the most sought after tool for the creative class<sup>2</sup>. It then comes as no ironic surprise that some of the most dynamic mass struggles today—such as anti-racism, climate change and intersectional feminism—are unfolding inside the sphere of art and coercing everyone into becoming an artist. Life seems at its most harrowing, or is it just inspiration? Speaking to Franco “Bifo” Berardi, we dissect “the artist” as a profession or insurgent.

**Penny Rafferty:** Why do you think people assume the position or title of an artist today?

**Franco 'Bifo' Berardi:** I have been obsessed and haunted by this question over the years. I have always been torn between two ideas of why people produce and create. One possibility is that they create for usefulness in a moral, historical, and social sense. The other is that art is totally useless and this is the richness of art. It's a superfluous activity and product by its very nature, which should not be seen as a luxury product, nor be handed to the lazy or the rich on a whim. Art itself is the divine purity of excess production.

**PR:** Taking the latter idea that art is the “divine purity of excess production”—how does the institution and the network fit in?

**FB:** I would say they are not so easily aligned. I have difficulty with the market and its relation to art. I don't refuse it as a writer. I publish; I could not live without selling books. My difficulty doesn't lie in the refusal of the market, but I'm tired of the market's impotence. Why only yesterday, Berlusconi's daughter (who is even worse than him) bought the second largest publishing house in Italy. *Mondadori* is the first. So now the book market in Italy is totally in the hands of Berlusconi.

Well, this means nothing day-to-day, but as a writer I have always thought of myself as a salaried worker. When I was twenty years old, I wrote pornographic novels. It was my first job, and I earned my living for years writing porn. It was in the period of rising feminism, and many of my closest friends were very active feminists. I wasn't embarrassed, per se, of the act, but it was a problem and, funnily enough, I was proud of it. I would say, when the metalworker works in the car factory nobody judges him for his ecological politics—he is paid for what he does. So I don't care about the porn industry—it's my job.

So you see being an artist means so many things; you can say it's salaried work or an attempt to become a rich capitalist. It can be either, or it's a way to do something that refuses the market and usefulness, and you can also say it's a way to take part in the social rejection of capitalism.

Also the word art is almost embarrassing—what does it really mean?

**PR:** I think the word art has never meant so much. People are identifying more with art as it becomes blurred and skewed, resulting in the art world

itself expanding into the field of technology, science, and philosophy like never before. But perhaps this is exactly art, an ever-expanding field with no limits or horizons in a world where we are constantly given parameters—why not find solace in the life of an artist?

**FB:** Well, exactly, why do people choose not to be an engineer but to be an artist—when they spent the last years studying engineering? I studied aesthetic theory at university in 1968 with an Italian philosopher, Luciano Anceschi. He was the first person who introduced me to this question, what is art? I was a young activist, I wanted to study poetry and art, but the first thing I remember him saying is, “I will never tell you about art. As art is nothing, art is only what you decide is art. Nobody can doubt whatever is created with artistic intention.” So there is a possibility of art in everything. For me it was the ‘60s, and it had a direct reference to the death of art, but I wanted to look at the essentiality of art in relation to social activism. In a sense, this has been my goal since the very beginning.

**PR:** And now?

**FB:** Well, in the last five years I have started to have the idea that the essential meaning of art is the reactivation of the erotic social body. The body is a crucial tool in art, dance, and politics.

When I took part in the movements of Occupy, I personally never understood it as a political movement. In politics the goal is power, and in Occupy there was no question of power, nobody craved it. Yes, it was against the global economic power, but something that size was never going to be conquered by this action. What was happening in Zuccotti Park and on the streets and the plazas was not politics as such, but a need to reactivate the erotic body of society away from stagnant financial abstraction. It's a new way to think about art. The physical presence of being with others, it's something we have lost.

**PR:** I can see the natural ability of art and activism acting as fission between people, space, and ideology, but this has a limited time frame for audience captivation. It only occurs in these moments of rupture when we give up work or deny our economic obligations for the greater good. Yet day-to-day, we are constantly moving against each other fighting for resources, space, capital; our consistent participation

in this neoliberal economy doesn't offer freedom from each other.

