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Chapter 4

**xyzzy: Contemporary Art Before and After Britain**

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*We are looking backwards  
We are running backwards  
Running through time into the past  
Taking retro to its logical conclusion*

*The Mighty Boosh, Series 3, Episode 3, BBC 3 (UK, 2007)*

**PART I. NEOMEDIEVAL ARTWORLDS**

It has long been common curatorial practice to assume that the international art world of the early 21st century was an exemplar of globalisation, that contemporary art was a global currency, a *lingua franca* that knew no boundaries. Recent historical revisionism suggests, however, that the contemporary art world’s patchwork striation of space was a perfect exemplar of geopolitical neomedievalism in practice. The
global art system provided but one example in which there were competing legitimate organising principles for the cultural arena, in which individuals were legal members of a transnational community while also having legal responsibilities to the territory in which they resided. Indeed, *fin de siècle* neomedieval theories of international relations may be pertinent when considering art’s global infrastructure in this period—which, as a highly opaque unregulated economy, was remarkably similar to the disconnected ungoverned spaces of medieval Europe.

According to Alexandr Petrovsky,¹ to consider any art-world as a system of international relations structured in neomedievalist terms—with actors performing the roles of artisan (artist), vassal or overlord—it would need to conform with the following neo-feudal petitions:

1. Art scenes are relatively small, territorialised, fiefdoms.

2. Successful artists operate as hired mercenaries, often simultaneously representing the competing interests of different fiefdoms.²

3. As managers of fiefdoms, critics, artistic directors, curators and dealers act as the artworld’s vassals. Vassals are reciprocally indebted to one another.

4. Vassals pledge fealty to overlords in the international art market: patrons and collectors, national arts councils and international arts bodies.

5. The private market pursues a monarchial form of order, while public sector arts councils are more ecclesias-

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¹ See Alexandr Petrovsky, *Transfiguration is Commonplace*, MBA thesis, University of the Mall of America Online.
² Contemporary artists were not “serfs”, since they were not wholly part of a manorial system.
tical in their outlook.

6. While the private/monarchial and public/ecclesiastical are competing forms of authority, they are mutually constitutive overlords.³

7. The overlords of the artworld have no absolute supranational authority and must share power. They may, nevertheless, command a great deal of influence in determining which forms of vassalage prevail.

In the early 21st century, contemporary art was still being produced in distinctive communities of place (“art scenes”) that collectively formed a global community of practice (“artworld”). Contemporary art did not, as yet, constitute a medievalist manorial economy, since local art scenes were not, and did not attempt to become, “self-sufficient” ecologies. While contemporary art was often, through necessity, a bespoke locally manufactured product, it was one ultimately intended for free trade and wide distribution throughout the global artworld.

While an “emerging” artist’s resources were relatively scarce and their mobility limited, the fabrication of artworks could not be affordably outsourced. Productivity was therefore most frequently resourced within and supported by local fiefdoms. Provincial resourcing strengthened the social ties and debt-bonds of local art scenes, forming modern confraternities through creating distinctive communities of place. The fiefdom in which an artist lived and worked, the reputation of the generative context, served not only to validate the authenticity of their work but also routinely invested in its production.⁴ The manufacture of works of art, at least in

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³ Of course the private/public division is a post-medieval imaginary.
⁴ As a community of place, an art scene generated events, objects, and sites for veneration. It also patronised local artistic production by gifting administrative confraternities in the not-for-profit sector. This differed from contemporaneous maker economies, wherein compo-
the research and development phase, was largely reliant on public subsidy and gift economics. As these economies were democratically accountable they had to concern issues of representation and cultural sovereignty. Art subsidised by such economies could not escape the cultural politics of the fiefdom. Public subsidy and gift economies were debt-bonds that tied artistic loyalties and proclivities to localised “art scenes” and were, ultimately, responsible for ongoing constructions of “regional” and “national” schools of contemporary art. It is, therefore, constructive to consider what remained of the public system of patronage for art in terms debated in contemporary neomedieval studies of international relations.

Public patronage of contemporary art continued to answer to the peculiar political requirements of the sovereign state as well as to the aesthetic convictions of the international artworld. It thus embraced polarised demands—subsidiarity and supranationalism, the vernacular and the global, cultural monasticism and creative economics—operating with a neomedieval foresight that was incomprehensible to most sovereign states. Since tax-raising powers and lottery revenues remained at the behest of sovereign states, public grant-awarding bodies were unambiguously regional and national rather than international.

The twilight years of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (UK) provide a good case study of the artworld’s neomedievalism in practice. Four sovereign Arts Councils in the UK exclusively supported the work of artists

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5 Such as the social production of space and processes of territorialisation.
6 If this were not the case, then art scenes would simply be nodes in an international network of makers; a community of practice without any community of place.
7 An example of a public-private partnership that allowed private enterprises to profit while raising taxes for public works.
living in its constituent nations—Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland\(^8\)—developing distinctive national imaginaries at the expense of a unitary contemporary British, European or global art. The dissolution of the Arts Council of Great Britain (ACGB) in 1994 significantly limited the patronage of a “British” macro-national imaginary within the UK, Balkanising public patronage for the arts. In Britain and Northern Ireland, there was no “UK” as far as the administration of culture was concerned, cultural policy was entirely devolved from Westminster to national parliaments in Belfast, Edinburgh, and Cardiff. Such cultural devolution had existed in the UK since the 1960s, pre-empting political devolution by over three decades.

The UK’s regional and national Arts Councils helped to create the economic conditions in which vernacular artistic microclimates flourished. England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland each had independent means to build a distinctive and appropriate infrastructure and a sustainable independent art scene. The Arts Councils were autonomous and answered to their respective parliaments\(^9\) and thus to different political ideologies and distinct national imaginaries. There was a quasi-federal system in play here. England, for example, not only had its own Arts Council, but had regionally devolved bodies relating, approximately, to its Regions and their population density. Since artists were patronised exclusively by their national or regional arts council, choosing the most appropriate region to work in was a crucially strategic decision in establishing a practice.

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\(^8\) The Scottish Arts Council was founded in 1967, The Arts Council of Wales in 1994, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland in 1962, and the Arts Council of England in 1994. ACGB finally disbanded in 1994, the same year that ACE emerged. Until 1994, the ACGB was the de facto Arts Council of England, a good example of Great Britain and England being mistaken for the same entity.

