

**DISRUPTING BUSINESS:**  
**ART AND ACTIVISM IN TIMES OF FINANCIAL CRISIS**

DATA browser 05

DISRUPTING BUSINESS: ART AND ACTIVISM IN TIMES OF FINANCIAL CRISIS  
Edited by Tatiana Bazzichelli & Geoff Cox

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# HOW TO DO THINGS WITH BUSINESS: AN INTRODUCTION

Geoff Cox & Tatiana Bazzichelli

- + With the backdrop of the failures of global financial capitalism and austerity measures, the motivation for this book is to respond to the cultural and artistic strategies that emerge in relation to a broken economy.<sup>1</sup> In a perverse way, we ask whether this presents new opportunities for artists and cultural producers to achieve more autonomy and control over their production process, and speculate on the alternative business models that arise. Can we hope for an alternative conception of business able to disrupt the capitalist logic from within its confines? Or is any disruption necessarily recuperated to achieve the renewal of capital and generation of new business opportunities?



Tatiana Bazzichelli's Disruptive Loop Diagram (2011)

As the title of the book suggests, this layering of processes of innovation and disruption associated to the concept of business lies at the core of our thinking: that art disrupts business but at the same time is disrupted by it—and consequently a feedback loop between art, business, and disruption is activated (see diagram).<sup>2</sup> Artists and cultural producers demonstrate that by developing new projects in the creative market they not only disrupt business by producing alternatives that are not always immediately compatible with business logic—often overtly criticising business—yet also become ways of producing new ideas for the market. Accordingly, our understanding of disruption draws upon the business concept ‘disruption innovation’ (associated with Clayton Christiansen and the Harvard Business School of the mid-1990s) that describes a process which disrupts the market in unexpected ways to generate a new market and value network. The concept derives from Joseph Schumpeter’s ‘creative destruction,’ used to describe business cycles and understand how capital renews itself through the introduction of ‘innovations’ that ‘revolutionize’ markets. Schumpeter argued that:

The fundamental impulse that sets and keeps the capitalist engine in motion comes from the new consumers, goods, the new methods of production or transportation, the new markets, the new forms of industrial organization that capitalist enterprise creates.<sup>3</sup>

We want to understand these operations better but also try to reclaim some of the concepts, given the way that multiple and contradictory meanings are produced. We want these terms to do different things.

In addressing these issues, we first define more closely what we mean by business, and later discuss the core concepts of disruption and innovation. These key words encapsulate the possibilities of how new meanings and values are generated in ways that reflect the inherent paradoxes of language and its appropriation by economics.

To focus on the performative power of the language of business seems a useful way to begin this book, not least as it has been identified how language has become fully integrated into the valorization process. In

*Capital and Language* (written in 2002), Christian Marazzi claims that the capitalist economy can be understood in terms of language; on account of finance being understood through linguistic conventions and also new forms of labour being produced through language and thereby analogous to speech acts.<sup>4</sup> Marazzi is referring to John L. Austin's *How to do things with Words* (1955) in casting financial conventions in similar terms to performative utterances—describing and producing something at the same time—as ‘speech acts.’ Marazzi also cites John Searle who makes the explicit link to finance, with reference to printed currency that is not simply a description of a fact but a creation of one: “A performative utterance is one in which saying something makes that something true.”<sup>5</sup> Like Law, the “fact-that-one-speaks,” produces the fact merely by the fact that it has been said. As such the world of finance not only takes on a controlling function in relation to social relations but at the same time reveals the potential for autonomy from it. He explains: “The theoretical analysis of financial market operations reveals the centrality of communication, of language, not only as a vehicle for transmitting data but also as a *creative force*.”<sup>6</sup>

We take this ‘force’ as a point of departure for the book—in taking business to be material for reinvention—and for the inclusion of new critical writing alongside numerous examples of ‘artist’ projects that all *do things with business*.

### **Business words**

One of the first things to establish is that the word ‘business’ does not simply equate to capitalism as such. Its etymology reveals its roots in *bisignes* (Northumbrian, late fourteenth century), referring to “care, anxiety, occupation,” and *bisig*, “careful, anxious, busy, occupied, diligent.” Yet its Anglo-Saxon roots, rather than Latin ones, are significant in helping to signal a pejorative ethic of “work, occupation” leading to the introduction of *busi-ness*—not *lazi-ness*. Its relation to the political economy or marketplace can be traced to the management of the household and in

turn to nation-state, and the identification of a meeting place for buying and selling, all diligently performed with the ‘correct’ values associated with the “protestant work ethic” (described in the writings of Max Weber).<sup>7</sup> The correct ethic is not simply working hard but working with the right values, and this has become the working paradigm for our understanding of business too, and, as such, the claim to be busy has perversely become a dominant virtue within capitalism (as well as in the arts and academy). “Sorry, I’m busy” has become the religious mantra of the worker—but also the artist and the cultural producer—as Franco Berardi states in his essay. Yet the irony of this sad realization is that the work ethic is already obsolete, as André Gorz confirms:

It is no longer true that producing more means working more, or that producing more will lead to a better way of life. The connection between more and better has been broken; our needs for many products and services are already more than adequately met, and many of our as-yet-unsatisfied needs will be met not by producing more, but by producing differently, producing other things, or even producing less.<sup>8</sup>

If it was overproduction and debt-fuelled growth that created the present economic crisis, then is the alternative once again to slow it down and become lazy, as autonomist theorists and practitioners have stated for some time now?<sup>9</sup> In the context of the European financial crisis, this is often referred to as the staged conflict of the ‘productive’ North and the ‘lazy’ South—which fits the Americas too—although this in itself is perhaps a rather lazy geopolitical generalization. But let’s be clear here: we don’t wish for lazy intellectual work but laziness in response to the capture of intellectual work. The point we are making is the obvious one: when the desire to appropriate work (of classical Marxism) has been extended to all aspects of our daily lives, we need to question whether its *active refusal* through laziness still represents potential autonomy from capitalist valorization processes.<sup>10</sup> Based on other conceptualizations that are not tied to work or labour, what forms of action or inaction might be useful to imagine new artistic, cultural, and political strategies?<sup>11</sup>

If there remains a certain disruptive impulse in wasting time and rejecting the *busi-ness* that comes with work and life, then what we do with our bodies becomes hugely significant. Or has this way of thinking become rather too expected, with the example of the ‘slow food movement’ as ethical business almost entirely absorbs back into mainstream supermarket practices? Let’s go beyond the rhetoric of free markets and free trade as Kate Rich does in her ‘feral’ approach to running her grocery business. For where do we turn to disrupt recuperative logic that endlessly transforms needs into wants, and when everything we consume into our bodies and perform with our bodies is so charged with value?

That valorization corresponds to the time of business is further explained by Berardi, citing Marx, to establish that: “It is not the time of work, of working in time, that produces value, for it matters little whether one is lazy or efficient. The important determination of value concerns the average time needed to produce a certain good.”<sup>12</sup> In Berardi’s article, the idea that business equals time is considered repugnant—a value he associates with the word itself. He goes on to describe the peculiar working methods of a trainee in a marketing company who displays *inaction*, much to the bewilderment of fellow workers who mask their laziness in very different ways by looking busy when indeed it is their actual jobs, like so many, that are a waste of time. It can be seen how financial capitalism establishes a disconnection between time and value, and work can be understood no longer simply in terms of the physicality of factory production but as the production of signs or the social imaginary—what Berardi calls “semiocapitalism.” Today the concept of ‘being busy’ cannot only be connected with working conditions, but is subsumed to more pervasive spheres, including our states of mind and lifestyles. It is this biopolitical sphere—so difficult to grasp—that becomes the territory for imagining business paradigms of attention and experience economies, for instance.

Businesses invent strategies to deal with the challenge to their established practices of value creation, and the process of financial

abstraction has privileged the creative industries and educational practices in perverse ways. In the *Harvard Business Review* of 2004, beneath the headline “The MFA is the New MBA,” Daniel H. Pink (former speech-writer for Al Gore) states: “an arts degree is now perhaps the hottest credential in the world of business.”<sup>13</sup> It would seem that artists set the standard for innovation and new processes of valorization these days as well as the standard for poverty, which can be seen in Heath Bunting’s 1996 satire *Skint - Internet Beggar*. Artists are left to beg for support or rely on contemporary models of patronage such as crowdfunding processes—that serve to negate public funding and further commodify social relations—as described by Renée Ridgway. The inner logic of crowdfunding also prompts Guido Segni’s ironic ‘middle-finger response’ and revolutionary call for crowdworkers of the world to unite rather than remain atomized.

If much of past experimental art (especially performance and conceptualism) sought to reject its commodification, then how does it manage this under conditions where value outside of monetization has become commonplace—where production relates to knowledge and creativity all the time—where all business is like art and vice versa? Take, for example, the Robin Hood Minor Asset Management project, a controversial conceptual/performative artwork launched at DOCUMENTA (13) in 2012, which aims to make money based on detailed analysis and understanding of the financial market, and to challenge the big banks and their elite asset management business.<sup>14</sup> The project’s statement on ethics emphasizes “transparency, autonomy and equality” to counter fear and depression and the ways that “financial capitalism exercises its arbitrary power and forces us to continuously exploit ourselves.” When political practices have lost their efficacy, their approach expresses a paradoxical solidarity based in business. They accept their project to be:

disgusting (what are the ethics of this!?), paradoxical (but are you not taking part in the same system?), something not reducible to present frameworks of knowledge and predictability (this is art? Or research? Or business?)... and something unimaginable, impossible... a Poetical-financial monster.<sup>15</sup>

This apparent collapse of ethical distinctions between art and business informs our discussion here, both inside and outside the workplace, leaving artists and non-artists involved in creativity at large. Whether “not-just-art” or “not-just-business,” Saul Albert reminds us of the contradictions of relative autonomy in peer production-based art practices in parallel with the pragmatics of managing a working organization that operates a ‘zero-sum’ business model—in other words, without the problem of surplus value on which the capitalist relies for profit.

A similar ethic underpins the Miscommunication Technologies series of projects by Telekommunisten, introduced in detail by Dmytri Kleiner and Baruch Gottlieb (and illustrated by Jonas Frankki). Based on an understanding of the political economy of social media, their intention is to uncover the uneven social relations embedded in the infrastructures of communication technologies, creating platforms that work in unexpected ways, and ‘miscommunicate’ their normalizing values. As a reappropriation of language, and response to the efficacy of free software/labour, their business strategy of “venture communism” serves as an exemplar for the book.<sup>16</sup> The paradoxical idea registers the need to develop an alternative business model that supports principles of collective redistribution of accumulated wealth, and at the same time rejects the manner in which value has been stolen from the commons in the first place. Indeed, this reminds us that the challenge for innovation is not technical but political.

The complexity of the situation lies partly in the ways that artists and non-artists now employ similar skills and technologies, flattening the social divisions of labour into what Paolo Virno has referred to as the “communism of capital.”<sup>17</sup> Yet far from leading to some kind of immanent communism—given that the project of the creative industries can be seen to have largely failed to regenerate economies—instead we find money once allocated for culture being cut to pay for the failures of financial capitalism.<sup>18</sup> Rather than those who created the mess in the first place paying for their poor performance, the outrage is that public money is used

to rescue banks that are counted as “too big to fail”—a phrase repeated by Oliver Ressler.<sup>19</sup> Through the words, we see the counterargument represented by images of social movements using the slogan “We will not pay for your crisis!” to oppose the massive redistribution of public resources. Given such ethical bankruptcy, it is also no wonder that the call to force-occupy banks—so-called ‘bail-ins’—seems so appealing among activists and politically engaged students and researchers.

So, given the logic of semiocapitalism, we would like to suggest semiotic occupation too, occupying—and consequently repositioning in a more extended symbolic context—the key terms associated with business as others have done previously with racist and sexist language (a suggestion made to us by Nishant Shah): making business more ‘queer,’ for instance. We are also reminded of how Marazzi discusses “words in crisis,” referring to how many Anglo-Saxon words remain untranslatable into other languages (is not English the language of business?). He refers to words associated with business, and finance in particular (such as the term ‘bailout’), as possessing its own language, a rather “esoteric neo-language”—an opacity that they hide behind and through which finance prospers.<sup>20</sup> It is interesting to think about how all words exhibit violence in this sense—they force-occupy objects with meaning to limit our understanding. This is the power or agency of words, as Judith Butler expresses it, drawing attention to the ways in which there is a relation between speech and action—between saying and doing—such as in the way insults exert a form of violence.<sup>21</sup> However, counter-speech returns speech to reverse its effects (again the re-codification of ‘queer’ is a good example of this strategy). Can we do the same with business words and actions?

As Marazzi describes, the recognition of the reliance of financial markets on collective speech acts simultaneously indicates the potential of freedom from its constraints.<sup>22</sup> What is established clearly is that financial business is not about growing rates of surplus value anymore but a form of capital accumulation that corresponds to new processes of valorization tied to cognitive capitalism. The value being created no longer

relates to traditional organization, production methods, and labour time in the factory, but is extended to creative life in general, and much of this happens outside of the traditional monetized economy. “What can we make of this goal in an age of semiocapitalism?” asks Stephen Shukaitis, “where the dream of ‘everyone is an artist’ has been realized in perverse form as ‘everyone is a worker’ all the time.” We are working even when at leisure, and we have moved to a situation in which value is now placed upon experience, relationships, or attention, and value can now be applied to further abstractions (such as data, as we know from social media enterprise). We are doing business all the time. The crisis of value can thus be understood as a struggle for control over the forces that wish to extract surplus from the processes of valorization, which are no longer so tied to the traditional monetized economy and to old concepts of work-time.

The revival of the idea of time as a unit of exchange arises from these conditions, with one of the most successful art world examples *Time/Bank* (2010) by e-flux.

Through *Time/Bank*, we hope to create an immaterial currency and a parallel micro-economy for the cultural community, one that is not geographically bound, and that will create a sense of worth for many of the exchanges that already take place within our field—particularly those that do not produce commodities and often escape the structures that validate only certain forms of exchange as significant or profitable.<sup>23</sup>

Indeed e-flux makes an interesting example more broadly for a book about art-business, also referred to in Marina Vishmidt’s essay as demonstrating forms of ‘disruptive innovation’ mainly within the confines of the institution of art, and thereby serving to extend their value in the mainstream art world. With an effective business model of distributing information—an attention economy of email announcements through their extensive international value network of more than ninety thousand art professionals<sup>24</sup>—they demonstrate a “classical entrepreneurial attitude of independence.” It becomes clear that disruptive innovation is not incompatible with forms of social critique in the art world.

Aside from this, Vishmidt is sceptical about the ability of alternative currencies such as time banks to significantly shift the capital–labour relation or its basis in the form of abstract value. Bitcoin is a further case of an alternative currency that Geert Lovink and Nathaniel Tkacz discuss. They question the value and values associated with it, and ask whether the “otherwise antagonistic and disruptive capacities of Bitcoin come to resemble the more palatable Schumpeterian creative destruction, where current economic practice is overturned (outcompeted), but only in such a way as to reaffirm the overall logic.”

### **Disrupting disruption**

As the etymology of business already demonstrates, is reappropriation not what capital does so effectively all the time? The inherent violence of, and to, words associated with business, reveals the destructive tendencies of capitalism as well as the ability to create alternatives. Here Schumpeter’s concept of ‘creative destruction’—drawing on Marx’s analysis of innovation and business cycles to understand how capital renews itself through devaluing wealth in order to establish new wealth—is important to understand the current crisis and the transformative potential it unleashes.

Brian Holmes traces the importance of this concept, and how capitalism follows a long wave of industrial development that presents opportunities for social transformation from a complex interplay of forces, especially at times of crisis.

What’s more, the interaction of these multiple forces unfolds over historical time, not in strictly repetitive cycles but instead in dynamic patterns that could be better represented as a rising set of overlapping waves or even as a continuous spiral, marked by quantitative and qualitative transformations at every turn of the screw. The present expresses the past at a higher power of complexity.

The hope is that once the crisis can be better understood then it can also be taken as an opportunity to develop strategies for changing the course of social development away from competition to strategies based

on cooperation on a global scale. In this sense, current ‘depression’—both economic and human—is the necessary condition for revolt, as Georgios Papadopoulos argues, and the opportunity to reinvent enjoyment that can “go beyond the constitutive ideology of the market” and transcend language. Poetry would be Berardi’s example of language excess—a human resource that enables a paradigm shift.<sup>25</sup>

The concept ‘disruption innovation’ further develops the logic of creative destruction for the digital age in recognition of complex forces that disrupt the market in unexpected ways. For example, one can easily identify how innovation patterns have been combined with the socialization of labour in the Web 2.0 business model and generated enormous profits for the global empires of Google, Apple, and the like—companies steeped in the logic of creative destruction. Moreover it is interesting to note that the same companies are amongst those who use offshore tax evasion described by Paolo Cirio. As he expresses it: “If we can’t stop corporations from hiding in the Cayman Islands to avoid taxes, we all need to become pirates.”

Recent changes in publishing exemplify disruption logic too, as Søren Pold and Christian Ulrik Andersen discuss with their reference to Amazon. With changes in technology, there exists *de-commodification* (such as open access initiatives changing academic publishing models) alongside strenuous efforts to *re-commodify* and exploit the disruptions to the publishing paradigm. The dynamic and cyclical nature of business can be seen in such examples in its unnerving ability to reinvent itself, and indeed much business thinking tends towards the prediction of unexpected changes and disruptions in recognition of how this drives innovation processes.<sup>26</sup>

But as with business, ‘innovation’ has also been perverted to the logic of capital in such examples. The word has been adapted from its roots in describing a better and, as a result, new idea or method; initially it simply referred to the idea of doing something different (from the Latin ‘to change’). This is closer to the understanding of innovation proposed

by Virno, in stressing the ability of humans to execute “innovative actions” capable of modifying “consolidated norms.”<sup>27</sup> He is referring to the innate creativity of verbal language and is drawing upon Aristotle’s description of contingency at the heart of our use of language (in *Ethics*) as well as stressing its shared and collective forms. The politics of this lies in the general sense that newly invented forms might diverge from established rules and perceived grammatical norms. Virno refers to linguistic innovation as: “how to do new things with words” (after Austin), in which the ‘doing’ relies on public action.<sup>28</sup> If language underwrites all institutions as Virno claims, then how do we disrupt business? Virno’s tendency would be to think of how to negate it in a non-dialectical manner in recognition that the system of language both ‘does’ negation (by identifying what something is not), and ‘is’ negation (in as much as it can only signify something): “The negation, or something that language *does*, is understood, above all, as something that language *is*.” His invitation is to experiment with more effective ways of negating negation, in placing “not” in front of “not human,” as he puts it.<sup>29</sup> Might we suggest the same with business, and place *not* in front of *not-business*?

This is a strategy that many of the examples which appear in the book provoke (Saul Albert, Franco Berardi, Heath Bunting, Paolo Cirio, Dmytri Kleiner and Baruch Gottlieb, Oliver Ressler, Kate Rich, Guido Segni), and is further explored in longer essays in relation to: the institution of art and processes of valorization (Marina Vishmidt, Stephen Shukaitis); new socialized platforms for exchange and production of new value networks (Christian Ulrik Andersen and Søren Pold, Geert Lovink and Nathaniel Tkacz, Renée Ridgway); and a deeper understanding of the crisis in terms of its complex operations and psychosocial consequences (Franco Berardi, Brian Holmes, Georgios Papadopoulos).

