

SVEN LÜTTICKEN

## THE COMING EXCEPTION

### *Art and the Crisis of Value*

**A**S THE CRISIS of financialized capitalism has morphed into a creeping catastrophe, the literature on questions of art and value has burgeoned.\* For Marx and many in his wake, in economic terms art was a partial exception—and the nature and extent of this exception are once more being hotly debated. These debates occur at a moment when the ‘culturalization’ of the economy and the economization of culture suggest that this exceptionality may be becoming a thing of the past.<sup>1</sup>

The following is an exercise in what McKenzie Wark has termed low theory: a praxis that ‘does not set its own agenda but detects those emerging in key situations and alerts each field to the agendas of others’.<sup>2</sup> When it comes to value and labour, art functions as a subject in two distinct ways: a subject of analysis, and also itself a quasi-subject that actively challenges and produces concepts. I will thus examine the ways in which contemporary art articulates the crises of both value and labour, with the aim not of arriving at a ‘correct’ Marxist understanding of art as commodity, or as an entity that fails to attain the status of ‘true’ commodity, but of bringing art as critical aesthetic praxis into dialogue with the work of theory.

Marx’s mature critique of political economy remained informed by romanticism, and hence by the aesthetic—for instance in the discussion of use value, which stands for the realm of the qualitative as opposed to quantifiable exchange value. The defence of the qualitative and of non-equivalence was a crucial aspect of the modern aesthetic project. It informed two distinct forms of aestheticism. The first was the more

familiar phenomenon of *l'art pour l'art* from Gautier and Whistler to Huysmans, Wilde and beyond; the second, which could be termed utilitarian aestheticism, was embodied in Ruskin's or Morris's attempts to reintegrate art into daily life and the realm of 'useful' labour and artefacts. Both strands were attempts to soften the blows of industrial capitalism and counter the relentless triumph of abstract labour and exchange value; Ruskin's invectives against Whistler's 'paint-flinging' amounted to internecine squabbling. The episode in 1875 when the young Oscar Wilde pushed wheelbarrows full of paving stones as part of Ruskin's project to have his students pave a road in Hinksey, near Oxford, in celebration of healthy and unalienated manual labour, shows how closely these genealogies are intertwined.<sup>3</sup>

If, according to the labour theory of value, the value of a commodity is the amount of labour socially necessary for its production, Marxist and non-Marxist theorists alike have long been aware that the artwork constitutes an exception to this rule. The artist did not sell his labour power to a capitalist who could pocket the surplus value, but worked in an artisanal manner, selling his products. While any work may be productive of use values, only labour that generates surplus value for capital is 'productive' in Marx's technical sense—which is to say, productive of value for capital:

Milton, who wrote *Paradise Lost*, was an unproductive worker. On the other hand, a writer who turns out work for his publisher in factory style is a productive worker. Milton produced *Paradise Lost* as a silkworm produces silk, as the activity of *his own* nature. He later sold his product for £5 and thus became a merchant. But the literary proletariat of Leipzig who produces books, such as compendia on political economy, at the behest of his publisher is pretty nearly a productive worker since his production is taken over by capital and only occurs in order to increase it. A singer who sings like a bird is an unproductive worker. If she sells her song for money, she

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\* Thanks to Kerstin Stakemeier for her comments.

<sup>1</sup> See for instance *Texte zur Kunst's* issue on 'The Question of Value', no. 88, December 2012, as well as numerous articles published in recent years on [metamute.org](http://metamute.org).

<sup>2</sup> McKenzie Wark, *Molecular Red: Theory for the Anthropocene*, London and New York 2015, p. 218.

<sup>3</sup> For a recent restatement of utilitarian aestheticism that takes cues from Ruskin, see Nick Aikens et al., eds, *What's The Use? Constellations of Art, History, and Knowledge*, Amsterdam 2016.

is to that extent a wage labourer or merchant. But if the same singer is engaged by an entrepreneur who makes her sing to make money, then she becomes a productive worker, since she *produces* capital directly. A schoolmaster who instructs others is not a productive worker. But a schoolmaster who works for wages in an institution along with others, using his own labour to increase the money of the entrepreneur who owns the knowledge-mongering institution, is a productive worker. But for the most part, work of this sort has scarcely reached the stage of being subsumed even formally under capital, and belongs essentially to a transitional stage.<sup>4</sup>

In this respect, as Dave Beech has noted in his study *Art and Value*, modern art presents the paradoxical spectacle of commodification without true commodities. That is to say, works of art are simple commodities to which commodification remains external and *a posteriori*; their production process is not truly capitalist.<sup>5</sup> Art may have been subsumed formally, but not in its productive logic. Beech attempts a ‘shift from a theory of art’s exceptionalism based on choices and consumer behaviour to one based on artistic production and art’s relation to capital’, criticizing his predecessors for failing to address the fundamental logic of commodification.<sup>6</sup> However, he has a surprisingly narrow and rigid conception of what constitutes ‘properly’ capitalist production, while refusing to acknowledge that capitalism itself appears increasingly ‘exceptional’ to the labour theory of value. It is precisely this constellation that makes art a potentially privileged field of inquiry, even as much of it sinks into collector-pleasing irrelevance.

### *Autonomism vs. automatism*

I will return to Beech’s analysis later; the key point for the moment is that discussions over productive, unproductive and reproductive labour are fundamental to debates about art’s status as economic exception, or as model for the post-Fordist economy—a position exemplified by Antonio Negri:

Artistic experience . . . has to be related to an analysis of the mode of transformation of labour. So, whereas throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries work was becoming increasingly abstract, from the

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<sup>4</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes, London 1990, p. 1044.

<sup>5</sup> Dave Beech, *Art and Value: Art’s Economic Exceptionalism in Classical, Neoclassical and Marxist Economics*, Leiden 2015, pp. 9–11.

<sup>6</sup> Beech, *Art and Value*, p. 22.

1960s onwards it has experienced again a process of singularization, which manifests itself in a new figure: that of intellectual labour, which is immaterial and affective—that of a labour which produces language and relations.<sup>7</sup>

One perceptive critic has argued that though Negri is right in noting that art and creativity are some of ‘the most prestigious commodities today’, he ‘never explains how this subsumed living labour will or can be transformed. The capitalist production process is in Negri’s writings only taken over, rather than changed fundamentally.’<sup>8</sup> What matters here is that Negri and other autonomists integrate art into a historical model in which forms of cognitive and affective ‘immaterial’ labour supplement and transform capitalist labour itself—generating new forms of collective subjectivation and action.

### *The esoteric Marx*

For the *Wertkritiker* of the Krisis group, autonomist accounts of the crisis of labour, value and capitalism remain too anecdotal, failing to address the fundamental logic and systemic crisis of capitalism.<sup>9</sup> There was a ‘double Marx’, as Robert Kurz liked to say, and for all their digging in the *Grundrisse*, the autonomists ultimately sided with the exoteric one of the *Communist Manifesto* and of workers’ emancipation. In contrast with the *operaist* insistence on the historical primacy of working-class struggle, and the subsequent autonomist emphasis on the proletariat or multitude as a potential revolutionary subject, the value critics side with ‘Marx no. 2’, the theorist of the value form and of abstract labour.<sup>10</sup> They approach value itself as an ‘automatic subject’, engaging with

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<sup>7</sup> Antonio Negri, *Art & Multitude: Nine Letters on Art, Followed by Metamorphoses: Art and Immaterial Labour*, Cambridge 2011, p. xi.