\(^9\) Creative Scotland to Holyrood, Arts Council of Wales to Cardiff, Arts Council of Northern Ireland to Stormount and ACE to Westminster.
These structures were echoed internationally. For example, at the Venice Biennale, the official British Pavilion in the Giardini was augmented by separate Scottish, Welsh, and Northern Irish Pavilions as part of the Biennale’s “collateral events” programme. There was no English Pavilion (since England was a stateless nation); rather there had been unofficial independent representation from Sheffield, Manchester and the London Borough of Peckham, which boasted no less than two “pavilions” in 2009. The independent national and civic pavilions overlapped with, and deliberately challenged, the authority of the official UK representation. This cultural turn in territorialisation was a way of responding to neoliberal globalisation, wherein the state was no longer the dominant site of capitalist reproduction.

We should note that—while the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish Pavilions offered more, albeit alternative, forms of national sovereignty—the civic pavilions appeared to transcend “national identity” altogether. The self-promotion of creative city-states, burghs, and neighbourhoods as cultural and economic dynamos was a neomedieval phenomenon. In a cultural economy that was globally networked, the discourses of “national culture” were increasingly being subordinated to a pursuit of cultural capital that was at once local and global. In this sense, the collateral events of Venice exploited the patronage of the (intra-)national to draw the attention of the international artworld to local art scenes. The Balkanisation of the Venice Biennale, then, was indicative of the uneven distribution of cultural capital between the world’s “creative cities”. The “national” discourses in Venice that attempted to interject between local communities of place and the global community of artistic practice were a small price to pay for invaluable public patronage.10

10 Access to public funding was highly regulated in an ecumenical sense. Artists who successfully established local and national support and/or achieved market recognition were far more likely to
Neomedievalism is a useful lens through which to reconsider the allegedly international character of such contemporary art biennials. With less than 50% of the world’s nations represented at the Venice Biennale, it could not convincingly claim to be internationalist—conversely, it represented contemporary art’s neo-feudal gangsterism. Venice was a snapshot of how a global community of practice received local art scenes and of how, in turn, those scenes transformed the values of the international artworld. Run by a small South London gallery, the Peckham Pavilion had more global visibility than many of the African states that could not afford to participate. This striation of space, however, could have some advantages. For those that could afford it, unofficial representation was one way that aspiring city-states, intranations, and diasporic ethnic groups found a global voice. International art events were, therefore, both a shop window for the creative economies of imperial sovereign states and a means by which those extant forms of territorialisation might be challenged and renegotiated.

In medievalist terms, the more established contemporary artists became, the more mercenary they became—working as hired hands, deploying their fealty in the service of multiple overlords. As they established their reputation beyond their fiefdom, artists were increasingly mobile and capable of exploiting entitlements in different regions. Since post-medieval art resisted incorporation as a trade and failed to industrialise, contemporary artists seeking patronage had to frequently shift loyalties between the cultural agencies of sovereign states, non-state actors, and the global marketplaces. Although legally bound by the strictures of the state, the contemporary artist became itinerant to exploit entitlements offered by different regions, moving on once a particular obligation had been fulfilled and available financial re-

attract international public-sector patronage. This built unity and cooperation in relationships and actions within the public sector of the international art world.
The export of “national art” was fraught with territorial ambiguities. Unlike international sporting events that required competitors to prove their citizenship, artists could choose to represent any nation (or city) participating in an international exhibition. Generally an artist’s current place of residency determined which state would invite them to take part, but this was not an essential requirement. The English artist Liam Gillick’s participation in the German Pavilion of the 2009 Venice Biennale was neomedieval in this sense. Gillick operated as an artistic mercenary, offering his services to the Federal German Republic in return for their patronage. We can also find instances of deterritorialised nations taking part in the Venice Biennale by establishing pavilions that implied forms of ethnicity that transcended modern states, most notably the Roma Pavilion. We also need to consider intra-nationalisms that were always overshadowed by the international state system. The Olympics Games, for example, did not permit intra-national or inter-ethnic competition. In the artworld there was a distinctly more fluid, neomedieval conception of territorial polity.

Many artisans in the ‘00s participated in the reinvigorated pre-industrial economy of international art fairs wherein objects were valued more highly than experiences. As more wealth was concentrated in the hands of fewer people, vassalage was responsible for the circulation of new relics and for

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11 While they may have encountered more opportunities to travel and remain abroad than most citizens, artists’ international movements and work entitlements were nevertheless restricted by tight immigration regulations.

12 This is in contradistinction to the wider experience economy of post-industrialism that attempted to market subjective experience as an immaterial cultural form. The commercial sector of the artworld in the early 21st century was operating in reverse gear, returning to a pre-industrial system of manufacturing unique, high-value objects.
the widespread retreat into cultural monasticism.\textsuperscript{13} Vassalage
was key to enabling, or denying, mobility. Curatorial celebrations of cultural supranationalism found at international biennials not only served to mask the centrifugal forces of vassalage that dominated the art world in the ’00s—they were a product of vassalage.

The social and geographical mobility of some artists did not change the fact that borders and financial constraints still existed for citizens who could not afford their own fantasy island. Artists were not merely subject to the educational policies of their own sovereign states. The regulation (or lack of regulation) of the art market in many states impacted upon intellectual property and regional licensing agreements. Artistic mobility (like artistic licence per se) was as illusive as it was fraught with complexity. Although the artworld remained an unregulated institution, it operated a hierarchal system of vassalage involving numerous state and non-state actors.

Many of the dominant organs of contemporary “British” Art were not “national”. For example, while the state-funded TATE organisation purported to be British, in territorial terms, it was not; TATE operated exclusively in England. As such, TATE cannot be considered to have been “British” in the geographical sense.\textsuperscript{14} TATE adopted national (TATE Britain), global (TATE Modern) and vernacular (TATE St. Ives/Liverpool) identities in different locales to make the brand relevant, improving the corporation’s image. As TATE’s franchise grew, it became a post-national global brand competing with comparable international art museums such as the Guggenheim and MoMA. Its mission was no longer correlated with the small potatoes of British statecraft or English nationalism; rather, it was a global leisure destina-

\textsuperscript{13} The snowballing dealer-collector system that was encouraged in the deregulated global financial sector enabled the privatisation of contemporary art.

\textsuperscript{14} In contrast, the BBC had branches throughout Britain and Northern Ireland and so can be considered to have been UK-wide.
tion. TATE’s ultimate fealty, therefore, was to a supranational artworld rather than to the nation state that supported its activities.