We have suggested the occupation of the institution of business to better understand its inherent grammar, to reinvent it through ‘innovative actions’—to understand language itself as a disruptive innovation and disrupt it further again. The idea of executing actions capable of modifying

‘consolidated norms’ lies in the ability of identifying what is already consolidated in the business imaginary and how something else might be done with it. This may be wishful thinking on our part, but nevertheless we hope that the book contributes to a better understanding of contradictory phenomena in ways that further stress the possibility of there existing an excess to business. If money and language have something in common, as Berardi states, in that “they are nothing and everything”—meaning they are nothing but signs, and yet demonstrate the power to get people to do things like work and act—then how do we begin to work and act differently?<sup>30</sup> The potential emancipation from money and language might also represent the emancipation from the neo-language of business in recognition of its excess: in the realm of the poetic, or through the creative force of innovative actions. Based on the evidence of current actions around the world:

Insurrection is a refrain helping to withdraw the psychic energies of society from the standardized rhythm of compulsory competition-consumerism, and helping to create an autonomous collective sphere. Poetry is the language of the movement as it tries to deploy a new refrain.<sup>31</sup>

The collapse of the economy clearly runs deeper than the financial consequences and reveals a broader appropriation of language and social practices. As our contribution to this discussion, we hold on to the inherent paradoxes of business as a political project in itself, and an opportunity to imagine new creative solutions able to play with its significations. Our concern is to deal with business in this way as (artistic) material for reinvention, and to stress the challenge for critical aesthetics in terms of reimagining key business concepts such as disruptive innovation. To do things with business in this way is to focus on the inherent paradoxes—to disrupt the unethical dynamics of capitalism itself.

5

## NOTES:

1. The publication follows a number of previous events and publications begun at Aarhus University in 2008. See <http://disruptiv.biz> for further information.
2. See Tatiana Bazzichelli, *Networked Disruption: Rethinking Oppositions in Art, Hactivism and the Business of Social Networking* (Aarhus: DARC Press, 2013), 10.
3. Joseph A. Schumpeter, "Creative Destruction," in *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (New York: Harper, 1975), 82-85.
4. Christian Marazzi, *Capital and Language: From the New Economy to the War Economy* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2008).
5. *Ibid.*, 34.
6. *Ibid.*, 27.
7. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and "The Spirit of Capitalism"* (London: Penguin Books, 2002).
8. André Gorz, *Critique of Economic Reason* (1989). Available at <http://www.antenna.nl/~waterman/gorz.html>.
9. See, for example, the Italian movie *Lavorare con lentezza* (2004); released in English with the title *Working Slowly (Radio Alice)*, directed by Guido Chiesa and written together with the Wu Ming collective.
10. See Mario Tronti, "The Strategy of Refusal," in *Autonomia: Post-political Politics* (1965; New York: Semiotext(e), 1980), 28-34.
11. An example that comes to mind is *Seppukoo* (2009), by Les Liens Invisibles, an online service for users to commit virtual suicide by removing their virtual identity from Facebook. The reference to the Japanese ritual suicide of *Seppuku* (literally *stomach-cutting*) demonstrates the refusal to fall into the hands of the enemy; autonomy even at the cost of one's life.
12. Franco "Bifo" Berardi, "Time, Acceleration, and Violence" (2011). Available at <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/time-acceleration-and-violence/>. He is further drawing on Jean Baudrillard's *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, from 1976.
13. Ronald Jones, "The Art Market," *Frieze*, Issue 101 (September 2006, referring to *Harvard Business Review*, February 2004). Available at [www.frieze.com/issue/article/the\\_art\\_market/](http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/the_art_market/)
14. Robin Hood Minor Asset Management. See <http://www.rhmam.org/>.
15. See <http://www.rhmam.org/pages/robin-ethics-values-and-mission?locale=en>

16. See Dmytri Kleiner, *The Telekommunist Manifesto*, Network Notebooks 03 (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2010), 15. Available at <http://www.telekommunisten.net/the-telekommunist-manifesto>.
17. Paolo Virno, *Multitude: Between Innovation and Negation* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents, 2008); Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello describe a similar process where the social divisions of labour between the non-creativity of producers and the creativity of non-producers represent a “new spirit of capitalism,” in their *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2005).
18. For example, the grass roots movement ‘Uncut’ takes action to highlight government spending cuts and corporate tax evasion.
19. Oliver Ressler’s *Too Big To Fail* was part of the exhibition *After Democracy* at Kunstraum Niederösterreich. The phrase is combined with images of protesters from a demonstration on 28 March 2009. See also Gregory Sholette and Oliver Ressler, eds., *It’s the Economy Stupid: The Global Financial Crisis in Art and Theory* (London: Pluto, 2013), and their touring exhibition of the same name.
20. Christian Marazzi, *The Violence of Financial Capitalism* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011), 123.
21. See Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York/London: Routledge, 1997).
22. The call “We are Anonymous, We are Legion” captures this spirit, as well as the appropriation of the business suit as logo.
23. *Time/Bank* was initiated by artists Julieta Aranda and Anton Vidokle in 2010. See <http://e-flux.com/timebank/about/>.
24. Also controversial is their management of the .art domain that again demonstrates their business acumen.
25. See Franco “Bifo” Berardi, *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2012), 147.
26. Sebastian Olma’s *The Serendipity Machine: A Disruptive Business Model for Society 3.0* (2012) facilitates a business model that is able to predict disruptions. Available at <http://www.theserendipitymachine.com/>.
27. Virno, *Multitude: Between Innovation and Negation*, 20.
28. *Ibid.*, 82.
29. *Ibid.*, 50, 190.
30. Berardi, *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance*, 134.
31. *Ibid.*, 151.



## EMPTINESS

Franco “Bifo” Berardi

### + **Christmas**

The local newspaper announces the good news: shops will be open on Christmas day. Alleluia. Crowds of fathers and mothers, and children, and aunts and uncles, will happily flow into shopping malls and buy lots of plastic packages filled with useless objects, then spend the snowy afternoon in their stuffed living rooms unpacking them. They will be busy all day long. The association of shopkeepers blissfully celebrates the decision.

Since the end of the nineteenth century, workers have fought for a limitation in the time of exploitation, and a long time ago workers’ unions won the fight for a maximum amount of weekly work time. Then something happened at the end of the twentieth century. The globalization of the labour market destroyed the political force of workers and opened the way to a process of transformation of the organization of labour: increasing productivity, raising the amount of work time, and finally eliminating every limit to weekly work time. The neoliberal offensive came along with an ideological one which is based on the idea that the highest ambition of every human being should be to become a private entrepreneur; a wannabe business (wo) man, and free agent.

No matter how poor and exploited one is in real life, one must identify with the capitalist dream. This way of life has turned into a nightmare for the large majority of people who are not even allowed to show their suffering and humiliation. Being a free agent does not mean

being free. On the contrary, it means to be available all the time to answer a phone call from the networking machine of exploitation.

The old relation between owner and salaried worker was based on the guarantee of a regular job and a continual negotiation went on all the time between workers and owners, so that—when the rapport de force was favourable—workers could gain more money and less exploitation. The emancipation from the regular job has put work in a condition of political weakness and has broken the social community of workers, reducing individuals to loneliness and precariousness.

Thanks to struggles and negotiation, workers had succeeded in getting freedom from work some days of the year. Now it's over. Little by little, every day of freedom has been cancelled and workers have to renounce the idea that some days of the year can be spent as they prefer. They have to be hanging by the phone waiting for a call from the recombinant capitalist machine. They have to work as long as the bosses want, otherwise they are out.

Now Christmas Day is also lost. The unions, hat in hand, mumble that employees are obliged to accept the umpteenth increase in working hours. They are precarious workers, and so they cannot refuse the blackmail if they do not want to be immediately fired. Don't you love business?

### **Sorry, I'm busy**

Business is, in my opinion, the most despicable word in the vocabulary. Well, I will try to express it better: the meaning and implications of the word 'business' in contemporary culture and daily life, and the positive emphasis placed on this term, are the most telling symptoms of the abysmal alienation of our time.

During Renaissance times, humanists and artisans used to say *intrapresa* in order to define the useful activity of producing concrete, useful things for the community, and more generally in order to speak of the process of active transformation of nature by human intellectual

and manual abilities. The word *intrapresa* (enterprise) means ‘starting something,’ and implies an active pro-tension—the act of entering the space of social relation with the precise finality of meeting the needs of other people and also of fulfilling the expressive needs of the person who undertakes a process of creation.

Now examine the word ‘business,’ its semantic implications, and the reality of business in our time. It is not a pro-tensive act, but the action of filling an empty space: the empty space of time without meaning, without a *raison d’être*, and also without warmth, pleasure and passion. If you are living your time with pleasure, you don’t need to be busy. Maybe you’ll be obliged to accept a job in exchange for a salary, but you should never be glad to be busy.

“Sorry, I’m busy” is what you answer when you are doing something to someone who is looking for your help, your affective presence or, simply, your attention. This sentence—which is tolerable in exceptional and hopefully rare cases of temporary engagement—is what we are obliged to answer more and more in daily life. We are only available for those people who take part in the business (customers, users, bosses, subordinates) but we are too busy for those who are not part of the business. We are busy because work is destroying any space of freedom, but also because the submission of our life–time to the demands of capitalist exploitation has emptied our time of autonomous life.

My niece has been working for six months in a call centre, sitting eight hours per day in front of two computer screens. On the last day of her sixth month, she was fired. They will hire someone else in her place. This is the meaning of precariousness: you will be fired before you get a good salary and the rights to have a pension and paid vacations (under employment law).

The boss has called her and has said, “Oh, you are a good girl, you are smart and everything, but the market situation as you know is not good so I hope you understand... you’ll find something better...” She was not really upset by the abrupt dismissal from employment. Working there

was so boring, so tiring, so depressing, that after the announcement, she simply smiled at her boss and said goodbye. Then she went back to her working desk, and sent an email to her whole list of colleagues: sixty people in a large space, each sitting in front of two computer screens. The text was very simple: “I’m leaving at four because they have decided to fire me. I’m not that sad about this; just sorry to leave you all of a sudden, without even exchanging good wishes and saying *au revoir*. Making your acquaintance has been a pleasure and I hope we’ll meet again somewhere in the future.” Just a few words of salutation and solidarity among workers.

Then she waited for answers. Frankly speaking, she tells me, I was expecting someone to get up, leave his or her post, and come over to embrace me and express some words of friendship. Well, nothing happened. Nobody came to her; nobody even raised their head from their computer. Nobody acknowledged the message.

Were they busy? Yes and no. They did not know what to say or what to do. They were horribly sad, and the only thing they desired was to not stop doing what they were obliged to do—all the time, all the time, without interruption, if possible. Until death comes and sets them free. This is business: the deadly sentiment of being confronted by yourself; of being obliged to meet your empty intimacy, your naked time.

## **Time**

Business is about time, about duration, and about the perception of time as duration. The repugnant word ‘business’ has become the keyword of neoliberal depressive ethics for two reasons. First reason: business is good because it places the worker in a condition of constant subjection. Second reason: business is good because it fills time which has been emptied by the obligation to work, work, and work. We should stop saying ‘business,’ and we should call it work.

Neoliberalism is based on some unquestionable dogmas—dogmas that have been shaping ideology, politics, and daily life over the last thirty years. The first dogma is that salaried workers have to work more, both in

absolute and in relative terms: more hours of work every day, more days every week, more years of work during a lifetime. Productivity has to be simultaneously increased, and the exploitation of individual workers has to be incremented in parallel.

As an effect, of course, unemployment is rising too, and precariousness is spreading. Precarious workers are easy to threaten and to blackmail, and they are obliged to think about their work as 'business,' because the word 'work' is obsolete, and is dangerous. If you say 'work,' I'll fire you, because you don't love your business, as otherwise you would call it business, right? Those who think of themselves as workers don't fully endorse the common goal of increasing productivity and profits.

And on the other side, those who think of themselves as business (wo)men are intimately broken, unable to think about their time as something that belongs to themselves, because they do not know what to do with their time. The business(wo)man is frightened by freedom, so s/he equates freedom with business, and is exempted from facing the issue of the duration of her/his time. Will we ever be able to violate the most untouchable of dogmas, and to say the unspeakable truth? Will we dare to say what is so evident: that we don't need to work anymore, that we have been working too much during the past five hundred years, and we have really been working excessively during the last thirty years? Will we? We should.

Financial crisis, unemployment, recession, depression, and so on—all these economic technicalities are the result of the complication of a very simple truth: general intellect, technology, and knowledge have created a situation which is making human work useless. Thanks to god, and in particular thanks to the modern development of science and past conflicts between workers and entrepreneurs, technology has taken the place of workers, and automation is able to expand into every space of social activity, making human repetitive work totally irrelevant for the production of useful things. Repetitive work can be replaced by machines; therefore, people who are freed from the need to work should be paid

a basic income, and do whatever they want with their time. We have so many useful things to do in place of wasting time in useless work.

At present, you need to pay if you want to learn, pay if you want to be healed, and pay if you want to have sex, as all human activity has been turned into business. But when technology takes the place of humans in the process of repetitive work (which might be possible from tomorrow), human beings could finally go back to human activities: teaching, learning, healing, loving. In this way they would no longer be frightened to face their naked time, because time would no longer be naked. Instead it would be filled by talks, education, healing, touching, and love.

### **The trainee**

In the summer of 2012, at the Exhibition of Visual Art (EVA) in the Irish city of Limerick, I saw *The Trainee*, a brilliant, distressing work by the Finnish artist Pilvi Takala (produced in collaboration with Deloitte, and Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art). In order to realize the project, the artist worked for a month as a trainee in the marketing department of Deloitte, a leading business advisory firm, where only a few people knew the true nature of the project.

Initially she seems to be a normal marketing trainee, but then she starts to apply peculiar working methods. We see her sitting at her workstation in the open-plan office space or in the tax department library doing nothing all day. One of the videos shows her spending an entire day in an elevator. These acts, or rather the absence of visible action, slowly make the atmosphere around the trainee unbearable and force colleagues to search for solutions and come up with explanations for the situation. Gradually she becomes an object of avoidance and speculation. Her colleagues start asking her embarrassing questions, demonstrating both sincere interest and bewildered amusement. Demands are directed at her superior regarding the strange behaviour of the worker.

Masking laziness in apparent activity and browsing Facebook during working hours belong to acceptable behavioural patterns of a

normal work community. However, sitting silent and still in front of an empty desk, thinking, smiling and gazing at the wall, threatens the peace of the community and breaks colleagues' concentration levels. The non-doing person isn't committed to any activity, so she demonstrates the potential for anything. It is non-doing that lacks a proper place in the general order of things, and thus it represents a threat to order.

The degrading religion of business (being busy) is exposed here together with the uselessness of contemporary work, and one is led to ask: why have we become so dependent on business? Why do we need to appear to be doing something all the time?

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# IF WE CAN'T STOP CORPORATIONS FROM HIDING IN THE CAYMAN ISLANDS TO AVOID TAXES, WE ALL NEED TO BECOME PIRATES

Paolo Cirio

- + With leaders from eight of the world's wealthiest countries discussing economic policies that will affect citizens worldwide, the G8, always a symbol of undemocratic governance, is particularly contradictory this year. British Prime Minister David Cameron, host of the summit in Northern Ireland, is calling for a crackdown on widespread global tax evasion. But he might as well be called prime minister of major tax havens for his role overseeing London and the Crown Dependencies.

As usual, G8 members will advance measures aimed at maintaining, rather than resolving, these contradictions. Their proposals will not contain any changes that might distress corporate interests.

A mere 100 miles southeast of the summit, Dublin serves as a tax haven and a centre of massive tax evasion for many of the wealthiest corporations. American companies like Cisco and Apple set up subsidiaries in Dublin to evade US taxes, since corporate tax rates are roughly three times lower in Ireland than in the United States. Apple's Irish affiliate actually paid no taxes on \$30 billion in profit over the last four years. Corporate CEOs defend such tax evasions by presenting themselves as job creators acting for the benefit of the economy as a whole, but they leave out the data showing the decline of the middle class and consequent increases in poverty and homelessness. Ireland is not such a great place for normal people, with its severe austerity and outrageously high unemployment.



If corporations don't pay taxes, then it follows that when people buy iPhones, search on Google or order items on Amazon, everyone loses hospitals, schools, road maintenance and eventually pensions. Meanwhile, the lucky employees of untaxed companies get higher wages that directly produce unaffordable living costs for people employed by local and public businesses. Only those who work for the regime of major firms can survive.

People who raise their voices against the injustice of this situation by taking to the streets outside G8 summits have met escalating violence from security forces. In my twenties, I joined several anti-G8 protests across Europe, facing riot police that regularly employed tear gas, water cannons and clubs against peaceful demonstrators. At the Genoa summit in 2001, I dodged the massacre at the Diaz school out of pure luck. I have not always had the same fortune, and violent repression and mass arrests have become ordinary in the decade since.

Although street protests are crucial in manifesting dissent, we need to supplement public demonstrations with new, creative strategies of subversion. For instance, with the project [Loophole4All.com](http://Loophole4All.com), I managed to unsettle corrupt Cayman Islands authorities and international accounting firms by creating a caricature of the Certificate of Incorporation used by shell companies set up in the Caymans. At the same time, I drew attention to thousands of fraudulent companies, engaging the public in an unusual form of civil disobedience that threatens the offshore financial system.

Political innovation should be considered an art form that challenges brutal repression and creates solutions for global governance. I believe that artists can create legislative and financial models for the complex needs of the 21st century, incorporating humour, beauty and interactivity into new forms of social organization. Just as creativity and concrete social goals come together in architecture, contemporary artists should intervene in proposing policies that work for our times, while guiding us in interpreting and unveiling the invisible truths of our world.

The absurdity of the unsolved legality of offshore business helps to expose to everyone the disorder of our times and the need for radical

change. The vast exploitation of discrepancies among legal jurisdictions undermines the notions of law and national borders that are central to contemporary civilization. Globalization has outstripped the power of governments, businesses and citizens; each is left powerless against the other.

The leaders at the G8 summit may recommend some weak international regulations. However, they won't resolve the implicit conflict of global economic competition. Take the cases of Russia and Cyprus, China and Macao, the United States and Delaware or the United Kingdom and its Crown Dependencies. Every economic power has its own offshore centre as a structural financial instrument that cannot be dismantled without major consequences. The use of offshore finance is too big to fail. The financial centres of London, New York, Frankfurt and Hong Kong are today's toxic factories, and they exploit offshore jurisdictions like the Caymans, Jersey, Zurich and Singapore as noxious, yet legal resources.

As the American Senate and the British House of Commons interrogated the CEOs of Apple, Amazon, Starbucks and Google about their massive tax evasions, it was evident that these companies would get away with the biggest robberies in recent history with nothing more than a slap on the wrist. The public, otherwise powerless, could only laugh at this nonsense.

When impunity and injustice are the new normal, transparency becomes an empty word. Corruption is no secret in Ireland, for example, which never needed to hide the fact that corporations pretend to be based there in order to evade taxes everywhere else.

Embedded in digital technologies, transparency is unavoidable, but it isn't enough to tackle present and future abuses of power. Leaks of unclassified information are important; however, information doesn't make any sense by itself. The huge quantity of data published by WikiLeaks and the recent Offshore Leaks can only generate political change if mainstream media filter the leaks sensitively and honestly. (Hence, whistleblower Edward Snowden turned to Glenn Greenwald, because he

trusted the journalist, and his outlet The Guardian, to tell the story of the US National Security Agency's surveillance.) Real change can only come about when people incisively interpret the political and ethical value of information.

We should all be involved in designing alternative tax structures in a process similar to the participatory budgeting initiatives that have spread from Brazil to Mexico to the United States. For example, people and businesses could be empowered with tools that let them determine which area of society needs their funds. People should be able to enact change in a more participatory and fluid manner, rather than waiting on a slow and corrupt legislative system to deliver tax reforms.