<sup>8</sup> Unsigned text, ‘Production, Creation and Outsourcing: Artistic Labour in Advanced Capitalism’, in Lucie Fontaine, ed., *Recherches: A possible anthology of signature, authorship, creativity and labour*, December 2012, p. 95.

<sup>9</sup> For an English-language anthology of the *Wertkritiker*’s writings, see Neil Larsen et al., eds, *Marxism and the Critique of Value*, Chicago 2014. For a critical perspective on Operaismo, Negri and Michael Hardt from the perspective of value critique, see Anselm Jappe, *Die Abenteuer der Ware: Für eine neue Wertkritik*, Münster 2005, pp. 235–40.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Kurz, ‘Der doppelte Marx’, [exit-online.org](http://exit-online.org). See also Kurz, *Geldohne Wert: Grundrisse zu einer Transformation der politischen Ökonomie*, Berlin 2012, pp. 11–45.

capitalism's intrinsic logic.<sup>11</sup> This automatic subject of value is pitted as being primary against that of the working class and its struggle against the perversion of work as human activity into alienating abstract labour. If the project of revolutionary working-class struggle became problematic in the wake of the West's deindustrialization, post-operaismo in its autonomist guise triumphed theoretically (or rhetorically) precisely because it sketched an alternative post-industrial and multitudinous subject as replacement for the old working class. As value progressively emancipated itself from living labour, becoming a short-circuiting automaton, the very proliferation of forms of precarity and unemployment demonstrated the need for siding with work as human potential and counter-value—as emancipatory praxis.

Both strands of theory articulate the crisis of value, looking towards the abolition of labour time as its measure, and towards the end of labour itself.<sup>12</sup> Both effectively analyse the current state of spluttering financialized global capitalism as one which, in its growing dysfunctionality, contains the seeds of a post-capitalist future that could be either a mere collapse—economic, but also ecological and social—or a consciously shaped alternative. In the latter case, according to Marx, the 'development of the social individual'—rather than labour power and labour time—will be the cornerstone of production and wealth.<sup>13</sup> This in effect returns us to the aesthetic dimension of Marxism, and of leftist political and aesthetic contestation in general. From Whistler to Morris, Jorn to Beuys, art has been conceived in different and frequently incompatible ways as *work against labour*. In the modern division of labour, the artist's job was to perform qualitative acts as a stand-in for liberated human activity, for true praxis, under capitalist conditions. The artist was a specialist of the qualitative in the realm of quantity—as another modern specialism, but one that took the form of an exception. Needless to say, conservative ideologies of the aesthetic exploited the tentative nature of the aesthetic

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<sup>11</sup> Marx noted that 'in the circulation M–C–M both the money and the commodity function only as different modes of existence of value itself', which 'is constantly changing from one form into the other, without becoming lost in this movement; it thus becomes transformed into an automatic subject': *Capital*, p. 255. The notion has been taken up with considerable enthusiasm by *Wertkritiker* and associated authors. See for instance Hans-Georg Bensch and Frank Kuhne, eds, *Das automatische Subjekt bei Marx*, Lüneburg 1998, and Jappe, *Die Abenteuer der Ware*, pp. 80–8.

<sup>12</sup> Jappe, *Die Abenteuer der Ware*, pp. 104–5. See also Gruppe Krisis, 'Manifest gegen die Arbeit' (1999), [krisis.org](http://krisis.org).

<sup>13</sup> Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus, London 1992, p. 749.

promise, its relegation to the status of a harmless daydream. Still, as can be seen from Marx's gloss on Milton, artistic 'work against labour' always contained within it a potential for politicization. Standing for the aesthetic promise of unalienated work, Milton-the-silkworm remains an indictment of the present, both archaic and a figure of the future.

### *Wages for art-work*

In recent years, there has been significant art-world interest in domestic and reproductive labour. Some projects have addressed the rise in domestic workers—often foreign and undocumented—retained by busy professionals, including those in the cultural field. Jet-setting European curators, for example, may depend on migrant women from the Philippines for childcare. Rather than merely representing such migrants, attempts have been made to collaborate actively with them—though care of course must be taken to avoid deepening the instrumentalization of the undocumented. This 'reproductive turn' has also involved an unearthing of feminist practices that combine and conflate art and housework on the basis that both have an exceptional status, being relegated to a grey area beyond the domain of labour that is productive in Marx's sense.

Mierle Laderman Ukeles's 1969 *Maintenance Art Manifesto* and related pieces, such as her cleaning of the Wadsworth Athenaeum art museum in Hartford, Connecticut, have been increasingly recognized for the way in which they aligned art practice as 'unproductive' work with 'reproductive', feminized housework. Ukeles focused not on the artwork as commodity object but on art-work as labour. Recasting the productive/reproductive dichotomy as 'development' and 'maintenance', she quoted an alleged Balinese saying, 'We have no Art, we try to do everything well', stating that:

Avant-garde art, which claims utter development, is infected by strains of maintenance ideas, maintenance activities, and maintenance materials. Conceptual and Process art, especially, claim pure development and change, yet employ almost purely maintenance processes.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Mierle Laderman Ukeles, 'Manifesto for Maintenance Art' (1969), in Binna Choi and Maiko Tanaka, eds, *Grand Domestic Revolution Handbook*, Utrecht 2014, pp. 134–5.

In arguing that the value of commodities—including labour-power itself—is determined by the amount of labour socially necessary to produce them, Marx included the time required for maintaining and reproducing the workforce. Until the later part of the twentieth century, however, the sphere of reproduction was not acknowledged as integral to the production process in general; women were relegated to the domestic sphere as a supposedly extra-economic supplement, which became the focus of feminist critique and activism. As Kerstin Stakemeier has put it, feminist theoreticians like Silvia Federici and Mariarosa Dalla Costa, ‘coming out of the *Operaismo* movement, demanded that autonomization be affirmed as a category of reproductive work’ in order to transpose ‘a struggle for autonomy *into* a social realm deemed heteronomous. This is precisely what Helke Sander addressed in 1968 . . . when she declared that the political struggle for autonomy could not be achieved by displacing heteronomy into specific sectors of life.’<sup>15</sup>

In a withering critique of Federici’s work, Gilles Dauvé has questioned the validity and efficacy of the entire Wages for Housework movement with which Federici—a key reference for contemporary feminist art theorists—was involved in the 1970s. Quoting Rivolta Femminile’s proclamation, in their 1970 *Manifesto*, that ‘We identify in unpaid domestic work the help that allows both private and state capitalism to survive’, he goes on to attack both the analytical soundness of this claim and its efficacy as a political tool, maintaining that, ‘We can call *work* whatever we want, yet the only work that reproduces capital is that which is done for a company.’<sup>16</sup> Dauvé disregards the fact that, as with art, there is a kind of immanent exception at play here. Is this exception—a seemingly extra-economic sphere of reproduction—also systemically necessary, such that its economization could bring down the whole edifice? Wages for Housework activists had thought of their programme of waging the unwaged as a kind of impossible demand which capitalists would be unwilling and unable to implement, and which would thus stand to ‘explode the system’ under the pressure of the oppositional alliances that such demands could bring together. In order to achieve this, it was necessary to critique the conceptual and political stranglehold that the categories of productive and reproductive labour held on the

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<sup>15</sup> Kerstin Stakemeier, ‘(Not) More Autonomy’, in Karen van den Berg et al., eds, *Art Production Beyond the Art Market?*, Berlin 2013.

