

Is the Art World Responsible for Trump? Filmmaker Adam Curtis on Why Self-Expression Is Tearing Society Apart

[Loney Abrams](#)



On mute, an **Adam Curtis** film might feel like the kind of montage you learn about in Video Art 101, with startling jump cuts between passages of seemingly incongruous found footage. But turn on the volume and the visuals become an illustrated essay about power—invisible power, the most dangerous kind, and the ways that it shapes the world we live in.

The longtime **BBC** producer's most recent film, ***HyperNormalisation***, begins with a daunting premise: that "politicians, financiers, and technological utopians" created a "fake world" to hang on to their power, allowing "dark and destructive forces to fester and grow... forces that are now returning to pierce the fragile surface of our carefully constructed

fake world.” The remainder of the nearly three-hour-long film toggles between subjects like **Jane Fonda’s** exercise routines, **Colonel Gaddafi’s** political puppetry, the bohemian New York lifestyle of **Patti Smith**, and terrorist suicide-bombing tactics—weaving a narrative that could almost feel like conspiracy theory if it didn’t resonate so convincingly with observable truth. Curtis’s ability to expose why and how society is the way it is—with aesthetic nuance and a sense of humor—makes him an object of cultlike veneration by journalists and artists alike.

Though Curtis would never call himself an artist, the filmmaker and serial documentarian has been known to flirt with the art world. In 2012, [Hans Ulrich Obrist](#) curated a retrospective of Curtis’s films at **e-Flux’s** gallery space. And although Curtis has been quite critical of art in its failing to challenge the status quo, many artists look to his work in building their critical worldviews.

Here, at a moment of vast societal upheaval much like the one Curtis describes in his new film, **Artspace’s** [Loney Abrams](#) spoke to the filmmaker for his views on the role of art in politics, the problem with self-expression, and what artists can do in our fracturing civilization.

Towards the beginning of *HyperNormalisation* you talk about a shift that happened in the '70s when artists detached from reality and retreated into themselves to mine content for their work. Your argument is that this kind of individualistic self-expression is antithetical to political change. How so?

Individualism is the really big thing of our time, and both left and right have been affected by it. It’s this idea that had been growing since the counterculture of the 1960s that really came to fruition in the 1970s—the idea being that what you as an individual feel and desire are the most important things, and that if you followed anyone who told you what to do you were inauthentic. People don’t believe they should give themselves up to the church or trade unions any longer. They want to be themselves.

It was a wonderful shift because it did stop us from needing to be told what to do by elites and old hierarchies. It freed us of that and that's really great—we are, to a great extent, free individuals. The problem with individualism is that, whilst it is liberating and exciting and beautiful, when things get difficult you are very weak. If you go into the woods at night, by yourself, it's frightening, isn't it? You get scared by the slightest noise, the slightest snap of a twig. If you go into the woods with your friends in a group, it's incredibly exciting and thrilling because you somehow feel stronger. It's as simple as that. That's one point.

The other part of that shift in the early 1970s was that more and more people looked to art as a way of expressing their radicalism in an individual way. Patti Smith's memoir *Just Kids* makes this very clear. People like her and [Robert Mapplethorpe](#) didn't want to be just a part of radical groups, they wanted to be individuals challenging the system. While that may have dropped away with Mapplethorpe, it remained central to Smith's belief. But what I was trying to say in the film was that the very idea of self-expression might not have had the radical potential they thought.

What rescued the U.S. economy from the economic crisis of the 1970s was a massive wave of consumer capitalism. And behind it were the forces of finance, because they offered credit to millions of people for the first time. In another series I made called *The Century of the Self*, I tried to show how the other essential component in that wave of consumerism was the idea of self-expression. People were encouraged to buy all kinds of stuff, not to be like each other as they had in the past, but instead to express themselves as individuals. In this way the very idea of self-expression became central to the modern structure of power.

We look back at past ages and see how things people deeply believed in at the time were actually a rigid conformity that prevented them from seeing important changes that were happening elsewhere. And I sometimes wonder whether the very idea of self-expression might be the rigid conformity of our age. It might be preventing us from seeing really

radical and different ideas that are sitting out on the margins—different ideas about what real freedom is, that have little to do with our present day fetishization of the self. The problem with today's art is that far from revealing those new ideas to us, it may be actually stopping us from seeing them.

This might be quite a difficult one to get over, but I think this is really important: however radical your message is as an artist, you are doing it through self-expression—the central dominant ideology of modern capitalism. And by doing that, you're actually far from questioning the monster and pulling the monster down. You're feeding the monster. Because the more people come to believe that self-expression is the *end* of everything, is the ultimate goal, the more the modern system of power becomes stronger, not weaker.

How can I make art without feeding the monster?

