After Brexit, Art Must Break Out of Its Bubble

The cultural establishment's reactions are getting it all wrong.

Ben Davis, June 28, 2016

Supporters of the 'Stronger In' Campaign react as results of the EU referendum are announced.
Photo Rob Stothard/AFP/Getty Images)

In the early days of 2009, to celebrate its ascendancy to the presidency of the European Union, the Czech Republic commissioned a special artwork for the headquarters in Brussels. Unfortunately, the artist they chose was Czech prankster David Černý, and the work they got was the instantly controversial *Entropa*.

Instead of a representation of European unity, Černý installed massive scaffolding, within which each nation was represented by a dysfunctional stereotype culled from the news: Spain a barren construction site, France draped with a banner that read "On

Strike," Sweden a box of Ikea parts, the Netherlands a flooded plain with only minarets visible above the water, representing panic over a Muslim takeover.

Entropa on display in the hall of the Justus Lipsius building in Brussels. Image: Wikimedia Commons.

The UK? It was represented simply by a gap in the map where it should be; a yawning, absent, Eurosceptic presence.

Černý's sculptural trolling has proved to be more prescient than the vast majority of the commentary in the run up to the Brexit vote. Almost the entire chorus of respectable opinion stood on the side of Remain, and now stands revealed as catastrophically out of touch.

Even the bookies got it wrong, according to the *Independent*, tagging Leave as a long shot despite mounting momentum in the other direction. Why? The "serious money, involving sums that might make you think quite hard before betting, were going on Remain."

In other words, those with "serious money" were so insulated from the majority of British opinion—the idea of a Brexit seemed so unthinkably stupid from their point of view, their capture of the levers of power and opinion so secure—that they couldn't even rationally assess the odds of it actually occurring.

Most Brits I know are heartbroken now, mortified, and with reason fearful at the way the vote has empowered the extreme right, imperiled immigrants, and touched off a cascade of unknowable economic catastrophe.

Satirical artist Kaya Mar poses for a photograph with Brexit-themed artwork depicting British Prime Minister David Cameron, former London Mayor Boris Johnson, Leader of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), Nigel Farage, and Scotland's First Minister and Leader of the Scottish National Party (SNP), Nicola Sturgeon, in central London on June 24, 2016.
Image: Ben Stansall/AFP/Getty Images.

In the face of all this, the opinion makers of the art world have not added much in the way of insight to these emotions. On the contrary.

By and large, what I see are thunderous homilies to cosmopolitanism and the virtues of immigration, larded with a lot of sanctimony and sarcasm—plus a healthy dose of cant about the universalism of culture that would have sounded regressively pre-postmodern just days ago.

"Art reflects our national consciousness, but now we've just dug a big hole and buried it for ever," super-sculptor Anish Kapoor lamented in some (poorly worded) reflections posted to the *Guardian* the morning after the referendum.

Playwright Lucy Prebble is more scathing in the same article: "I blame you, Leave voters, for 'going with a gut feeling' of empty rhetoric and downright lies because of a sad sense of lack of agency that we've all felt."

But what do the results—with the arts-and-culture sector near-unanimous for Remain, the majority of the country for Leave—show if not that artists do not at all represent the "national consciousness," that the idea that "we" have "all felt" the same thing is a foolish miscalculation.

One of Damien Hirst's memes for the We Are Europe campaign. Image: Damien Hirst Instagram.

In the lead-up, the "pro-EU collective" We Are Europe <u>trotted out memes from Damien Hirst</u> to make their case. Yet when the artist most famous for hawking a diamond-studded skull for £50 million pleads, blandly, that "Britain is stronger and safer in the EU," I can't help but think it only helps Remain seem like the cause of the entitled.

And when Hans Ulrich Obrist, the curator and human embodiment of art-world globalism, opens up his can of platitudes <u>in *Frieze*</u>, warning, "Britain's potential exit from the European Union represents a mindscape that reverts to the past rather than looks to the future," I can't help but cringe.

"The future" can appear as an optimistic beacon only if you stand on its jet-setting winning side. There's a perilous lack of self-awareness here.

From the point of view of culture, the striking thing about the referendum results is the incommensurate cultural divide it confirms, to the point where the logic of the one side is completely incomprehensible to the other.

As a critic, I have <u>written</u> <u>a lot</u> about how the soaring art market is aligned with soaring inequality. Well, the same insane accumulations of wealth that make it possible to casually drop tens of millions of dollars on single paintings has a spatial correlate in the sharpening contrast between metropolitan centers awash in spectacles of luxury consumption and the deindustrializing provinces.