Like the global playground of the world’s wealthiest 1%, the art market of the early 21st century echoed the culture of Europe’s transnational medieval aristocratic elite. The artworld was a global economy that networked internationally through a busy calendar of temporary international art fairs and biennials. Appearing to occupy a non-territorial space, actors operated in a transnational market that was perpetually mobile and constantly renegotiating recognition and authority. The art market was monarchical in a medievalist sense, since it was not geographically restricted by sovereign jurisdiction. The constitutive power of the market’s itinerant network was hierarchal rather than distributed. While access to information—especially in the physical form of fairs and biennials—was negotiable through the prior acquisition of sufficient cultural and social capital in civil society, it was equally a commodity to be bought, sold, or inherited. Either way, this chivalric code ensured that access to the art market’s information-based economy was strictly limited.

When compared with the social production of value that supported grassroots movements such as crowd-funding, the speculation of the contemporary art market was fiscally conservative. Collectors were more likely to invest in objects than intellectual property, viewing art as the contemporary equivalent of gold bullion. This conservatism favoured the production of “unique” artisanal material objects to be conserved and maintained rather than open processes and projects that might be fabricated and reproduced. The art market was relatively risk averse, investing in work that had al-

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15 Although the local and national facilitated the generation of cultural capital, there were no significant local or national markets in contemporary art. High prices were achieved only in the global international marketplace. Key actors in the art market were loyal only unto their overlord peers. Being place-less, they did not suffer from pangs of disloyalty to communities of place.
ready been “relic-ed” and was therefore more likely to increase in value. Vassals in the public and not-for-profit sector were engaged in more ecumenical matters, generating theories and establishing contemporary art’s transnational values. They were in the ecclesiastical business of “relic-ing” artistic practices, providing a hub that embodied the artworld’s relations.

While contemporary art was commonly perceived to be a speculative commodity, floated freely in the market, it was more frequently manufactured to order through a public system of patronage, one that imagined itself as an alternative to brute market forces.¹⁶ The art market could not generate cultural capital autonomously since it was a system of distribution and consumption with no means of production. The market only provided a career for artists that had already established a practice and an audience through other means. The patronage of “emerging artists”, therefore, emerged either from the state, as a form of self-subsidy, or a mixture of both.

Without a private system of workshops or guilds, the private sector depended on public subsidy to formally educate artists and provide them with tertiary support through the awarding of grants and loans. From this perspective, production was outsourced to a no-cost mixture of state and philanthropic organisations that operated in an ecclesiastical fashion. In this sense, the art market relied on vassals not only to perform the task of identifying and advocating significant new work but of giving artists access to expensive land-bound resources. Such vassals were mainly employed in, or volunteered in, the state or not-for-profit sectors, the workshops in which contemporary artistic research and development took place.

¹⁶ In Art Scenes: The Social Scripts of the Artworld (New York: Jorge Pinto Books, 2012), artist Pablo Helguera pointed out that the market did not represent the values of the artworld as a whole, especially given that so much of the world was denied access to the international art market.
Only sanctioned relics accrued the social and cultural capital that made them valuable in the market. So, while the monarchical private sector could influence the production of art by providing financial incentives to encourage artists to participate in the art market, it could not dictate the direction of the artworld as a whole.\textsuperscript{17} The regulatory bodies that existed at a national level, however, had far greater influence, since they could determine which forms of cultural vassalage would be supported in the state sector. These public overlords, then, had powers to excommunicate in-subordinate vassals and with them the artists they espoused.

The private and public sectors were not mutually exclusive; on the contrary, they clearly overlapped and interlocked in a neomedieval fashion.\textsuperscript{18} This was all the more evident following the world financial crisis of the late '00s, when the public sector was substantially curbed to subsidise the cost of bank welfare. State support for culture, along with enlightened, democratically elected civic authority was systematically replaced by shadowy and unaccountable “private-public partnerships”.\textsuperscript{19} As the state withered, the public sector would not benefit from controlling the means of production since the mutable category of “emerging art” was essential for moving large sums of money around.

The cosy relationship between the private and the public sector led to many conflicts of interest wherein public money was used to pay for the production of works of art clearly destined for the market with no return to taxpayers. This ambiguous overlapping was quintessentially neomedieval, recalling the lack of division between public and private space in medieval societies. As vassals, art dealers and public sector artistic directors were mutually constitutive members of the same class.

For example, as a replacement for the Scottish Arts Council and Scottish Screen, Creative Scotland—a quango (Quasi-Autonomous Non-Governmental Organisation) that bundled the arts together with business development and the tourist industry—offered an approach to government of the arts in Scotland that was at once paternalistic (the long-standing principle of arm’s length having being abolished) and neoliberal (viewing the arts primarily as eco-

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sector was required to speak the language of economics and justify its decisions in market terms. The skeletal public sector looked to what was being supported by the market as a barometer of what forms of vassalage it should “invest” in. The process of veneration became circular, the public sector acting more explicitly in partnership with the market in the belief that it would make it more efficient and “sustainable”, while the market continued to rely on the emaciated public sector to provide it with blessings and free resources.

The metaphorical medievalism of contemporary art extended into other areas of practice. For example, we might consider contemporary artistic nomadism as a form of pilgrimage, the workshop model of production as a re-articulation of the guild system.

The growth of state-funded art institutions and international expos in the early 21st century should alert us to the fact that the international Westphalian system was still very much alive in contemporary art. Domestic systems of artistic patronage largely remained obligated to the Westphalian system of absolute state authority. Artists seeking public support were subject to the political whims of local and national governments—to how fiefdoms decided, variably, to support the cultures of naturalised citizens and foreign nationals. While artists were no different from any other citizens in this respect, the nature of their profession encouraged them to exploit subsidies at home and abroad. Contemporary artists had little to gain by remaining static, and acts of pilgrimage, tactically, were a means to an end.

The most common form of contemporary artistic pilgrimage involved the **laissez-faire** migration to sanctified sites of production. Since artists began their careers in time-rich cash-poor economies, they were attracted to citadels that promised a low cost of living and relatively few employment restrictions. Artistic confraternities emerged in “creative” cities that provided a temporary path of least resistance, a

conomic drivers of culture industry).
supportive community of place and access to the artworld’s global community of practice. The required conditions for an “art mecca” to emerge were not generated by artists. While there had been a concerted attempt to socially engineer creative climates in ‘90s Britain, they were far more likely to emerge where catastrophic economic mismanagement, political instability, and rapidly changing demographics depressed property values.

This form of pilgrimage was cyclical. Being a bulwark of the cultural economy, the influx of artists into an urban neighbourhood, invariably, increased the value of property and drove up the cost of living. Artists either had to establish a market for their work or move on to a more affordable environment. Given the striation of the artworld into artisans/vassals/overlords, not all artists who moved to a supportive community of place stood to profit enough to sustain a living from selling their own work. Since marketisation was the job of vassals rather than artists, most artists were driven back into pilgrimage, passing through in pursuit of their practice.