We already have the tools for a direct and open democracy. What we need is a cultural and educational revolution that can bring it into being. Designing new ideas for governance is the real creative challenge of today. Faced with the austerity recommended by politicians and economists, artists can activate the utopian imagination, fostering innovative forms of participation and shared cultural values in social structures.

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Loophole for All is a service to democratize offshore business for people who don't want to pay for their riches. It empowers everyone to evade taxes, hide money and debt, and get away with anything by stealing the identities of real offshore companies.

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- ALDAR FUNDING..
- COLOMBIA..
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- GUY..

### Last companies sold

- K & D CORPORATION..
- PAN AFRICAN MINERALS LL..
- INTERNET CONSULTING SER..
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- MARTIN SIMPSON TECHNOL...
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- ISRAEL TECHNOLOGY INTE...
- SIGNES TECHNIQUES INVE...
- EUROPEAN VALUE AND ...
- LEGLER MANAGEMENT AND ...
- LITTON TECHNOLOGY CORP...
- ACER TECHNOLOGY VENTUR...

### A few Oil firms

- ATTOCK OIL SERVICES ...
- BRASPETRO OIL SERVICES...
- TAMPIMEX OIL 019786 ...
- BURBANK OILFIELD SERVI...
- CALICO OIL & MINERALS ...
- CAL PACIFIC OIL & ...
- CANSTATE INTERNATIONAL...
- CANUSA OIL & GAS ...
- DIAMOIL LIMITED 025387...

### A few Banking firms

- BANK LEUMI LE ISRAEL ...
- BANK LEUMI LE ...
- BANK OF BOSTON ...
- BANKBOSTON INTERNATION...
- BANKBOSTON TRUST COMPA...
- BANK OF BRITISH ...
- BANK OF CREDIT AND ...
- BANK OF INDIA ...
- BANK OF IRELAND ...

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- OVERSEAS INVESTMENT BA...
- NORTHERN TRUST ARBITRA...
- PAGET BROWN TRUST ...
- RALLI BANK AND TRUST ...
- RHODE ISLAND HOSPITAL ...
- ARAB BANKING CORPORATI...
- RICHARDSON SAVINGS & ...
- POWER BANK AND TRUST ...
- PRIVACO TRUST COMPANY ...

### A few Chinese firms

- ZERO2IPO CHINA ANGEL ...
- BLUE RIDGE CHINA ...
- CHINA VALUE ACCESS ...
- FRONTPOINT GREATER CHI...
- CHINA HARVEST PARALLEL...
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- HAO CAPITAL CHINA ...
- CHINA SEED VENTURES ...
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### A few American firms

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- INTER AMERICAN FINANCE...
- INTER AMERICAN ...
- INTER AMERICAN ...
- INTER AMERICAN PROPERT...
- INTERAMERICAN SERVICE ...
- INTER AMERICA PHENIX ...
- INTERAMERICAS INTERNAT...

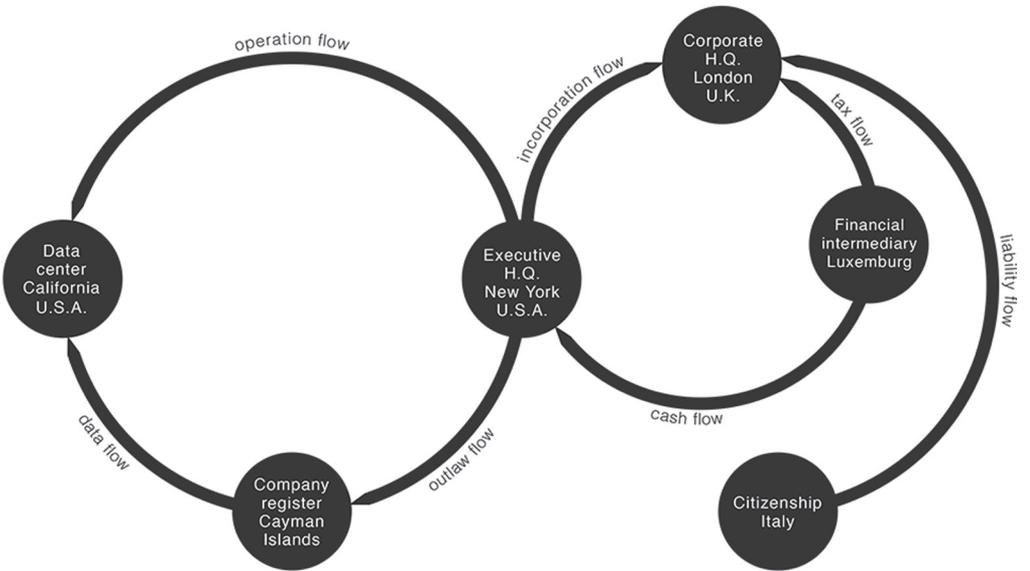
### A few Arab firms

- ARAB AMERICA FINANCE ...
- ARABIAN GULF TRADING ...
- MAGNUM ARABIAN DRILLIN...
- HEALTH RESOURCES CORPO...
- GULF ARAB OVERSEAS ...
- ARABIAN GULF MARKETING...
- ARAB INVESTMENT GROUP ...
- ARABULK LTD ...
- BARABAS LIMITED 225953...

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- JAPAN VIETNAM GROWTH ...
- ACI JAPAN MARKET ...
- CAREP JAPAN ...
- AIP JAPAN RECOVERY ...
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**CORPORATE DIAGRAM FOR LOOPHOLE FOR ALL (2013)**



Available at <http://loophole4all.com/>



# MIMESIS OF THE HARDENED AND ALIENATED: SOCIAL PRACTICE AS BUSINESS MODEL

Marina Vishmidt

- + We have invented ourselves, so to speak, the social contradictions that made our freedom necessary.' Where invented doesn't mean made up but found and translated the facts that reveal their dormant political dimension. Claire Fontaine, "Human Strike Within the Field of Libidinal Economy."

In this essay, I would like to think about how the figure of the entrepreneur manifests in the domain of cultural production or, more narrowly, art, particularly under normative crisis conditions. The second half of the piece will focus on some case studies, chiefly Theaster Gates, Superflex, and e-flux, and try to situate these phenomena in that conjuncture. In the meantime, we can set up the questions that will guide this analysis.

The title of the essay, "Mimesis of the Hardened and Alienated," comes from a phrase used in an essay in Theodor W. Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, "Situation," where he writes, "Only by immersing its autonomy in society's *imagerie* can art surmount the heteronomous market. Art is modern art through mimesis of the hardened and alienated; only thereby, and not by the refusal of a mute reality, does art become eloquent; this is why art no longer tolerates the innocuous."<sup>1</sup> We can make some extrapolations here, which may not necessarily be Adorno's own. One is that part of modern art's very being was emulating that which was alien to it; that is, its autonomy was based upon a relation of troubled proximity, whether of rejection or mimesis, with the banal social, economic, and material facts from which it operated at a remove. This was a degree of 'near distance'

necessary for providing it with new resources of ‘alienated reality,’ which it would process into increasingly less formal and independent articulations as the transition to the ‘contemporary’ made its impact felt. This kind of mimesis, which can be observed in the history of art since the decline of its ‘modern’ moment—a decline that was well underway by the time Adorno wrote the above in the 1960s—gradually takes over not only art’s formal imperatives but ends up incorporating the social character of the artist and the productive relations which sustain her. This shift, arguably, signals the transition from modern to contemporary art: to a situation in which art is no longer a separate domain strategically distancing itself from or connecting to an ‘alienated reality’ at will, but a specialized niche within that reality—art that is contemporary with its time; a time which is strictly harnessed to the temporal rhythms of the market, or, more broadly, to capital accumulation.<sup>2</sup>

Another extrapolation would be that the intolerance of the innocuous that Adorno imputes to art can otherwise be coded as a constant modernizing and constant revolutionizing of the techniques, social relations, and formal ambitions of art, which perhaps can be said to follow the ‘dialectic of Enlightenment.’ Art constantly strives to overcome its inherited limits, but the metaphysics of art stay in place and prevent it from fully doing so. Following through on this modernizing logic might also imply art doing away with itself in a moment of enlightenment-cum-immolation.

As with all narratives of modernization, art cannot help but also evoke the narrative of economic growth, the liberation theology of capital. Capital too is always striving to overcome its boundaries and turn the new terrain it has won into the basis for a new round of accumulation.<sup>3</sup> More specifically, we can allude to the process of ‘disruptive innovation’—or to take its classical Schumpeterian variant, ‘creative destruction’—as a rubric that encompasses and binds processes of critical valorization internal to art and the processes of capital valorization in which it is enmeshed, however differently these ‘disruptions’ are articulated in these

two domains.<sup>4</sup> As emphasized by Rosa Luxemburg, capital expands by absorbing into itself non- or pre-capitalist forms of life in an ongoing vector of ‘primitive accumulation.’ Art, as described by Adorno above but as is readily observable from any survey of contemporary production, similarly expands its reach and its relevance by absorbing and re-presenting in its own domain that which was not previously deemed an instance of art. Just as in the vortices of capital, this occurs as a ‘disruptive innovation,’ putting into question or rendering obsolete the previous modes of signification and value, forcing new languages of critique, and ushering historical narratives into view which can ‘account’ for this new paradigm. We could turn to Peter Bürger’s account in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, where he draws a distinction between ‘self-criticism’ and ‘immanent criticism’ based on a reading of passages in Marx’s *Grundrisse*.<sup>5</sup> Self-criticism would be posed as a challenge to an institution, whereas immanent criticism would be posed from within an institution to one or another of its aspects. The suggestion could be made here that a historical process can also convert the former into the latter, particularly in the case of art, which, as Bürger shows with the example of the 20<sup>th</sup> century avant-gardes, expanded as an institution to absorb its self-criticism. He demonstrates this shift from the ‘historical avant-garde’, which challenged the system of art itself, to the ‘neo-avant gardes’ of the 60s and 70s which elaborated a critique internal to that system. While the reasons Bürger gives for this can be set aside here, we can see how art adopting the strategies of business has been a self-criticism and a disruptive innovation mainly within the institution of art, helping to extend its power and influence. E-flux could be taken as a case in point, where the mimetic conflation of collaborative art practice and small media corporation results in an institutional entity which corners the market in virtually every thinkable activity in the sphere of circulation of art; that is, in publicity—what Alexander Alberro defines as the main playing field of Conceptual Art.<sup>6</sup> Here, the ‘disruptive innovation’ is to the institution of art: an art practice can gain immense leverage from single-mindedly pursuing business strategies, all the while defying categorization.

Characteristically, no business strategies were harmed in this experiment, it is only art that had its boundaries distended one further time in what, to Bürger, would surely count as a final heap of earth on the coffin of the historical avant-gardes. When no institution is hurt but individual actors can advance their interests by reconfiguring the institution so that it works for them, this is an instance of immanent criticism. It can similarly be demonstrated that up until the present moment, all crises of capitalism have been immanent in that they have simply propelled it beyond obsolete barriers, whether they be ways of manufacture, old technology, or the moderate wages and welfare state provisions.

It is also true that art can behave as a form of ‘disruptive innovation’ *within* the economy, with culture-led regeneration tasked with redeveloping whole areas, displacing and replacing the populations which inhabit them with boutique subjectivities and the high-value forms of consumption that come with them. Art is a force for speculation within an era of speculative capital. It provides a fearless, omncreative, and iconoclastic archetype for managers and finance professionals to self-identify with, as well as a class-based ‘soft power’ to mobilize the potential of low-value and at-risk populations, as in the ‘social’ or ‘socially engaged’ art initiatives that form part of any regeneration agenda these days.

However, if these ideological affinities can be mapped and developed further, the analogy between ‘disruptive innovation’ in art and in business is of only limited interest so long as it stays on the level of analogy rather than allowing us to discern a common logic structurally grounded in the economic mechanisms that drive capitalist society. We can start to delineate some of the features of such a logic with the proposition that “the mimesis of the hardened and alienated” as it comes to us today does not simply, as I have already indicated, give art new resources for its own formal, or even social, innovation. It allows it to stop *being art*, or to stop being *only art*, and allows it to start playing a much more direct role as a channel of empowerment, governance and even accumulation—if only of ‘social capital’<sup>7</sup>—for specific communities and in

specific contexts. No longer is art a component in larger market-led and top-down social engineering plans which adds value and creative cachet to speculative property development, however threadbare and transparent this *modus operandi* is by now. Now it is art, and the art institution in particular, which provides the ‘added value’ to activities which function only partially and strategically as art. It is now the practice of the hardened and alienated in the social field, with the mimesis of art. This resource-based approach, distinguished by a pragmatism that appears subversive at first glance, ends up buttressing the boundaries it treats so casually, because it lives and dies with the capital those boundaries are still capable of yielding. That is, the institution of art must remain in place, but so must the institution of business and the community—the community of capital.<sup>8</sup> This is something that I have elaborated at greater length elsewhere in my published work, so this will serve as an extended sketch departing both from that work and signalling more to come.<sup>9</sup>

Here I would like to confine myself to charting the ‘entrepreneur’ as a policy and a life form which does not only index this pragmatism in the field of art production—a pragmatism which we can also recognize from the world of activism, particularly online activism and many progressive NGOs. Besides embodying a logic between art and activism in some exemplary art practices of the present moment, it can also appear as a logical culmination of the ‘disruptive innovation’ that economic logics must represent in the field of art, if the art wants to both remain relevant to the exigencies of the contemporary and not be defined by them.

What comes to mind when we try to reflect upon entrepreneurialism in the field of culture? For instance, we can think of a sort of entrepreneurialism-from-below that some still fondly reminisce of as one of the better aspects of Thatcher’s legacy in the UK, producing a great deal of idiosyncratic and insurgent self-organized culture such as post-punk record labels; once the field of cultural production was redrawn both by the DIY imperative and the ideology of small ownership as the best way to secure material and ideological independence from the state and

the social compacts state cultural funding was meant to secure. One could also recall the ‘culturepreneurs’ of the 1990s and early 2000s.<sup>10</sup> When it comes to charting the fortunes of this figure in periods of crisis such as we are experiencing in the present, one is likewise reminded of World Bank policy documents extolling the bootstrapping virtues of street sellers and ‘micro-entrepreneurs’ who only need a small boost from the bigger entrepreneurs of micro-credit to flourish in the vibrant informal economies of ‘emerging markets.’ As we should have learned from the work of Silvia Federici on the destructive impact of micro-credit in Indian, African, and South American subsistence economies, or even the campaigning around ‘payday loans’ in the UK recently, unregulated micro-economies (serving ‘populations’ which are not deemed worthy of regulation, since they have proven themselves unresponsive to market incentives those regulations are there to promote) breed large parasites.<sup>11</sup> The greater the degree of need, the more likelihood that entities capitalizing on that need—also like the layers and layers of subcontractors in informal economies or deregulated large economies—will spring up, further eroding the solidarity required to organize in order to combat exploitation and poverty effectively. Only right-wing zealotry would strive to deny that capital invariably tends to monopoly, which contributes to limiting access to resources for those who do not start from an established resource base, and drives the much-eulogized small producers, innovators, etc., out of business, returning them to the pools of dependent waged labour or unemployment whence they came. Here we can also think of Albert-László Barabási and his theory of the emergence of power nodes in scale-free networks.<sup>12</sup> The law basically stipulates that those who have resources will attract more, while those who don’t will have to transfer whatever they have to those with the resources, in a network-theory confirmation of the Biblical adage.<sup>13</sup>

However, maybe a bit laterally, I would also like to think about the dispositions, subjectivities, and sensibilities that are produced at the encounter of art with the ‘disruptive influence’ of business; in other words, the aesthetics of this encounter. The cell-form of art is the entrepreneurial

artist who reproduces the art institution simply by reproducing herself as an artist. She is thus mimetic of the ‘automatic subject’ of value, which is self-reproducing as a social form once the presuppositions (for capital, private property, and wage labour; for art, the institution of art) are in place. Claire Fontaine has discussed this in terms of the ‘ready-made artist,’ the natural consequence of a century’s assimilation of the ready-made ‘artwork’ into the institution of art and the predictable slow diffusion of art as a quantum which can take place in, and add value within, any social situation guaranteed by the art institution in the person of the artist.<sup>14</sup> This instils an ethical and affective homogeneity that obtains between the subject and object of art, and, in times of the intensified rule of abstract value over production in general and art’s markets in particular, between art and capital. This tends to even out the ideological edges between economic and political positions, as a general agreement is reached that capital is simply what we all are and should strive to maximize. Parenthetically, this can be compared to the non-politics of inclusion, where systemic variables cannot be questioned or changed, but more and more people can be upgraded to ‘participate’ in the system, and political activism is nothing but evening out the playing field to improve the prospects of success for those temporarily ‘excluded.’<sup>15</sup> It may be objected that more radical perspectives have made an impact in the mainstream of policy and public opinion since the crisis struck, especially with the emergence of Occupy, 15M, and the uprisings in the Arabic Mediterranean. However, as commentators have noted, pragmatism rather than ideological contestation is the lifeblood at least of the Western movements, and the bedrock of pragmatism is inclusion, albeit with one important exclusion that follows from this principle: there can be no demands.<sup>16</sup>

But how does all this relate to the figure of the entrepreneur as a contemporary art strategy? Perhaps it does have something to do with the diffuse activism sketched out above, which is centred on doing good in the here and now, in a horizon where there can only be addition, only be accumulation, never disruption. This kind of pragmatic standpoint thus,

paradoxically, plays a disruptive role in art, if not in society, since art is constituted by the fiction of uselessness, formal rigour, and indexicality rather than direct involvement. Counter-tendencies would of course include all 'social practices' which have been variously adumbrated as relational, interventionist, or engaged in the past several decades. However, isn't it the case that among the practices viewed as most subversive at the time, in counterpoint to artists such as the institutionally feted Tiravanija or Deller (to take two otherwise extremely divergent practices), were the overtly entrepreneurial ones? Because they occupied both the community-facing and business-minded ends of the relational spectrum, such practices were deemed to be seriously engaging with the legacy of the art and economics nexus that had been so variously explored since the Artist Placement Group, to take only one of the best known and most opaque exemplars.<sup>17</sup> Here, I principally have in mind the 'shovel-ready' social aesthetics of the collective SUPERFLEX for an illustration of how entrepreneurialism and autonomy conjoin in a resolutely post-critical and results-oriented agenda which is often indistinguishable from a mainstream development NGO, whether it directs its efforts at Amazonian farmers or residents of inner-city Copenhagen.<sup>18</sup> SUPERFLEX have consistently maintained an emphasis on the 'entrepreneurial' as the conceptual basis of their practice, which I have written about at greater length elsewhere.<sup>19</sup> This can be viewed as a 'capacity-building' manoeuvre, in the language of the NGO: what they are enabled to do through the agency of art would not be accessible to a regular business, while the structures and rhetoric of business gives them a certain currency in fields outside of, but to no small extent within, art.

Other examples of the 'entrepreneurial' as an identification and a logic of production in current and recent art could be cited, albeit not within the length confines of this essay. Andy Warhol might be the germ plasm here; although artists have behaved entrepreneurially more or less for the whole recorded history of art, he was perhaps the first to thematize it as production logic on a massive scale. These examples are characterized by an opting for the optimizing, expansive possibilities

afforded by embracing business as a principle of production of art, rather than a hostile 'Other' to art. In SUPERFLEX's case, this is then joined with charitable or community-minded infrastructure projects which easily slot into a 'social design' typology, driven by the same logic of optimization as the business side of things. But even if such non-conflictual activist outlooks in the realm of contemporary art are not new or unprecedented, and are indeed presupposed of the overtly 'social practices' sketched out earlier, SUPERFLEX's focus on the 'entrepreneur' is somewhat special.

