

## PART TWO

OUT  
WITH  
THE NEW

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Whenever one speaks about neo-liberalism the first danger to be avoided is reducing the term from the analytic to the normative – that is, from a descriptor of the ways things are organized and arranged at the present moment to a claim about whether this arrangement is a good one or not. Yet it is in the normative register that neo-liberalism is most often invoked. Some two decades after the temporal split of 1989 (i.e., the beginning of the “end of history” that accompanied the end of the Cold War) that we can’t help sticking squarely in the middle of our sense of the before and after through which we are living, the now suddenly old word for the present – globalization – has become the accepted taxonomic term, with neo-liberalism coming to name one’s attitude towards the developments of globalization. To say neo-liberalism is to say that globalization is bad. This is unproductive. But if neo-liberalism is substituted as an analytic term for the various phenomena all too easily collapsed into the concept of globalization, then we’re getting somewhere.

Globalization as simply the name for everything happening at the present – and happening, in a sense, *naturally*, the latest step in the upward progression of human societies from the darkness and cold of nation-based Fordism to the light of worldwide creative economies. This was an assertion and a belief that has been continuously challenged by scholars and activists on the left. Neo-liberalism better names the ideological dynamics of geopolitical manoeuvring over the past several decades, exposing in a flash the ideological function played by the concept of globalization all along. Globalization as neo-liberalism was *not* characterized fundamentally by the shift of all manner of relations to a global scale, the increasing presence of communications technologies in the everyday, a change in human consciousness about space, or some new awareness about the international character of late-twentieth-century life – or any of the other developments typically connected with it. The fascination with geography, technology, or cosmopolitan affect that has constituted much of scholarly and popular engagements with the

global tended until recently to miss a more fundamental development: a violent redistribution of wealth and consolidation of the power of the Global North by means of the ferocious extension and dissemination of market values to every social institution and activity. As Wendy Brown puts it, neo-liberalism means that human beings are “configured exhaustively as *homo oeconomicus*, [and] all dimensions of human life are cast in terms of a market rationality.”<sup>1</sup> Neo-liberalism grows out of the core logic of capitalism. The drama of scale and planetary fantasies of globalization made *homo oeconomicus* appear to be inevitable fate of *Homo sapiens* instead of the product of determinate choices and political struggles won and lost.

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In *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, Slavoj Žižek writes that “[Francis] Fukuyama’s utopia of the 1990s had to die twice, since the collapse of the liberal-democratic political utopia on 9/11 did not affect the economic utopia of global market capitalism; if the 2008 financial meltdown has a historical meaning then, it is as a sign of the end of the economic face of Fukuyama’s dream.”<sup>2</sup> Though some might have hoped that the financial crisis would have brought an end to neo-liberalism’s dominant and defining political rationality, this hasn’t been the case. One need only look to the lack of widespread protests by citizens at the actions of their governments to shore up the financial system (with France being a notable exception), or at the decisions made – or not made – by governments to try to address fiscal deficits: it is apparently now impossible to ever again increase taxes, so the only actions which can be taken are to cut or restrict services, sometimes severely (the direction taken by David Cameron’s UK government and the driving imperative of the US Tea Party). What *has* come to an end, however, is the ideological productivity and function of globalization as a justification and smoke screen for government decision making. Žižek isn’t the only one proclaiming the definitive conclusion of the fantasy of the end of history. No less a figure than Robert Kagan, senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment, columnist for the *Washington Post*, and a member of the State Department during Ronald Reagan’s second term in office, has declared (with explicit reference to Fukuyama) that history has returned and that, accordingly, a new way of thinking about the world has become necessary. According to Kagan, after the Cold War we imagined that we had entered a “new kind of international order, with nation-states growing together or disappearing, ideological conflicts melting away, cultures intermingling, and increasing free commerce and communications.”<sup>3</sup> Today, however, “the world’s democracies need to begin thinking about how they can protect their interests and defend their principles in a world in which these are once again powerfully challenged.”<sup>4</sup> But this is less of a change that one might think: the nation-state is still figured as the primary agent of politics, and the interests and principles to which Kagan points are none other than those of market fundamentalism, which once again have to be fought for rather than merely taken as a given as they were during the two decades of globalization.