Another form of pilgrimage concerned the growth of art residencies, one of the most transparent ways that artists found public sector support to conduct research and development. The itinerant residency circuit came with strings attached. Residencies allied to the cultural economy of place-making operated an implicitly medievalist form of patronage, commissioning a pilgrimage that would enable communion between artist and site. As a pilgrim, the contemporary artist was a stranger who may offer fresh insight. Rather than providing a Euclidian means of navigating or controlling territories, the contemporary artist was a freelance postmodern geographer, offering fluid conceptions of space comparable to pre-modern cartography, moral and sensual palimpsests of non-synchronous person-objects and object-events.  

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20 See David Woodward, “Reality, Symbolism, Time and Space in
In the early 21st century, such residencies often privileged environmental, social, and historical research that promised to “other” the local, finding the miraculous in the overfamiliar. Of course social, environmental and historical pre-moderns can play an important role in the artistic re-imagining of the present. However, the mere act of inviting artists to temporarily relocate and work in a less familiar environment was considered to be an effective way of adding value and a sense of uniqueness to a place, transforming spaces into potentially popular sites of pilgrimage. Contemporary art residencies did not produce relics or perform miracles to anoint holy sites. The sites simply needed to be activated to allow their cultural potential to be narrated. In ritualising space, residencies promised to perform a neomedieval role in the experience economy.21

Residencies flourished in places where there was a civic desire to encourage cultural exchange and enhance the host’s reputation for internationalism. Since they were so heavily invested in cultural authenticity, residencies were implicated in the promotion of the vernacular through a vernacular dialogue. In practice, there were a number of factors that made this promised dialogue of vernaculars very difficult to achieve. Contemporary art spoke an ecclesiastical linga franca that regulated standards in the field transnationally. The ecumenical tropes of site-sensitivity and fieldwork that were active in the residency circuit, for example, formed part of this linga franca. The fact that contemporary art was considered a global culture made it a homogenising force in opposition to the vernacular.

The misconception that contemporary art was an international “visual language” that needed no “translation” actively encouraged the mobilisation of artistic labour in the inter-

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21 Biennials performed a similar role curatorially, ritualising extant sites for bi-annual pilgrimage.
national arena. In the neo-realist world of international relations, artists (and athletes) were idealised diplomats and ambassadors, roles they were often happy to play. At this level, a few artists found themselves engaged in a form of cultural diplomacy, representing the values of their nation on a world stage. While internationalism was greatly esteemed in this international arts sector, reciprocal and multilateral partnerships between arts organisations were notoriously difficult to maintain in most practices. Contemporary art did not have a free trade licence. Artists and works of art moving between states were subject to the same customs regulations and tariffs as everyone, and everything, else. If a sovereign state decided to tighten the restrictions on its borders, the reciprocal impact was felt internationally. A tension, then, was evident in the effect of sovereign states exercising their cultural authority, something that that enabled artistic pilgrimage while determining its terms and conditions. As national subjects and foreign nationals, artists were subject to these conflicting and overlapping demands.

Contemporary art’s neomedieval infrastructure was also influenced by non-state actors in the private sector. The global art market had long afforded speculative forms of production, embracing the modern idea that contemporary art was not produced to commission, as it had been in the middle ages, but was, rather, a product to be floated freely on the market. The market played a pivotal role in affirming post-medieval imaginaries of artistic autonomy and their attendant divisions of creative labour. Artistic autonomy was the primary way in which the liberal subject embodied the perceived anarchy of the international system of sover-

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22 From the perspective of production, contemporary art continued to be egocentric, promulgating the post-medieval concept of the artist as the sole progenitor of their work, manufacturing personalised ontologies, and constructing reputations around sovereign subjects. Artists who worked as auteurs could not be considered to follow medievalist means of production.
While the market manufactured an artistic subject unbound by supra-artistic authority, in practice, this required a neo-feudal distribution of roles: that artists produce, dealers, curators and critics distribute, and collectors consume. Herein lay its neomedievalism. The market required modern artistic subjects, but to establish the illusion of their autonomy, it relied on the maintenance of clearly delineated neo-feudal roles: on the art world’s mercenaries, vassals, and overlords.

In practice, such divisions of labour maintained themselves so long as contemporary art continued to operate as a guild economy. While contemporary artistic practice was established and supported through networks of local confraternities, it was difficult to establish vertically integrated manufacturing and vertical monopolies throughout the artworld. Indeed, the appeal of confraternities was such that, at the turn of the 21st century, the local workshop model grew in popularity. This was particularly prevalent among artists seeking to participate in a collaborative commons. Workshops were perceived as a means of bundling skills and resources, of hollowing out the ego from art practice, of shifting the emphasis from actors to networks. Both the gallery and the studio were thus reinterpreted as stages upon which social alchemy would be performed.

The workshop, in effect, was a pontifex, building bridges between contemporary art and the practices of everyday life by engineering interactions between participating social subjects. From this optimistic perspective, contemporary art would break free of its specialist enclave and work towards a non-hierarchical production of micro-utopias, transient instances of the commons that would resist recuperation.

From a neo-realist perspective, the anarchic artistic subject was the embodiment of the anarchism of the Westphalian state system, a self-possessive individual who did not recognise supranational authority. This is a distinctly post-medieval archetype, the ascendancy of the sovereign self-accompanying the rise of the sovereign state.
through their stealthy impermanence. Within this deflated ontology of contemporary art, the artist’s role was that of the “sociable expert”, a workshop leader who made the translation of tacit knowledge his principle craft.

Simultaneously, the workshop model was adopted by market-oriented artists who needed to keep apace with the ever increasing demand for their work. While they were led by the brand-building artisans (the “antisocial expert”), entrepreneurial workshops did not replicate medievalist practices of indenture or apprenticeship wherein less experienced artisans learn their craft by following the lead of a master. They were, effectively, small-scale manufacturing concerns designed to manage the extant division of artistic labour more efficiently. Although they increased the speed and scope of fabrication, it would be inaccurate to describe them as industrial—they resembled, at best, a medieval form of small scale artisanal production aimed exclusively at plutocrats.

The booming international market relied appreciably on a plutocracy that invested heavily in contemporary art. The

24 “The danger to others posed by people driven by excellence crystallizes in the figure of the expert. He or she appears in two guises, sociable or antisocial. A well-crafted institution will favour the sociable expert; the isolated expert sends a warning signal that the organisation is in trouble”: Richard Sennett, The Craftsman (London: Penguin, 2008), 246.