<sup>16</sup> Gilles Dauvé, ‘Federici versus Marx’ (2015), [troploin.fr](http://troploin.fr).

radical imagination as long as they were used as positive descriptions rather than critical concepts. This seems to have been lost on Dauvé, as well as on Beech.

It is of course perfectly possible to critique the autonomist feminists' Wages for Housework campaign for a lack of tangible results. However, are all consequences that fall short of the immediate end of capitalism to be discredited? Artists tend to be unfazed by a lack of quantifiable results, and Laurel Ptak's *Wages for Facebook* website, with its witty appropriation of the Wages for Housework logic, seems more of a thought experiment than a real campaign to quantify and remunerate the value produced by each Facebook user.<sup>17</sup> However, in articulating what seems a utopian and unrealistic demand, *Wages for Facebook* is not entirely without effect, however minor. It is one effort among many to problematize conventional notions of labour, and the limits they impose on forms of activist practice. Perhaps, in seeking to unseat or effect a different approach to the productive/reproductive distinction, the Wages for Housework campaign, too, had an 'aesthetic' aspect.

Like the unpaid labour of housewives, the paid work of cleaners and other maintenance staff is unproductive in orthodox Marxist terms; it does not directly contribute to the production of surplus value. In recent decades, private and public sectors alike have increasingly outsourced cleaning to specialized companies. In such cases, as the value critic Anselm Jappe argues, formerly unproductive labour *does* become productive—but only on the micro-level of the companies in question, *not* on the macro-level of the entire economy. The rise of the 'service industries' or 'tertiarization' has certainly resulted in profits for these companies in particular, but not at a systemic level.<sup>18</sup> Thus, privatization and outsourcing reveal themselves not as part of capitalism's dynamism, but as contributing to a movement towards stasis.

### *Art-work as a service*

The notion of art as a 'service' first came to the fore with the dawning of the neoliberal era, as art became commodified and financialized to an unprecedented degree. When artists Christopher d'Arcangelo and Peter

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<sup>17</sup> Laurel Ptak, *Wages for Facebook* project/campaign, [eyebeam.org](http://eyebeam.org).

<sup>18</sup> Jappe, *Die Abenteuer der Ware*, pp. 130–1.



Nadin did construction jobs in the late 1970s, plastering apartments and suchlike, they sent invitations to view the results of their work in the style of an art-world opening—a masculine counterpart of Ukeles’s maintenance art—always listing the amount of labour time: ‘The product of four days work may be seen on June 16th, 1978, between 12 noon and 5 PM. At 99 Prince St NYC, 5th floor, West.’<sup>19</sup> In 1983, after d’Arcangelo’s death, Nadin co-founded ‘Offices of Fend, Fitzgibbon, Holzer, Nadin, Prince & Winters’, which advertised ‘practical aesthetic services adaptable to client situation’—though members of the short-lived group have admitted the nature of these services remained sketchy. A much more fully elaborated model of ‘artistic services’ was developed by Andrea Fraser in the early 1990s, when she published a number of prospectuses outlining her services for individuals, not-for-profit and for-profit institutions, and co-organized a symposium and documentary exhibition titled *Services* with Helmut Draxler.<sup>20</sup>

If one takes the stance of value critique—the theoretical elaborations of which come at the cost of an almost Adornian aloofness—such service-based art practices can appear as instances of the same capitalist logic as the object-based art they oppose. After all, post-Fordist capitalism is marked by both a proliferation of service industries and an expansion of the financial sector. However, ‘service art’ can engage with a different set of symptoms. In his work *Some Cleaning* (2013), the dancer and choreographer Adam Linder sits in an art space, talking to the gallerists and visitors, occasionally jumping up to perform movements akin to window-cleaning or dusting. Referencing Ukeles, D’Arcangelo, Nadin and Fraser, Sabeth Buchmann notes that Linder and the gallery have drawn up a contract for selling the piece that is ‘reminiscent of classical conventions of conceptualism as well as of institutional critique associated with what’s called “service art”’.<sup>21</sup> This contract stipulates that the hourly rate is that of cleaners rather than of performers—though in the

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<sup>19</sup> The best documentation of these activities was published by artist Ben Kinmont as *Project Series: Christopher D’Arcangelo* (2005); see [benkinmont.com](http://benkinmont.com).

<sup>20</sup> The original iteration was at the Kunstraum der Universität Lüneburg, where the project and its implications were the subject of a 2014 conference, *Art and Its Frames*.

<sup>21</sup> Sabeth Buchmann, ‘Art as (Un-)Specific Work as (Un-)Specific Labour’, lecture at the conference *Aber etwas fehlt. But Something’s Missing: Marxist Art History between Possibility and Necessity*, MUMOK, Vienna, 15 December 2015. Quoted from the manuscript.

latter case it would be much more difficult to determine what an average hourly rate would be.

As the New York collective WAGE (Working Artists and the Greater Economy) has uncovered, remuneration varies most among institutions that host performances (with The Kitchen being the best, and Performa the worst). In 2011 Andrea Fraser, a board member of WAGE, published the graph *Index*, which shows a correlation between the rise in the Mei Moses All Art Index and increases in US income inequality and the S&P 500 Total Return Index during the same decades. Correlation may not be causation, but it seems clear that forms of ‘deregulation’ have been good for the 1 per cent or the 0.1 per cent and, as a consequence, for the art market. In other words, ‘what has been good for art has been disastrous for the rest of the world’.<sup>22</sup>

Whether they explicitly situate themselves in the context of ‘services’ or not, art practices that foreground issues of remuneration and the living wage cannot escape the contradictions of contemporary capitalism. If they participate in a ‘transformation of labour’ such as that discerned by Negri, this remains within the capitalist horizon: nonetheless, they are part of a continuum of theoretical and practical work that articulates and intervenes in these accelerating contradictions. Meanwhile, the dominant ‘answer’ to the intensifying income and wealth gaps, precarization and increasing migration takes the form of exclusionary right-wing movements. While the denizens of the art world are usually staunchly opposed to this new identitarianism, they are profoundly implicated in the upwards redistribution that underlies it.