**FB:** Yes, day-to-day we are moving against one another; we are taught to think of one another as competitors, not as friends. But this is a new strategy in the workplace. Originally, workers worked in the factory, they lived in the same streets, and socialized together after the workday—living all their lives together with the same possibilities and naturally the same impossibilities. Now this is over; workers never meet in the same place twice, they are like crazy atoms going in different directions. They are part of the machine, and the precarious worker now sees the other as a danger to his or her own livelihood. This has deeply hindered the progress of the worker and has an increased effect on the worker's alienation from his peers, environment, and desires.

**PR:** So, actually the ego is the biggest survival strategy of the worker, and society pumps this “super-ego” out to us daily through our own media, culture, and fear. Take, for example, the re-appropriation of Charles Darwin's theory of “the survival of the fittest”—it is now a cocky catchphrase on Wall Street. The larger the ego, the more chance you will survive and conquer your peers, giving you freedom, wealth, and security.

**FB:** You are forced to. It's not moral, it's social, it's materialistic. You will be more successful the more you take on “culturally” the identity of the “ego”. I don't think the people of today are more stupid than my generation. I think the cognitive worker knows more and is sharper than ever, and I don't think they are any more egotistical—they are in a position of war. When you are on the battlefield, you cannot choose to kill or not to kill, because if you choose not to kill you are killed. This is their reality.

**PR:** But then if you assert yourself into the position of the artist, you put yourself into the utmost position of precariousness.

**FB:** Yes, the condition of the artist is the most extreme manifestation of the precarious worker, and it's competitiveness, but it's also freedom from slavery, from salaried work.

**PR:** I see the romanticization of the artist and yes, I think some people become artists to avoid capitalist slavery, but how does this fit into the idea of the erotic?

**FB:** Ahh, yes, well this is another problem. When I was here before (Berlin, Germany), in May 2011, I was speaking to someone who told me that 24% of young Germans wanted to be artists according to some newspaper. Naturally, they didn't know what being an artist is like; they may think it's like being Michael Jackson and being very rich, etc. But this statistic came true, the art academies are booming, and becoming an artist is sort of possible for all in the generation of the precarious worker. Essentially, this choice to become an artist is the choice to escape the boredom of work. This sentiment is strong in the self-perception of the artist. It has always been this way. It's the bohemian attitude.

**PR:** In my eyes, becoming an artist is to change the rules, to slow down or eradicate the goals set to us by society; when we should go to school, when we give birth, when to die, etc.—It's an act of rebellion.

**FB:** Yes, which is why being an artist is saying I don't want to be a slave, a slave of life, a slave of salaried work, but previously when I asked your opinion, you said you thought people wanted to be artists because they needed a new form of language?

**PR:** Yes, I did and I still believe that. The next generation has resigned themselves to a world that is centred entirely around lack: a lack of work, economy, and resources. You will constantly need or want something. People are resigned to this "indebted" life. So they escape and rewrite it with an online persona, a digital life, or a personally curated digital profile, freeing themselves from their physical bodies that are enslaved to the system. A virtual reincarnation of the so-called freed aesthetic self can take place online. I say aesthetic because we cannot do anything online without aesthetics, be it a moniker or a choice of emoji or profile picture. The masses are the creators once more, yet everyone creates their own singular systems of visual communication as an artist would.

**FB:** Which brings me back to art and action. In the 1960s, being an engaged artist had a special meaning. You could be whatever you wanted—rich, egotistical, power hungry, or elitist. You just had to say the working class will win, and Stalin is good, and capitalism is bad. I don't like engaged art, it can be fake. I don't like art that preaches. In my opinion, the task of the artist is now to revive the body as I saw in the action of Occupy. When I say body, I mean the social, political body and persons who are bodily. Do you remember the 2012 Biennale in Berlin, curated by Arthur Żmijewski? He brought the

Occupy movement into the museum; well, I find this art action hypocritical. I don't care for political progressive values in the museum. I prefer very much to dance in the streets. The place of the museum is a preconceived place where you know what you will find, but the streets can change your life.

**PR:** I have strong reservations about art and the political gesture in general. From community arts to rehashing "the protest" in the museum—but for me, I ask the question, why is this art? Why are we shying away from the term activism?

**FB:** Well, if your artwork is able to create a possibility of people being together, that is an artwork. Where you are physically means nothing; you could be on the Gaza Strip or just writing on the wall—it means nothing really. But if it has the chance to move people, then it could be art.