Locations that can attract the interest of that wealth flourish, accumulating glamour and amenities, educated professionals and striving youth; those that can't stagnate.

This, in turn, leads to sharpening differences in how place and nationhood are experienced, and what sorts of cultural narratives seem credible. Here is Oxfam in <u>a report</u> about the price of austerity in the UK, from three years ago already:

As the UK returns to growth, this will not be cause for celebration for the bulk of the population, as it is accompanied by rising levels of insecure work, high unemployment and the destruction of mechanisms to reduce poverty and lower inequality. Far from a shift towards more inclusive growth, austerity will increase inequality in what is already one of the most unequal developed countries, in which the richest continue to gain disproportionately from new growth.

A few years ago, the *Economist* <u>described </u>the north of England as effectively "another country," its culture defined by "islands of affluence in a sea of poverty."

A woman walks past a house where "Vote Leave" boards are displayed in Redcar, north east England on June 27, 2016. Photo: Scott Heppell/AFP/Getty Images.

On the other hand, London, heretofore arguably the world's finance and art capital, has been on the winning end of that particular neoliberal equation. (Though as in New York, inequality has nasty side effects in terms of the cost of living.)

This spatial inequality story rings true, incidentally, even on the level of government cultural funding, where London has been historicallydramatically favored over the regions—again, making sermons by big time curators and museum directors tone-deaf.

At least Simon Wallis, head of the Hepworth Wakefield, acknowledged in his contribution to the debate on Brexit (to *Frieze* again): "Let's start with a fairer redistribution of Britain's huge wealth and more vital localism: too much power resides in London. This often deeply alienates communities that are outside the capital."

Are you more likely to imagine yourself invited to a flashy new museum opening, or be affected by a factory closure? The answer might tell you something about whether you are lured by the Brexit rallying cry to "Take Back Control."

The loudest voices in the Leave camp are distinguished by vile nativism and Great British nostalgia. But much liberal commentary now drips with unapologetic class

disdain. Suddenly, everyone sounds like Edmund Burke, declaring that the people are too irrational to have a vote.

Here is the artist Helen Marten in *Frieze*, before the vote: "If I could physically pluck this island from its surrounding waters and fling all naysayers into a temporary vote-blocking freeze, I would do so."

And here's artist Ryan Gander [talking to my colleagues](#) on Friday, after the vote: "[T]he majority of the British public do not have enough of a grasp of economics, politics and social mobility to be trusted to decide the future of the country."

Good thing that art is such a bubble: Such haughty anti-democratic sentiments are custom-engineered to confirm the narrative peddled by the likes of the ultra-right nationalists in UKIP, that unaccountable elites are conspiring to keep the people from having a voice.

UKIP party leader Nigel Farage greets supporters before a press conference in Westminster after British people voted in the British EU Referendum to leave the European Union in London, United Kingdom on June 24, 2016. Photo: Ray Tang/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images.

The awful reality is that popular feelings of alienation and insecurity are being channeled almost exclusively by explicitly xenophobic forces. In this situation, it may be emotionally seductive to write off the entire Leave camp as Morlock-like troglodytes—but that means putting more than half of the population beyond redemption, and essentially conceding the ideological fight as lost.

Economic misery is the radioactive sludge that ordinary prejudice gets dipped into, mutating it into the kind of monster now unleashed. In many, many accounts, it is the sentiment that "there is not enough to go around"—that the schools are crumbling, the National Health Service wilting, the wait for housing intolerable—that has given anti-immigrant rhetoric traction. That is how observers have explained the fact that even some first-generation immigrants and ethnic minorities in the UK campaigned for Brexit.

Here is Richard Seymour's postmortem in *Salvage*:

The big problem for Remain was how to detach Labour-supporting, working-class and often ethnic minority voters from the Brexit bandwagon. No one was able to make them an offer. No one even seemed to be talking to them, for most of the campaign—at least, no one from Remain. Instead, in despair, the Remain campaign acquired a bullying, bombastic and alienating tone. The tone has not improved in defeat. On the one hand, the tragic, broken-hearted memes of "the 48%" have all the bathetic mawkishness of, in the words of Jamie Allinson, being trapped in a really sad mobile phone advert. On the other, the young scamps mocking 'grandma' and 'stupid voters' for messing with the future are perpetuating precisely the resentments that allowed the racist Right to win the campaign.