I was trying to say in the film that the way to question power is to stand up against it. And to do that, you have to go into the woods at night together. You have to be powerful and confident as a group. And you have to do this thing that I think a lot of modern artists and modern people in general would find very difficult to do: give yourself up to something that is bigger than yourself.

There are other forgotten ideas of freedom. For instance, the religious idea of freedom—I think the phrase is "in His service is perfect freedom." An example I always give is from the civil rights movement in the late 1950s and early 1960s in America. A lot of young white activists in the middle classes went down to the South, joined with the young black activists, and for years worked anonymously, giving themselves up to what they believed in. Many of them were beaten up, some of them were killed, but they actually changed the world and they did it by giving themselves up to something.

I'm sorry I'm being rude here, but at this point radical art involves going off on one demonstration, or doing an installation that says something

angry, and then going home. And that's it. You've felt you've expressed yourself, but **if you do want to change the world you have to give yourself up to it.**

In my country, the classic example of this was the march against the Iraq invasion in 2003. Three million people marched through London. It was a really impressive march. And they had this slogan that I thought was very much of its time: **"Not in my name."** That is the ultimate individual protest. So what then happened is they all went home feeling that they had all protested against the war and it was no longer their war, and then they did nothing else.

They really did nothing else. And as a result, hundreds of thousands of innocent Iraqis and American and British soldiers were killed. For what? You could have stopped it, but to do it you would have had to have given up the next three years of your life, to marching every day, to working against it, to try and change the mood. You'd have had to give yourself up to it. That doesn't fit with the idea of the self, or of self-expression.

The same can be said for "Not My President"—the slogan of many anti-Trump protesters. But I wonder if it needs to be all or nothing, as you say. We're not really talking about art anymore if we're saying that artists need to stop what they're doing and march for three years. I think one of the problems is that populist political art isn't really valued by the art world. The art world values work that is dense and complicated conceptually—work that is inaccessible to the general public or people without an art-history education—but that's also easy to write about critically and to justify putting into museums. The other type of work that the art world values is totally benign and inoffensive, which the market likes because it's easy to sell and to envision in your living room above your couch. Art that's really challenging while also accessible doesn't really fit into either of these two categories.

That's a very concise and clear division, and I agree with everything you've said about what's happened to art at the moment. Art can be

completely obscure. Even I sometimes don't understand it at all, as if it's deliberately hard to understand. And yes, the other type is a sort of benign, soft art. The real issue for art at the moment is that not only has it not changed the world for better, it may partially be responsible for the counterreaction from Trump supporters. The elitist, obscure, rather smug art that we've had over the last five or six years is part of the sort of metropolitan stubbornness that Brexit reacted against in my country, and that the Trump voters reacted against in your country.

I'm not criticizing the actual art that many people produce. Some of it is very good, and beautiful, and moving. It's just that the way in which it's done, through self-expression, tends to actually have a much deeper effect on society than what the artist necessarily intended.

What I'm really questioning is whether the function of art is to change the world, or whether its function is really to express what is happening in the world in a really clear way. Ever since the 1960s there has been this idea that the function of art is to change the world, and it will do so by changing the way people think and see. Whereas I think, if you look at the history of art, really brilliant art steps back and shows to you clearly what really is going on in the world you live in, in a vivid, imaginative way.

The astonishing thing in my country after Brexit—and I think probably you're seeing it now after the election of Trump—is that all the metropolitan hipsters looked around at each other and went, "Fuck, where did those people come from?" They didn't even know the Trump supporters and Brexit supporters existed, because they were so in their little bubble they just couldn't see them. What then happened is that they started blaming those people, which I thought was pretty bad. You'd hear in bars, "God, the really stupid people are in control now." And I just wanted to say, "No, hang on, *you're* stupid: *you* lost the election." Instead of trying to blame people for voting, they should go out and find out what is really going on, bring it forward, and *try and show why people voted like that*. And to do that you have to identify where real power is in our societies. And that's what I was trying to do in *HyperNormalisation*.

The current system of power is fundamentally pretty invisible to us. It resides in finance, in all sorts of new kinds of management, and within computers and the media, which involves invisible algorithms that shape and manage what information we get. I think one of the most beautiful things artists and journalists can do at this moment in time is to be sympathetic and understanding to the people who voted for Brexit and Trump, and then bring to the fore the invisible power structures that those people feel completely distanced from so that they know where power is. And do it in such a way that isn't obscure so people like me don't have to read it three times just to understand it. Do it in a way that really grabs ordinary people's imaginations.

I think a lot of people would say that what you're describing, what you're calling for, is what you actually do. Do you consider yourself an artist?