25 “. . . post-studio practices initially seemed like a bracing challenge to the old-fashioned figure of the lone artist in the studio. These alternative approaches have nonetheless opened onto the reestablishment of workshop-type enterprises designed to sustain both high production volume and the logistics of international artistic careers”: Martha Buskirk, “Introduction”, in Creative Enterprise: Contemporary Art between Museum and Marketplace (New York: Continuum, 2012), 3.

26 Sennett, The Craftsman, 246.

27 Contemporary artists operated on a much smaller scale than makers, garage geeks who fabricated and modified existing commodities as a profitable hobby.
character and wealth of the plutocracy began to change rapidly in the early 21st century. A visible divide was growing between the geekocracy, the digital entrepreneurs that had become among the wealthiest individuals in the world, and the contemporary art market. Silicon Alley was not investing in contemporary art—it did not buy the work of emerging artists, was not a philanthropic supporter of the arts, and did not even appear to value the arts as a form of capital. Writing in the *New York Times*, Alice Gregory speculated on the reasons for this:

There are all sorts of plausible explanations: the tech industry is relatively new (especially in New York); its members are young, busy and most did not plod through four years’ worth of liberal arts syllabuses.\(^{28}\)

A laboratory culture spawned in universities, the tech world was not so dissimilar from the workshop commons model that had arisen amidst contemporary artistic confraternities. It identified itself as iconoclastic culture of self-learning rather than a practice of canonical rote learning.\(^{29}\) Tech valued transparency: it grew up in public. As Gregory noted, entrepreneurs who had made their fortunes from start-ups disliked the secretive approach of the art market,


\(^{29}\) It’s important to stress here that this was the utopian self-image of the tech industry. The reality was more complex and less virtuous. For example, companies such as Google and Facebook were not open; rather, they were Fordist in their aims (if not in their methods) to monopolise their markets. The main revenue streams of tech companies that offered “free” services came from data mining and consumer profiling, providing bespoke information to specialist marketers and government security agencies. In this sense, the web primarily served the narrowcasting of more conventional proprietorial markets such as commerce and manufacturing.
its hidden and fixed prices, its preoccupation with vetting consumer’s social and cultural capital, and the closed experience of viewing art in a private white cube. The tech world, in contrast, imagined itself as a culture of sharing, of open sources, and creative commons. Given their antipathy towards the anti-social expertise of market-oriented workshops and the proprietary black-boxing of objects, the economic shift from real to virtual estate-based fortunes heralded the immanent collapse of the art market. Since the art market’s consecration and monopolising of the charismatic monad was rejected by this culture, it had to adapt to connect with its new tech overlords, or risk being completely disenfranchised. It was not a case of simply appealing to the new rich as patrons, but of adopting their culture of production and distribution.

To overcome its disconnect with the new economic elite, the art market of the early 21st century could not simply facilitate a similar adaptiveness. We need to seriously consider the values at stake in such a bargain. The culture of the electronic nouveau riche was one that preceded their economic rise, and it constituted its core value system. To compromise those values risked ostricisation from the tech community and thus economic ruin. Similarly, contemporary artists had, since the late 1960s, developed networks of their own that were independent from, and often in contradistinction to, the art market. Why would these artists compromise their own hard-won values to ensure the future of an art market that was, largely, indifferent towards them? The model of patronage that assumed artists must compete to provide luxury goods for a tiny coterie of plutocratic overlords was,

30 “To those used to start-up culture, with its utopian transparency and meritocratic ideals, the art world’s barriers to entry are discouraging and confusing. Parties are exclusive. Works are not always sold to those with the most money. Images are often not online. Invoicing can take months. There is, to borrow a term from the lexicon of tech culture, a preponderance of inconvenient ‘friction’”: Gregory, “Does Anyone Here Speak Art and Tech?”
historically, a relatively recent one. There was no reason to 
assume that it could or should continue indefinitely. 

The value of sharing was a culture that generated a new 
economy. For contemporary art to adapt to these conditions 
it had to become entrepreneurial—it had to generate a long-tail 
economy of its own. The aspects of the artworld that were in 
alignment with the start-up culture of tech were already pre-
vant in its artist-led and not for profit organisations.

PART II. THE ROUGH MUSIC

No longer automatically conceived as a relatively primitive stag-
ing post en route to some higher telos or more sophisticated 
stage of human understanding and self-realization, that which 
has gone before can be revisited not only as a source of instruc-
tion on the present, but also as existing in some kind of intellec-
tual and developmental parity with it. In the light of the con-
temporary crisis of scientific rationality, pre-scientific narratives 
or forms of understanding can from this point of view be invest-
ed with new insights; older ways of thinking may be charged 
with correcting the mistakes or deficiencies of contemporary 
prejudice; categorizations and conceptual divisions that in the 
perspective of a classic liberal humanism were deemed perverse 
or fantastical or simply confused offer themselves as potential 
 sources of a . . . “posthuman” enlightenment.31

Since the 1980s—a time when historical gestures were rou-
tinely discredited as a renewed form of authoritarianism— 
contemporary artists have avoided appearing to be overly 
cconcerned with the past, fixing their eyes firmly on the pre-
sent. We might consider project-based work, site-sensitivity, 
time-based art, and the social turn to be, means by which 
artistic practice contemporised itself. Being contemporary 
cconcerned flow, the cyclical movement from cultural rele-
vance to irrelevance, maintaining the hectic pace of drifting

31 Kate Soper, “The postmedieval Project: Promise and Paradox”, 
from one project to another. Mobility, contingency and adaptability became prized qualities in contemporary art.

Perpetual presentism did not concern itself with epoch-spanning perspectives, with a longer now. Neomedievalism held the promise of a longue durée, speculation on premodern futures providing an antidote to the pathologically short-term mentality of the modern sovereign subject. The late ’00s were “ravaged by a pervasive medieval nostalgia”. Altermodern, the 2009 Tate Triennial, constructed its own little medievalisms, featuring a range of works engaging with neo-paganism (Olivia Plender), shamanism (Marcus Coates), and carnivàle (Marvin Gaye Chetwynd). Altermodern reflected a concern with the medievalisms evident in other exhibitions and projects across the UK at the end of the noughties, including Disclosures II: The Middle Ages, Laxton (part of Histories of the Present produced by Nottingham Contemporary), The Long Dark (2009, curated by Michelle Cotton at International 3, Manchester and Hatton Gallery, Newcastle-upon-Tyne), The Dark Monarch (2009, Tate St. Ives, Cornwall), Torsten Lauschmann’s solo exhibition The Darker Ages (2009, Mary Mary, Glasgow), and Alex Pollard and Clare Stephenson’s Four Fatrasies (2010, Pump House Gallery, London).