### *The trouble with classicists*

Dave Beech’s *Art and Value* is an extended critique of Western Marxism’s absent economy of art: ‘Western Marxism has always used every device it can find to associate art with capitalism without having to conduct the economic analysis that could establish such associations as [either] substantial or superficial.’<sup>23</sup> It is true that Western Marxists such as Adorno tended to sociologize economic categories, and to some extent focused on appearance rather than underlying logic, but at its best this move was

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<sup>22</sup> Andrea Fraser, ‘Le 1%, C’est Moi’, *Texte zur Kunst*, no. 83, September 2011, p. 122.

<sup>23</sup> Beech, *Art and Value*, p. 219.

tactical and well-considered. Noting that Marx's critique of the illusory sensuousness of the commodity as fetish is coupled with his attack on the 'illusion of the autonomy of the value-form', which is concomitant with a reversal of subject and object, Stewart Martin argues that in his *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno 'mobilizes the first illusion (fetishism) against the second illusion. The autonomous artwork is an emphatically fetishized commodity, which is to say that it is a sensuous fixation of abstraction, of the value-form, and not immediately abstract.'<sup>24</sup> But then, is Adorno himself not in fact falling into the trap of aesthetic *Schein*, falsely claiming commodity status for an aesthetic fetish that is not, strictly speaking, a commodity fetish?

Beech remarks that Adorno acknowledged that the culture industry was not in all respects a true industry.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, Adorno was well aware of the wastefulness of even the most 'Fordist' of its branches, the movie industry in Hollywood, noting that while distribution is fully standardized, the same degree of technological rationalization cannot be achieved in production.<sup>26</sup> With its expensive flops and surprise low-budget hits, the history of Hollywood speaks to the truth of that assertion. But Beech omits to note that Adorno also stressed that the culture industry is thoroughly capitalist, in that the 'profit motive' is implemented directly in artistic production, since the managerial caste is looking for 'new opportunities for the realization of capital' as 'the existing ones became ever more precarious because of the same process of concentration that in turn enabled the culture industry as an omnipresent institution.'<sup>27</sup> Adorno here shows a nuanced and dialectical grasp of the peculiarity of the culture industry: thoroughly capitalist, but still structurally incapable of being organized along Fordist-Taylorist lines.

Meanwhile, the culture industry is only one side of the equation. The other side is modernist art. Adorno, of course, did not assume that such art was situated in some realm of pure autonomy outside all economic and social structures. He did however argue that modernist art could

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<sup>24</sup> Stewart Martin, 'The Absolute Artwork Meets the Absolute Commodity', *Radical Philosophy*, no. 146, Nov–Dec 2007.

<sup>25</sup> Beech, *Art and Value*, p. 227.

<sup>26</sup> Theodor Adorno, 'Résumé über die Kulturindustrie' (1964), in *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft I: Gesammelte Schriften* 10.1, Frankfurt am Main 2003, p. 339.

<sup>27</sup> Adorno, 'Résumé über die Kulturindustrie', p. 338.

aspire to the model-like status of pure commodity, precisely because it 'absented itself from real society' and barely counted as a sideshow within industrial capitalism.<sup>28</sup> In his essay on Wagner, Adorno contended that the autonomous appearance of the artwork is dependent on the concealment of labour.<sup>29</sup> This remark deserves to be unpacked. On the one hand, it is situated within the context of his critique of Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* as a post-Romantic, proto-Hollywood phantasmagoria; the 'autonomy' we are dealing with, then, would be precisely that of the culture-industrial fetish. On the other hand, however, the dialectic of autonomy and concealment of labour was also at play in the modernist artwork, which seemed to embody the resistance to the division of labour that was fundamental for capitalist production.

Opposed to other commodities as the product of qualitative creation rather than quantitative wage labour, the artwork is nonetheless a product of the very division of labour it appears to sublimate: this is its aesthetic *Schein*. The reified products of the culture industry attempt to present themselves as products of creative subjectivity—whether sentimental, funny, or Oscar-worthy serious. By contrast, genuine modern artworks could be imperfect or all-too-perfect, exceptional and exemplary (potential, absolute) commodities, *objets de pensée*, theoretical subjects. Through their immanent construction, modernist works could effect a 'mimesis of the hardened and alienated' that acknowledged their fall from grace, the loss of aura, while still remaining loyal to a mute and maimed humanity through their irrevocably mimetic nature.<sup>30</sup>

Beech argues that on the level of production, visual art has mostly remained a matter of artisanal production of simple commodities, and that even when artists such as Warhol or Koons create studios in which assistants do not just sweep the floor or prime canvases but participate more directly in the making of the work, this 'is not commodity production according to the labour theory of value' because the work is insufficiently standardized. Further, these art factories 'do not require economizing measures, and they do not determine the prices

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<sup>28</sup> Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie: Gesammelte Schriften* 7, Frankfurt am Main 2003, p. 351.

<sup>29</sup> Adorno, *Versuch über Wagner*, in *Die musikalischen Monographien: Gesammelte Schriften* 13, Frankfurt am Main 2003, p. 80.

<sup>30</sup> Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, p. 39.

of artworks'.<sup>31</sup> These prices are rather determined by critics, curators, other artists and even collectors.<sup>32</sup> Arguing that it is 'strange within the labour theory of value to think that an act of consumption added value to a product', Beech maintains that 'in fact no value is added at all, even though the prices of artworks appreciate. The difference in price is not extracted from labour but, as Marx puts it when talking about trade as a zero-sum game, is "coaxed" out of the pockets of another capitalist.'<sup>33</sup> While it is indeed important to acknowledge the particularities of the art market, with its gatekeepers and its 'value-adding' experts, are we not living though an economic moment in which such work is becoming an ever more common and fundamental feature of value production? If the kind of work performed by experts in art spells trouble for the labour theory of value, then what of fashion bloggers, YouTube trend gurus, Facebook users, and all sorts of online likers and linkers?

Intriguingly, the newly vocal 'prosumer' of communicative capitalism has thrown processes of art-world valorization into a bit of a tailspin. Critical left-wing art writers in particular bemoan the powerlessness and marginality of discourse, as a speculative art market seems to have become largely autonomous from critical judgement. Back in 2002, Benjamin Buchloh glumly noted that 'you don't have criticism of blue-chip stocks either'.<sup>34</sup> In the age of websites that function as 'algorithmic moodboards'—from Mutualart and artifacts.net to DIS magazine—the conventional chain of artist–critic–curator–dealer–collector is in tatters.<sup>35</sup> Here as elsewhere, Beech comes across as curiously classicist in failing to address such developments.

### *Exception becomes rule?*

In contrast to Diedrich Diederichsen's spirited but flawed attempt to save the labour theory of value for the analysis of art, Beech acknowledges that art in fact flouts the theory's logic, but treats it as an isolated case.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Beech, *Art and Value*, p. 311.

<sup>32</sup> Beech omits to mention the latter; today, the act of being acquired by a major art collector can itself add to a work's value.

<sup>33</sup> Beech, *Art and Value*, pp. 311–2.

<sup>34</sup> 'Round Table: The Present Conditions of Art Criticism', *October*, no. 100, Spring 2002.

<sup>35</sup> The phrase 'algorithmic moodboard' is by Melanie Gilligan and Marina Vishmidt, from a work in progress.