Yet the celebration of the entrepreneur can also be done rather more dramatically. Here I would like to focus the phenomenon through the lens of the 'insurgent business' practice of Theaster Gates,<sup>20</sup> a Chicago-based artist who's been getting a lot of attention recently precisely for his projects that seek to 'add value' to communities through entrepreneurial artist-led redevelopment and to add 'social credit' to the art world by giving it a chance to contribute to these projects.

Gates has forged both a lucrative and critically significant career by mobilizing interest and investment in derelict, historically African-American areas of Chicago through a complex and performative practice involving object-making, advocacy and the physical rehabilitation of built spaces. This amounts to a sort of benign artist-run (rather than art-led) gentrification, empowering the artist himself in these agendas as well as the community he has defined as both the substance of and the audience for his work. A recent exhibition at the White Cube in London entitled *My Labor is My Protest* presented this work for a UK public. Here there is an articulation of labour as a positive and transformative practice, one which entails organizing groups of friends, supporters, and local people to fix up old, decaying houses and turn them, not into residential units, like Edgar Arceneaux or other US-based artists who address themselves to independent housing projects in neglected areas, but into cultural or community centres, archives and libraries, bolting 'cultural capital' onto run-down areas of Chicago which would not normally attract middle-class audiences of whatever racial designation. It should be noted that Gates'

work very much departs from the history of racial segregation and zoned disinvestment in the city, but is far less interested in questions of class. In a mode typical for US discourses of social justice, it elides questions of class with those of race and especially of racialized—and fetishized—culture.

Some of the material that is produced in the renovation process will later find its way to the art market or the exhibition circuit, as Gates uses it to craft discrete autonomous art objects. Recently in DOCUMENTA (13) in Kassel, an ageing townhouse due to be demolished and converted into a hotel was taken over by Gates and his team for the duration of the exhibition. It was inhabited by documenta interns, who mediated a programme of regular activities in the house, and the renovation process that the house was undergoing; or, rather, the documentation of this process became the artwork on display. Large rooms hosted film and video installations of glossily produced soul and gospel musical performances by Gates' associates.

Gates' entrepreneurial outlook—promoting the virtues of labour in social change, preferably the labour of others, while he interfaces with real estate developers, art institutions, and NGOs—is resolutely and unapologetically 'post-political.'<sup>21</sup> This evokes the precepts of 'human capital,' with the reversal entailed by the notion of the capitalist as a worker and the worker as the owner of 'human capital,' which both appropriates and cancels the political subjectivity of work as alienation. This then leads to a monadic notion of experience based on this corporate and consumer personhood, meaning change can only be construed on personal and self-maximizing grounds, bearing out the truth of 'human capital' ideology (which, like all ideologies, creates the grounds for its own legitimation). Michel Foucault charts the emergence of the concept of 'human capital' in the genealogy of neoliberalism he provides in *The Birth of Biopolitics* lecture course. With Foucault, however, we would also need to decipher the link between notions of creativity in reconstituting for workers the kind of compulsively self-enhancing assets 'human capital' denotes.<sup>22</sup>

This dynamic of self-enhancement is then transvalued from an economic process to an affective one, and this transition is called 'creativity.' While this can only be touched on here, creativity as a complex of overt and implicit presuppositions about the relation between labour and value does not just generalize the 'creativity' of capital to labour but marks the point where management intervenes in labour, where management is internalized. The mobilization of the entrepreneur is guided by creativity both as a productive norm at work and a way to transcend the constraints of labour while, of course, not escaping the demands of value. Creativity thus marks the joint between self-management and self-exploitation, autonomy, and heteronomy. The capacity of creativity to be easily internalized as a workplace norm renders it the form of governmentality that obtains specifically in the workplace, even as the entrepreneur can principally operate anywhere, most visibly in cultural fields and as a labour template for the no-longer-autonomous artist. Creativity thus functions as a springboard for capitalist populism, assuring every exploited worker and discontented artist that their interests are not any different from capital's. These interests signally coincide in the performance of labour that is inventive, fulfilling and that would be a joyful experience whether or not there was money involved.

Given this set of co-ordinates, which to me seem to be implicitly and manifestly at play in Gates' project, he appears not to be interested in some of the structural conditions that both make the project materially possible and call forth its particular appearance of politics. One of these would be the role of the very interests, such as property developers whom he involves to support these projects, in the decay and depression the projects are intended to address. Eliding this enables him to uphold a donor-friendly message of inspirational community action and social capital-building through culture. What is powerfully suggestive about his activities as an artist and as an amateur developer is that they so perfectly integrate the logic of culture-led regeneration while translating it into the terms of autonomous art, on the one side, and on the other neutralize the critical

perspectives that have developed on these processes through those terms. It exemplifies the current dogma of ‘crisis-as-opportunity’ for positive community action, as the state withdraws from social reproduction only to better perform its duties of service to an increasingly narrow fraction of capital. At the same time, it disavows this set of ideological co-ordinates by developing a convincing and affective grammar of historically-freighted cultural symbolism and empowerment for its protagonists.

The notion of ‘empowerment’ has long played an ambivalent role—a progressive rhetoric with often conservative and co-opting results—in minority communities in the West in the neoliberal era; that is to say, in the aftermath of the era of social movements and wide social contestation. ‘Empowerment,’ analogous to the ‘inclusion’ I examined earlier, is the accepted terminology for a process of social mobility which is usually individualized and has a pragmatist orientation in taking the extant power relations as its ultimate horizon, as the parameters which circumscribe a social actor who hopes to improve her position. However crudely this might resound, we can only understand the function of empowerment as a political technology if we juxtapose it with ‘revolution’ as a way to name the horizon of social change. When applied to collectives, it denotes a non-antagonistic mode of advancing through power structures which are flexible enough to accommodate the claims of the thus-far marginalized, thus in a position to grant ‘power’ to those claims or the people making them—rather than a system which is structurally hostile to equality or an ‘equal’ distribution of power. Empowerment thus redounds to the credit of injustice, showing that there is actually enough justice in the system to recognize the claims of the dispossessed (how did they get that way? It doesn’t matter), so the system must be ultimately good, and open to change. In the case of Theaster Gates, it means that emblems of structural violence such as housing privatisation, unemployment, and white supremacy turn into resources for a cultural project which exposes them to the light, only to push them into the background as irrelevant in the face of the real, positive change partially bankrolled by the market

and non-profit entities systemically responsible for those very same ills. This project, however, guards itself from charges of instrumentality or exploitation through its recourse to artistic speculation; that is, a parallel as well as an implicated practice of autonomous art which then renders the social a *contingent* aspect of its mythopoesis.

This is a notable tendency, not only for Gates, but for a large swathe of currently produced art that takes the social as its material and circulates at the most visible levels of the global exhibition circuit. Another example that could be cited here would be Tino Seghal. Particularly in his work, this tendency can be described as a kind of optical illusion which presents two dimensions at once, but both of which cannot be perceived simultaneously. Either you, as a viewer, agree to the social contract of the work—which involves focusing on the immediate, direct experience of orchestrated sociality in Seghal's case or a processual and temporal theatre of community in Gates—or you try to understand the conditions of possibility of these performances, including working conditions, the performers' agency, power relations in this ensemble of social mimesis, and so forth. It seems that each cancels out the other, rendering any critical approach off limits, or even redundant, because the distance demanded by critique breaks the social contract of frictionless exchange on which this work is predicated (as in the service industries that it emulates), thus declining to 'engage' with the work's basic process. The work places itself beyond critique, by its participants or its viewers, because it does not base its criteria on anything but the language and parameters of 'autonomous art' while at the same time using only social relations—such as the economy and layers of institutional mediation in Gates' case—as its 'material' and territory of action. In Gates' case, there is a valorization of the 'entrepreneur' as a broker of capital generated within and outside the community for the purposes of improving the situation of that community and also turning it into a sort of authored artwork that can circulate in the channels of legitimacy and resources afforded by the art world. Both sites—the community and the art institution—merge in a pragmatic and

charismatic tableau of empowerment.

In a similar manner to the original theorist of ‘human capital’ theory, the Chicago economist Gary Becker, Gates affirms that social change is driven by business, by entrepreneurial initiative, and that a successful enterprise is the best form of resistance to any crisis.<sup>23</sup> As a recent review put it, “Against dismissing the sublation of civil rights into consumer rights, *My Labor Is My Protest* proposes business as a mode of collaborative critique. A political space where people make things, invest narrative in those things, and sell those things.” So this brings us back to the idea of business as an activity fostering autonomy, and disrupting established relationships of passivity and dependence. We can note how easily collaborative critique and the exploitation inseparable from making and selling things are fused here. Given the current social and economic decline observable in many parts of the world, with escalating, concrete misery and stagnation a reality even in the ‘rich countries,’ it is not surprising that activism and business pair up in a utopian vision of social desire which has at its base a vision of money brokering intimate and meaningful exchanges which can have actual empowering effects. This is a seductive vision with great social resonance at the moment, echoing with the gospel of financial abstraction ‘out-cooperated’ by small-scale enterprise, alternative economic models, and networks of trust: a pastel landscape of sharing that has been readily embraced by corporates.

The e-flux platform has been a salient vector in this milieu.<sup>24</sup> Given its different but co-present modalities of business, artwork, social aggregator, journal, video distribution service and exhibition space, all of which take as their object the ‘social capital’ of the artworld, it is the *Time/Bank* project<sup>25</sup> which would seem to be most interested in branding and valorizing the already irregular and quixotic forms of exchange that drive the artworld (in distinction, say, from the ads business which seems to subsidize some of the less lucrative aspects of e-flux activity). This is not a reflection on the insufficient radicalism of time banking; for no local-exchange or time–money system has any capacity whatever to shift the

capital–labour relation or its basis in the form of abstract value. The most it can do is prop up de-monetized or hyper-exploited sections of the population or regions, which can sometimes be a significant precursor to any social or political action that then might have systemic implications. This may be said to apply when the state intervenes to ban alternative or parallel currencies which prove ‘too successful,’ as in the episode of the ‘Wörgl experiment’ with freigeld in 1933.<sup>26</sup> E-flux can also be said to be a radiant example of ‘disruptive innovation,’ as they have developed an operating model that affords great latitude creatively and materially to its participants while ideologically distancing themselves from both state and market as support systems for art, thus upholding the fairly classical entrepreneurial attitude of independence.

To its credit, e-flux has eschewed socially utopian rhetoric to adumbrate its activities, keeping to a studied neutrality which at times is grounded in its announced status as a collaborative artwork and other times in that of a business. The speculative gesture which stakes a claim to the post-conceptual legacy is the one of disavowing the barriers between art and commerce ontologically—in the sphere of production, rather than incidentally, art in the market after it’s made (circulation). *Time/Bank*, on the other hand, is an economic experiment within an economic experiment, a microcosm of the space for alternative economies afforded by booming macro-economies—incipiently legitimizing both e-flux’s business model, and the impenetrable quasi-markets of the artworld.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, e-flux is a small business that asseverates itself to be an artwork, whereas SUPERFLEX uses entrepreneurialism as an analogy with the making of art which seeks a direct social function. Gates takes this mediated corporate mentality one step further into ‘actual’ philanthropy. Given the cynicism that cannot help but accompany the socially entrepreneurial approach, it may seem like a successful mimesis of the hardened and alienated would look very much like e-flux, where art and commercial services are not to be critically or practically distinguished and gain all the more leverage from this blurring—something like an artworld Serco, “the biggest

company you've never heard of."<sup>28</sup> Dramatizing art's overlap with money as modalities of speculation has been a solid tradition in the twentieth century, from Marcel Duchamp and Daniel Spoerri's cheques to Robert Morris' and Maria Eichhorn's 'investment art' and Christine Hill's career-long mimesis of petty proprietorship as relational aesthetics. Still, e-flux shows that this structural symmetry between art and the economic cannot remain allegorical forever. With the advent of permanent economic crisis, the autonomy of art will sublimate itself in the gospel of profit, if only to support the autonomy of the money in a society where making money is its only source of support. There is a certain logic, even a beauty, to such a solvent pragmatism. Perhaps we can say, with J.H. Prynne, "The name of that is of course money, and/the absurd trust in value is the pattern of/bond and contract and interest-just where/the names are exactly equivalent to the trust/given to them./Here then is the purity of/pragmatic function."

5

**NOTES:**

1. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London & New York: Continuum, 1997), 21.
2. The art historian and critic Kerstin Stakemeier makes some acute observations on this shift in my dialogue with her, in “The Value of Autonomy: A conversation between Kerstin Stakemeier and Marina Vishmidt about the reproduction of art,” *Texte zur Kunst*, no. 88, *Die wertfrage/A Question of Value* (2012): 102-117.
3. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 1993), 270, 334, 408–410. The footnote on p. 334 establishes the Hegelian provenance of this idea.
4. Of course Schumpeter didn’t believe capitalism relied on exploitation; he was at pains to disprove ‘Marxian doctrine’ with his more scientific deductions that capital accumulation in fact relies on the ‘supernormal’ intelligence and acuity of entrepreneurs. See “Introduction,” in Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 16. The notion of ‘creative destruction’ is mainly developed in this text.
5. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 20 -27.
6. Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual art and the politics of publicity* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004).
7. For a review of a recent book-length critique of this dubious term by Ben Fine which glosses the arguments of the book as well as its limitations and the types of political agency it does not investigate, see Emma Dowling, “Tales of ‘Much of a muchness’: Adventures in the land of social capital,” *ephemera: theory and politics in organization*, vol. 12, No. 4 (December 2012): 480–485.
8. Jacques Camatte, *Capital and community: the results of the immediate process of production and the economic work of Marx*, trans. David Brown (London: Unpopular Books, 1988).
9. One of the contexts where I have pursued these questions at length is my recently completed doctoral thesis titled *Speculation as a Mode of Production in Art and Capital* (Queen Mary, University of London, 2013).
10. Anthony Davies and Simon Ford, “Culture Clubs,” *Mute*, vol.1, no. 18 (September 2000). Available at <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/culture-clubs>; also “Art Futures,” *Art Monthly*, no. 223 (February 1999).
11. Silvia Federici, lecture at launch of her book *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland: PM Press, 2012), 12 November 2012, Goldsmiths, University of London. The Guardian newspaper’s ongoing coverage of the spread of payday loans and attendant controversies

includes Hilary Osborne, “University of London bans payday loans on campus” (28 February 2013), Osborne, “Problem payday loan debts rise by almost 300%,” and Nicholas Watt and Patrick Wintour, “Payday loan firms face cap after government U-turn” (28 November 2012).

12. Albert-László Barabási, *Linked: The New Science of Networks* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus, 2002); Eric Bonabeau, “Scale-Free Networks,” *Scientific American*, 288 (5) (May 2003): 60–9.

13. “The Parable of the Sower,” in Matthew 13:12 in the New International Version: “Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.” Thus we can see a secret archaeological resonance between the pseudo-naturalistic tropes of Social Darwinism and the wrath of the Old Testament deity.

14. Claire Fontaine, “Ready-Made Artist and Human Strike: A few Clarifications.” Available at [www.clairefontaine.ws/pdf/readymade\\_eng.pdf](http://www.clairefontaine.ws/pdf/readymade_eng.pdf).

15. Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (London & New York: Verso, 2002).

16. The ‘movement of the squares’ in Europe and North America (15M/ Indignados/Real Democracia Ya! in Spain, Syntagma in Greece, Occupy in the US) had a strong, and in some circumstances definitive antipathy to political polarization of any kind, and declared themselves, at the highest level of generality, simply in opposition to the present (which is not a bad starting point). Of course there were many conflicts emerging inside the movement, including splits over property destruction in the Oakland Commune and the presence of gender/sexual violence and racism inside the camps. Particularly for the latter point, see the Communiqué from [bmorewomentrans](https://sites.google.com/site/bmorewomentrans) at <https://sites.google.com/site/bmorewomentrans/communique>. Here, the question of the ‘human strike’ can still emerge as antagonism within a show of unity, whether it is arrived at by consensus or party politics.

17. Although APG pioneered the adoption of business-focused strategies in contemporary art, their itinerary was too broad and idiosyncratic to paint them as straightforward precursors of the tendencies discussed here.

18. See [www.superflex.net/](http://www.superflex.net/).

19. Marina Vishmidt, “Sales Targets: Superflex Face the Economy,” *Kaleidoscope*, no. 10 (2011).

20. See [www.theastergates.com/](http://www.theastergates.com/).

21. In this sense, it is very much in keeping with the most recent documenta, which offered a soi-disant ecological thematic whose only theoretical commitment seemed to be to the power of the bourgeois art institution to map and index every natural and cultural phenomenon taking place anywhere in the globe any time in

human history—a good diagram of the artistic ‘primitive accumulation’ I discuss in this essay, and here clearly traceable to the ‘real’ primitive accumulation that delivers these far-flung events into the curatorial lap like so much festive neo-colonial confetti (although with ontological equality between humans and non-humans assumed, the questions of power that are framed through the category of colonialism can no longer be articulated, and certainly not within the institution itself—the last documenta ran on the labour of 100 unpaid interns, who facilitated the majority of artists’ projects, including that of Gates.).

22. Jason Read, “A Genealogy of Homo-Economicus: Neoliberalism and the Production of Subjectivity,” *Foucault Studies*, no. 6 (February 2009): 25–36; Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978–1979*, trans. Graham Burchell (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Marina Vishmidt, *Speculation as a Mode of Production in Art and Capital* (Queen Mary, University of London, 2013); Chris Bilton, “Manageable Creativity,” in *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, vol. 16, no. 3 (2010); or Ulrich Bröckling, “On Creativity: A Brainstorming Session,” in *Educational Philosophy & Theory*, vol. 38, no. 4 (2006).

23. Gary S. Becker, *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis with Special Reference to Education*, 3rd Edition (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993); Hesse McGraw, “Theaster Gates: Radical Reform with Everyday Tools,” *Afterall*, no. 30 (Summer 2012).

24. See [www.e-flux.com/](http://www.e-flux.com/).

25. See [www.e-flux.com/timebank/](http://www.e-flux.com/timebank/).

26. See [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/W%C3%B6rgl#The\\_W.C3.B6rgl\\_Experiment](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/W%C3%B6rgl#The_W.C3.B6rgl_Experiment).

27. See also Valueform’s “Delusions of Revolt: Notes on the Limits of Aesthetic Praxis,” (14 May 2012). Available at <http://www.metamute.org/community/your-posts/delusions-revolt-notes-limits-aesthetic-praxis>.

28. Serco Group PLC is a ubiquitous infrastructure, services, logistics, and facilities corporation which operates a number of formerly public services worldwide, while sporting a comically sinister name (SERvice Corporation) straight out of 1960s counter-cultural satire. Serco is involved in everything from traffic systems to prisons to school meals. See <http://www.serco.com/> and a critical report at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=szNLMtg17hU> (“The Biggest Company You Never Heard Of”).

29. J. H. Prynne, *Kitchen Poems* (Grossman Publishers/ Cape Goliard Press, 1968).



# TOO BIG TO FAIL

Oliver Ressler

+



Oliver Ressler, *Too Big to Fail* (2011), Wall text.

100

The number '100' is rendered in a large, bold, sans-serif font. The '1' is a solid black vertical bar with a small horizontal bar at the top. The '0's are filled with black and white photographs. The first '0' shows a person in a dark jacket holding a white object. The second '0' shows a person wearing sunglasses and a white scarf. The background is white with faint corner crop marks.









# THE SUBJECT OF THE CRISIS: COMPLICITY, DEPRESSION, DISIDENTIFICATION

Georgios Papadopoulos

## + **Economic depression as personal drama**

Financial collapse is often described as depression. The bivalence of the word depression, with its economic and psychological connotations, is by no means an accident; the two meanings come together at the subjective level, where the economic and the psychological become indistinguishable in the petrified helplessness that grips the agent's psyche and its ability to act when faced with the failings of the economic system. In periods of crisis, the economic extends beyond the level of production and consumption, addressing the subject at the most basic level of its existence.

