

Wazungu means “White Men”: Superflex and the Limits of Ethical Capitalism

1. Globalization and Neoliberalism

For all globalization’s benefits, all the talk of friendship, the Americans count their dividends at home, the British count theirs—and we count ours. The majority count their losses. So when they tell us that sovereignty is outdated, as is the nation-state, we should ask ourselves what they are up to.

Vladislav Surkov, Deputy Chief of Staff of the President of the Russian Federation, 2006¹

The experience of “Globalism” is typically framed in terms of rupture and dislocation, entailing the emergence of new categories of subjectivity, new modes of social interaction, new configurations of political power, unprecedented movements of populations, and technological transformations that break radically with the past. There is, of course, nothing particularly novel in this. For every breathless account of “immaterial labor,” “precarity,” migrating multitudes and the utopian powers of the internet we can identify numerous historical precedents (the self-aggrandizing claims of the emergent “Professional Managerial Class” in the early twentieth century, immigrant “homework” in the tenements of New York City, or the democratizing promises made for rail expansion or rural electrification, for example). The very claim that globalism is somehow new or unique is entirely traditional: part of a well-established script in which rupture and dislocation play a central role. If the analysis of modernity has a signal intellectual trait it would seem to be a persistent historical amnesia, and the desire to claim that this moment of transformation, the one through which we are currently living, is somehow more decisive, more extreme, more symptomatic, than any before it.

It is the capacity to describe, diagnose, or envision this ostensible change, to be the “early adopter,” so to speak, the creative consumer possessing a privileged insight into this rupture, that has consistently defined the modern artist and intellectual. The act of “naming” a new epoch or its constituent elements (the nominative impulse so evident in Hardt and Negri’s work, for example) carries with it an almost irresistible attraction, functioning as it does to legitimate the theorist’s own cultural necessity.

I’d argue instead for preserving a sense of historical continuity in analyzing the current cultural situation, while remaining attentive to specific, localized transformations in the social fabric. In this talk I’ll examine the intersection between globalization and contemporary art production, with a specific focus on collaborative, socially engaged art practices. I want to begin by substituting the term “neoliberalism” for globalism. The analysis of globalism or globalization has tended to concentrate on its spatial characteristics, due in part to the role played by urban geographers such as David Harvey in its original articulation. I want to focus instead on the discursive system of neo-liberalism: the way in which it constitutes and curtails collective and individual identity and action. From its origins in the work of Chicago School economists under the influence of Friedrich von Hayek, neoliberalism has emerged as the new “common sense” of global development. One of its chief effects has been the strategic reassertion of a nineteenth century model of subjectivity in which success or failure in the market system is the primary determinant of self-worth. Within this model, a parasitic “dependence” on state or public institutions is a sign of moral depravity, marking

the absence of the entrepreneurial drive necessary to survive in the market system. Neoliberal economic theory provided an effective ideological template for expanding capital in the post-WWII period. It has been mobilized in conjunction with certain strategic shifts in the projection of corporate power: the increasing centralization of control by trans-national financial and managerial elites, the spatial segregation of production, which works to disempower and disaggregate labor, and the ongoing erosion of the state's capacity to impose any significant regulatory limits on corporate interests.

These processes have been germinating for decades, with offshore sourcing beginning in the late 1950s, and the contraction of the state's regulatory and ameliorative role in the US beginning with the backlash against Community Action Programs in the late 1960s, and continuing through Richard Nixon's "New Federalism" initiatives in the early '70s. A parallel process occurred in England under Margaret Thatcher during the 1980s, and is ongoing today in the EU as member nations are under increasing pressure to shed social provisions such as free health care, and subsidized housing and higher education. One of the primary cultural goals of neo-liberalism is to erode the autonomy of public institutions, which are seen to represent a collective interest or space of articulation that is potentially resistant to the privatizing drive of the market system. In practice, this has entailed an assault on all forms of collectivity or solidarity that challenge the imperatives of capital, aside from ideologically compliant forms of organized religion. The effect has been to collapse or confuse a number of the salient distinctions through which cultural resistance has

conventionally been defined: private vs. public interest, individual vs. collective action, and so on.