What does culture or art have to do with all of this? If neo-liberalism means the spread of the rationality of the market to everything, then a great deal. Art was once defined by its opposition to the market – constitutively so, as an ontological category, whether or not it participated in a market of its own (as it surely does), and even if specific art forms and practices hesitated to be explicitly anti-capitalist in their aims or in-

tentions. One of the signal developments of neo-liberalism was to produce a situation in which it appeared that art and life had been folded together, if in a very different fashion than that imagined by the historical avant-garde. *Work* became the (supposed) site of self-transformation, freedom, and creativity (as celebrated par excellence in the writings of Richard Florida), expanding to fill a day that no longer needed to be separated into times of labour and leisure, while art was now added to the bottom line, generating ideas necessary for a global economy newly fuelled by design, innovation, and tourism. It is this always-already faux utopia of late capitalist labour that comes to an end with the emptying out of the apparent necessity of neo-liberal discourse. Which is to say: we may well be entering an intriguing new moment in which the political has re-emerged from the economic, and the social and cultural can once again breathe free of a means-ends rationality that has demanded economic accountability and determinate outcomes from artistic practices while leaving artists as prone as ever to financial precariousness, if not outright destitution. And if the opportunity has not yet been seized in public discourse, art practices might well have the power to activate deadened sensibilities and faded political will by reminding publics that social life is something to be created and celebrated rather than feared or endured.

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The return of the nation (out of the fiction of its dissolution in the waves of globalization) that Kagan points to above is another matter. One of the productive developments of the past two decades of global-speak has been a protracted challenge to what Ulrich Beck has termed “methodological nationalism”:<sup>5</sup> the assumption that of necessity one has to interpret all manner of phenomena, from electoral patterns to developments in the contemporary visual arts, through the frame of the nation. If we want to understand the role played by the visual arts and culture in the drama of globalization and neo-liberalism, the nation limits our understanding more than expands it, breaking up larger-scale analyses or sending them in the wrong direction – for example, towards an interest in border crossings and transnational flows, when the emphases should be on the social logics and imaginaries that generate borders in the first place. One needs to be careful, of course. Even if the nation is a social and political fiction that has to be repeatedly and forcefully imagined into being, it is a fiction that has taken material form, most prominently in that entity called the nation-*state*. Borders, police, controls over movement and access to resources, social institutions, funding agencies, all manner of material histories and social lineages – these are but some of the structures that have come into existence via a national imaginary. When Kagan returns to the nation in the aftermath of globalization, he does so without thought, retreating to the comforts of methodological nationalism and the project of Western geopolitics intent on making a world of multiplicity into a singularity shaped to its own ends and purposes. One should not assert the necessity of national difference in order to challenge this project, but rather should pose serious questions about the ease with which, even now, even after globalization, the nation is invoked as a container of social difference and as an explanatory model for the way in which the world works.

The four essays in this section interrogate the uses of the nation as method in the study of visual art and culture in Canada, while also raising the kinds of questions about the script of globalization that I have outlined above. Barbara Jenkins’s “National Cultural