The aim of my analysis is to illuminate the psychological grip of the market economy in the state of economic exception that is explained away as crisis, by offering a tentative description of the process of subjectification in the marketplace, and illuminating the affective investment of the subject in the symbolic order. The discursive constitution of the subject via market ideology provides the foundation for the ideological formation of capitalism. The contemporary construction of subjectivity suggests a rational, self-centred individual, sovereign over its passions and constantly maximizing its own individual utility. The individual agent is described as a free producer and a dominant consumer, participating voluntarily and according to its abilities, endowments, and desires in the market. Crisis can trigger a reversal of the same mechanism that connects the subject and the social environment. The reversal can take many guises depending on

how the subject comes to terms with the failure of the symbolic mandate it has assumed: it can blame itself (depression), the social environment (disengagement), or another subject or group (over-identification).

The fact that depression is the most common reaction is a symptom of the dominance of neoliberal ideology over the people, who eagerly assume the responsibility of the collapse of their environment in order to avoid facing the failure of the symbolic universe they inhabit. Depression is not the only available reaction—crisis also offers an opportunity of disengagement precisely because crisis disrupts the affective link between the economy and the subject. Resistance, constructive as well as destructive, is an alternative that becomes available when guilt transforms into hate and/or enjoyment. My analysis will reflect on depression and disidentification as two possible reactions in the face of economic collapse, starting from an account of subjectification via production and consumption, and explaining how the mechanism is challenged at periods of crisis, simultaneously creating possibilities of disengagement as it cancels the very identity of the subject.

### **Economics and the subject**

The economic discourse, contrary to its proclamations, compromises individual autonomy when it interpellates the subject as a producer and consumer. It is this identity that mediates the social relations replacing the subject by the signs of economic value that assemble its identity in the marketplace. Subjectification unfolds in production, as it develops in consumption, in education and in marriage, as well as in the family and in the social network, creating a signifying chain of positions defined by their economic value that will ultimately refer back to the subject, its desire, and its social environment.<sup>1</sup>

Economics is the dominant discursive formation of social reality today. Economics becomes entangled in a mutually constitutive relation with social reality. The appeal of the neoliberal economic narrative, if one compares it with other possible discursive constructions of social

reality, lies with the construction of a clear and simple understanding of the workings of the social world. The marketplace is a powerful metaphor of social interaction, constructing a system that is supposed to combine individual freedom with collective efficiency. The economic maxims for individual action contribute greatly by creating a feeling of mastery in a complex and constantly changing environment. Rationality, self-regard, and utility maximization create a set of behavioural maxims that facilitate the subject in its navigation through social reality. Free competition accommodates the maximization of utility and enables the realization of the individual interests of the economic agents, leading to an equilibrium point where no further increase in the well-being of the actors is feasible. The fundamental myth of economic discourse dictates that markets can facilitate a general equilibrium that safeguards efficiency and justice in an environment of free choice.

The supposed autonomy of *homo economicus* in the marketplace ignores the constitutive power of the capitalist symbolic order. Neoliberal ideology is in a mutually constitutive relation with social reality; the organizing principles of market economy and the behavioural maxims that support it at the individual level create the framework of social interaction. These very structures are in turn used as evidence for the validity of neoliberal economic ideology. Becoming a subject in capitalism is a process of alienation mediated by the market where the individual has no choice but to assume the position of producer and consumer. The choice is supposedly free, and the responsibility lies with the individual to actualize itself in a setting free from constraints and full of possibilities. The fundamental myth of the dominant economic discourse is a universalized version of the ‘American dream,’ which is nothing more than the ideological mantle of the symbolic mandate that capitalism has in store for the subject. The subject may feel free to choose, only as long as it makes the right (i.e., the rational) economically consistent choice. Latsis described the choice setting that rational agents face in the marketplace as a “single-exit situation,” suggesting that, given the maxims of rationality

and utility maximization, the endowments of each individual, and the rules of the market, there is only one course of action that best realizes individual interests.<sup>2</sup> In real-life situations, economic rationality is supplemented by the necessity of survival. The subject needs to play by the rules of the market, and to play well, so as to ensure the material means for its survival. The implications of economic behaviourism are clear: the options are very limited, constrained as they are by the principles of economic ‘rationality’ and the ‘survival of the fittest.’

The symbolic mandate that capitalism has in store for the individual dominates and represents subjective existence, forcing the subject to negotiate continuously its self-perception with its position in the market as a producer and consumer. Self-valorization and self-perception are progressively aligned to the market valuation of one’s work and resources—always made in terms of money. The economic dimension of socialization becomes increasingly dominant as capitalism develops and dominates all other types of relations to the social environment and consequently the process of symbolic castration within the market assumes an even greater importance for the overall self-perception of the individual. The precondition for the success of the interpellation by the market is the illusion of a conscious and deliberate choice by the subject, based on the fantasy of an independent subjectivity. The doctrine of individualism enhances the illusion of an autonomous ego, which the subject negotiates with the symbolic order. At the same time, neoliberal discourse guarantees the legitimacy and consistency of the symbolic order the individual is required to adapt in. The illusion of an autonomous ego is both oppressive and supportive of the subject throughout the process of subjectification and the negotiations between self-perception and the symbolic order. The burden of adaptation lies with the subject and it is up to the subject to perceive its participation in the market economy as a freely chosen or enforced relation.

### **Labour As non-work**

The distinguishing characteristic of employment lies beyond the ‘real’ contribution in the production of commodities and services. Employment is defined by the creation of economic value, which is conditioned by the acceptance of the symbolic mandate of the market, the constitution of the subject as worker, and its recognition as a worker by the social environment. The generation of economic value has for some time now been divorced from ‘real’ production, as wage is divorced from ‘real’ work, with the relation between wage and work being often inverted. Work, even creative or affective labour, becomes meaningful only if it is recognized by the symbolic order via the sacrament of wage, and only if it becomes employment. Employment is yet another sign in the signifying chain of subjective identity, which is demanded and consumed by the subject. The most reproductive and by implication the most unproductive work (in terms of traditional production of tangible commodities that fulfill ‘real’ needs) is the best paid, whereas hard and dirty work is badly paid (if at all). Employment has assumed a symbolic dimension as a gesture of obedience towards the market—a sign of integration and acceptance in the hyperreality of the circulation of signs of value.

Production in the centre of capitalism has moved away from the discipline of manual labour or the production of ‘useful’ objects; it is reduced to the manipulation of signs, supported by the signifieds of cost, utility, and labour. The relation of profit to traditional productivity is also reversed. The economy in the West is centred on services, immaterial labour, creative industries, virtual technologies and, of course, finance. Firms are not in the business of producing commodities; their main goal is to maximize shareholder value. Conventional production is in place mainly to legitimize the performance of the firm in the stock market and to maintain appearances in the economy. Industrial architecture is still standing and the rituals of production are perpetuated only to mask the end of production.<sup>3</sup> The price of the stock is the identity of the firm and functions as the main determinant of its value, in a similar fashion

as the salary of the employee defines its place in the market and society. The economy as a whole has been progressively reduced to nothing more than a trading board where subjects, corporations, commodities, and even countries have a price that signifies their identity and their position.

Labour is not exhausted in the gestures of acceptance of the symbolic order as the generation of value and is not achieved only by a manipulation of code. The long lineage of critiques of exploitation, from Marx to Bataille and to Baudrillard,<sup>4</sup> all recognized that work is not only production and reproduction, work is also—if not primarily—loss, and destruction. Labour is counter-investment: the boredom of useless repetitive tasks; the sacrifice of time in employment; the death of the worker; the abstraction of living labour into surplus value. The contribution of each worker and participation in the process of production needs to be mummified through the bureaucratic control of scientific management. The enjoyment of creativity, the affectivity of social interaction, and the excitation of desire are commodified at the same time as the individual worker is counter-invested, through discipline and alienation, in the reality of rationalized employment. It is not only the work but also the worker that is objectified and re-inserted in the machine, as a knot in the network of flows that produce surplus value.<sup>5</sup> Employment, even the easiest and best paid, has to produce a *malaise*, in order for the workers to recognize themselves as workers. Alienation is as symbolic as it is Real,<sup>6</sup> based on the realization of the employee who is exploited and even more performatively exploited in order for the economic to retain a semblance of reality. Employment transforms from a mandate of the symbolic order to a gift of slow death (and not merely symbolic slow death) marketed as a promise of self-actualization.

### **The misery of the universe of commodities and spectacles**

The symbolic order regulates the socialization of the individual into subjectivity through the fantasmatic management of desire. The interplay between the constitution of an imaginary subjectivity and the drive to

articulate and satisfy subjective desire “constitutes the mechanism by means of which the subject is integrated into a given socio-symbolic field—the way he/she assumes certain mandates.”<sup>7</sup> In capitalism, desire looks for its object in commodities and in spectacles, while enjoyment is regulated in their pursuit and consumption. All types of connection to the world are substituted for consumption and the world becomes a system of prices, experienced as signs of forthcoming enjoyment.<sup>8</sup> Social relations are inescapably consumed and consummated in a series of commodities that represent them; there is a tendency in the system towards the complete commodification of all relations to the external world and the representation of the social world by a self-constituting and consistent system of economic signs. Consequently, the identity of the consumer and the reciprocity between the self-perception of the subject and the symbolic dimension of consumption are becoming increasingly important determinants relative to the contribution of identity as a producer. Currently individuals define their identity, their personal value, and their social relations in terms of their preferences over commodities and their ability to consume, while employment itself has been transformed into a commodity to be consumed by the worker along with all other commodities.<sup>9</sup>

To paraphrase Freud, we could argue that there is no ‘natural’ or pre-established place of desire; that the latter is constitutively out of its place, fragmented and dispersed; that it only exists in deviations from ‘itself’ or its supposed object; and that desire is nothing other than this ‘out-of-placeness’ of its constitutive satisfaction. Lacan would add to this observation that desire is a demand without an articulated object—a demand without a need revolving around an empty space.<sup>10</sup> Desire does not strive to be fulfilled, but to remain active, maintaining the affective tension of the subject; it is always transferred to a promise of enjoyment of the next object. The postponement of enjoyment in the market, always to the next commodity, keeps the desire economy agitated and the subject always in desire. What supports and constitutes human desire economy is

exactly this open point, the object–cause of desire that is decentring the imaginary consistency upon which subjectivity is constituted.<sup>11</sup>

When subjects are not able to find the object of their desire, capitalism creates it for them—a demand that does not address any need and assumes the shape of commodities and spectacle. The consequent failure of satisfaction in the system of commodities, the fundamental inconsistency of the capitalist symbolic order, that keeps the desiring subject desiring and the capitalist symbolic order reproducing itself, is constituted and at the same time masked by money. The ability and the freedom to enjoy as well as the prohibitions against enjoyment are perceived by the subject in economic or, more precisely, monetary terms.<sup>12</sup> These monetary constraints conceal the fundamental failure of the capitalist symbolic order to provide enjoyment for the subject. Unfortunately, the subject fails to grasp why it is that commodities fail in their task to satisfy, and suppresses the realization of the very impossibility of full enjoyment. The subject perceives this failure as its own inability to consume as much as it wants; thus the failure to consume creates only the impulse for more consuming.

The fantasmatic management of desire through the interplay of consumption and lack can sustain itself as long as the loss of satisfaction, and the surplus enjoyment that functions as the cause of desire, is masked by the intervention of the signifier that defines the symbolic order.<sup>13</sup> Money is the signifier of all commodities, representing a promise of satisfaction that is attached to the consumption of each and every commodity. Money presents itself as the link between the subject and its commodified desire, because it operates as the intermediate between subject and consumption. Money is also connected with prohibition, the necessary precondition of enjoyment. The fundamental misrecognition that is encouraged in capitalism is that subjects tend to conflate their objects of desire with the means of the attainment of commodities; the fact that money is a signifier, a form without content, combined with the inability of the subject to articulate its desire and recognize the real cause of its dissatisfaction, is

what makes this misrecognition possible. The dominance of money over commodities is the structural principle of capitalism. The intervention of money as the signifier of enjoyment, resulting in the displacement of desire on money, encourages the libidinal investment of the subject on the same structural principle, providing support for capitalism also at the affective level. Money does not only constitute the capitalist symbolic order, it articulates and keeps active the desire that sustains it.

The subject perceives itself in the market in term of prices, income, and money, both in relation to production/work and to consumption/enjoyment. The ascription of prices to all that it does, produces, or consumes, creates a matrix of meaning and consistency according to which it makes sense of itself and of its social reality. Prices provide the position of the subject and the meaning of subjective existence. Money arises as the prototypical case of a signifier in the constitution of the economic symbolic order; the general equivalent of all commodities, including the subject, represents the subject in the market and it is the signifier for which all commodities represent the subject.<sup>14</sup> Money and—through money—price signify the subject qua producer in terms of economic value and insert it in a chain of relations to all the other producers and commodities that inhabit the symbolic order. Conversely, money enables all commodities to represent the subject qua consumer. Interpellation and symbolic identification come together through the subsumption of the subject under money, which connects the production process to consumption, and the ego to its immediate economic and social reality.

### ***Would prefer not to... disidentification as resistance***

The precondition for even an ephemeral realization of a genuine existence outside the mandates of the market economy is the discursive as well as the affective disengagement from the symbolic order. The rupture is only possible if it leads to the renegotiation of the subject's identification with its economic identity as it is constituted by the signifying operation of money. Capitalism can only be challenged if the subject abandons consumption

and work altogether in a process to find other forms of identification with its environment; other possibilities of the constitution of subjectivity; other possibilities of enjoyment. The full embracement of anxiety, caused by the eternal recurrence of failure to live up to the expectations of the social environment, can trigger a process of disidentification and release the *jouissance*<sup>15</sup> linked to the symbolic suicide of the subject. When the lack in the subject becomes acknowledged and eventually accepted the subject can observe, impotently but joyfully, the unmasking initiated by personal failure. The transformation of this joy into abandonment opens the door to a fuller realization of desire; the key to this door is the understanding of the dynamics of *jouissance*. Only unmediated, unarticulated, and therefore impossible, desire can transcend the dominant discourse of social existence and the socio-symbolic system that supports its reproduction.<sup>16</sup>

A revolutionary act need not only disrupt the identification of the subject with and in the market, but also destroy the imposed identity of the subject at the same instance. What is at stake is the position of the subject as it is mediated by the signifier—a place where the subject is interpellated and that it has to accept. Pure acts of resistance are accompanied by a symbolic death, where the subject is not recognizable anymore, and actually can not recognize him or herself. The precondition of such acts is the disruption of the symbolic fabric, which interrupts the subject's relation to itself defining the meaning of its actions. Emancipation goes hand in hand with self-dissolution, at least on the symbolic level. Nonetheless, the escape from the symbolic order can only be endured for so long as can the complete insignificance that an escape from social reality entails. All acts are destined to be reinterpreted and reintegrated in the code. All subjects should be given a place and a name in the signifying system of consumption and employment, or be aborted from social reality into oblivion. The symbolic death of the subject leads either to a new identification and a new role, or will be followed by a *Real* death. The trajectory from resistance to the symbolic, and possibly Real, suicide is a path of personal emancipation that ultimately refers to the politics of the

body and the attainment of an ever elusive *jouissance*. Since the alienation and interpellation of the subject is enforced through the management of desire via the socialization of the needs in the system of commodities, a possibility of full, or at least fuller, enjoyment is only attainable through the transcendence of the signification process that regulates pleasure. The dissolution of subjectivity is a necessary step both for revolutionary politics and for an affirmative biopolitics of *jouissance*: a negation of the self; a loss of oneself in mute, unrepresentable pleasure.

The current crisis of financial capitalism (circa 2008) and the struggles that have developed as a result have showed that resistance is not enough; nor is critical distance from reality. Political struggles have not been able to address the kernel of the crisis, and political praxis is either recognized to give an alibi of reality to the capitalist symbolic order, or it has been rendered invisible by neoliberal propaganda. What has been proven in recurrent instances is that political struggle is rarely able to resist suppression nor to construct viable alternatives; it is simply and purely an unformulated, speechless—hence ungraspable—unpredictable and meaningless recalcitrance. The anonymous, unformed and unformable part of this non-representable resistance can provide a successful, if ephemeral, tactic for escaping the ideological control of the system and the market via the symbolic (and not merely symbolic) abandonment of subjectivity. Still, such a stance is impossible precisely because it has to jump over its own symbolic shadow; because it has to go beyond the symbolic order and to aim for different articulations of enjoyment and subjectivity that go beyond the constitutive ideology of the market and that transcend even language. Revolt is an embrace of the Real of *jouissance*. The radical transformation of society should aim for reinvestment into a revolutionary potential that defies all pre-existing representations; only then an absolute de-territorialization of theoretical and practical critique may resist momentarily the fate of re-territorialization by the system of semiotic reproduction.

**NOTES:**

1. “The imposition of the economic logic on social reality passes through the re-constitution of society as a market. Prices communicate the content of social constitution, organizing a signifying chain where all commodities are inserted as signifiers of economic value in accordance to their prices. Signification is regulated by money, the master signifier of economic value, which supports and quilts the signifying chain of commodities, effectively constituting the system of prices. Economic value, the ultimate signified of all commodities, remains nonetheless elusive and ambiguous, an ambiguity that is never eliminated but always remains obscured by money.” Georgios Papadopoulos, *Notes towards a Critique of Money* (Maastricht: Jan Van Eyck Academy, 2011), 48.
2. Spiro Latsis, *Method and Appraisal in Economics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 13.
3. “All these things—factories, asylums, prisons, schools—still exist, and will no doubt continue to exist for an indefinite period, as warning signs, to divert the reality of the domination of capital into an imaginary materiality. There have always been churches to hide the death of God, or to hide the fact that God was everywhere, which amounts to the same thing.” Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (London: Sage, 1990), 19.
4. Karl Marx, *Capital* (London: Penguin, 1990); Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: an Essay on General Economy* (New York: Zone Books, 1991); Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*.
5. “The original alienation (pain, loss, trace), the implied eclipse, repression, or oppression is the foundation of the world of values and meaning. The various forces maintain the world of values, of which they form the substance; *in return* the world of values, rules and represses them. This antagonistic circuit between productive investment and the counter-investment that suppress and universalize them operates under the occult aegis of an unconscious regulatory law.” Jean-Joseph Goux, *Symbolic Economies: After Marx and Freud* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 60–61.
6. Here I am referring to the Lacanian term “Real” (always capitalized), defined by Lacan himself as “what resists symbolization absolutely.” The Real is one of the three orders according to which all psychoanalytic phenomena can be described—the other two being the symbolic order and the imaginary. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar. Book I: Freud’s Papers on Technique, 1953–54* (New York: Norton, 1988), 66.
7. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 110.
8. “With the onset of the symbol—the inception of the prohibition of enjoyment—recognition gains a paramount importance. Once this occurs, all of the things for which people strive are important not for the immediate enjoyment that they might provide, but for recognition that they can confer upon those who

have obtained them. Money is perhaps archetypal in this sense. Its value doesn't lie so much in the enjoyment that it can purchase as in symbolic recognition it produces." Todd McGowan, *The End of Dissatisfaction? Jacques Lacan and the Emerging Society of Enjoyment* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004), 25.

9. "Labour, which in its completed form has no relation to any determinate production, is also without any equivalent in wages. Wages are equivalent to labour power only from the perspective of the quantitative reproduction of labour power. When they become the sanction of the status of labour power, the sign of obedience to the rule of the game of capital, wages no longer possess any such meaning. They are no longer in any proportional or equivalence relation at all, they are a sacrament, like a baptism (or the Extreme Unction), which turns you into a genuine citizen of the political society of capital." Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, 19.