Among UK-based artists schooled in the histories of modernisms, there was a high degree of self-awareness that retreat into irrationalism and fantasy was expected to emerge at points of “crisis” in modernity, such as the global financial crash of 2008. The Long Dark explicitly related this fissure to John Ruskin and the neo-Gothic of 19th-century

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33 While Altermodern’s thesis stressed the role of the artist as “homo viator”, a contemporary journeyman drifting through space and time, it was not overtly neomedievalist. Indeed, the exhibition manifesto, written by curator Nicolas Borrriaud, eulogised and universalised mobility in ways that were challenged by neomedievalist International Relations theory.
industrial England—*The Dark Monarch* to its neo-romantic progeny in the early 20th century. The fact that the pre-Raphaelite and neo-Romantic episodes formed canonical medievalist chapters in the history of English art was crucial in establishing the imaginary “national character” of modernism in England. This narrative distinguished English modernism as reactionary and primitivist; rather than embrace modernity, it sought escape through a return to the modern world’s preconditions. *The Long Dark* and *The Dark Monarch*, in their different ways, correlated the eccentric modernity of the sovereign English subject with territorial and cultural sovereignty.  

In both cases, medievalisms formed a foil to modernity, arming English modernists with pre-fabricated, pre-modern alternatives to the UK’s military-industrial imperialism. The scholastic and second-hand nature of these 21st-century medievalisms signalled their neo-medievalism: “not a dream of the Middle Ages, but a dream of someone else’s medievalism. It is medievalism doubled upon itself”. Medievalism within the canon of English art, therefore, was as much a product of modernity as it was a cultural response to it.  

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34 I write “English” rather than “British” here as English art existed before (and after) the formation of the UK. Since the UK did not unify until 1707, there was no “British” medieval art. The medieval-modern in the UK was therefore characterised by the invention of distinctive pre-British medievalisms in Scotland, Wales, England, and the province of Ulster. For an account of the Scottish medieval-modern, see Tom Normand’s *The Modern Scot: Modernism and Nationalism in Scottish Art, 1928–1955* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000).


36 In this ‘00s, medievalisms came to be regarded as situational, changing and shifting into multiple forms in accordance with the perspective of the person applying the concept. See Elizabeth Emery, “Medievalism and the Middle Ages,” *Studies in Medievalism XVII: Defining Medievalism(s)* (Cambridge: D.S.Brewer, 2009), 77–91.
neomedievalism of the early 21st century was the symptom of a longer-running tension between the advocates of modern rationalism and pre-modern syncretism, a competition that was a product of post-medieval renaissance and enlightenment. When this tension manifested itself in cultural production, it reflected competition for power in contemporary society.

Taking its lead from medieval nonsense poetry, Pollard and Stephenson’s *Four Fatrasies* was a collaborative installation that filtered the “Dark Ages” through Victorian medievalist sensibilities. Stephenson’s sculptural guardians formed a medievalist tableau to Pollard’s bespoke Italian sports shoes and afforested paintings (many of which featured Robin Hood-style vagabonds). This textural brogueing of the preindustrial, pre-Enlightenment, and early modern was one that always remained self-consciously contemporary in perspective: “If medievalism can be said to work within a framework of distance (reverential or otherwise), then neomedievalism obliterates distance in an intensified combination of love and loathing, its desire for the past torn asunder between denial of history and a longing for return.”

*Four Fatrasies*’ bricolage of neomedieval argots, its use of peculiarly “English” folk morphologies was as much an established vernacular of English modernism as it was an absurd riposte to the techocratic drift towards dis-integrated European transnationalism.

Such artists were particularly prone to the hauntological tendencies found within popular medievalisms, to their invocations of ambient or unseen terrors and hidden phantas-

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39 European transnationalism questioned the basis of statehood and ethnic imaginaries by separating the practices and processes of cultural production from the geographies of recognised macrostates.
magorical cultural anachronisms within the present. Plender’s focus fell on historical pressure points before and after science—fusions of science and spiritualism. In particular, it involved a revisitation of the pseudo-spiritual movements of Romanticism and early mystical modernisms. Rosicrucianism, neo-paganism, and theosophy also offered the kind of curious, conspiratorial early modernist aesthetic of faith and redemption that attracted the contemporary neo-medieval mind. This followed a dominant tendency to question the logic and presumptions of Western Enlightenment, bookending early modernism’s similar concern regarding the limits of Enlightenment.

Plender’s focus on the Modern Spiritualist Movement (1848- ) and the British youth organisation Kindred of the Kibbo Kift (2006),40 for example, was rooted in the fact they were modern medievalisms invented and promoted by charismatic individuals. The complex syncretism of the Modern Spiritualist Movement offered a distinctive, and popular, example of the constant re-invention of medievalist folklore. Kibbo Kift’s woodcrafting and its invocation of Native American, Norse and Saxon rituals, legends, clans and tribes was a rich example of the pre-modern consciousness that swept through modern co-operative scouting.41 The Kibbo Kift was a notable medieval-modern that was not uncommon in the heroic phase of modernism. Their neomedieval mourning of historical authenticity was precisely what Plender foregrounded. Plender’s work was as a whole was characterised by an engagement with the para and the pseudo, with the inventiveness that abounds when we leave the calm charted waters of modernity. Hearsay, myth, legend were all readily in the service of para- and pseudo-historical movements that arose in response to modernity. Where modernist spiritual-

40 Kibbo Kift was active from 1920 until 1951.
41 As part of the Co-operative Movement, the Kibbo Kift promoted pacifism and an international utopianism in lineage with William Morris and John Ruskin’s medieval-modern Christian Socialism.
ism re-enchanting the world, and neo-pagan scouts communed directly with their pre-modern forebears, Plender evoked the cooler stance of the melancholic researcher, keeping an observational distance.\textsuperscript{42}

Plender’s work concerned how modernist forms of post-secularism were manifested and replicated in the present. As in the 20th century, early 21st-century futurity was dominated by technocentrism. However, as we have seen, the canon of English modernism fostered a futurity that castigated this position, \textit{looking backwards} to alternative, allegedly less-technologically interventionist future-pasts. Kibbo Kift’s hand-made Saxon cloaks, archery and mumming were precursors to the 21st century’s alternative medicines and organic foods. While the late middle ages were a time of great technological advance, popular medievalisms admonished the pre-modern era as a time of social and technological equilibrium. The trope of medieval stasis was a boon to social and political movements seeking some form of (mythical) stability in a rapidly changing world.\textsuperscript{43} Medieval stasis was one modern medievalism that underwrote contemporary culture.\textsuperscript{44} Plender, then, was not concerned with a comparative analysis of contemporary and medieval cultures, or with the dis-

\textsuperscript{42} Plender’s research on the Kibbo Kift, for example, was undertaken on a residency at the rural retreat Grizdale Arts, near Lake Coniston, Cumbria, England in 2004. This formed part of Grizdale’s “Year of Romantic Detachment” and culminated in an exhibition at PS1 in New York. In neomedievalist terms, it is significant that Coniston in the Lake District was a favourite retreat of John Ruskin and often considered to be the birthplace of English Romanticism.