Whereas Diederichsen tried to normalize art by creating a more encompassing labour theory of value, Beech follows John Roberts in affirming that most art falls short of being productive in the capitalist sense, and the reason for this is ultimately that it cannot be adequately explained by the labour theory of value.<sup>37</sup> But while he is right in arguing that the labour theory of value meets its limits in art, he is wrong to stop there. If the labour theory of value falters on the ‘micro-level’ of art as a specific type of commodity, we need to acknowledge that art now has a status fundamentally different than it enjoyed in 1890, 1920 or 1950. If, on the one hand, certain artists and artworks realize baffling prices—and garner a lot of media attention in the process—while, on the other hand, precarious and badly remunerated ‘creative’ work proliferates, these are both symptoms of a crisis of labour and a crisis of value that seems to fall outside of Beech’s self-defined purview.

In different ways, Italian autonomists such as Negri, and German proponents of value critique such as Kurz, have both noted a breakdown in value production due to the increasingly technological nature and socialization of labour. In 1971, Negri had already noted a ‘disconnection between work and labour value/exchange value’ in the post-war welfare state in crisis, and technological, economic and social developments since then have only exacerbated this crisis of value.<sup>38</sup> In key economic sectors, little (or cheap) labour is used to produce material goods, and a lot of ‘immaterial’ labour goes into advertising and branding, with some of this work being done for free by the consumers themselves on social media and the like. It is possible to argue that the socialization and technologization of production ‘simply’ means that the calculation of the labour invested in a single commodity gets more complex.<sup>39</sup> However, not only does

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<sup>36</sup> Diedrich Diederichsen, *On (Surplus) Value in Art*, Berlin 2008; see Beech’s response on pp. 20–2 of *Art and Value*.

<sup>37</sup> John Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art After the Readymade*, London and New York 2007.

<sup>38</sup> Antonio Negri, ‘Crisis of the Planner State: Communism and Revolutionary Organization’ (1971), in *Books for Burning: Between Civil War and Democracy in 1970s Italy*, London and New York 2005, p. 24. See also Matteo Pasquinelli, ‘Capital Thinks Too: The Idea of the Common in the Age of Machine Intelligence’, *Open!*, 11 December 2015, [onlineopen.org](http://onlineopen.org).

<sup>39</sup> For a nuanced and incisive statement of this position see Wu Ming 1, ‘Fetishism of Digital Commodities and Hidden Exploitation: The cases of Amazon and Apple’, Wu Ming Foundation website, 10 October 2011.

this neglect the theoretical critique of the ossified productive/reproductive distinction by the autonomist feminists, it also fails to do justice to the cumulative effects of the scattering and diffusion of labour, which undermine such distinctions between productive and reproductive—or unproductive—in practice. As Anselm Jappe has argued, the calculation of the labour invested in a single commodity becomes a *de facto* impossibility.<sup>40</sup> Even if one were to try to identify all constituent factors, the question would be what to include and what not. Is a fashionista ‘liking’ posts by Louis Vuitton working or not? Or both, or neither?

One much-remarked characteristic of post-Fordism is that the distinction between labour and leisure has eroded in many sectors. ‘The measurability of labour presupposes that the individual subject is always either working or not working. It is impossible to measure labour time that is mixed with other activities’, as Jappe puts it.<sup>41</sup> If the value of a Facebook is indeed ‘proportional to the square of the number of its users’, as Metcalfe’s Law has it, this means that the value of an individual user’s quasi-labour can and will fluctuate greatly.<sup>42</sup> Thus re-establishing the labour theory of value by widening the net—by including what was previously regarded as non-labour—is not necessarily going to yield convincing calculations. What if the artwork, as a problematic quasi-commodity, is in fact much more similar to stocks and other assets? The fact that the top segment of the market is becoming increasingly disconnected from the rest would point in that direction. Beech is critical of accounts of visual art’s transformation into an asset. While noting that ‘artworks which are less like conventional art commodities (paintings, sculptures, prints) take on forms that belong to assets (documents, contracts, certificates)’, he maintains that even while art ‘has developed since the 1980s as an asset class, included in investment portfolios’, it remains exceptional and anomalous on this level too.<sup>43</sup> If artworks are not stocks or options or futures, this is precisely why they can function as a distinct, specific kind of asset, one with deliciously little regulatory oversight. At Deloitte’s 9th annual Art & Finance Conference, which took place at—and was co-organized by—the Van Gogh Museum (!) in

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<sup>40</sup> Jappe, *Die Abenteuer der Ware*, p. 126.

<sup>41</sup> Jappe, *Die Abenteuer der Ware*, p. 105.

<sup>42</sup> Jodi Dean discusses Metcalfe’s Law in *The Communist Horizon*, London and New York 2012, p. 129.

<sup>43</sup> Beech, *Art and Value*, pp. 303–4, 306.

Amsterdam, one panel was dedicated to the subject of ‘Monetizing—Why and how to turn your fine-art collection into a working asset’. Here, issues of ‘art-secured lending’ were discussed by speakers including the President and CEO (ex-Bloomberg) of the Athena Art Finance Corp., a ‘specialty lender for the art market providing non-recourse financing against art as collateral’. Another speaker was the CEO (ex-KPMG) of a group that ‘invests in rare art pieces for investment purposes and currently advises some of the largest art funds in the world’.<sup>44</sup>

It is in mimicry of such companies that the art project Real Flow—devised by a group that includes Suhail Malik and Christopher Kulendran Thomas—purports to pave the way to ‘art’s sublime future by offering tailor-made financial solutions’. Specifically, they note that ‘art’s potential is stifled by its entrenchment in a terrestrial, illiquid commodity form’ and is weighed down ‘by the gravity of obsolete historical identifications’.<sup>45</sup> Using romantic-idealist verbiage, they claim that financialization offers the prospect of a purified and rarefied, truly sublime art beyond distinct form or embodiment; an art of financial air. In order to achieve this, Real Flow offers ‘instruments’ that allow for a decoupling of the artwork from its physical incarnation. Different permutations of the art as object/property and as financial asset are possible—so that, for instance, a collector uninterested in ‘the burden of handling or possessing an artwork’ can deal with it as a virtual asset.<sup>46</sup> There is a virtualization at play here that is similar to artist duo Katleen Vermeir and Ronny Heiremans’ *Art House Index*, a multifaceted project based on a custom-made algorithm that charts the value of Vermeir and Heiremans’ Brussels loft, or a virtual double of it, by tracking the real-estate and art markets, and their careers. The project includes a video based on Melville’s *The Confidence-Man*; the video’s exact appearance is determined in real time by the movements of the index.<sup>47</sup> While the

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<sup>44</sup> Conference booklet for Deloitte’s 9th Art & Finance Conference, 21 April 2016, p. 11. Available on [deloitte.com](http://deloitte.com).

<sup>45</sup> *Real Flow: Art Is the Sublime Asset*, prospectus, 1 March 2015, p. 3. Available on [p-exclamation.com](http://p-exclamation.com).