10. Jacques Lacan, *Ethics of Psychoanalysis: Seminar VII* (London: Routledge Classics, 2007).

11. "... the inconsistency of this (symbolic) reality in order to imagine itself to have some ground—some 'subjectum', some subject—there. And it is this comfortable inconsistency which, for its part, is disturbed by a kind of all too 'consistent' remainder of the real, hindering the positive inconsistency which enables the pleasure economic system to gain what it lives by: pleasure." Marc De Kessel, "Sex, Psychoanalysis, Philosophy; Some notes on Alenka Zupančič, Psychoanalysis and Ontology: 'Being-Towards-Sex'" (Paper presented at a Workshop on Economics and Desire at the Jan Van Eyck Academy, March 2008): 11.

12. Freud makes it seem as if prohibition is strictly opposed to the enjoyment of the drives. In fact, quite the opposite is the case. External prohibition secretly sustains fantasies in which full *jouissance* is possible (for instance, fantasies of, as Lacan calls it, the "*jouissance* of the Other"). External barriers to impossible *jouissance* relieve the subject of the burden of having to discover that enjoyment fails, that drives are constitutively dysfunctional, being caught-up in an interminable antagonism plaguing the very essence of enjoyment itself." Adrian Johnston, "The Forced Choice of Enjoyment: *Jouissance* between Expectation and Actualization," *Lacanian Ink*, 2 (2000). Available at <http://www.lacan.com/forced.htm>.

13. "The loss of the object, the loss of satisfaction, and the emergence of a surplus satisfaction or surplus enjoyment are situated, topologically speaking, in one and the same point; in the intervention of the signifier." Alenka Zupančič, "When Surplus Enjoyment Meets Surplus Value," in Justin Clemens and Russell Grigg, eds., *Jacques Lacan and the Other Side of Psychoanalysis: Reflections on Seminar XVII* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 156.

14. "A signifier is that which represents the subject for another signifier. This signifier will therefore be the signifier for which all the other signifiers represent the subject; that is to say in the absence of this signifier all the other signifiers do

not represent anything, since something is represented only for something else.” Lacan quoted in Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 1991), 21.

15. “Interiority without an object: totally empty self. And yet: *jouissance*... no longer directed at the egocentric Cartesian subject; no longer produces objects of the self for reflection; it is as if it transcended the relation between the subject and the objects of its drives, as if it referred to something like the experience of relation to a *drive without object, beyond phantasy*, beyond the realm of specular identification.” Goux, *Symbolic Economies*, 189.

16. “A desire that does not refer to a fixed object, but to the gap between need and demand, a loss of satisfaction in the process of the symbolic (linguistic-social) articulation. The object-cause of desire does not exist, it is a place-holder, a reminder of the gap, a hole, an empty space, which keeps the desire economy active, fueling the excitement and the dejection of the subject. Consequently, desire is not defined in being ‘fulfilled’ but in the propagation of desire as such.” Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1996), 38. Unarticulated desire is liberating because it recognizes the illusion of its supposed object and the impossibility of its satisfaction, remaining attached only to the desire of desiring, which is also its true meaning.

image: Jack Henrie Fisher, *Crash* (2012) >





## FERAL TRADE

Kate Rich

- + Feral Trade is a grocery business and public experiment, trading goods over social networks. The word ‘feral’ describes a process which is wilfully wild (as in pigeon) as opposed to romantically or nature-wild (wolf). The passage of goods can open up wormholes between diverse social settings, routes along which other information, techniques or individuals can potentially travel.

The first registered feral trade was in 2003, with the import of 30kg coffee direct from Sociedad Cooperative de Cafecultores Nonualcos R.L. (CODECANO) in San Pedro Nonualco, El Salvador, to the Cube Microplex, Bristol, UK. The import was negotiated using only social contacts, and conducted via email, bank transfer and SMS. The coffee is traded on through the UK and Europe over social, cultural and occupational networks; harnessing the surplus freight potential of existing travel (friends, colleagues, passing acquaintances) for the practical circulation of goods. New products are chosen for their shelf-life and capacity for sociability: feral trade goods in recent circulation include the whole coffee harvest of Finca El Volador in Coatapec, Mexico; plus olive oil from Spain, green tea from China, salt from Georgia and Cube-Cola from UK.

Design and production of documentary product packaging is an integral part of the feral trade process, with a view to rendering details of source, shipping and handling with the microattention that ingredient listings normally receive.

<b>Shipping Facts</b>		
coffee El Volador shipment <b>FER-1726</b> Finca El Volador, Mexico to Feral Trade, UK		
<b>FER-1726 Finca El Volador Coatapec, to Feral Trade, Bristol [596 x 500g]</b>		
<b>import costs: purchase &amp; freight</b>	<b>gross</b>	<b>p/unit</b>
Total paid to farmer for 350kg green beans in sacks at \$85 pesos/kg, 18.77 MXN to GBP	£1584.00	£2.66
5x 70kg sacks coffee to Cargo Darnyt in Mexico D.F via tres guerras trucking 1215 MXN	£66.95	£0.11
Hi Fx fee to transfer the 1215 MXN	£9.00	£0.02
Aeromexico cargo MEX to LHR, \$USD 1140 at 1.46 USD to GBP	£780.82	£1.31
mexico freight agent charges \$USD 438	£300.00	£0.50
transaction charge with HIFX GBP to MXN	£9.00	£0.02
transaction charge with HIFX GBP to USD	£9.00	£0.02
Kingscote Heathrow freight agent customs clearance	£45.00	£0.08
Kingscote overcharge for clearing saturday-arriving shipment	£35.00	£0.06
freight handling at 17p/KG	£59.50	£0.10
kerbside delivery, London Heathrow to Littlehampton roaster at 21 GBP plus 17p/kg	£80.50	£0.14
Fuel Surcharge at 15% of delivery cost	£12.07	£0.02
Coffee roasting at £2 +VAT per kg green beans	£840.00	£1.41
road transport, roaster to feraltrade at £7.80 per 24KG green beans roasted	£109.20	£0.18
metallised coffee bags @ 36p per unit	£213.12	£0.36
<b>total</b>	<b>£4153.16</b>	<b>£6.97</b>
feral trade runs freight via social/cultural baggage. not all delivery costs are reflected in product price but represent freight potential of social & cultural traffic for the distribution of goods		
feral trade since 2003 <a href="http://www.feraltrade.org">www.feraltrade.org</a>		

# feral trade (import-export)

trading goods along social networks since 2003

enter a shipping number for tracking

FER-

now shipping



coffee from Mexico



Cube-Cola from UK



olive oil from Spain



agave from Mexico



hot chocolate from Mexico



blue corn from Mexico



mezcal from Mexico



## feral trade courier

track all shipments for

LATEST COURIER ACTIVITY update 23/06/14

### COURIERS SOUGHT

to transport

contact [kate@feraltrade.org](mailto:kate@feraltrade.org) to offer carriage.

**FER-1782**   
9 FUJIAN SPRING GREEN TEA,  
Beijing, CHINA to Bristol, UK



▷18/5/12 FERAL TRADE COFFEE SHIPMENT 10, 350KG from COATAPEC, MEXICO HAS ARRIVED!!



SEARCH the shipping archive

#### awaiting transit

- ✈ FER-1807 596 coffee El Volador to Coffee Compass roasters, Littlehampton
- ✈ FER-1803 3 coffee El Volador to Constant, Brussels
- ✈ FER-1785 10 agave el Coyul to Feral Trade, Bristol
- ✈ FER-1782 9 fujian spring green tea to Feral Trade, Bristol

#### in transit

#### shipping disasters

- ☐ FER-1784 5 fujian spring green tea to Feral Trade
- ☐ FER-1676 1 Cube-Cola to Eyelevel Gallery

#### recent deliveries

- ☐ FER-1811 2 coffee El Volador to University of Dundee, Dundee
- ☐ FER-1809 5 olive oil Retemar to University of Dundee, Dundee
- ☐ FER-1813 5 olive oil Retemar to the List, Edinburgh
- ☐ FER-1810 1 coffee El Volador to Hospitalfield House, Arbroath
- ☐ FER-1805 10 olive oil Retemar to Hospitalfield House, Arbroath
- ☐ FER-1791 8 coffee El Volador to FoAM, Brussels
- ☐ FER-1812 2 Cube-Cola to Hospitalfield House, Arbroath
- ☐ FER-1814 1 blue corn to Hospitalfield House, Arbroath
- ☐ FER-1792 10 coffee El Volador to Hospitalfield House, Arbroath
- ☐ FER-1808 1 olive oil Retemar to Burghley Rd, Bristol
- ☐ FER-1802 150 olive oil Retemar to Feral Trade, Bristol
- ☐ FER-1806 1 coffee El Volador to Steal from Work, Bristol
- ☐ FER-1800 1 puerh tea to MoMA, New York

#### all recent deliveries

TRACK ALL 541 feral trade shipments to date

## about feral trade ▷

MAP database

The Feral Trade Courier is a live shipping database for a freight network running outside commercial systems. The database offers dedicated tracking of feral trade products in circulation, archives every shipment and generates freight documents on the fly.



FER-1792 (coffee El Volador to Hospitalfield House):feral trade coffee outside hospitalfield house

sponsored by

contact [kate@feraltrade.org](mailto:kate@feraltrade.org)

# feral trade coffee El Volador

from Finca El Volador Coatepec, Mexico

Coffee farmed by Alvaro Soberanes at sky high altitude of 1500m, under old growth leguminous trees which pump nitrogen back into the soil, nothing more needs to be added. The farm is called El Volador which means the Flying One. Uncertified organic, some gringos and a German came by offering organic certification for 20,000 pesos but one sure thing about farming in that big investments whether in fertilizer or certifications do not bring you certainty. The Cerro de la Campana area near Coatepec, Veracruz provides almost perfect conditions for coffee growing, producing one of the best coffees in Mexico if not The World. feral traded since: 22/11/12.

## FER-1792

Feral Trade Bristol, UK to Hospitalfield, House Arbroath, UK  
dispatched 19/06/13 delivered 20/06/13



coffee El Volador shipment FER-1792

**REMARKS:** ground coffee for Hospitalfield hospitality, summer. Open. Weekend.  
**QTY:** 10 units at 500g each  
**FROM:** Feral Trade 10 Marina, UK  
<http://feraltrade.org>  
**TO:** Hospitalfield House Arbroath, UK  
<http://hospitalfield.org.uk/>  
**SENDER:** Kate Rich  
**RECEIVER:** Hospitalfield House  
**REQUESTED:** 10 units between 23/05/13 and 21/06/13  
**INVOICE:** 10 Invoice-1792  
**STATUS:** delivered Hospitalfield House 20/06/13  
**MAP:** route map  
[www.hospitalfield.org](http://www.hospitalfield.org)

**COURIER:** cAlvaro Soberanes cCargo Danyt Caeromexico cKate rich ctras guerra ground transport cRichard Janisz cKate rich

**TRAIL ROUTE:** Finca El Volador-Tehuacan Coatepec-Cerro Negro-Agropec Mexico City-Tenixtlan-Jamaica-London Heathrow Airport-Kingstons Freight-Heathrow-Coffee Compass-roasters Feral Trade-Bristol-Temple Meads station-London Paddington station-London Euston station-Arbroath station-Hospitalfield House



coffee El Volador Feral Trade to Hospitalfield House 1. feral bag aboard delayed Bristol London train 2. courtesy cart meets feral trade at london Paddington station 3. london Paddington station staff 4. a bag green feral trade at Paddington station 5. feral bag aboard hospitalfield 6. feral trade coffee outside hospitalfield house 7. feral coffee lacy byst office hospitalfield house

**Shipping Facts**

FER-1792 Invoice Expenses & Freight	price	each
Finca El Volador to Feral Trade	1354.00	1354.00
Post and to be made at 300g green beans in sacks at 800 monthly	16.77	
Mocha to GBP	366.58	366.58
175.00		
By 175 lbs to transfer to cargo Danyt in Mexico City - via the green house	38.70	
175.00		
By 175 lbs to transfer to 175 MOXO	30.00	30.00
Acquisition charge 1600 to 1200 8000	270.82	270.82
175 at 48 USD to GBP	330.00	330.00
London freight charges 300 USD	30.00	30.00
Interaction charge with HFX GBP to MOX	30.00	30.00
Kingstons Heathrow freight agent business clearance	64.00	64.00
Kingstons overcharge for clearing business clearance	23.00	23.00
Royal handling at Bristol	39.50	39.50
Business handling at Bristol	39.50	39.50
Post charge at 10% of delivery cost	33.22	33.22
Coffee making at 12 + VAT per kg green beans	840.00	840.00
Local transport, roaster to hospitalfield at 82 per 2000 green beans roaster	1109.20	1109.20
hospitalfield coffee bags @ 360 per unit	213.32	213.32
<b>Total</b>	<b>4115.16</b>	<b>4115.16</b>

never forget the procedure to register the following information in the UK: Register or provide information about the coffee freight contract at Bristol and ensure you're the distributor of goods

**Courier Report FER-1792 DISPATCHED: 19/06/13 DELIVERED: 20/06/13** Kate rich (FM) Bristol London train schedule delayed by a person killed by a train in the swindon area shortly after 5:30. Train dispatched in emergency mode with 2 train managers who got busy distributing bottled water and declassifying 1st class so that passengers stuck in coach E of standard class where the air conditioning had failed could be released, on a rare 20 degrees+ humid British June afternoon. As only one line into London was operational & arrival delayed by 45 minutes, train manager sympathetically ordered feral trade a London taxi to make sure of timely transfer to the B21PM sleeper train to go to Scotland. Additionally a mobility cart was kind enough to meet feral trade at the platform on London arrival, saving trader from a perilous situation as bags were anyway semi-unmanageable with 10kg olive oil, 6 kg of coffee, 2kg blue corn and a load of kitchen equipment. Courtesy cab made swift transit to London Euston station where trader boarded the baldhead sleeper in good time for the overnight journey up to Scotland. Picked up at Arbroath station (GBAM) by Lucy Joyce & her new greyhound Isaac.

**Forward transit of FER-1726 from Finca El Volador arrived Feral Trade 2013-03-14**

Alvaro Soberanes From: Alvaro Soberanes Date: 2013/04 Hello Kate, good news coffee is on the way, today, directly to cargo agency. I'm moving there to check all the papers and stamps, by tomorrow, Meanwhile, I'm sending pictures of spaced in the sacks, "haggan" and coffee jumping in the car. Date: Tue, 9 Mar 2013 20:24:40 -0600 From: Alvaro Soberanes I just came back from Mexico City. I went directly to cargo danyt office to push to have the coffee in tomorrow a plane. Everything seems to be in order, coffee is there, papers are ALL ready. The last step, is the unknown criteria of custom officers, so as you say, crossing fingers! Tomorrow will be close to the telephone until coffee came to aeroparco's hands inside the custom. Almost there.

Kate rich trader's courier work concentrated on the money transport, after some delay in receiving correct & compliant bank details from Mexico, made 2 transactions 292 and 1/3 through online money changer HFX, sending MXN to farmer's bank account, and USD direct to freight agent Danyt. 1/3 incidentally the day when GBP sterling plunged to its lowest level against the dollar for 2.5 years due to surprise bad data from the UK manufacturing sector. An 8% decline in the GBP against USD since coffee negotiations began & confirmation of the weighted value of the commodity against other more liquid assets such as cash. B21P packed incoming shipment via aeroparco website & flurry of phoned calls with Kingstons freight agent Matthew Dean. No city no VAT on green beans which accompanied by their many certificates (origin, phytosanitary, commercial invoice) cleared customs like a dream and were passed to tractors for sundry overnight delivery to roaster Richard Janisz in lislehampton. 143 waited home AM for the usual panoflexo guy, 20.3K coffee delivered & tasted on feral trade's home stove, tasting notes brilliant clear & clean coffee, ideal with breakfast.

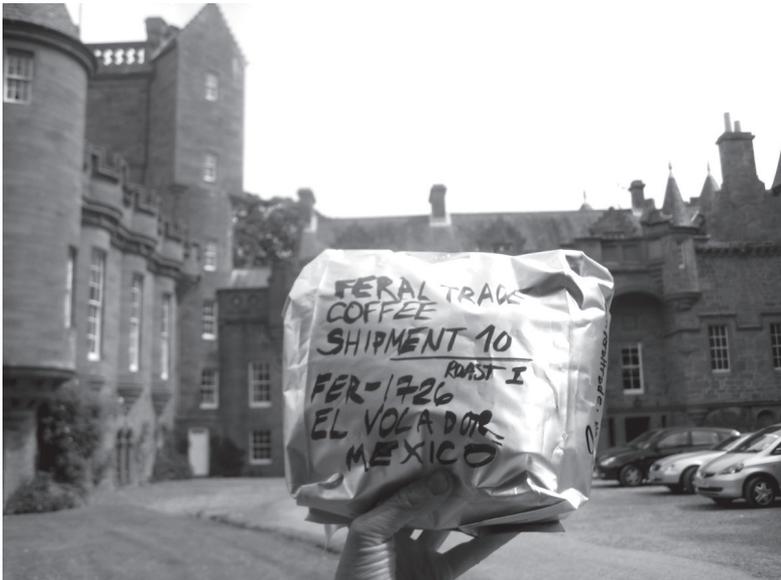


coffee El Volador transit: Finca El Volador to Feral Trade

freight and handling coffee El Volador to Hospitalfield House sponsored by

**Hospitalfield**  
FRESH/LOCAL products passed by hand. The word 'local' describes a process that is deliberately wild, as if grown, and opposed to nature wild (cert). Feral Trade freight operates largely outside commercial channels, using the surplus potential of social, cultural and data networks for the distribution of goods. contact: [kate@feraltrade.org](mailto:kate@feraltrade.org)

FERAL TRADE products passed by hand



FER-1792

Feral Trade coffee El Volador to Hospitalfield House delivered 20/06/13

See the feral trade courier for more information at <http://www.feraltrade.org/>



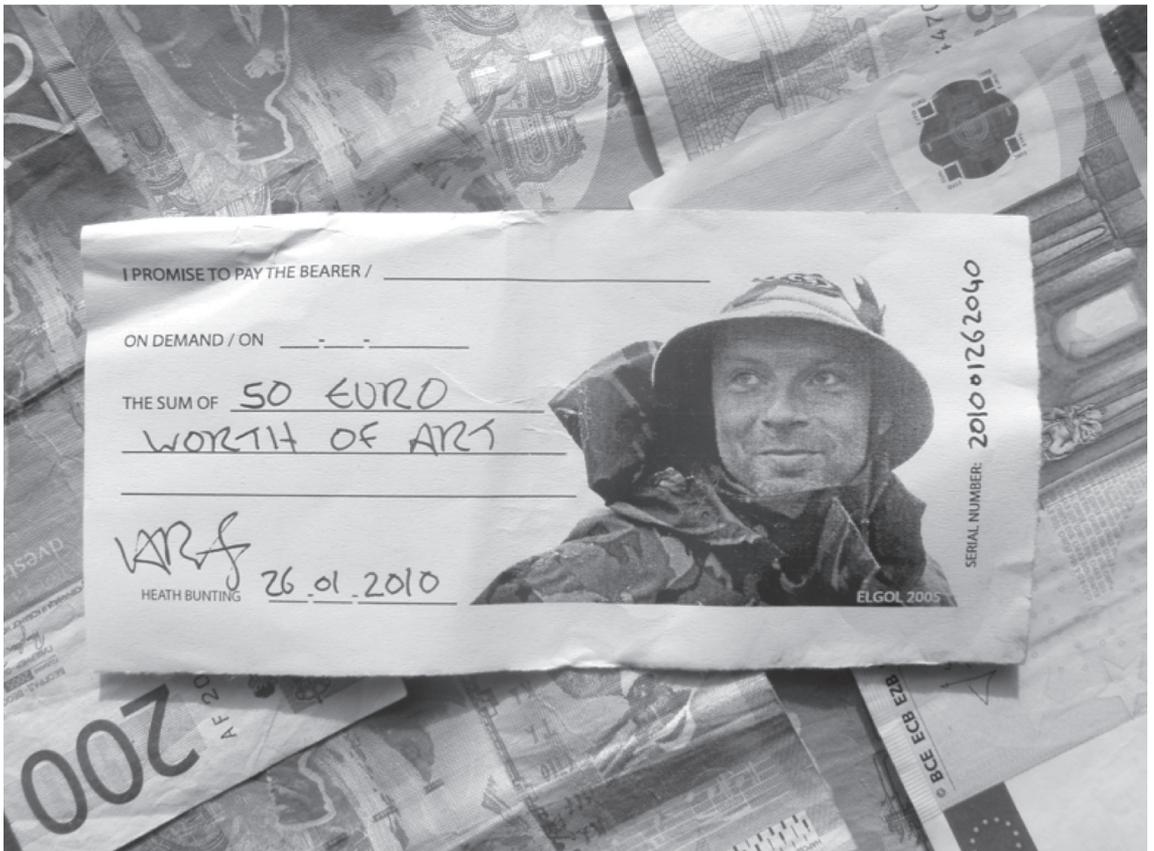
# SYMPHONY OF THE SURPLUS/VALUE: LABOUR, VALORIZATION & SABOTAGE IN THE METROPOLITAN FACTORY