\textsuperscript{43} Neomedieval theories of International Relations are predicated on the fact that the middle ages were dynamic.

\textsuperscript{44} “Medieval stasis” was, arguably, a medievalism generated in the middle ages itself. For example, the feudal system generated a legal system that defended fealty in perpetuity. This generated a medieval account of the future in which all social and economic relations were guaranteed forever by feudalism. Where modern futurity became increasingly fixated with change, pre-modern futurity was preoccupied with stasis.
covery of primary medieval sources; rather, she was working with medievalisms as her primary materials. Studies of medievalisms formed part of Plender’s rich tapestry of media. She transformed these materials through performative praxis. As such, we might consider aspects of Plender’s work to be neomedievalist in the sense of simultaneously being the study of, and a contribution to, medievalisms.

Did such neomedievalism constitute an intervention into the culture of contemporary medievalisms? Was it a form of institutional critique akin to that promulgated in the art of “The Long Nineties”? The theatrical and fictional nature of Plender’s work would preclude an overt social turn as prosaic and dogmatic. The social turn certainly remained evident, but only as a proxy, a given context that need only be implied. Plender’s work drew attention to the fact that new medievalisms were constantly being fabricated, and had been since the middle ages. For Plender, it was a question of opening up this field of study as a futurist practice. Contemporary artists were attracted to the speculative and fantastical aspects of medievalisms. They were involved in speculation themselves, and so in the production of neomedievalisms.

While performances such as In Search of the New Republic (or the tables turned) (Serpentine Gallery, London 2006) were rigorously researched, Plender’s work imparted an air of professional amateurism, the illusion of the culturally authentic. In occupying this expanding cultural territory, it did not help to distinguish between the professional and the

46 Perpetrating this view was also the aim of Leslie Workman in establishing the journal Studies in Medievalism in 1979.
47 Hedley Bull’s new medievalism, equally, was pure speculation, a future scenario that he held out little hope for.
48 We need to remember that artists were not medievalists. They were appropriating studies of medievalisms. As such, we can think of them as scholar-fans, or professional amateurs.
amateur; to do so would be to vastly underestimate fans’ intelligence (not to mention their economic potential):

Pro-Ams are a new social hybrid. Their activities are not adequately captured by the traditional definitions of work and leisure, professional and amateur, consumption and production. We use a variety of terms many derogatory, none satisfactory—to describe what people do with their serious leisure time: nerds, geeks, anoraks, enthusiasts, hackers, men in their sheds. Our research suggests the best way to cover all the activities covered by these terms is to call the people involved Pro-Ams.49

Marvin Gaye Chetwynd’s work exemplified a sprightliness and candour reminiscent of community and amateur dramatics. Costumes were home-spun, the choreography jerrybuilt and customarily botched. The participants in the Chetwynd Mime Troup were friends. There was the perennial threat of interactivity, of the audience being invited to play a part. The stock medievalism used to describe Chetwynd’s actions and tableaux was “carnivalesque”. This is fitting in one sense. Rather than drawing sustenance from the good taste and sensibilities of serious culture, Chetwynd’s paintings, collages, objets d’art and performances were energised dedications to the cult of ugliness. Yet not everything within the realms of pop grotesquery was admitted for reprocessing. Nor was the spontaneity which was generally associated with her performances entirely what it seemed. Chetwynd was careful to borrow from choice cuts of intermediary sources, most of which were themselves already deliberate forms of self-critical distortion. There was a knowing sense of the carnivalesque as always being authorised, of going through the motions, and of temporarily acting out transgression.

The Pro-Am cultural communities and economies that Chetwynd drew upon were, perhaps, more diverse and eclectic than Plender’s subjects, including *Star Wars* fans, Hulksters, Glam Goth Meat Loafers and Live Action Role Players. Never groupies, dedicated fans worked as Pro-Ams in their respective fields—writing their own scripts, filling in back stories, making story-things, and producing critical coverage of the objects of their desires. The relationship between artists and their (human) resources can all too often compare with that between colonial anthropologists and the “natives”. Rather than maintain a detached view, Chetwynd took matters into her own hands, collaborating with her troupe to make costumes and props, to paint scenery, to script and perform in her own productions. Yet, as a neomedievalising scholar-fan, Chetwynd wasn’t as concerned with being as truthful to detail as fan-scholars often could be. In *Star Wars*—a performance based on one of the most prolific medievalist franchises in modern times—Jabba the Hutt’s language Huttese was very carefully assembled from the ancient Incan dialect, Quechua. *Star Wars* fan-scholars have spent almost many years perfecting this *lingua franca* by studying the movies in great detail. Going straight for effect, Chetwynd’s Jabba spoke fluent Persian.

Chetwynd was no autodidact; before studying Fine Art at the Slade and Royal College of Art, she read History and Anthropology at University College London. Her interests and methods seemed to lie somewhere between art, history, and anthropology. There was a sense that some of Chetwynd’s happenings might be loose anthropological experiments. They recall also the populist history-in-action documentaries that were the staple fare of British television. Chetwynd’s interest in Spartiatism and carnivâle emerged

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50 For a discussion of the distinction between “scholar-fans” and “fan-scholars”, see Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (London: Routledge, 2002).
from anthropology and the sociology of popular culture. It would be wrong to castigate Chetwynd’s self-sufficient folkmote as a manifestation of a “new irrationalism”. Her art was allusive and analogous. Although they may have been informed by history and anthropology in equal measure, the acts performed by her troupe were not consumed by rehearsing the past; they concerned the present. They were a proxy battle between a homogenising technocracy and its discontents (represented by the radical characters of darker ages). While “medieval” was often abused as a byword for negative clichés associated with the Middle Ages—creationism, paleoconservatism, torture, gang lords—Chetwynd’s neomedievalism provided a focus on more liberal associations with the early 21st century: subsidiarity, Latin transnationalism, close community bonds, social participation, the commons and heightened sensuality. The “liveness” of Chetwynd’s performances allowed this version of the folktale to be both liberated and retold repeatedly.