2. Recoding Autonomy

In this context, the proliferation of contemporary art practices concerned with building new social networks and crafting new forms of collective social interaction can be seen as the expression of a political struggle to re-think collectivity against the grain of a diminishing public sphere. Thus the emergence of these practices marks a cyclical shift *within* the field of art (towards process-based, participatory work), even as the nature of this shift involves a re-articulation of aesthetic autonomy and an increasing permeability *between* 'art' and other zones of symbolic production (activism, radical social work, environmentalism, participatory planning, etc.). I will argue that aesthetic autonomy, as it's been traditionally understood, is being re-coded or renegotiated in these projects. As we all know, the core function of art changes quite dramatically in the modern period. As early as the mid-nineteenth-century art began to abandon it's traditional function of transmitting and idealizing dominant forms of power, whether religious or secular, and instead took on the role of disrupting or destabilizing them. This agonistic posture changes art's self-understanding, its ontology, if you will, as well as the kinds of knowledge that it produces. First, modern art begins to define itself in opposition to, or as the negation of, certain characteristics identified with the dominant culture. Early on this "other" was provided by academic painting and later it became consumer

culture. By the post-WWII period contemporary art was sufficiently institutionalized and capitalized that its survival was no longer at stake. The previously externalized threat represented by the salon or kitsch was internalized in anxieties about the proliferation of rogue tendencies within contemporary art itself.² This approach lends itself to a hygienic attitude on the part of the critic, who must defend art from contamination: a fear that art will lose its specific identity if it becomes too permeable to other, impure, areas of culture.

The second feature of this agonistic model involves art's relationship to the viewer. The appropriate response to the work of art is no longer veneration or obeisance, but discomfort, rupture or an uncanny derangement of the senses. I've written about this elsewhere in terms of an "orthopedic" model of the aesthetic in which art seeks to improve the cognitive or perceptual capacities of the viewer, who is constructed as always, already in need of correction. These provocations often perform an affirmative function; verifying the pre-existing self-image of art world audiences. Or they are consumed rhetorically, as the viewer identifies, in a self-congratulatory manner, with the subject position of the artist rather than the hapless implied viewer. In fact, one comes to the space of art prepared for precisely this sort of provocation; disruption is, in a way, expected and even savored. This coincides with what I term a "textual" model of art production, based in part on the rapprochement between neo-conceptual art strategies and poststructuralist theory in the 1990s.³ Here the work of art functions as a hermeneutic device intended to destabilize fixed oppositions via some form of embodied conceptual provocation. Importantly, the work, whether

it's a painting, installation or event, is conceived by the artist beforehand and subsequently set in place before the viewer. While there is certainly an interactive dimension to even the most opaque or static art work the "interaction" involved in textual production is understood primarily in terms of either contemplative decoding or sensory derangement.

We are witnessing today a certain disenchantment with the existing parameters of avant-garde art and an attempt to rearticulate the specificity of the aesthetic in relationship to both the viewer and to other cultural, and political, practices. Groups such as Les Huit Facettes Interaction in Senegal, NICA in Myanmar, Navjot Altaf in India, Ala Plastica in Argentina, and countless others, are involved with a more or less conscious effort to renegotiate the condition of art's autonomy, and to shape a new paradigm. In place of the either/or mentality of the traditional avant-garde, which defines art through antithetical negation (art is not activism, not ethnography, not popular culture) we encounter a relation of reciprocal elucidation relative to other fields of political and cultural action. And in place of a textual paradigm we discover practices centered on immersive interaction and a reactive, referential orientation to specific sites of social exchange and interaction. We can get some sense of this shift in the work of the German group Park Fiction, in the creation of an alternative park in Hamburg's gentrifying harbor front or "Hafenstrase" area. The project was complicated by the militant history of the area, which was the site of a long-term occupation during the 1980s, when local residents took control of housing in the area and fended off attacks by the German police. A traditional avant-garde approach

would preclude any direct involvement in this context. While art can encourage a critically self-reflexive contemplation of the political situation, the argument might go, it's forbidden from open participation in the circuits of political and economic power that structure the development process itself.