<sup>46</sup> *Real Flow*, p. 8.

<sup>47</sup> On *Art House Index*, see Steyn Berghs and Jesse van Winden, ‘Masquerade: On Public Personae in a Video Installation by Vermeir and Heiremans’, *Kunstlicht* 36, no. 4, 2015, and Vermeir and Heiremans’s *In-Residence Magazine*, no. 2, spring 2015.



index is a mere number (it is not calculated in dollars or euros), the artists speculate about a potential market of options and futures as a financialization of the index itself.

In its focus on financial liquefaction, Real Flow in particular seems to mutate the Adornian ‘mimesis of the hardened and alienated’ into a captive mimicry *vis-à-vis* the automatic subject of finance capital.<sup>48</sup> The toxicity of its over-identification stratagems notwithstanding, Real Flow does introduce a factor that Beech consistently minimizes: historical change. Real Flow both acknowledges that art has become an asset of sorts and that it is an impure one; this is what it seeks to remedy, in however illusory a manner. The project pushes the transformation of artworks into ‘documents, contracts, certificates’ to a grotesquely logical conclusion. Beech’s insistence that ‘the appreciation of artworks as assets, whether paltry or spectacular, appears to be independent of the production of new value’ is useful, but one could extend it to other sectors of the ‘creative’ economy.<sup>49</sup> On the macro-level, it is not so much the labour theory of value that falters, but value production itself. Value production increasingly makes way for value extraction and redistribution—and financialized art, however unlike other commodities and assets this peculiar hybrid may be, plays a part in this redistribution. Welcome to the Van Gogh Museum, dear investors.

If the modernist artwork exacerbated the sensuous presence—or pseudo-concrete appearance—of the commodity fetish, the contemporary artwork sides with that other aspect of commodity fetishism: the seeming autonomy of the value-form. As with many commodities in today’s economy, this appearance takes on a new reality. On the micro-level of iPhones or paintings, fetishism is all too real. This is not to say, of course, that it is impossible to analyse the factors that go into a product’s success, but it *is* impossible to unveil the ‘true’ value of the commodity-fetish through the amount of labour invested in it. While this was always impossible, in the age of brands it seems all the more so, both in art and elsewhere. Beech notes that the value added by critics and curators to the artwork remains ‘external to the commodity’, but does it?<sup>50</sup> And is this

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<sup>48</sup> See also Kerstin Stakemeier, ‘Exchangeables: Aesthetics against Art’, *Texte zur Kunst*, no. 98, June 2015.

<sup>49</sup> Beech, *Art and Value*, p. 307.

<sup>50</sup> Beech, *Art and Value*, pp. 311–12.

not precisely where ‘the real economy’ has learned from art? At what dialectical tipping point does an exception become the norm?

*Practice makes imperfect*

John Roberts has linked the Marxian distinction between productive and unproductive labour with the issue of the unique versus the multiple in visual art. He sees art as a transformative intervention into productive labour, rather than as productive labour itself—even and especially in cases such as Duchamp’s readymades, which are artistic appropriations of mass-produced objects (though many of these objects were the products of pre-Fordist workshops). As with Duchamp, many more recent artists who appropriate objects or images singularize and auraticize them: they either become unique artworks or works in limited editions. Today, even artists working in other fields take cues from visual art’s ‘unproductive’ accumulation strategies. In the 1960s, Marcel Broodthaers ironically announced his transition from poetry to visual art by casting some copies of his book *Pense-Bête* in plaster, stating ‘I, too, wondered whether I could not sell something and succeed in life.’ Today, we see purely pragmatic use of singularization strategies, as with the Wu Tang Clan’s single-copy album *Once Upon a Time in Shaolin*, which sold for a reported \$2 million to pharma executive Martin Shkreli, notorious for raising the price of the drug Daraprim from \$13.50 to \$750 a pill.<sup>51</sup> This is an exceptional case that, like the blue-chip end of the contemporary art market, depends on a rarefication much more extreme than that of even the most exclusive branded goods. It is this ‘archaic’ dependence on the aura of singularized and financialized objects that has made contemporary visual art a real political-economic vanguard.

When appropriation artist and ‘rephotography’ pioneer Richard Prince printed out Instagram profiles of young people, mostly women—with extremely minor interventions in the form of his own vacuous comments on Instagram itself—and exhibited and sold them via the Gagolian Gallery for a reported \$90,000 apiece, this was unsurprisingly seen as a disturbing and creepy expropriation of self-fashioning women who were themselves trying to raise their visibility and value in the attention economy. Some of Prince’s photos were of women associated with a pin-up site named SuicideGirls, which then decided

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<sup>51</sup> ‘Who bought the most expensive album ever made?’, *Bloomberg*, 9 Dec 2015.

to offer prints of one of Prince's appropriations for a mere \$90, which must be one of the greatest discounts in history. This demonstrates the extent to which value in the age of the brand has become autonomous.<sup>52</sup> Here, a fairly disastrous critical reception barely seems to register. Not only can Gagosian catalogues always count on critics-for-hire, but media attention may have replaced critical judgement. In today's art world, websites that function as aggregators rather than critical platforms draw on artist or curator rankings to determine value. It is probably only a matter of time until some of these become further sublimated into further investment opportunities, perhaps akin to the 'Bowie Bonds' issued by David Bowie in the 1990s.<sup>53</sup>

Many practices today are marked either by enthusiastic participation or by some form of supposedly tactical over-identification. From Real Flow to Swedish artist Jonas Lund's algorithm that produces a curatorial ranking, these acts of mimicry result in a dismal form of capitalist realism. However, it is important to look beyond this. If there is one fundamental problem with many economic and sociological accounts of art, it is that they treat art as a mute object of study. Art is rarely accepted as a form of praxis that might itself have theoretical insights to add—sometimes precisely by problematizing all-too-perfect models. In certain cases this takes the form of projects that, in the tattered relation between labour and value, side with labour. This is the case, for instance, in the aforementioned collaborations with 'reproductive' domestic workers, or in Gulf Labor's engagement with the 'productive' male construction workers building institutions such as the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi under conditions of *de facto* slavery—marked by a general lack of rights, passport confiscation and debt from 'recruitment fees'.<sup>54</sup>

Without attempting to arrive at the 'true' value of Abu Dhabi's Guggenheim as an architectural icon and franchise of a global institutional brand, several posters and other pieces made by artists in the context of Gulf Labor attempt to quantify various factors, and emphasize jarring pay gaps. A newspaper ad by Andrea Fraser, for week 45 of the '52 Weeks of Gulf Labor' campaign, lists the budget as 'potentially

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<sup>52</sup> 'Payback for Richard Prince as Models Re-appropriate Stolen Images and Sell Them for \$90', *artnet.com*, 26 May 2015.

<sup>53</sup> 'Bowie: The Man Who Sold Royalties and Brought Music to Bonds', *Bloomberg*, 11 Jan 2016.