Plender and Chetwynd shared a fascination with medievalist resources that was visually explicit in their work. In a similar fashion to the oral-formulaic composition of the folk tradition, we can think of their neomedievalism as concurrently illustrating and performing. Cultural neomedievalism, in this sense, was a recalibration and reactivation of premodern assemblages, broken down, outmoded or faulty machines fixed and adapted by the practitioner and applied to contemporary use. The practice of “mumming” was a key case in point. Since mumming formed part of the Kibbo Kift’s rituals, it appeared ready-made in Plender’s lectures.

51 In particular, Mikhail Baktin and Greil Marcus.
52 Debt, to paraphrase Chetwynd, was a play that would perhaps be of interest to an audience in 2005. It makes sense to consider it in relation to the debt economy of contemporary art, an economy heavily reliant on gift-bonds.
and guided tours. Mumming also informed much of the Chetwynd Mime Troupe’s theatrics. Mumming is a medievalism in so far as there are no transcripts of the mumming plays said to have been performed in medieval England. Our knowledge of mumming, therefore, is part of a folk tradition, one known only through new acts of performance. Mumming may be medieval in origin, but it is a contemporary living event. The fact that mumming is an overtly social and confrontational art form lent itself to contemporary artistic practice. Mummers reverse the normative modes of behaviour, adopting inversions of speech, gender and social roles, placing the audience on the defensive. Mummers are not professional actors—instead, they are amateurs, ordinary citizens transforming into temporary avatars by adopting home-spun disguises.

We can find significant uses of mumming throughout the art of the ’00s. For example, Tatham & O’Sullivan’s mumming troupe Slapstick Mystics with Sticks performed Thou Art That! (Great Western Road, Glasgow, 2001). The Slapstick Mystics with Sticks transformed into a series of performances, notably at Frieze Art Fair in London (15-18 October 2004), before becoming a short novella. Mumming was also central to the performances of Plastique Fantastique. For example, Plastique Fantastique Ribbon Dance Ritual to Call Forth the Pre-Industrial Modern (“The Event”, Birmingham, 2007), while resembling a pagan calendar custom, verged on a form of Charivari or “rough music”, a raucous vigilantism in which the regeneration of Birmingham’s Bull Ring shopping complex, including its obligatory Anthony Gormley sculpture, was made subject to a light roughhousing by the mummers. The mobbing was invoked as a discordant liturgical form:

What is a Pre-Industrial Modern? Well, well, well, well might you ask exactly just-such-a-question, for it is not as straightforward as it might at first appear (indeed, it is a very queer, a very wonky thing). For certainly—and this is
our understanding [All: this is our understanding]—there are apparent so-called pre-industrial moderns that are little more than impostors, fakes, shadows of the Spectacle, more of the same . . . we are talking about those despicable commodities clothed in the new. We spit on them. [All spit]53

Again, it is the second-order nature of such practices that transforms them from medievalisms into neomedieval ciphers, toolkits for practice. This was wholly consistent with the celebration of contemporary art’s extradisciplinarity, the search for tropisms that enabled self-learning and the acquisition of (relatively) new competences. Rather than perfect a singular genre or form, contemporary artists mined disciplines and practices that they felt might inform their work. This was certainly evident in the wilful amateurism of neomedieval contemorary art, a playfulness born of the autodidactic nature of the inquiry. Extradisciplinarity was the sine qua non of contemporary art. It would be disingenuous to claim that neomedievalism, or any interdisciplinary work, was “innovative” or pushed beyond the boundaries of contemporary artistic practice in this sense. Since it was so ecstatically undisciplined, the art of the early 21st century had few boundaries to push beyond. Nevertheless the question remains. Why were contemporary artists so drawn to the neomedieval?

As subject matter, medievalisms offered malleable alterior presents remote (or obscure) enough to liberate this kind of performative, ludic research. As a method, neomedievalism provided an ever expanding tropism, a novel point of entry into an inexhaustible range of contemporary subjects. Neomedievalism’s elasticated atemporal looping and folding opened a longer perspective on artistic practice—pre-modern conditions providing insight into postmodern condi-

53 Plastique Fantastique, What is a Pre-Industrial Modern? The Gawk-in Must be Made!: www.plastiquefantastique.org/performance 02.html.
Neomediaevalism was a means of circumventing the late modernist industry, reading the present as simultaneously embodying conflicting elements of what has preceded it: modernism and the pre-modern. Much contemporary art embodied the pre-modern, thus, in its disaffection with the modernist auteur and in its embrace of collectivist and collaborative practices. At the same time, a significant sector of contemporary art continued the practice of preindustrial, artisanal modes of production, distribution and consumption. Produced and consumed in very small quantities, contemporary art was never modern in the industrial sense.

We can easily list ways in which the British Isles in the early 21st century mirrored their medieval pasts: a thousand years in which ordinary people suffered from global warming, economic meltdown, and a pandemic that killed half the population. It was also increasingly clear that Europe’s modern experiment with sovereign nation states was in deep crisis, returning neomediaeval subsidiarity and supranational authority to the continent. Such analogies were neomediaeval practices, adaptive responses to a connected world in which space and time were being compressed. Such neomediaeval practices were part of a broader imaginative process of exposure to otherness—folding in and getting out. Advocates of an alternative consciousness that would be better informed by the positive aspects of the pre-industrial, pre-Enlightenment, and early modern were always self-consciously postmodern in perspective. Embarking on an extra-disciplinary pilgrimage, artists travelled far beyond the negations of modernism and its limited analysis of modernity. Neomediaevalism was but one suppressed alterity that postmodernism released into the wild.

This was particularly pressing during a period in which technologically advanced post-industrialism was in such deep crisis. Artists based in the UK were canonically ordained to lose their rational minds in challenging the diluted positivism that was the experience economy. But neomediaevalism did not have to equate with an embrace of the irra-
tional, nor was it predisposed to recycle the past as a way of celebrating the tyranny of the present. The neo-feudalism generated in this narrative was one—with its emphasis on a complex mixture of individual autonomy and multiple loyalties—that fused with neomedievalist readings of globalisation. Of course, the fascination with the other had to extend beyond “British” and European medievalisms. It also had to engage with simultaneity—with the fact that there were many moderns and thus many pre-moderns and post-moderns. Neomedievalism, then, was a lens through which contemporary artists identified and justified the present in the past and through which they narrated this past in terms of how they imagined their futures. It has no logical conclusion.