The US liberal commentariat, seeing things completely through the lens of our own election circus, falls squarely along these condescending lines, mainly leaving out the theme of economic resentment to focus on the fear of the Idiocracy. (Samantha Bee's *Full Frontal* rant from yesterday is along these lines.)

To make this argument is not to excuse hate, only to say that economic anxiety and political alienation plays a decisive role in making hate flourish. And this perspective is very, very important, because that economic anxiety is about to get a whole lot worse.

Even without the epoch-making cataclysm of Brexit, the entire creaky contraption of our capitalist world system was already just barely ticking over. The European Union's dysfunction has seen the crucifixion of Southern Europe and a scandalously unjust migrant policy. There has been a continent-wide rise in ultra-right populists, emboldened by the EU's stagnation, all hawking anti-immigrant snake oil as the secret to cultural rejuvenation.

The global turmoil unleashed on Friday can only intensify all this. And because the hard right is on its front foot, you can expect the solutions advanced to take the form of more austerity, which can in turn be justified only by intensified xenophobia.

What will be needed is an outspoken anti-racism, coupled with a credible case that wealth can be redistributed, that scarcity is engineered, that the future can get better, together.
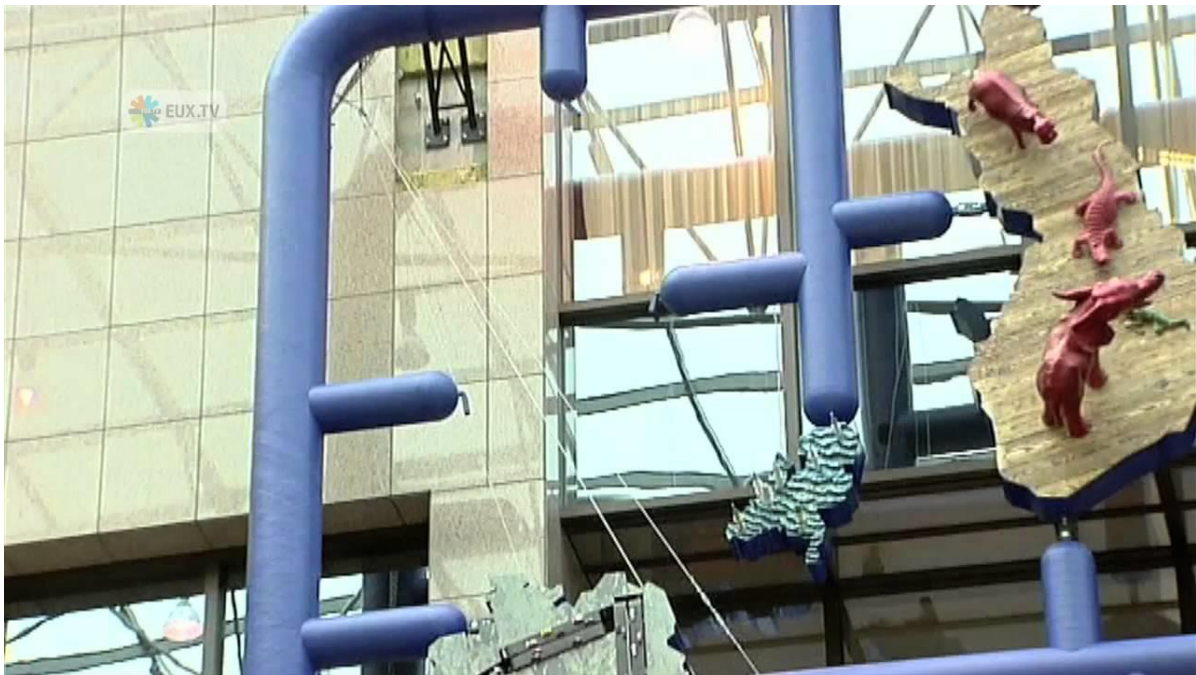
Detail of the absent Britain in *Entropa*.

If the art establishment's public response to this rift only serves to ratify the image of arrogant and out-of-touch elites, it is pouring fuel on the fire.

Can at least some of those Leave voters pulled by right-wing arguments be reached by an argument that responds to their lived experience, and offers a credible counter-narrative about how scarcity and inequality can be relieved? I don't know. I hope so.

What I do know is that they definitely *cannot* be reached by paeans to the beauties of art's insanely eccentric cosmopolitanism or how great the status quo was.

Entropa was meant as a snarky joke. It is a joke no longer. Entropa is real now. It is terrifying.

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