<sup>54</sup> Andrew Ross, ed., *The Gulf: High Culture/Hard Labor*, New York 2015.

unlimited'; the total construction budget of the Saadiyat Island Museum Complex (\$27,000,000,000); former Guggenheim director Thomas Krens's severance bonus (\$2,000,000); the Abu Dhabi GDP per capita (\$103,000); and the monthly wage of Guggenheim Abu Dhabi construction workers (\$177). In 'creative', 'cultural', 'semiotic' or 'communicative' capitalism, physical labour is made as invisible and disposable as possible, whether in iPhone factories or at building sites. The large question in Fraser's ad—'Who's building the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi?'—emphasizes the physical construction of the institution over other kinds of labour involved, such as that of architects, artists or managers.<sup>55</sup>

### *Workers leaving the factory*

Taking a more generalist and somewhat scattershot approach, Antje Ehmann and Harun Farocki's 2011–14 project *Labour in a Single Shot* took the form of a series of workshops in fifteen major cities on different continents, during which the participants were asked to represent one form of labour in a single shot of one to two minutes. When the project was exhibited at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin, the main exhibition space contained a screen for each city, showing a selection of 'single shot' films, and also, behind a curtain, a thematic selection on sixteen monitors. Here, the focus was on the motif of 'workers leaving the factory', the subject of the first film by the Lumière brothers in 1895, which Farocki had previously explored in a 1995 video essay, and in the 2006 installation *Workers Leaving the Factory in Eleven Decades*. At the HKW, the 2006 version was mirrored by a new installation in which the Lumière film was shown with 'remakes' made by workshop participants in the project's fifteen cities. Not all the sites were actual factories: they included shopping malls and construction sites. Many of the other films show street performers and other 'picturesque' occupations. Industrial labour is scarce on the ground; there are a few interesting instances of domestic labour, though curiously it does not feature as a category on the project's website.

There is also no 'finance' category, though there is one for 'monitor work'. The project compellingly shows the impurity of the global

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<sup>55</sup> Andrea Fraser, '€132', published in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*, 17 August 2014.

economy, in which ancient professions coexist with laptop labour, but it hardly functions as a cognitive map of contemporary capitalism and its vectoral, violently transformative powers.<sup>56</sup> The artistic labour of the workshop participants is largely subsumed under Ehmann and Farocki's double curatorship-as-authorship—and within the latter, Farocki is usually foregrounded. While the result is more than the sum of its parts, the legal status of the individual films and the remuneration of their makers remain unaddressed and opaque. With its networked approach, the project is hyper-contemporary in a way that Ehmann and Farocki never fully acknowledge: here, the labour of authorship becomes such a scattered and aggregate condition as to become obscure.

With his film *Transformers: The Premake* (2014), Farocki admirer Kevin B. Lee has crafted a 'desktop documentary' entirely from online videos, most of them taken by fans or random citizens of various *Transformers* 4 shoots in the US and Asia. What is striking is that, while Paramount occasionally requests some footage to be removed from YouTube, the company nonetheless can profit from the unpaid labour of hundreds or thousands of volunteers—though some of these attempt to 'monetize' their videos. In our circulationist age, images are forever being re-performed. Farocki's *Workers Leaving the Factory* re-performs historical films, and was re-performed once again in the context of *Labour in a Single Shot*. Subsequently, the piece was again re-performed as part of Alexandra Pirici and Manuel Pelmus's *Public Collection of Modern Art* at the Van Abbemuseum in 2014, in which performers 'enacted' various artworks. In this case, the performers left the exhibition space and museum, only to return and continue with their gruelling schedule.

Value is reaped from the process; but as with Facebook and other social media this is not only deliberately and systemically obscured, but also follows different logics to the traditional labour theory of value. If the latter counters commodity fetishism by demonstrating the determination of a commodity's value by labour time, here a new theory of value is needed that examines the ways in which networked capitalism transforms human labour and the creation of value. Of course, Beech and others will deny that value is actually being produced in art and in some other sectors of the contemporary economy. Here, one has to

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<sup>56</sup> Fredric Jameson's concept of cognitive mapping has been revisited by Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle, *Cartographies of the Absolute*, Winchester 2015.

insist on a differentiation between levels: value is produced in social media as well as in art (itself increasingly permeated by social media), which is to say on the micro-level of companies or even entire industries; however, on the macro-level of the global economy as a whole, this amounts to redistribution.

Anselm Jappe insists that an hour of labour has the same value no matter what, and that the production of sixty chairs in one hour means that each chair is worth only one minute.<sup>57</sup> Less labour time spent in the production of an individual company of course does not mean less value realized as profit for that company in particular. In fact, more automated production processes with less living labour will often win: in spite of the fact that they ‘produced less value’, German and Japanese cars destroyed the UK car industry and thus effectively captured ‘a portion of the surplus value produced in England’.<sup>58</sup> The enterprise that employs more living labour per commodity—and therefore helps maintain the total mass of value—is punished.

Ultimately, according to the analysis of the value critics, capitalism is digging its own grave; rising superfluity of labour indicates that the objective limit of capitalism is drawing nearer, as do dwindling resources and increasing ecological costs. The autonomous alien Autobots of the *Transformers* franchise seem a celebration of the impending obsolescence of human labour by those who, in Lee’s preface, work for free in circulating images of the film shoot. Surplus populations face off against a capitalist system thriving on value that has become autonomous from labour; it is this rift that constitutes the crisis of value and labour alike. The intriguingly coiffed symptoms of this crisis continue to dominate the news cycle.

### *Prefigurativism*

In this context, many artists, activists and theorists have shifted to articulating and developing counter-values. One guiding assumption is that it is possible to create and maintain non-capitalist modes within

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<sup>57</sup> Jappe, *Die Abenteuer der Ware*, p. 128.

<sup>58</sup> Robert Kurz, ‘The Crisis of Exchange Value: Science as Productivity, Productive Labour, and Capitalist Reproduction’ (1986), in *Marxism and the Critique of Value*, pp. 62–3.

actually existing capitalism. Homing in on the impurity of the economy shown in *Labour in a Single Shot*, in which pre-capitalist forms coexist with industrial and post-industrial formations, such activities attempt to develop forms of production, exchange and collaboration which can forge a kind of embedded socio-economic alterity—albeit one of course still entangled in capitalist logic.

The Robin Hood Minor Asset Management Cooperative, for instance, is an art-activist intervention in the financial economy at large that originally emerged as part of a transnational network of initiatives seeking to develop alternative economies within and against actually existing capitalism. A ‘counter-investment bank of the precariat’, the cooperative tries to divert capital from the sphere of financial speculation to ‘commons-producing projects’ such as the P2P Foundation or Casa Nuvem in Rio. Pilfering from Deleuze and Serres to theorize its operations—which depend on a ‘parasitic’ algorithm that supposedly mimics the best-performing players on the market—the Robin Hood cooperative has so far produced mostly rhetoric. Its financial results are negative, though its website’s statistics page, which allowed one to verify this, had conveniently disappeared in April 2016. In contrast to Real Flow, this is a reversed-redistribution machine that makes the case for an art, or an aesthetic activism, that uses mimicry against its model. The Art House Index is also part of this constellation. For all their mimeticism, these artists ultimately stand for a practice with underpinnings very different from that of the ‘financialized’ segment of the art world.