The members of Park Fiction didn't sequester themselves from the political scene of the Hafenstrasse, but they didn't fully collapse the separation between the aesthetic and the political either. They operated through a principle of what I term *adjacency*. That is, they worked adjacent to or alongside political systems through a whimsical re-enactment of planning that nevertheless had a pragmatic effect. They didn't begin by assuming an agonistic or adversarial position based on direct confrontation: marching in the streets or territorializing space, naming an enemy. Instead, they operated through the dislocation of the political through the cultural, organizing a series of party-like participatory planning sessions in which the Hafenstrasse's residents sketched out their wishes and dreams regarding the potential use of the space (which was otherwise slated for a condominium development). They didn't come onto the scene and announce their intention to fight real-estate developers or challenge private property, but their work ultimately had that effect in taking control of the land on which the park currently sits. They accomplished this through a very subtle understanding of the relative permeability of the cultural and the political, as they touch on and interact with each other. As Park Fiction argued, in the Hafenstrasse "art and politics made each other more clever." This work was actualized precisely *because* the city's power structure, knowing the history of

the area, recognized that the threat of civil disorder lay just beneath the surface. The park thus possesses a dual character. On the one hand the city no doubt saw it as a way to buy off the Hafenstrasse community with a cultural “amenity”. At the same time, the park provides a physical expression of the resident’s solidarity through its collective ownership and ongoing use.

Fig.1 Park Fiction in Hafenstrasse, Hamburg (Photo: Grant Kester)





3. *Supergas* and *Guaraná Power*

These practices raise a number of relevant questions: what is the specific orientation of “art” outside of art institutional settings? What metric do we use in analyzing this work? Most importantly, what forms of knowledge are generated in the intersection between art discourse and other, parallel, systems of action? One of the most complex zones of contact occurs in the relationship between collective art practice and models of organization drawn from the corporate world. I’m not referring here to the largely ironic appropriation of corporate language or branding techniques evident in projects by the Yes Men, Etoy and others. Rather, I’m interested in groups that openly, albeit ambivalently, embrace market-based behavior and values. This is a connection rendered all the more problematic by the canniness with which neo-liberal managerial theory has appropriated models of creativity, innovation and structural organization ostensibly drawn from the arts.⁴ The Danish group Superflex provides a useful case study of these issues through their endorsement of “ethical capitalism” in projects such as *Supergas* in Tanzania and *Guaraná Power* in Brazil. In the *Supergas* project Superflex worked with engineers and a sustainable agriculture organization in Tanzania to develop and market an affordable biogas generator to African farmers. The biogas unit turns human and animal waste into a gas fuel source. In *Guaraná Power* Superflex worked with a group of Guaraná berry farmers in Brazil to develop and market an energy drink to recapture some of the profits currently taken by the multinational beverage corporations that purchase their crops. Each functions as a kind of pilot project, with the expressed hope of

some wider replication: there have been (halting) attempts to market the biogas generator in other countries, and the Guaraná Power group has arranged for limited distribution of their drink. However, both projects have received their primary public exposure and legitimation in art venues and before art audiences.⁵

There isn't space here to fully explore the implications these projects have for contemporary art practice. I want to focus instead on a single, and apparently ancillary, aspect of Superflex's work: their vexed relationship to the protocols of non-governmental aid agencies. On the one hand, the *Supergas* and *Guaraná Power* projects have clear affinities with the operation of NGOs: the members of Superflex work with "disenfranchised" communities and seek to ameliorate their condition through locally-situated interventions. They operate with the implicit understanding that they have something to offer these communities; new machinery, intellectual technology, or modes of social organization or subjectivity, which can help the disempowered improve their situation. In fact, images of Superflex's members assisting Tanzanian's with the creation of a test digester remind me of nothing so much as earnest young Peace Corps volunteers spreading western technological "know how" through the developing world in the 1960s and '70s. Despite their somewhat labored efforts at tongue-in-check staging, which seem intended primarily for art world consumption, they are apparently sincere in their "mission" as emissaries of the developed world.⁶ Of course the encouragement of grower's cooperatives or the circulation of new technologies among poor farmers is being carried forward in a virtually identical manner by literally hundreds of NGOs and aid agencies, as well as corporations,

around the world. Danida, the Danish International Development Agency, has funded numerous projects organized along similar lines throughout Africa. Despite the obvious corollaries, Superflex's members have been extremely concerned to differentiate their work from the operations of nonprofit aid organizations in interviews. This ostensible difference is an article of faith in most sympathetic reviews as well (the quotes below are taken from articles available on the Superflex website).

In order not to become involved in existing (power) structures in Danish government controlled development aid, Superflex is working to have their biogas project funded by companies and private and public foundations and funds. Superflex is thus accelerating a situation dramatically and effectively being a complex combination of art activism, "ethical" capitalism, and new development of ecological technology.

