

STEPHEN PRITCHARD O Rose thou art sick

We live in a time of alienation, oppression and suppression, dispossession of our rights and, in many cases, our homes, and in a time of consumerism and commodity fetishism. In this neoliberal world, we are told that there is no alternative to this way of being and living. Competition rules. Dog-eat-dog. All this is dressed up as “social mobility” and “individuality”, “freedom” and “choice”, “democracy” and “ownership”, and “innovation” and “progress”. All this is, of course, a façade.

Neoliberalism is “glocal” – global *and* local. Every person is an object, every institution is an enterprise. Everything has a value and everyone, it often seems, has a price. The centrality of neoliberalism engulfs (or at least threatens to engulf) everything, everywhere. It seeks to colonise even its farthest margins – whether it deems them productive or otherwise. Its language of free markets, freedom, localism and deregulation is a sham. The neoliberal state (and of course each one is both unique *and* the same) is in fact deeply authoritarian, controlling and highly regulated.

The suggestion that the arts (whatever that might mean) or academia is in any way marginal, unregulated or in the least bit interested in prefigurative political change is, unfortunately, unreasonable. These institutions are part of the market-driven, regulatory framework of neoliberal governance. They marginalise communities and people. Their attempts to “include” and to be “diverse” are little more than falsities – a “caring” veneer which excludes and stereotypes people and communities. Unfortunately, even popular artworld buzzwords like “participation” and “collaboration” have become part of neoliberalism’s complex lexicon. Words that obscure realities like difference – class, race, gender, and so on – and subjugation and oppression. Words that conceal very different objectives. Words that seem to free us yet do quite the opposite. Words that impose authority and ever more invasive regulatory structures rather than offering us freedom from them.

In this context, I argue that any attempt by the arts or academia or any other institution to attempt to challenge, to insist upon change, upon social justice and equity for everyone, simply produces and reproduces the very regulatory structures that it may claim to be critiquing (or perhaps even denouncing). To participate is to *participate within* the neoliberal system of governance – to reinforce our lack of opportunities, lack of democratic rights, lack of humanism, lack of reasonable rights; to re-enact and reimpose hierarchical control. To collaborate is to *collaborate with* the neoliberal system – to do their work for them, even when it may appear that we are criticising them and asking for (usually very minor) concessions in return for our collaborations.

It is therefore only possible to realise radically different prefigurative politics by re-inhabiting the margins – by becoming peripheral. We must understand that to enact prefigurative politics requires us to enact and embody the society, the world in which we want – not that which already exists. We need to create our own critical utopias – collectively *and* individually. Our futures lie *outside* the neoliberal paradigm – in our dreams for socially just societies. Yet we must also work within the neoliberal “glocal” monoculture – not by demanding different or less or more democratic regulation, but by being disruptive and disobedient by helping the already rotten structures of governance to decompose more quickly. Our futures also lie *inside* the neoliberal paradigm – by acting as its saboteurs. The rose is sick. We are, I argue, its invisible worms.

The Sick Rose (William Blake, 1794)

O Rose thou art sick.

The invisible worm,

That flies in the night

In the howling storm:

Has found out thy bed

Of crimson joy:

And his dark secret love

Does thy life destroy.