**PR:** This is true, but it is an active gesture. Why must we call it art? Surely, activism is a much purer form than art—take your Engaged Art as a case study.

**FB:** Because people aren't confident they need more than politics to identify themselves with, they need emotional discourse. If the intentions are to make people happy, then why not? Of course, it doesn't make them an artist but they are producing art. I think you are saying it's not enough for an artist to just have good intentions to produce good art, and I agree, but we must all try to reactivate the erotic body. What we must do in art now is to emancipate ourselves from the dictatorship of abstraction.

**PR:** I found Banksy's latest action interesting for this notion of emancipation in art, with his Dismaland theme park being dismantled and sent to "The Calais Jungle" with only this statement presented online as documentation: "All the timber and fixtures from Dismaland are being sent to the Jungle refugee camp near Calais to build shelters. No online tickets will be available."<sup>3</sup> This seems a purer act. He doesn't assume the position of the angelic artist on a theatrical stage.

**FB:** So this is Dada extremism at its finest. Only the gesture is important, not the documentation or grandeur.

Do you remember when we first started talking about this, why people wanted to be artists? I said, I thought that people were artists because they didn't want to be slaves, yes? You said, people wanted

to be artists because they needed to create their own language, which at the present moment has something to do with the digital language that is dominant in society. I think both of these are interesting points, but they are both talking about intentions of what can be implemented into a gesture. The trace of art is not problematic; art can be a spectacle but it can also be the re-activator of the social erotic body that can create a chain of reactions through society, and this latter idea is exactly what I expect from art. Art is the act of creation outside salaried work, and art creates singularities in space. But these are things that determine what an artist does, not what is art.

### Notes

1 Mark Townsend and Jason Burke. 2002. "Earth will expire by 2050." *The Guardian*, July 7. Accessed online.

<http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2002/jul/07/research.waste>

2 Douglas A. McIntyre and Thomas C. Frohlich. 2015. *24/7 Wall St.*, October 27. "The 10 Most Profitable Companies in the World 2015." Accessed online.

<http://247wallst.com/special-report/2015/10/27/the-most-profitable-companies-in-the-world/>

3 Notification from Dismaland: <http://dismaland.co.uk/>.

**Franco 'Bifo' Berardi** is a contemporary writer, media theorist and media activist. He founded the magazine *A/traverso* (1975-1981) and was part of the staff of *Radio Alice*, the first free pirate radio station in Italy (1976-1978). Like other intellectuals involved in the political movement of *Autonomia* in Italy during the 1970s, he fled to Paris, where he worked with Félix Guattari in the field of schizoanalysis. He has been a contributor to the magazines *Semiotexte* (New York), *Chimères* (Paris), *Metropoli* (Rome) and *Musica 80* (Milan) and *Archipelago* (Barcelona). Currently he is writing for the monthly *LINUS* (Milano).

He has published *Le ciel est enfin tombé sur la terre* (Paris, 1978) *Mutazione e Ciberpunk* (Genoa, 1993), *Cibernauti* (Rome, 1994), *Felix* (Rome, 2001, London 2009), *Generacion Postalfa* (Buenos Aires 2007), *Skizomedia* (Roma, 2005), *La fabrica de la infelicidad* (Roma, 200, Madrid, 2004), and *El sabio el guerrero el mercader* (Aquarela, Madrid, 2006). In 2009, he published *The Soul at Work* (*Semiotext(e)*, Los Angeles), *After the Future* (AK Press, Oakland, 2012), and *The Uprising* (*Semiotexte*, Los Angeles, 2012). He is teaching *Media Theory* at the Academy of Fine Arts in Milan, and has lectured in many universities around the globe.

In 2015 he published the book *HEROES* (Verso Futures, London) and *AND – Phenomenology of the End* (*Semiotexte*, Los Angeles).

**Penny Rafferty** is a writer and visual theorist based in Berlin. She is heavily involved with the artist collective group *Omsk Social Club* featuring *PUNK IS DADA* (2012) and pioneered the spectacle *Ying Colosseum* (2014). She is working intensively with the concept of *Cosmic Depression*—the theory of depression caused by digital utopia (*Paradise without Ecology*). [www.punkisdada.com](http://www.punkisdada.com)