—Lars Bang Larsen, "Superflex: Art and Biogas" (*Siksi*, 1997)

We don't want to help the way an aid organization does. Instead we offer a functional product that they are able to use on their own terms. . . The goal of the "donors" in the classical aid-giving scenario is to raise the quality of life among the "recipients" by providing a road, a school or some other amenity. Quality of life is, however, measured by Western or European values and norms and does not always work in a new context. . . Many Africans talk about wanting to kick out all aid organizations, saying that they make their society passively dependent on the "helper's" contributions. They undermine creativity and initiative and thereby create victimized people.

—An Exchange Between Åsa Nacking and Superflex (*Afterall*, 1998)

This confrontation demonstrates a clear difference between the objectives of the Superflex project and development aid: a functional product is offered for which an actual need has been identified and available resources (dung) are used. The argument here is not a social one, but rather an issue of economics. . . Superflex thus distances itself from the traditional donor/recipient relation in which the latter becomes passively dependent on contributions, stifling creativity and initiative.

—Barbara Steiner, "Radical Democracy, Acknowledging the Complexities and Contingencies" (August 1999)

As I've described it, the negative ontology of traditional avant-garde art is based on difference from an implicitly inferior dominant cultural form. This gesture entails, of course, a certain violence; the disparaged "other" against which advanced art defines itself, is necessarily reified; a caricature whose unalloyed simplicity or instrumentality justifies the complexity and ludic freedom of art as somehow unique and necessary. I suspect Superflex's almost instinctual effort to distance itself from the clearly analogous operations of aid organizations is motivated in part by this same tradition. Their ability to take up an adjudicatory, critically-reflexive relationship to the operations of NGOs is precisely what defines their practice as "art". In order to produce this distance, Superflex, in what they apparently believe is a refreshingly non-conformist rejection of received wisdom, embrace the concept of "ethical capitalism".⁷ Where NGOs make recipients "dependent," stifle "creativity and initiative," and inculcate a passive "victim" mentality, the market system makes them independent and entrepreneurial. Where NGOs force recipients to conform to western values rather than meeting their real needs, the market gives people "functional products" that they can use "on their own terms."⁸

Curiously, this same uncompromising criticality does not extend to Superflex's understanding of the market itself as a parallel organizational model. Instead, "market standards" remain a naturalized given which they accept more or less at face value. "We have always been oriented towards the market," according to Rasmus Nielsen, "We want our projects to be able to function

according to market standards. It is not because we think corporations are particularly sympathetic, but rather, out of an attempt to avoid the giver-receiver relationship established by NGOs.” Superflex attaches a particular importance to the act of *selling* the biogas digester to Tanzanians, thereby implicating them in a market-based transaction which will ignite their entrepreneurial spirit. The ameliorative effects of the cash nexus are evident in a cartoon created to publicize the *Supergas* project. The cartoon features a proud villager bragging to a friend about the virtues of his biogas digester. “Where did you get that technology?” the friend asks. “I got it from Superflex’s ‘Wazungu’ [white men],” he replies. “But this ‘Wazungu,’ they must be very rich and clever. How come they know our problems and work hard to help us solve them?,” his friend inquires. “Oh! You boy,” he responds, “‘Wazungu’ are not helping us, but we are helping each other. . . I paid for this technology you see.” NGOs practice a patronizing cultural superiority, but the “giver-receiver” relationship established by the market is refreshingly free of humanist cant and pretension. The market is an ideologically neutral device which artists can easily appropriate and turn to their own ends. Hence we have the unintentionally ironic sight of a group of Danish artists whose education and art practice have been subsidized by one of the most generous welfare states in the EU, working to encourage “entrepreneurial” independence among poor Africans; generously giving them the tools to “empower” themselves and overcome their “victimization” by Western aid agencies. The cause of African poverty isn’t the damaging economic “reforms” imposed by the World Bank, disproportionate debt, lack of resources or

kleptocratic government, but rather, an absence of “creativity” and “initiative” among the African people rendered passive and dependent by a surfeit of health clinics and water pumps.

