

On Opportunism as an Emergent Property

Based on Kelly Xi's "Opportunism as emergent property"

In a text for the exhibition *Bye Bye Avondale*, my friend Kelly Xi wrote about opportunism as an emergent property. The term points to a parasitic phenomenon that can be understood as a structural consequence of particular conditions. Opportunism arises where systems are not closed, where they generate gaps, thresholds and unused capacities.

The figure of the parasite appears here as a mode of existence that does not act against these structures, but inhabits and exploits them as its host in their interstices. The analogy to the occupation of vacant, already existing buildings as art spaces led me to ask whether there is a scenario in which the parasite can fundamentally alter the system on which it depends – or whether its interventions must necessarily remain within the order that sustains its conditions of life. This tension questions less the efficacy of parasitic practices than the very understanding of change itself: whether it is to be conceived as overcoming, or merely as a displacement within existing relations.

Drawing on Niklas Luhmann, one could argue that systems necessarily produce their own edges: zones of indeterminacy, of the non-regulated, of what is only partially integrated. It is precisely there that room for action emerges. Late-capitalist urban redevelopment thus qualifies as an ideal host: gentrification necessarily produces “dead” intervals – those temporal windows between the displacement of artists and the definitive conversion into profitable monocultures such as warehouses or luxury housing. In this phase, the system is particularly vulnerable to opportunism.

In this sense, opportunism is not a deviation from the system but one of its functions – an effect of the incompleteness of formal order. The parasite is therefore not an external source of disturbance, but a constitutive moment of relation. It takes without giving, yet in doing so it provokes reorganisation. It does not transform the system through confrontation, but through redirection: of energy, attention, resources. Crucially, the parasite does not stand outside the system. Its existence is entirely bound to the host. It lives off the host's stability while simultaneously throwing it off balance. Change here does not appear as rupture, but as disturbance within existing configurations.

Michel de Certeau distinguishes between strategies and tactics. Strategies presuppose a locus of power, an overview, the capacity to plan. Tactics, by contrast, operate without such a place. They seize occasions, are temporally limited, mobile, and dependent on circumstances. The parasitic can be understood as such a tactic. It has no duration, no claim to control. Its strength lies in adaptability, in the situational use of what is already there. Here, transformation does not occur through founding something new, but through re-appropriation.

This form of transformation remains necessarily ambivalent. The parasite cannot destroy its host without depriving itself of its own ground. Its interventions are limited, reversible, often invisible. Yet it is precisely in this that their systemic significance lies. By exploiting gaps, parasitic practices render those gaps visible. They point to surpluses, to absences, to the discrepancy between formal order and actual use. In Foucault's sense, one might say that they do not operate outside power, but within its microphysics.

Opportunism thus appears neither as pure adaptation nor as a resistant stance in the classical sense. It is a practice of survival in unstable orders, a form of situational intelligence that relies

not on duration but on momentariness. Anna Tsing describes such practices as forms of life in the ruins of capitalism: modes of existence that do not trust in progress or control, but in improvisation, co-existence and dependency. The parasite is neither hero, reformer, nor revolutionary. It is an indicator.

The question is therefore not whether the parasite can change the system. That question presupposes too strong and too linear a concept of change. Rather, the parasitic shows that systems are transformed not only by external intervention but also through their own edges.

Change here takes place as a shift in use, meaning and value – not as rupture, but as reorganisation.

Seen in this light, opportunism sheds its moral aftertaste. It becomes legible as a structural response to incompleteness. Not as a stance in any emphatic sense, but also not as mere going along. The parasite inhabits the system without identifying with it. It accepts its conditions without legitimising them. Perhaps it is precisely in this ambivalent position – dependent, temporary, effective – that the seed of a different conception of institution and order can be located: one that is not grounded in closure and control, but in permeability, negotiation, and the productive handling of its own contradictions.