Tactical mimicry can, however, lead to integration. In an attempt to create a Robin Hood 2.0 that would address the shortcomings of the original parasite algorithm, founder Akseli Virtanen is attempting to reinvent the project as a startup company that uses blockchain technology to offer ‘non-cryptocurrency cryptoassets’, taking Robin Hood in a direction that makes some RHMAC stakeholders profoundly uncomfortable. In a profile published in Vermeir and Heiremans’ *In-Residence Magazine* that makes him sound less like Melville’s confidence-man than a Deleuzian Bernie Madoff, Virtanen proposes a financial product named the Hood Note, which is backed by the assets in the Robin Hood portfolio—‘a dynamic portfolio of the stocks of the best companies in the world.’<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> ‘RH 2.0’, *In-Residence*, no. 2.

If the mythical Robin Hood was a defender of the common forest against its appropriation by Norman kings, there is no primitivist nostalgia at play in RHMAC's jump from Sherwood Forest to high-frequency trading. The notion of the commons has become a key banner under which art-activists experiment with new non-capitalist modes—a step necessitated by the productive logic of communicative capitalism. According to Primavera de Filippi and Samer Hassan:

Today, the production and dissemination of information is increasingly done outside of the market economy. An alternative model of production is emerging—both on the internet and elsewhere—that does not rely on market transactions, but rather on sharing and cooperation among peers.<sup>60</sup>

As labour and value spiral into ever deeper crisis, practices of 'commoning' come to embody the aesthetic as well as political promise of immanent exceptions. Is it any wonder that art, seeing its exceptionalism eroding, latches on to commonist theory and practice?

In 2013 the Utrecht-based art space Casco organized a 'Conversation Market' in the shopping mall Hoog Catharijne, with artist Aimée Zito Lema providing newly built versions of De Stijl designer Gerrit Rietveld's crate furniture as the setting—a project titled, after Rietveld, *Sitting Is an Active Verb*. The project was indebted to feminist economic geographer-duo J. K. Gibson-Graham's notion of community economies, taking as its motto their slogan, 'The economy is something we do, not just something that does things to us'. Gibson-Graham insist that the capitalist part of the economy is just the tip of an iceberg: above the water level stand 'paid wage labour', 'production for markets' and 'capitalist business'; below we find a much massier informal economy—a mix of 'not for market' and 'not monetized' activity, including gifts and volunteer work, barter, non-capitalist cooperatives, self-employment and children's labour.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Primavera de Filippi and Samer Hassan, 'Measuring Value in the Commons-Based Ecosystem: Bridging the Gap between the Commons and the Market', in Geert Lovink et al., eds, *MoneyLab Reader: An Intervention in Digital Economy*, Amsterdam 2015, p. 76.

<sup>61</sup> The diagram was originally devised by Community Economies Collective in 2001 and drawn by Ken Byrne. See J. K. Gibson-Graham, *A Postcapitalist Politics*, Minneapolis 2006, p. 70.



This has met with an enthusiastic response in art circles that are interested in moving from ‘artistic services’ to forms of commoning in art practices and institutions. Artistic appropriations of notions of the commons and of community economics can of course be criticized as naïve. Do they not leave the dominant structures intact, just resulting in the creation of commonist playgrounds that bother nobody? Is the supposed size of the ‘hidden’, informal part of Gibson-Graham’s iceberg metaphor fooling us about the pervasiveness of capitalism in society as a whole? As Jappe notes, a collapse of capitalism would have much more drastic consequences for the majority of the population now than it would have had around 1900. Indeed, for Nancy Fraser capitalism is ‘something larger than an economy’.<sup>62</sup> Nonetheless, in however scout-like a manner, these practices (or proposals for practices) tackle the crisis of value and the concomitant crisis of labour head on. They do indeed result in a conversation market.

### *Art after value*

In the context of the MoneyLab project, some of the more technologically minded actors in this field have attempted ‘the radical reinvention of money itself’ on the basis of a critical engagement with Bitcoin, other cryptocurrencies and the blockchain technology behind them. They have attempted to counter the frequently right-wing cyber-libertarian discourse associated with these technologies by sketching the outlines of a much more fundamentally alternative form of money. In Bitcoin, as a MoneyLab contributor argues, the asset function of money trumps the exchange function, meaning that it essentially becomes a derivative—an option or futures contract—in short, just what the Hood Notes aspire to be.<sup>63</sup> By contrast, Tiziana Terranova and others have proposed a ‘commoncoin’ that would lose value over time to counter this speculative aspect. While this proposal is neither the first nor the last word on the matter, it at least opens up the conversation beyond the ‘there are alternatives’ baseline of contemporary ideology. Terranova is insistent that the crisis of value and of capitalism should not lead to primitivism:

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<sup>62</sup> Jappe, *Die Abenteuer der Ware*, p. 138; Nancy Fraser, ‘Behind Marx’s Hidden Abode: For an Expanded Conception of Capitalism’, *NLR* 86, Mar–Apr 2014.

<sup>63</sup> David Golumbia, ‘Bitcoin as Politics: Distributed Right-Wing Extremism’, in *MoneyLab Reader*, pp. 118–31.

The notion of a bad, fake financialization opposed to the real economy is contested both by activist anthropologists of the financial world, but also by post-workerist Marxists who, as we have seen, consider financialization as the answer of capital to the crisis of measure—that is the inability to measure productivity on the basis of the labour theory of value. Financialization has a potential: it reveals how money can function as an intervention and that it can also account for different ways of organizing the production and distribution of wealth.<sup>64</sup>

In contrast to the merely theoretical radicalism of the value critics, Commoncoin is an attempt to devise a post-capitalist tactic that will help to accelerate the crisis even while reshaping social and economic structures in ways that go beyond a simple ‘taking over’.

If Commoncoin would have devaluation built into its DNA, then what about art? Given art’s capture as exceptional asset, Andrea Phillips has argued for its ‘devaluation’ as a political process through which ‘we dispossess ourselves of value as an economic and aspirational asset class’.<sup>65</sup> She advocates a transformation of art education to this end, and suggests that there may be uses of artistic skills that allow artists to make a living in ways ‘that do not necessitate individualized value as a form of capital expansion’.<sup>66</sup> Of course, this expansion goes hand in hand with shrinkage elsewhere. If a global capitalist machine predicated on growth has already reached its limits and has begun to eat its children—shifting from the accumulation of value to its redistribution on the macro-level—then we are overdue a revaluation of all values: an *Umwertung aller Werte*. As an increasingly normative exception whose disastrous success has forced many to rethink and reshape their practices, contemporary art may not be the worst place to start.

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<sup>64</sup> Tiziana Terranova and Andrea Fumagalli, ‘Financial Capital and the Money of the Common: The Case of Commoncoin’, in *MoneyLab Reader*, pp. 150–7.

<sup>65</sup> Andrea Phillips, ‘Devaluation’, *Parse*, no. 2, November 2015.

<sup>66</sup> Phillips, ‘Devaluation’.