The critique of “dependency” among aid recipients is, of course, straight from the neo-liberal playbook (it reiterates neoconservative attacks on state welfare provision in the US during the 1980s by figures such as William Bennett). Aid, for all its problems, encourages a form of reciprocal obligation between state entities and the poor that violates the moral economy of the workplace and the private market. With their appeals to “ethical” capitalism and the glories of “entrepreneurial” subjectivity, Superflex only manage to differentiate themselves from Danida by aligning themselves with Starbucks, whose support of “Fair Trade” initiatives is widely-publicized. Superflex attempt to triangulate a critical perspective on NGOs and development dependency through the vehicle of market-based forms of social organization which are themselves deeply problematic. In an interview with Åsa Nacking they associate their approach with Muhammad Yunus’s “Grameen Bank” system of micro-credit in India, describing the Grameen system as a “virus” circulating among the poor that “provides the tools to enable a poor person to change his condition.” “All humans are potential entrepreneurs,” they enthuse, speculating on the positive effects that would follow if the poor were given access to the same financial “tools” as the developing world.

Despite its reputation, the Grameen Bank system has resulted in incidents of aggression and even violence in rural villages over loan repayment.

Alex Counts, president of the Grameen Foundation USA, acknowledges that the micro-credit model has “a dark side. . . It brought a lot of solidarity but also brought an enormous amount of tension. If someone fell behind, people got very tense and even got hostile with each other.”⁹ By displacing conventional direct aid, the Grameen system increased debt entrapment among poor rural women who are forced to repay loans at interest rates of up to 36%. “The poor are exploiting the poor,” as Dr. Shudhirendar Sharma of the Dehli Ecological Foundation writes.¹⁰ Notably, the micro-credit “market” has now attracted the attention of Citibank and other global financial conglomerates. This isn’t to disregard the positive impact of the Grammen Bank system, but simply to acknowledge it’s necessary ambivalence and it’s explicit alignment with the discourse of neo-liberalism, and to question Superflex’s simplistic contrast between the always, already compromised operations of the non-profit sector and the ostensibly untroubled procedures of ethical capitalism. Ethical capitalism implies the assimilation of a resistance to the mandates of capital within capitalism itself through a kind of self-policing. It functions on two levels. First, through a quasi-socialization of risk via subsidized or simulacral versions of market tools (the Grameen Bank system relies, in fact, on NGO funding to remain solvent), and second, through a reduction of ethical claims to largely procedural forms of “transparency” and self-disclosure. Here ethics becomes a form of cultural capital. The necessary cost of doing business in a global world is to *appear* ethical so as to not disturb the fragile sensibilities of your customers in privileged countries. The first assumes that the poor need to be gradually

weaned from their collectivist traditions and inoculated with the entrepreneurial virus. The second is merely cover for business as usual. Neither are without problems, and neither is any less ethically compromised or less prone to the projection of western desires, than the work of the typical aid agency.

The *Guarana Power* project helps to complicate this analysis further. In the *Guarana Power* project Superflex worked with a collective of Brazilian Guarana berry farmers who were being pressured by beverage corporations such as Pepsi and AmBev to lower their prices. The result of their collaboration was a new energy drink (*Guarana Power*) that has so far received limited distribution (primarily at the opening of art exhibitions by Superflex). The bottle features the *Guarana Power* logo superimposed over the label of AmBev's competing *Antartica* brand. While discussions of this project in the artworld have focused primarily on issues of intellectual property and trade-mark infringement, it also suggests some of the constraints posed by Superflex's embrace of "ethical" capitalism. Neither Superflex nor the berry farmers have access to the capital, production facilities or distribution networks necessary for their drink business to become self-sustaining in market terms. In fact they are already in direct competition with a number of other locally-produced, "fair trade," Guarana-based drinks (*Mondo Guarana* and *Steaz: The First Fair Trade Energy Drink*) being produced with equally altruistic motives, but a somewhat stronger grasp of market fundamentals. In fact, the idea for the drink itself (and of consumption as a kind of surrogate form of political engagement or "empowerment) was taken from *Mecca Cola*, which is marketed by a French company that devotes a

percentage of its profits to Palestinian charities (their slogan is: “Don’t drink stupid, drink with commitment”). The *Guarana Power* project exhibits a certain ambivalence. While the (arguably naive) attempt to compete with multinational beverage corporations may well constitute a poetic or symbolic gesture of resistance, it is likely to do little to improve the bargaining position of the Guarana farmers relative to Pepsi and AmBev (an instructive comparison could be made here with Grennan and Sperandio’s “worker-designed” candy bar in *We Got It!*, which was part of Mary Jane Jacobs’ “Culture in Action” exhibition in Chicago in 1993). Further, the project reinforces the perception (quite popular in “Free Trade” circles) of the global market as a demanding but essentially equitable field of action, in which a small but entrepreneurial band of individuals can stake their claim with little more than a good idea and the sweat of their brows.