Stephen Shukaitis

- + On 7 November 1922 Arseny Avraamov, standing on top of a tall building in the city of Baku waving two flags, conducted one of the most ambitious artistic works imaginable. *The Symphony of the Factory Sirens*, the piece Avraamov had been commissioned to produce in commemoration of the fifth anniversary of the Russian revolution, far exceeded the scope and form involved in almost any other symphony. It was not a piece played by a small group of trained musicians, but rather involved choirs of thousands, a flotilla on the sea, twenty-five locomotives, the artillery of an army battalion, and all the factory sirens of the city that had been tuned in order to be able to play “The Internationale” and “La Marseillaise.” What Avraamov strove to accomplish, and arguably did, was to celebrate the liberation of the city precisely by playing on the entire city as an instrument itself. He did not want to create the spectacle of liberation, with a piece that is moving but leaves most as passive observers, but rather he wanted to mobilize everyone in the city using the instruments and abilities at their disposal.<sup>1</sup>

On a much less epic scale, on 22 August 2010, net artist and provocateur Heath Bunting launched *The Heath Bunting Collection*. In an apparent attempt to secure his own future artistic production and other non-selling artists, and render it into a medium and store of value, Bunting began issuing promissory notes in quantities ranging from 10 to 150 euros, backed by the reserve of the *Heath Bunting Collection*. In

this arrangement, Bunting continued to hold 49% of the work, which functioned as a capital reserve. *The Heath Bunting Collection* attempts to hold 51% of its collection authored by Heath Bunting. According to Bunting, given that the value of art is defined by the relationship between the artist and the audience, in some ways the actual work itself becomes insignificant. What is fundamental is the social bond, or social value, in the relation, which serves as a basis for exchange, and in this case for the deliberation of a certain kind of value.<sup>2</sup>



Heath Bunting, *Promissory Note* (2010)  
[http://irrational.org/heath/promissory\\_notes/](http://irrational.org/heath/promissory_notes/)

In this way Bunting playfully explored an idea that seemingly was carried out in a much more deliberate manner in December 2010 with the launch of the Art Exchange,<sup>3</sup> a stock market for artistic works. Based on a stock market model, the Art Exchange creates a platform for the collective ownership of works, with shares available from ten to one hundred euros. For a 5 per cent commission, the Art Exchange secures the right to issue shares for a set period of time. Among the initial pieces on offer for investment from the Art Exchange is Sol LeWitt's 1998 piece *Irregular Form*, as well as work by Mike Kelley and Galerie Hussenot. The apparent plan of the exchange is to target people who previously invested in blue chip stocks and other forms of collective investment, in part based upon the tax-free status of art in France. Although at face value this may seem to be just a clever scheme to avoid tax, the directors of the exchange claim that their aim is to inspire more people to become collectors. As commented by Caroline Matthews, the operations director, "For some people, mixing fine art and finance goes against their principles, but perhaps they will see things differently in the future."<sup>4</sup>

What is it that unites these three moments? How is it that we can understand the connection between an epic symphony designed to celebrate a revolution and take part in the building of a new socialist society by playing the city itself as a productive ensemble, with processes of securitizing and valuing artistic works? This is precisely the connection that I want to explore in this essay—one that might not seem obvious at first.

"Everyone is an artist," proclaimed Joseph Beuys. Beuys, as an inheritor of the avant-garde desire to abolish the separation between art and daily life, argued for the realization of a multitude of forms of creativity throughout many areas of social life, or 'forms of social sculpture,' as he called it.<sup>5</sup> What can we make of this goal in an age of semicapitalism, where the dream of 'everyone is an artist' has been realized in perverse form as 'everyone is a worker' all the time? That is to say, where the relationality 'sculpted' through the circuits of an always-present network culture are

rendered into opportunities for capitalist valorization: all YouWork and MyProfit.

What I want to explore here is the way that artistic practices and interventions, such as the *The Symphony of the Factory Sirens*, model social and relational practices that prefigure transformations in the production, and circulation, of value. In other words, to look into what Diederich Diederichsen has theorized as artistic surplus value.<sup>6</sup> But as Esther Leslie has argued,<sup>7</sup> when theorists subject art to matrices of value, whether economic or sociological, the result does not necessarily move any closer to a ‘law of art value’ as much as gaining an uncomfortable insight into art/criticism’s crisis of worth within an exploitative and celebrity-driven culture industry. In that sense I am less interested in trying to engage in an analysis of value production in art so it can be settled once and for all, in some sort of metaphysical manner. Rather, here I am interested in how particular models of valuation inaugurated in artistic practices assist in the emergence of new kinds of what autonomist theorists would describe as ‘moments of class composition,’ or ‘new forms of political possibility,’ which emerge as a result of antagonisms found within the labour process.

### **Value, essence, composition**

There is always something difficult about directly discussing value formation, and perhaps even more so when discussing how artistic labour produces value. Questions of value production often stand in as a proxy for providing the basis for politics, lending legitimacy to certain kinds of interventions or modes of organizing in Marxist politics, or providing the prime logic for decision-making within capitalism. In this sense, one can say that in the same way that labour power is more than itself, the question of value production is always more than itself, precisely because of how it connects to other concerns and realities. And this in some ways serves to explain the difficulty in approaching it, for as Diederichsen suggests, paraphrasing Marx, “Value, therefore, does not have its description branded on its forehead; it rather transforms every product of labour into

a social hieroglyphic... this hieroglyphic speaks of something, but it is impossible to tell by looking at it what it is speaking of.”<sup>8</sup>

While there are interesting questions involved as to whether certain forms of labour or interaction really do produce value, or whether there is an overall crisis of value production, I am not going to concern myself with them here. My goal is more to use concepts and tools provided by the tradition of autonomist Marxism, or post-workerism, to analyze how the value produced by artistic labour facilitates the shaping of social and class composition. The idea of class composition, developed by thinkers such as Mario Tronti, Antonio Negri, and Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi focuses on how moments of working class insubordination are the driving and primary factor shaping the development of economy and state. Class composition analysis focuses then on the relation between the skills and knowledge involved in the overall labour process, or technical composition, and how they connect to the forms of political antagonism and collectivity that exist within and against the existing situation, or political composition.

The concern here is the form of social valuation produced by artistic practices and intervention. Or, taking up the argument of Peter Bürger,<sup>9</sup> it would be to ask if the role of the avant-garde has been to attempt to bring art back into daily life, what modes of interaction and value were produced by this movement? In Bürger’s narration of the historical avant-garde this becomes a story of a rejection of traditional art institutions and formats resulting in a transformation of the logic of the art institution and art practice more generally, as it comes to value other forms of artistic practice and production than it had before. Antagonism is converted into new forms of artistic productivity, in some ways quite similar to the argument made by post-workerists that antagonism and exploitation end up shaping new modes of production and accumulation. Thus we could say that the goal here is to analyze composition in a dual sense: both in terms of how the developing modes of class composition shape production, and how forms of aesthetic composition are connected to and embedded within this process.

This is not, however, to fall back on an argument that artistic practices are merely reflections of underlying economic structures that determine them, as would likely be the case in an older style of Marxist analysis that relies on a base-superstructure model. As Jacques Attali argued in his important book *Noise*, modes of artistic production precede and can actually forecast broader changes in economic interactions.<sup>10</sup> Pascal Gielen has expanded this argument with his recent work on the artistic multitude, arguing that the art world served as social laboratory for the development of the post-Fordist work ethic.<sup>11</sup> The purpose of examining changing modes of value and production in the art world is then not necessarily to remain in one's concerns in the art world. In fact there is too great a tendency for discussions of art and labour to remain with the circuit of concerns of the art world exclusively, rather than considering how these interactions have become more generalized and expanded beyond the art world. This is what interests me, the generalization of modes of value production and interaction developed from within artistic practice to more general modes of social being.

While there has been a much greater degree of interest in the autonomist tradition since the publication of Hardt & Negri's *Empire* trilogy, there has been less use of these concepts to consider the shaping of artistic practice. There has been some work carried out in this direction, taking place in events such as the *Art & Immaterial Labour* conference at the Tate (2008). While there has been some work in this direction, for the most part this work has tended to draw only from the more recent autonomist debates on immaterial labour and the formation of new political subjects. While there is not space to develop the argument in full, I would argue that there is a certain political sense that has been lost within these more recent debates, and that what has been lost is important.

There is much value in taking a compositional analysis view when considering the shaping of artistic labour and value. To give one example, one could reconsider the rise of conceptual art and minimalism, as described by Lucy Lippard in her book *Six Years: The Dematerialization*

*of the Art Object*.<sup>12</sup> To consider this from a compositional perspective gives a new view; it's not just a question of a particular moment in art history, but how that moment of art history connects to broader questions of transformations in labour and society overall; for instance, in the development of new modes of working with information, affects, and interactions. It could be argued that conceptual art prepares the ground for the emergence of new forms of immaterial labour, as information work.<sup>13</sup>

But perhaps we are yet again getting a bit ahead of ourselves, as is easy to do in such a consideration of issues. Taking a step back we can return to what seems to be a quite basic question. When we speak of value being created in an artistic process, value being created by artistic labour, how exactly is that value created? I would argue that there is something particularly slippery in talking about value production in artistic labour, and that the slipperiness of this discussion can easily lead one back into an almost neoliberal conception of value production; one that could be held even despite the stated intentions of the person who is making claims about artistic labour.

What are the main models of value production and labour? For the sake of simplicity, I am going to argue here that there are mainly two approaches, and then perhaps not so surprisingly I am going to make an argument for expanding a third form. The first approach would be to argue that value is created through the process of exchange itself. That is to say, that value is the product of a social exchange—the outward expression of valuation of whatever goods and services are discussed. Value in this sense is created within the process of exchange itself rather than being a formal characteristic that existed before the exchange process. Perhaps the best expression of this can be found in the work of Georg Simmel, and more generally in neoclassical conceptions of value production and utility developed within neoclassical economic thinking but generalized since then.<sup>14</sup>

In contrast to this, one could pose a more traditionally Marxist conception of value: that value is the substance produced by labour power which is then valorized by circulation and accrued eventually into the further development of capital accumulation. Although this is admittedly a very crude rendering of complex debates around value production, the essential aspect for consideration here is that value is an attribute related to labour itself, and thus value production occurs prior to exchanges happening within the market place. This is Marx's point about trying to understand commodity production not from analysis of the market and its appearances, but rather in relation to the labour and value practices that happen within the hidden abode of production.

Here we should also pause to gesture to models of value production that have extended and developed these ideas in quite fruitful directions. In particular, David Graeber's anthropological model of value production is a framework for evaluating the importance of actions and modes of being that are already in motion.<sup>15</sup> His work is formed by the bringing together of Marxist political economy with the ideas and work of Marcel Mauss, and provides a way of thinking value in a broader sense. This has been taken up by Massimo De Angelis who expands this into a framework of value practices and value struggles around ways of living.<sup>16</sup> And it could be further expanded along the lines that Bruno Gulli has sketched out in exploring how labour functions as a core concept for social and political ontologies.<sup>17</sup> Gulli proceeds from his poetic conception of labour to a politics that recuperates what political economy often forgets: culture, care, and ethics of singular becomings not determined by economic value.

The main reason I bring up models of value production is not that I want to get into a long exploration of them as much as point out that they seem to have difficulty when being applied to understanding the way that artistic labour produces. Or, I should say, that Marxist approaches of value production get into the greatest difficulty. This can be seen when you take the clichéd scenario of any recent news article that discussed how

a particular work by this or that master artist has sold for some new and unprecedented amount. Now, if value is produced by the labour necessary for the creation of the piece, whether a piece of steel or painting, it does not make sense to say a piece would contain more value one day than any other, particularly when the artist has been dead for decades, if not centuries. In this case it would be easy enough to take such instances as a kind of false bubble effect of capitalist market relations that bears no semblance to the substance of value contained in the work. There might be some truth to this, but there's more to it than just this.<sup>18</sup>

The value produced by the labours of circulation is that which underpins the social evaluation of worth or significance of whatever it is in question. In other words, the value does not reside in the object or work itself, but in that labour necessary to create and sustain the social perception of its worth. For the work of the old master that is now valued in prices beyond all reasonable imagination, it is not simply that the piece itself has magically accrued value. Rather, there is a whole industry of discussing and evaluating the importance of artists and their work, displaying and exhibiting them, commenting and discussing, cataloguing and curating, building histories, and all the work that creates what Howard Becker very rightly describes as 'art worlds.'<sup>19</sup> Thus the labours of circulation are the labours that curators, commentators, galleries, and art sales—in short, all the figures that make the art world work, that make images and ideas circulate—take part in. This is precisely the point Isabelle Graw makes when she describes critics as marketers; that is to say, as boosters of art value, consequently participating in a form of labour that amasses symbolic value that can be translated into economic value on the market.<sup>20</sup> As such it is not the case that a piece, through its own self-acting action, has mysteriously managed to increase in value through its own effort. This is a mystical conception of value, art, and labour. Rather, it is the way that the diffuse labours flowing through art worlds come to attach themselves to particular pieces, or to be rendered into market prices of these works.

### **Value and the artistic mode of production**

What I find most useful in thinking about the labour of circulation and how that produces value in artwork is less the importance of that dynamic specifically in the art world itself, but more what happens when such ideas are spread beyond the boundaries of the specifically artist economy and become a more general dynamic. Or as Chin-Tao Wu has argued in her book *Privatizing Culture*, the way that art, the business world, and politics have entered a “clandestine symbiotic relationship” through which those enmeshed in the overlapping of these networks (for instance, the Saatchis) find themselves in an ideal position to transform economic capital into cultural capital as well as cultural capital into economic capital, all mediated through the circulatory auras of the art world.<sup>21</sup>

Following the work of Sharon Zukin, this could be described as the rise of an artistic mode of production; one based upon utilizing the same dynamics of circulatory labour in the remodelling of lifestyles, neighbourhoods, and ways of life into a generalized mode of value production.<sup>22</sup> It can be recalled that Zukin’s work examined the transformation of Manhattan in the 1960s and 1970s as former industrial spaces were taken over, initially by artists who used them as combined studio and work spaces. This is the emergence of the ‘loft economy’ and the transformation of lower Manhattan from an industrial space to another form of production. This is when a sign proclaiming ‘artist in residence’ was displayed not for the purpose of advertising some snazzy new programme, but rather to inform the fire department that there were people living in these industrial spaces (which they would not have otherwise assumed).

This use of former industrial space for mixed use, the complete combining of living and working into an integrated mode of artistic production, has become a key model for schemes of urban renewal and development based around the cultural cache of the arts. It ends up forming a mode of gentrification and development that is applied far beyond the context of New York, being used to fuel property development books in many other locations. In Zukin’s description of this process in New

York, the main victims of it were not the local residents, but more so the workers from the workspaces that were displaced. And more importantly, artists end up standing in as a proxy in the gentrification process, with the 'bohemian' lifestyles afforded by these spaces serving as a model of imitation for the middle class. Artists find themselves acting as inadvertent proxies for real estate booms and investment. They also further develop modes of combining work and life that—by the impossibility to clearly separate them—end up serving as ways to intensify and deepen forms of labour and attachment to work when they are generalized specifically beyond the arts economy.

This argument has been explored by Bohm and Land, in particular looking at the ways that notions of value are shaped within cultural policy discourse, and how they have shifted.<sup>23</sup> They argue that in the UK over the past fifteen years there has been a shift in how value in the cultural economy is conceived: from an earlier conception that the value of the arts is their potential to generate revenue to one of the forms of indirect value creation, such as generating creativity, fostering employability and social inclusion, and other such conditions. Arguably in recent years there has been a shift away from this indirect model of artistic value creation back to the direct production of revenue. The ongoing economic and social crises have certainly contributed to this trend, or perhaps more accurately provided a convenient explanation for it. Regardless of changing trends in arts and cultural policy, it is this social value of the arts and cultural labour more generally, and how they take part in renewing social bonds and sociality more generally, which is precisely not recognized or rewarded. As Randy Martin argues, the connection created by the artwork is the work of art itself. Art makes exchange possible but is not of it<sup>24</sup>—and therefore, paradoxically, falls out of the accounting of the labours involved in maintaining the conditions, the very forms of sociability, that make possible exchange itself.

### **An artistic multitude in the metropolitan factory?**

The metropolis is to the multitude what the factory was to the industrial working class. The factory constituted in the previous era the primary site and posed the conditions for three central activities of the industrial working class: its production; its internal encounters and organization; and its expressions of antagonism and rebellion. The contemporary productive activities of the multitude, however, overflow the factory walls to permeate the entire metropolis, and in the process the qualities and potential of those activities are transformed fundamentally.<sup>25</sup>

As can be seen in this quote from Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, in their continued work and elaboration of an autonomist analysis of labour and politics today, the metropolis is itself considered an important space. And keeping with the long-standing themes of autonomist analysis, this becoming-factory of the city is not simply a question of the changing nature of labour relations, but also of the politics that are connected to these forms of labour. For Hardt and Negri, the dispersed forms of immaterial labour that flow through the metropolis connect to their argument for new kinds of political subjectivity in the form of the multitude. In relating shifts in the arts and cultural economy, connecting this to the broadly autonomist framework, we can say that arts and cultural labour developed and fostered these forms of diffuse creativity and labour in the city before they came to be applied more broadly in the economy, particularly through the creative industries and the rise of the information and knowledge economy.<sup>26</sup>

This is the argument Pascal Gielen makes in his book *The Murmuring of the Artistic Multitude*, that the modern art world has played a central role in the movement of ideas of creativity, innovation, and flexibility into workings of the economy and labour markets more generally. As Gielen suggests, “the social structure of the early modern art world was one of the social laboratories in which the current Post-Fordian work ethic was produced.”<sup>27</sup> This is precisely why a class compositional understanding of the arts economy is so important, not just in understanding the functioning of the labours involved in the arts world, but also in how the labour process developed in this art world was

then generalized outside of it. This description in some ways parallels Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello's description of a similar process of modelling and then generalizing a new labour process formed around projects, creativity, and flexibility.<sup>28</sup> Gielen argues that the protagonists of creative labour end up moving from a rejection of the horrors of enforced labour and attempts to escape from it to a position where it could be said, 'Freiheit macht Arbeit'—freedom makes work—for “such an ethic of ‘creative’ freedom is eagerly adopted by temp agencies that advertise temporary contracts in term of the ‘freedom’ they allow.”<sup>29</sup>

In the metropolitan factory, management has become redundant, as the organizational forms necessary and fitting for these forms of labour are immanent to them. In such conditions management becomes little more than the role, not of producing anything, but harvesting that which is already in circulation, extracting value and imposing measure on that which it does not directly control. This is a paradox for attempting to manage performance in a cultural economy dependent upon free labour, for much of the labour that is necessary and integral to the overall labour process is not directly under the control of the organization. Under these conditions, Jon McKenzie argues, performative labour and its management has become much more an art of management indebted to drama and theatre than to traditional notions of ‘management science.’<sup>30</sup> The virtuoso labour of performance management in the metropolitan factory then becomes the ability to modulate, intensify, and alter the circulation of labour and creativity within the productive basin of the metropolis. The management of labour is not the actual organization of the labour itself, but the ability to offload the costs of labour to self-organized forms, and to extract surplus value from them.