Policy and the International Liberal Order” presents a nuanced and sophisticated framework for the analysis of Canadian culture in the changing field of political relations mapped out by the national and international. Jenkins insists on the need to view Canada as a part of an interlinked global liberal-political economy with a much longer history than that of the small sliver of time named “post-1989”; for her, we need to view the practice of art and culture as having a specific role in producing a shared cosmopolitan world view for a transnational bourgeoisie. Building on critical histories of museums and art movements in Britain, France, and the us, Jenkins argues for the need to examine the ways in which Canadian cultural institutions were created to enable local elites to participate in those art discourses which defined their membership in a transatlantic capitalist class. There *is* a specificity to Canadian art and culture, but it emerges not from shared national values or an ethos emerging from a common geography, so much as from the status of Canadian elites and the national economy within a larger capitalist geopolitical system. To exemplify her point, Jenkins highlights the degree to which Vincent Massey was intent on making use of Canadian culture – shaping and defining it – to position himself as part of an international capitalist class. She points to a continuation of this elite imperative at the present moment in the construction of all manner of new cultural buildings in Canadian cities, whose social necessity is framed, at least in part, as maintaining Canada’s international prestige (which is to say: to keep our elites in the ever-evolving game of global cultural distinction). Jenkins’s approach to art and culture in the context of globalization generates a productive redefinition of how to approach the study of visual arts and culture in Canada. “Regarding Canadian cultural policy as part of a transnational cultural movement not only reveals the importance of understanding national cultural institutions or national schools of art from a transnational perspective,” she writes, “but also underlines the importance of looking at culture in the context of political economic explanations of the liberal international order” (000). Though some might see a tendency in her analysis to too quickly reduce the function of art to a practice that does little else but define and reinforce class divisions, I believe Jenkins’s insistence on the politics of class and economics in a transnational frame offers a much-needed push to think about Canadian art and national culture in a more critically and materially astute manner.

Sarah E.K. Smith’s essay, “Visualizing the ‘New’ North American Landscape,” investigates the political function of art in our neo-liberal present. Like Jenkins, she insists on the need to see the mobilization of the nation in relation to art as a problematic project. If art and culture had a function at an earlier time of legitimating the participation of specific national elites in global capitalist economies, today these elites are prepared to mobilize national discourses in order to generate the larger frameworks of belonging necessary for them to function effectively and competitively in the global system. Smith explores the role played by art in promoting new ideas regarding the relationship between Mexico, the us, and Canada. Examining two art exhibitions in Canada at end of the last century – *Mexican Modern Art: 1900-1950* and the online exhibit *Panoramas: The North American Landscape in Art* – Smith probes the narratives of belonging and connection these shows were designed to highlight. She argues that these exhibitions put art to use to invent a new North American identity that would legitimate and justify the

North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Smith views the nation-state as the key actor in the process of mobilizing the visual arts for economic purposes. In a manner that is in general accord with the dynamics of art and political economy outlined by Jenkins, the state's promotion of a mode of national identity that fits the economic circumstances of the contemporary moment benefits elites in Canada whose commitments are to their international brethren more than to those populations with whom they formally share citizenship. Smith, too, draws important lessons from her example of art under NAFTA about the manner in which one thinks about an object like Canadian art, prompting us to consider the nation as an ever-shifting elite project within economic logics that occur at a global or international scale.

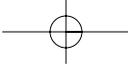
The contributions by Richard Hill and Heather Igloliorte explore the circumstances of Indigenous art and culture in relation to discourses of nationalism and internationalism. The study of visual art and culture in Canada to date may have largely failed to critically view Canada as a project, despite the fact that it has nakedly been so throughout its existence, with the state and elites trying desperately to produce narratives that might bind blood to soil (e.g., via transportation and telecommunication infrastructure; discourses of biculturalism, the welfare state, and multiculturalism; state institutions emerging out of the Massey Commission; the legal structure of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms; and so on). In this regard, Indigenous communities and artists have the least to unlearn, having either been positioned by the state as outside of these national narratives from the outset, or because they have been rightly suspicious of their blunt, incorporating, and de-differentiating function (e.g., a state multiculturalism designed as a singular national narrative rather than the inclusive one it pretends to be). These two contributors present starkly different views of the circumstances of Native communities in Canada and the role that art and cultural criticism may play within them. Igloliorte proposes that Inuit visual culture should be understood not through the framework of the Canadian nation, but within the emerging zone (cultural, political, social, and economic) of Inuit sovereignty. Smith and Jenkins trouble the function of art in producing and legitimating sovereignty; Igloliorte embraces it, arguing that Inuit art production helps to support Inuit culture and so participates in the broader politics in which contemporary Inuit society is engaged. She offers a sense of how cultural practices can support sovereignty by describing critical museum practices carried out in recent exhibits of Inuit art and by adapting aesthetic principles outlined by Hopi filmmaker Victor Masayesva to the case of the Inuit. For some, this appeal to sovereignty might come across as a misstep – a political response to colonialism that adopts a form similar to the one it rejects, and in doing so produces a people with a self-certainty about customs, traditions, and ways of being that sounds potentially like a dangerous form of populism, if not a structure akin to the nation-state form it rejects.