No, I'm a journalist who steals a lot from art. But to be honest, I don't see much difference between the two, because the function of art and the function of journalism is to go out and explain the world to people, and do it in ways that make it vivid and imaginative.

I believe you can be clever whilst also being very clear and imaginative for ordinary people. You can do it by being funny sometimes, by using music that people like, and by writing very simply and very clearly. But you can't make ordinary people out to be chumps—I come from a working class community, and I know they're really clever. They may feel completely isolated and fed up and pissed off, but they're not stupid. They're angry, and they were given a giant, big button that said "Fuck off" on it, and they pressed it. And I think the same thing happened in the Midwest, in your country. They didn't believe Trump's stories, they were just given this button—and they pressed it.

Now, the thing you can do is the kind of journalism that both explains things but also grabs their attention. I think great art can do that. You know, great novels have done that in the past—they made worlds vivid for you. I think artists have retreated over the last 10 to 15 years into either

those obscure bubbles that you described or into money, basically. And they pretend radicalism, just as much as I think the Occupy movement was only cartoon radicalism. None of it will actually go out and engage with the world—it's a retreat. And I think I can be rude about artists because I'm being rude about my own profession, journalism, as well. Because I think the exact same thing applies to journalists, too.

I think what's waiting to be invented is a new kind of imaginative language that describes the world of power, which is invisible to us, and I think both journalists and art can do this, because the present languages are just so boring and so obscure and so dull that people turn away from them.

To be useful as an artist or journalist, you must reach the swing voter or the middle-American person—that's what you're saying. But here's another way to think about it: contemporary art's audience is the 1 percent. We already have those in power, the wealthy, paying attention to what we as artists are doing. So rather than figure out how to reach a whole new audience, why not just try to influence politicians, lawmakers, and elites in general?

I come from a progressive populist tradition, and I believe that, somewhere in the late 19th century, art became much more democratic. People started to read novels, people started to like films, and what those things did is take people out of their world and gave them other worlds and transformed their imaginations, giving them bigger horizons. I believe that you can grab the imaginations of people.

On the other hand, though, what you've just said is probably closer to the reality of our time. You argue that, given contemporary art's close relationship to the rich, then maybe artists should be trying to tell the rich about what was really happening in the rest of society. In that way they could radicalize the wealthy.

I think you are right, and to be honest, it's the position that most art has occupied over the ages. Artists have been financed by those in power and their work tends to reflect and express the views of those in power, and

the clever artists are the ones who play with that and subvert it, so that hopefully then those in power will look at the world in a better way.

But there is something else the artists can also do in that position. They can tell us, the people, about the wealthy. They can show us the rich, elite world in a powerful and dramatic way, and let us see it more clearly and thus make up our minds about it. This is something art has done in the past. Look at the paintings of the Gilded Age and the robber barons in America, and the novels of people like Frank Norris in the early part of the 20th century.

The problem with today's world of billionaires and plutocrats is that, unlike practically all past elites in the West, they don't flaunt their wealth. In fact, they tend to hide it away: they dress down, and although they live in luxury they tend to be reticent about the great public displays that you see in Zola. But far from offering us insights into this hidden world of wealth and power, modern art tends to just sell these people stuff, which, even if it's radical in its message, fails to show us that world clearly.

In this way, I would argue that art helps perpetuate the disguise and the secrecy of modern power. I do think one of radical art's main aims should be to show us how power works, to pull it forward so you can see it—and I think in this age of extreme plutocracy it is rather failing to do that.

In a [review](#) of *HyperNormalisation* in *Artforum*, Tobi Haslett writes, "Curtis refuses to register—indeed, obliquely snubs—feminism. That political action and collective consciousness might *also* work to enrich the individual spirit—once a rather uncontroversial claim on the Left—is to him an insidious contamination of political sensibilities by our narcissistic present." What do you think about that critique?

What I said to you early on was that the rise of individualism has all sorts of liberating aspects to it, one of which was feminism. This is partly the reason why I chose New York in 1975 as a place to begin the story I tell in the film, because at that point many of the radical left shifted away from

revolutionary attacks on the state to the idea of liberating individuals from social and cultural inequalities via feminism and the gay rights movement. And I agree that a fantastically successful movement came out of that and liberated the lives of millions of people. That's really good. You could argue that that's what the left has been most successful at—changing how individuals behave towards each other.

But at that very same time, in New York, a newly confident financial elite took control of the democratic government of the city, and they did this almost unopposed by the radicals and the left. And the point I was making was that there was an unforeseen consequence to the left's choosing to shift their focus to individual rights. It allowed a massive shift of power—to finance and the banks—to go largely unexamined and unopposed. Out of that shift of power came the extraordinary right-wing economic revolution that we now live with, and which dominates all our lives.