As I’ve already suggested, the projects of Superflex raise a number of timely questions regarding the changing modalities of resistance and assimilation in contemporary art. A substantive analysis of this work requires a critical metrology capable of tracing the subtle calibration of ironic distance and sincere engagement, the movement and counter-movement of ideological pressures, as these projects orient themselves within a complex and rapidly changing political moment. They also reveal some of the symptomatic tensions within contemporary art practices that operate within, against, and adjacent to development agencies, NGOs, and other quasi-public institutions. What relationship does the artist take up relative to these institutions? Ironic distanciation? Adjudicatory critique? Sympathetic cooperation? The ambivalent

character of Superflex's work is emblematic of these tensions. Are they simply reinforcing neo-liberal orthodoxy, or exposing the contradictions of the "soft cops" of developmental aid? Are they building bold new models of social interaction or merely recruiting incipient capitalists, in a kind of perverse, globalized version of Junior Achievement? The very terms here suggest some of the limits of this practice, as they consistently define Superflex's collaborators in behaviorist terms. How, in fact, does this critical or cooptive economy relate to the needs and experience of their local collaborators? And at what levels of meaning does the work still operate as an art practice? For myself, the most interesting part of the *Supergas* project isn't its earnest critique of NGO "dependency" (a critique which was acknowledged and debated within the aid community long before Superflex discovered it), but the particular effects of collaborative interaction itself; the habitus of shared labor and its relationship to new models of collectivity. This dimension of the work is generally treated as incidental or merely pragmatic in most accounts of the work. A more thorough account of this work must proceed dialectically, tracing the interrelationship between the situational protocols of collaboration and the constraints imposed by the discursive horizon of neo-liberalism.

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¹Michael Specter, "Kremlin, Inc.," *The New Yorker*, January 29, 2007, p.59.

² See "Duration, Performativity and Critique" in *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

³ Here we might consider the parallel's between Clement Greenberg's notion of formal "movement" in the development of avant-garde art (as the sublimated expression of a currently unrealizable political "movement") with the ethical normalization of textual "play" in the poetics of Roland Barthes (which would exercise a significant influence through the canonization of poststructuralist theory in European and American art schools during the 1990s). In each case, the perceived impossibility of substantive political change (blocked by the rise of fascism in Greenberg's case and the failure of May '68 for Barthes) necessitates withdrawal into a zone of formal/textual autonomy that must be protected from the pragmatic demands of "real world" politics. Each proceeds via a conservational displacement or deferral of political critique into a more abstracted critique of epistemology *per se*, evident in Greenberg's attack on "representational" art and Barthes' attack on conventional forms of "signification".

⁴ See Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2007).

⁵ Venues include Redcat gallery at the Disney/Cal Arts Theater in Los Angeles, the Venice Biennale, the Hering Kunstmuseum, and the Arken Museum of Modern Art in Denmark.

⁶ "Their African clothing, for example, was based on the idea of combining the look of an engineer, a practical social worker, and the kind of uniforms preferred by imperialist armies." Barbara Steiner, "Radical Democracy: Acknowledging the Complexities and Contingencies" (August 1999).
<http://www.superflex.net/text/articles/acknowledging.shtml>

⁷ The English author Richard North offers the following "propositions" on ethical capitalism, from a talk at London's Institute of Contemporary Art in 2002.

1. Good is done by firms involved in cigarettes, animal research facilities, oil, chemicals, landfills, drink, pornography, 'sweatshops,' and flowers grown in the tropics. Much less good is done by organics, windmills, 'fair' trade suppliers, 'development' NGOs.

2. It is a matter of debate what production systems and goods and services produce good, so it pays us to remember that describing CSR [Corporate Social Responsibility] or ethical business is contested territory. Firms going for 'corporate social responsibility' can much more easily achieve political correctness than real good.

3. NGOs do not have a monopoly on understanding virtue. NGOs are romantic, idealist and propagandist. The public, media and corporations have been unwise to sub-contract so much ethical thinking to them.