But Igloliorte has something different in mind than a mode of sovereignty practised under the sign of Carl Schmitt's definition made famous by Giorgio Agamben: "Sovereign is he who decides on the exception."<sup>6</sup> Rather, the case of the Inuit shows that one has to recognize that there are multiple ideas of self-determination that operate differentially based on the status of a people and their specific history. Though she does not draw out this point in her essay, Igloliorte points to the form of non-national belonging

that is characteristic of Indigeneity – not just the internationalism of the Inuit in particular (who are spread across the circumpolar regions of the planet), but what Richard Hill finds in the work of Cherokee artist Jimmy Durham: “It is less a being-here-firstness that unites us [Indigenous people] than a resistance, whether conscious or structural, to incorporation into the structure of the modern nation-state” (000). Hill offers a pointed critique of the nation-state and its historical impact on Indigenous communities around the world. As an artist and critic, he ignores the nation-state as a frame of reference; he also knows, however, that while the nation might well be an ideological fiction, it is one with real consequences, and a political form we are unlikely to move past anytime soon. Because “nation statehood is the only game in town for those of us not in control of capital,” Hill writes, the issue “is always about how Indigenous nations can achieve sovereignty” (000). This is not something he himself supports; it represents, rather, a blockage that he wishes it would be possible to somehow move beyond. In Durham’s relentless artistic critique of even the weakest forms of nationalism, Hill locates a model for a form of critical, intellectual work that endeavours to “put some grit in the gears without getting ground up” (000).

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This seems to me the perfect description of the imperative that should drive the study of visual culture and art forward. Getting beyond the mode of methodological nationalism that Ian McKay points to doesn’t mean abandoning the nation altogether. It means to think it better – more historically, structurally, and materially, not as fixed site but as ideological-political project in process. This project *is* a social invention, but this is not the same as saying that it has no reality or effect, or that we are not all its subjects (or citizens), whether we want to be or not: one is a national-subject at the moment of birth, before one has had the opportunity to be anything else. Those engaged in the project of reorienting visual cultural studies in Canada have to be careful not to see art and other visual practices as either so fully reduced to the politics of nations or so fully free of them to treat them either as pure ideology or pure subversion. Art and culture have always been part of the political project of Canada, and continue to be. But this political project can take multiple forms, from reinforcing the sovereignty of the nation-state (as Jenkins and Smith show us) to deliberately attempting to undo it in order to generate new modes and forms of belonging (as Igloliorte and Hill remind us). “Politics is aesthetic in that it makes visible what has been excluded from a perceptual field, and that it makes audible what had been inaudible.”<sup>7</sup> It is for this reason that the visual arts have been so close to politics, and still have the potential to make visible and audible what the political as it is now constituted has a hard time grasping at all. These essays are important contributions to the project of Canadian visual studies *after* globalization, in a century yet to be shaped by governing fictions and one in which everything is at stake.



NOTES

1 W. Brown, "Neo-liberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy," para. 9.

2 S. Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, 5.

3 R. Kagan, *The Return of History*, 3.

4 *Ibid.*, 97.

5 U. Beck, *Cosmopolitan Vision*.

6 C. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 5.

7 J. Rancière, *The Philosopher and His Poor*, 226.