What I was trying to suggest was that by focusing on the rights of individuals—and the groups of which they are a part—the radicals possibly lost sight of something: that the only way to really challenge deeply entrenched power is through mass collective action, not through a radicalism that is rooted in individualism.

In *HyperNormalisation* you covered Trump's campaign, but you released it before he won. I have to ask: what do you think is going to happen now?

The reason you prefaced this questions with "I have to ask" is because you and I know that we don't know. We've got no idea, and he knows that we don't know, so he's playing with that as well, which is part of his thing. In simple terms, what I think is this: Trump made all sorts of promises, some of which—as I point out in the film)—are quite left-wing, like, for example, bringing jobs back to America. To do this he will have to challenge deeply entrenched systems of power, global power—like finance, which is based on the fact of having exported labor for cheap stuff overseas. I think he will find that very difficult. If he does, then what will happen is that those systems of power—that at the moment are very

invisible to us—will come more in focus because of his failure. We'll be able to see them. And as a result, you might get the left regenerating and beginning to realize what it's got to challenge.

This is complete supposition and hypothesis, but if Trump finds it very difficult to do what he does, then where power has gone will become much more obvious. And that will have a very good effect, both on the left and the right, and you might get a return of real struggles for power, and real politics, rather than the cartoon radicalism that you have on the left at the moment. I think that'll be really good—that's my optimistic view.

My other view is that he will fail and things will snap back to exactly where they are now and you'll be left with a sort of traditional right-wing government in America, and in Britain, and everything will be hypernormalized again. But those, I think, are the two options. I don't think he's going to suddenly turn into a strange cross between Franklin Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan. I don't think he's got the power to do that at the moment.

What I thought was really interesting, in America, was that it was Wisconsin that got him voted in. There's a very strong progressive tradition in Wisconsin, and that sort of distrust in elites can swing to the left or right. There's no reason why, in my country and your country, the liberals and the left can't get hold of those people that are pissed off at the moment. It's just they're so lazy, so locked off in their own bubbles, that they can't.

This moment, with liberals crying over Brexit and over Trump, it's what I call the Princess Diana moment for liberals—everyone just cries rather than saying, "OK, this is democracy, this is shit. Let's deal with it. Let's try and oppose it and see how we can end the crisis." They're not doing it, and it's something to do with their retreat. I suppose we'll be having another round.

The main thing I want to say is that the problem with the left is that it's obsessed with the problems of the individual. What they have neglected

is power. It's so important in our time, and in the discourse of right-thinking liberals, and right-thinking radical artists, the word power is practically never mentioned—it's as if it doesn't exist. But, actually, power shapes your world so much. That's what I was trying to show in the film, that even on the echo chamber you occupy on Facebook, there are bits of code written that are shaping what you're given. That's power. There are computers shifting money around. That's power. We've just got to try and bring it in focus. But because we're so locked off to questions of the individual, we've lost sight of the questions of the collective, and that involves power.

People understand activism in an individualistic sense too. I mean, I think a lot of people truly recognize that their Facebook feed is an echo chamber, and they understand that they're not seeing an accurate picture of what's going on—but in order to combat that, rather than saying, "We need to challenge Facebook" or "We need to challenge the way the media is presented to us," they say, "I need to take it upon myself to go and search out and befriend conservatives, watch Fox News, et cetera." In the same way that I could say, "I'm an environmentalist because I recycle my plastic water bottles" rather than demanding that Poland Springs figures out a more sustainable alternative, or that the government should give tax incentives to alternatives to plastic. We think of ourselves as activists by making small changes in the way we consume—whether it's consuming social media or water bottles—and we forget to look upwards to the powers that burden us with these choices.

You have to do a few things. You're right—you can look up the chain and ask where did it come from, and you have to do some work, as a good journalist does and a good artist should do. You go find this stuff out and then you have to find ways of bringing that power forward and showing it people, and then finding ways of challenging it. Those tend to be activities that are not just those of the individual.

I thought the one image that really summed it up for me was the

photograph of the protest outside Trump tower. I think it was two days after the election, and there was a girl holding up a poster that said, "I just feel so sad." And I thought, "Well, that's not enough." I'm so sorry, because, you know, we have gotten to this point that is brilliant—where we are all allowed to express ourselves. Fifty years ago, we *weren't* allowed to do that, so it's great. That's about feminism, that's about gay rights, that's about all the good things we've done. But at the same time we've gotten locked off into the individualism that is at the heart of that.

What we've got to recapture, somehow, is the idea—and this is the real key thing for politics in the future—of allowing people to feel that they are individuals, with rights, and that they desire to do what they want to do, but also feel that they can give themselves up to something bigger. Squaring that circle is going to be the future of politics on the left. Someone's got to find a way of doing it.