4. Firms, instead of claiming to be 'ethical', should say they are catering to a particular fashion, taste or market sector. The owners, managers and staff may share that taste, but they should remember that there will be others who, perhaps rightly, think them fools.

5. Ethics is like politics. I believe in the market as a force for good in rather the way a Conservative might think that self-reliance is good for the poor; I believe 'leftist' reform often does damage. Similar cases can be made for capitalism 'red in tooth and claw' vs. 'Third Way' capitalism incorporating an NGO agenda.

North, whose most recent book is *Let's Scrap the BBC: Ten Years to set Broadcasters Free*, is affiliated by the Social Affairs Unit, a London-based "charity" whose other recent publications include an apologia for the slave trade. See: http://www.richarddnorth.com/10_propositions/ethical_capitalism.htm

⁸ Here is Superflex, from an interview with Åsa Nacking:

Yes, the [Biogas] project may be seen as a utopia for a specific group of users, namely the African family. We do not wish to impose a prevailing ideology on people—the families are perfectly free to choose. Nor is the Biogas project a gift. We might compare it to a western family buying a car, they will usually only do so if they need one and if their finances allow. We are interested in the opportunity that the Biogas system presents for the individual families. They now have more time to do something else but gather firewood. Inherent in it is an opportunity for productivity, even if we have no definite proof that this will follow.

Åsa Nacking, "An Exchange between Åsa Nacking and Superflex," *Afterall*, issue 0 (1998). [Http://www.superflex.net/text/articles/an_exchange_between.shtml](http://www.superflex.net/text/articles/an_exchange_between.shtml)

Superflex's embrace of market-based "solutions" and the cultivation of an "entrepreneurial" spirit among their Tanzanian collaborators is rendered all the more problematic because Tanzania was one of the first African nations to be subjected to forced "structural adjustment" policies by the IMF and World Bank, as early as 1979, resulting in growing social tension over the resulting economic and class divisions. See Michael Chege, "The Return of Multiparty Politics," in *Beyond Capitalism vs. Socialism in Tanzania and Kenya*, Joel D. Barkan, editor (London, Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1994), pp.47-74.

⁹ See Laxmi Murthy, "Banking on Poor Women: Grameen Bank," *Infochange India News*, accessed on April 15, 2007. http://www.infochangeindia.org/microc_article2.jsp. See also Susan F. Feiner and Drucilla K. Barker, "Microcredit and Women's Poverty: Granting this year's

Nobel Peace Prize to microcredit guru Muhammad Yunus affirms neoliberalism,” *Dollars and Senses*, November/December 2006.

¹⁰ Interview with Dr. Sudhirendar Sharma, “Micro-credit improves cash flow but doesn't create wealth,” *Infochange India News*, accessed on April 16, 2007 http://www.infochangeindia.org/microc_article5.jsp. A recent essay by Jaya Sharma of Nirantar, a Delhi-based women's resource center, describes some of the drawbacks of the micro-credit system. It's worth quoting at length:

Banks enjoy higher rates of return than they could ever dream of getting from individual men or corporations due to extremely low transaction costs, since poor women undertake the role of pressurising each other to repay. Corporations gain easy access to vast rural markets with micro-credit-based women's collectives serving both as consumers and sellers of their products. Donors find a route to ensuring self-sustainability of NGOs they support since a share of the often higher-than-market rate of interest being charged to the women goes to the NGOs managing micro-credit interventions. Several studies draw attention to the rise in women's indebtedness as a result of back-to-back lending, higher incidence of violence in the event of women being unable to bring into the family the credit that is expected of them, and the tremendous pressure on women to repay which can compel them to migrate. There have even been reported instances of defaulting women being imprisoned. The most popular model of micro credit in India is that of self-help groups (SHGs). A qualitative study of SHG interventions in Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat undertaken by Nirantar. . . offers insights into the micro-credit phenomenon through voices of women who are part of SHGs. A district-level official linked to a national level SHG programme sponsored by the ministry of rural development explained why the programme focused on women. "Women cannot go anywhere, they can be located easily; they cannot run away leaving their homes; they can be easily persuaded to repay as they feel shame more quickly and consider non-repayment as a betrayal of family honour".

Sharma also points to the political implication of the shift from subsidy as a right (evident in the reduction or elimination of agricultural subsidies) and it's replacement by the financial burden of credit. Jaya Sharma, “Grameen Myth,” *The Times of India* (Bombay), November 6, 2006.