Returning to Avraamov's symphony, there is something more than just an interesting historical example. I would argue that there is still some profoundly unrealized potential in the model of value production and sociality that are suggested by constructivist practices and ideas. As commented by CrimethInc., *The Symphony of the Factory Sirens*

demonstrates what is possible when art/cooperation is thought of as central to life rather than as belonging to the private/leisure sphere.<sup>31</sup> But the question then becomes how to organize and sustain the surplus sociality generated through these emergent forms, whether they become the basis for reinventing society itself, or whether they are harvested into a basin for the accrual of personal artistic value and reputation, or transformed into a new market for art value and aesthetic accumulation. Historically the art world, and the work of art itself, has provided a laboratory for developing new forms of capital accumulation, the intensification of labour, and precisely because of that, a space for rethinking methods and tactics for sabotaging and disrupting those very processes of accumulation.

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**NOTES:**

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1. To hear an attempt at reconstructing what this performance might have sounded like, see Various Artists, *Baku: Symphony Of Sirens – Sound Experiments In The Russian Avant Garde* (Surrey: ReR Megacorp, 2009).
2. For more information, see [http://www.wuw2010.pl/download/BUNTING\\_TEKST\\_WUW.pdf](http://www.wuw2010.pl/download/BUNTING_TEKST_WUW.pdf)
3. For more information, see <https://www.aexchange.net>.
4. Roxana Azimi and Anny Shaw, “Art to get its own ‘stock exchange,’” *The Art Newspaper*, no. 219 (December 2010). Available at <http://www.theartnewspaper.com/articles/Art-to-get-its-own-stock-exchange/22065>.
5. Joseph Beuys, *What is Art?*, ed. Voler Harlan (East Sussex: Clairview Books, 2004).
6. Dierich Diederichsen, *On (Surplus) Value in Art* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2008).
7. Esther Leslie, “The Art/Canapé Nexus,” *Mute* (March 2011). Available at [http://www.metamute.org/en/articles/the\\_art\\_canape\\_nexus](http://www.metamute.org/en/articles/the_art_canape_nexus).
8. Dierich Diederichsen, *On (Surplus) Value in Art*, 22.
9. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
10. Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).
11. Pascal Gielen, *The Murmuring of the Artistic Multitude: Global Art, Memory and Post-Fordism* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2009).
12. Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object* (New York: Praeger, 1973).
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general social embedding of labour. On this, see Wouter Davidts and Kim Paice, eds., *The Fall of The Studio: Artists at Work* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2009).

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26. If we return then to all the debates on the creative class and creative city, with such a perspective they can be appraised in a new light. What is the creative other than the dispersed management function immanent and necessary to the labours of circulation? If, following Hardt and Negri's argument, the metropolis has become the productive factory space, creative labour is the form of cultural logistics that keeps supplies moving in the creative economy. And as Andrew Ross (2009) has pointed out, the main source of revenue for this creative economy, which extracts profits from the rents on shared resources, has been through the fueling of a gentrifying property boom that is premised on extracting value from the cultural aura of an area. Andrew Ross, *Nice Work If You Can Get It: Life and Labor in Precarious Times* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).
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# MISCOMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES: TELEKOMMUNISTEN ARTWORKS 2009-2013

Dmytri Kleiner & Baruch Gottlieb

- + The development of communication technologies is not merely a neutral process driven by discovery, progress, and innovation, but an intensely social and political process where choices are made in ways that fundamentally influence the reproduction of the class conditions of the societies that produce these technologies. Communication technologies embody and perpetuate the social relations of their modes of production.

The *Miscommunication Technologies* series of artworks by Telekommunisten elaborate these social conditions by creating technologies that don't work as expected, or work in unexpected ways. The artworks in the series allow the embedded social relations to be critically experienced and confronted. The series employs parody, juxtaposition, exaggeration and *reductio ad absurdum* to bring aspects of these relations, which are normally hidden from view, into the foreground.

The resulting artworks illustrate some of the real-world challenges faced by anyone or any group who would like to challenge the dominance of capitalist models of production. They take a light-hearted approach to an intractable reality: capitalism is not only the system by which maximum value is extracted from social production, it is also the current global system which, in its unsatisfactory yet somewhat reliable manner, provides services that we come to depend on every day. Any challenge to capitalist hegemony must be prepared to provide for the same social needs which persist in any system.

### **The rise and fall of net.culture**

The illusions of the early Internet as a panacea platform for the emancipation of human intelligence and collaborative spirit emerged because it was financed for use-value, not exchange-value. Its early developers were universities, NGOs, hobbyists and, prominently, the military. The contributors to the early Internet built the platform according to what could be seen as a product of a communist credo, “from each according to ability, to each according to need.”

As Richard Barbrook described in “The::Cyber.Com/munist::Manifesto” of 1999: “Within the Net, people are developing the most advanced form of collective labour: work-as-gift.”<sup>1</sup> Information and software spread freely across the network. This, to many people, created the impression that a new society was emerging. For instance, “The Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace” by John Perry Barlow stated: “We are creating a world where anyone, anywhere may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without fear of being coerced into silence or conformity.”<sup>2</sup>

John Gilmore, Barlow’s EFF co-founder, claimed that: “The Net interprets censorship as damage and routes around it,”<sup>3</sup> implying that The Net existed beyond the jurisdiction of States, or even the organizations that operate it, as it can simply ‘route around’ those that would seek to interfere with the freedom of exchange on the network.

This might have held true to some extent during the initial stages of the commercialization of the Internet, since the first commercial ventures, ‘Internet Service Providers’ (ISPs), did not develop their own communications technologies, but only provided access to the public Internet, and the decentralized, open technologies that ran on it, such as email and Usenet. The exchange value these ISPs were capturing was collectively created. Each ISP was independently earning income by being part of a common platform, not owned by anybody as a whole, but composed of the mutual interconnections of the participants. Though made up of parts owned by public and private organizations, the platform

as a whole functioned as a commons, a common stock of productive assets used independently by the ISPs and their users.

In parallel to the Internet, 'online services' like CompuServ emerged from the capitalist imagination. They were financed for exchange value, by profit seeking investors, and as such did not employ a mesh topology like the Internet, but rather employed a star topology. Users could not communicate directly with each other, but only through the central servers of the operator, which could not be 'routed around.' This was required by profit-oriented business models, since control of user interaction and user data is required to monetize the platform; for instance, by charging fees or selling advertising.

Part of what fed the illusion of the emancipatory potential of the then-possible Internet was the fact that the platform made capitalist-funded online services like CompuServ and AOL obsolete. This happened largely because of the explosive growth made possible by its distributed infrastructure, allowing the ISP industry to develop as a kind of petit-bourgeois industry of small producers. ISPs were a cottage industry of home-grown telecoms of sorts. The design of the Internet allowed anybody with a connection to the Internet, to provide a connection to others, thus the barrier of entry to becoming an ISP was relatively small, just an upstream connection, some computers, modems, and telephone lines.

During the early days of the public Internet the communistic petit bourgeois ISPs prevailed over the feudalistic haute bourgeois online services, making it seem momentarily that the superior technical architecture of the Internet, combined with the cultures of sharing and gift economies, would be able to surpass and even transcend capital.

Both personal and commercial users migrated *en masse* to the Internet. For instance, in a letter to their customers that is still available online, the software company BASIS international, 'The Big Little Software Company,' writes: "By the end of 1997, BASIS plans to move completely off CompuServe (CSi) and onto the Internet. This is a logical consequence of the many changes that have taken place in the online world over the past

few years.”<sup>4</sup>

In their letter, BASIS spells out a lot of these changes:

While our CSI presence has served the company well in the past, its pay-to-access structure is increasingly harder to justify with the Internet providing almost limitless content at a negligible incremental cost. People are moving away from CSI in significant numbers, making it a less effective platform from which to address our current and future customers. We believe that moving our existing support infrastructure from CSI to the Internet will give us better access to our customers and our customers better access to us.<sup>5</sup>

It goes on to explain how it will now use open platforms like email, Usenet and IRC instead of CompuServ’s proprietary and centralized applications. How ironic that now web 2.0 platforms have companies, and individuals are returning to centralized, proprietary systems for their support and communications. The reason for this is not because centralized platforms were superior all along, but because they are the only kind of systems that are funded by capitalists and therefore could afford to scale up their services enough to provide for the population flooding in for Net services.

While ISPs invested in bringing Internet access into households and offices worldwide, they did little to actually develop the communications platforms used on the network; these were largely developed within the gift economy of the users themselves. The ISPs were even less able to take over the provision of long-haul data transmission, dominated by international telecommunications conglomerates. Most ISPs got their start by simply connecting shelves full of consumer grade modems to consumer grade computers running free software, providing connectivity to an upstream Internet provider for end-users who were using freely available communications platforms.

Thus, while the emergence of the ISPs and the rapid mainstream adoption of the Internet were spectacular, they were not able to capture enough profit to scale up and take over the more investment-heavy infrastructure of Internet provision. The end was already apparent in the beginning. Well-financed telecommunications conglomerates would soon

replace the home-grown ISPs, either buying them up, or driving them out of business by providing 'broadband' services, which delivered the Internet to the home along with telephone service, leaving the remaining ISPs as mere resellers, providing service over telecom-managed circuits.

As Internet usage grew, technically-oriented users became the minority. The general Internet user became what Clay Shirky eventually called 'everybody.'<sup>6</sup> This had a significant impact on the culture of sharing and tolerance. The first wave of 'everybody' to arrive was when AOL, in an effort to remain relevant, allowed its users to access the Internet, and this epoch has been called 'Eternal September' since then.<sup>7</sup>

The *Jargon File*, a glossary of hacker slang, defines 'The September That Never Ended' as follows:

All time since September 1993. One of the seasonal rhythms of the Usenet used to be the annual September influx of clueless newbies who, lacking any sense of netiquette, made a general nuisance of themselves. This coincided with people starting college, getting their first Internet accounts, and plunging in without bothering to learn what was acceptable. These relatively small drafts of newbies could be assimilated within a few months. But in September 1993, AOL users became able to post to Usenet, nearly overwhelming the old-timers' capacity to acculturate them; to those who nostalgically recall the period before, this triggered an inexorable decline in the quality of discussions on newsgroups.<sup>8</sup>

The *Jargon File* mentions 'netiquette,' a quaint term from the innocent times of net.culture; yet netiquette was not simply a way of fitting in, like table manners at an exclusive dinner party. The cultural context of that Internet, which made acculturation necessary, was its relative openness and lack of stratification.

Netiquette was required because the network had relatively little constraints built into it, and these needed to be cultural for the system to work. There was much more to this culture than teaching new users how to not abuse resources or make a general nuisance of themselves. Netiquette was not so much about online manners; rather it was about the ethics of sharing. Starting from the shared network resources, sharing was the core of the culture, which not only embraced free software and promoted

free communications, but generally resented barriers to free exchange, including barriers required to protect property rights and any business models based on controlling information flow.

The influx of new users to the old-timers' net.culture had dramatic cultural effects, but the influx of capital investment and its conflicting property interests quickly emerged as an existential threat to the basis of the culture. Net.culture required a shared Internet, where the network itself and most of the information on it was held in common. Capital required control, constraints, and defined property in order to earn returns on investment. Lines in the sand were drawn, and the primitive communism of the pre-September Internet was over. The Eternal September began and, along with it, the stratification of the Internet began. The burgeoning populations on the Internet meant profits for those companies who could extract them, and this meant dividing and conquering sections of net activity. Rather than embracing the free, open platforms where net.culture was born (such as Usenet, email, IRC, etc.), capital embraced the Web. Not as the interlinked, hypermedia, world-wide-distributed publishing platform it was intended to be, but as a client-server private communications platform where users' interactions were mediated by the platforms' operators.

The flowering of 'Web 2.0' was capital's re-engineering of the web into an Internet-accessible version of the online services they were building all along. These were the very platforms with mass user bases whose influx started the Eternal September—most notable among them: CompuServ and AOL. The gift-economy-model of software development that developed platforms like email and Usenet was unable to compete with a quickly growing venture capital start-up scene pushing Web 2.0 platforms.<sup>9</sup>

Like the profit-oriented online services before them, these start-ups were also compelled by the profit motives of their investors to implement a centralized topology—a star topology—because once again, the central control of user data and interaction was required to monetize

the platforms. We moved from a world CompuServ and AOL to a world of Amazon and Facebook. Scratch off the Facebook logo and you'll find the CompuServ logo underneath.

### **OCTO vs Thimbl: the miscommunication economy**

The OCTO P7C-1 prototype, premiered at transmediale 2013, exemplifies this problematic.<sup>10</sup> OCTO, the fictional venture capitalist start-up, promised to build the next dimension of the Internet—a physical dimension of communication through a pervasive pneumatic tube network. The utopian rhetoric of the OCTO boosters is exuberantly clichéd, promising all manner of human empowerment and positive transformation, and conveniently leaving behind in the shadow of bold promises the fact that this technology will be completely centralized, completely transfused with invasive security and monitoring technologies, and an outright monopoly.

OCTO P7C-1 presented the situation on several parallel levels. First, the actual working prototype, the P7C-1, allowed visitors to send capsules around the entire Haus der Kulturen der Welt, the venue for the transmediale festival. The P7C-1 stations were integrated everywhere at transmediale and used by staff and visitors alike. Use of the system was purposefully complicated, every capsule having to be sent through a central station in coordination and at the mercy of the operators positioned there. P7C-1's cumbersome, labour-intensive, and privacy-agnostic factuality flew in the face of the transcendent promises unflaggingly issued from the fictional directorship of the fictional OCTO Company. The constant work of managing the central station, end stations, and tube network was *labour theatre*. Unlike the Internet, where the physical labour is hidden, the labour in OCTO P7C-1 is presented as a central theatrical aspect of the work.

OCTO, the company, provides the second layer, the *social fiction*, constantly driving home the lesson that there is a price for the convenience of every new technological utopia under capitalism, and the price will be extracted from those who are promised to benefit. OCTO, the company,

manifested itself broadly across all contemporary promotional modes the Web today affords: a crowdfunding platform, a facebook page and, especially, the facebook account and twitter feed of OCTO's fictional CEO Octavia Allende Freedman.

OCTO's theatre is farce, but it exists to bring people into the third level: the critique of the political economy of network topologies. We have moved from administering our own email to using the centralized email services of giant entities like Google and Yahoo, which, as part of their mere functioning, parse and analyse private contents. Massive data sets have proven as useful for optimizing AI applications—such as automatic translation—as any improvement from the (academic) information science community. Access to these storehouses of real-time contextual semantic

data is the *nec plus ultra* of contemporary Web profit models.



The revolutionary Internet that inspired Barbrook, Barlow, Gilmore, and many others, has become a dystopia, a platform whose capabilities and pervasiveness of surveillance, behavioural conditioning and influence surpass the wildest dreams of the tyrants and technocrats of previous eras. As we will see again and again, despite claims that culture and economy has gone 'immaterial,' the rules of access to the physical technology of the Internet condition the forms of services which are eventually at the disposal of users.

Whereas OCTO is the archetypal network start-up with an unabashed agenda of market sector conquest, Thimbl appears as the light at the end of the long, dark tunnel of centralized hegemonic corporate dominance of the Internet. Developed in 2010,<sup>11</sup> it is made out to be a distributed, peer-to-peer alternative to microblogging platforms such as Twitter. Thimbl appears as an analogue to projects like Diaspora, also launched in 2010—a purely altruistic project with no profit motive and

with only the idealism of freedom of information.

The tragedy of projects like Diaspora is that they are not really viable replacements for capital-funded projects like Facebook, for economic and political reasons, not technical reasons. Therein lies the message of Thimbl. Anyone who has some understanding of the elementary server architecture of the Internet can use Thimbl, because it is based on a protocol originally developed in the 1970s called Finger which allowed users to update public ‘project’ and ‘plan’ messages akin to status updates. The free-access, non-commercial functionality of Finger harkens back to the period when the Internet was still being developed for use value. By retrieving Finger, Thimbl indicates how users today are allowing corporations to benefit from the value of their social interactions for services which, in principle, could be used freely and for free. Thimbl shows that all that is necessary to provide a microblogging experience like Twitter is available for free and built into the Internet right now, but, precisely because they are freely available, technologies based on protocols like Finger will never be developed to the extent that they offer the satisfactory user experience of competitive commercial platforms.



Unlike the highly centralized OCTO, capital will never fund a project like Thimbl because it will not generate sufficient return on investment (ROI). Thimbl is an *economic fiction* or *social fiction*. Making it work is not the greatest challenge; making it financially viable is. Thimbl does not provide investors with the ability to control its users or their data, and as Thimbl’s Manifesto states: “This control is required by the logic of capitalist finance in order to capture value. Without such control, profit-seeking investors do not provide funds.”<sup>12</sup>

For Thimbl, or any other platform with a similar vision, to become a real alternative to the capitalist financed platforms like Facebook

and Twitter, we need more than running code, even more than a small, perhaps dedicated, user base. To get beyond this and actually break the monopolizing grip of centralized social media we need to match their productive capacities. We need financing on a similar scale, so that the development, marketing, and operations budgets are comparable and sufficient enough to compete. Just as science fiction becomes reality when science transcends the limitations that existed when the fiction was imagined, for an economic fiction like Thimbl to become reality, society will need to transcend the political and economic limitations that we currently face. We can write code, we can write texts, we can create artworks, but as a small network of artists and hackers, we won't be able to change the economic conditions we work under.

Free, distributed platforms are very practically suited to the work of radical communities; both symbolically, as a model of the kind of society we wish to foster, and as a matter of solidarity—also practically—since support for privacy and cryptography is often desirable. These platforms should, in a meritocratic economy of technological production, become prevalent, but instead they are marginalized by the current 'owners' of the Internet. Free, distributed platforms cannot provide the same ease-of-use, the so-called user-experience (UX) provided by capitalist platforms, because they simply lack the work-time to generate such quality. The result is that radical programmers pride themselves on the superiority of the software and bemoan the state of things which prevents such software becoming more prevalent. Radical programmers are motivated to campaign on the level of code for a freer, anarchistic, egalitarian Internet, but they are not motivated to confront the difficult, seemingly intractable political and economic realities which prohibit the social adoption of these technologies. This generates much frustration and defensiveness, rather than the commitment to dedicate some small quanta of their formidable imaginations and intelligence to the problem of ownership.

*Miscommunication Technologies* reveal the improvisatory economic structures of network-optimism in the way they inevitably 'fail'

to deliver the seamless networked experience they provocatively advertise. The schism between the promise of utopia and the reality of a system which requires much spontaneous effort on the part of users even to provide a modicum of functionality, playfully points to the immense work still needed to produce conditions which will support a radically different model of industrial communications as it prioritizes the generation and cultivation of direct interpersonal engagement between a community of users.

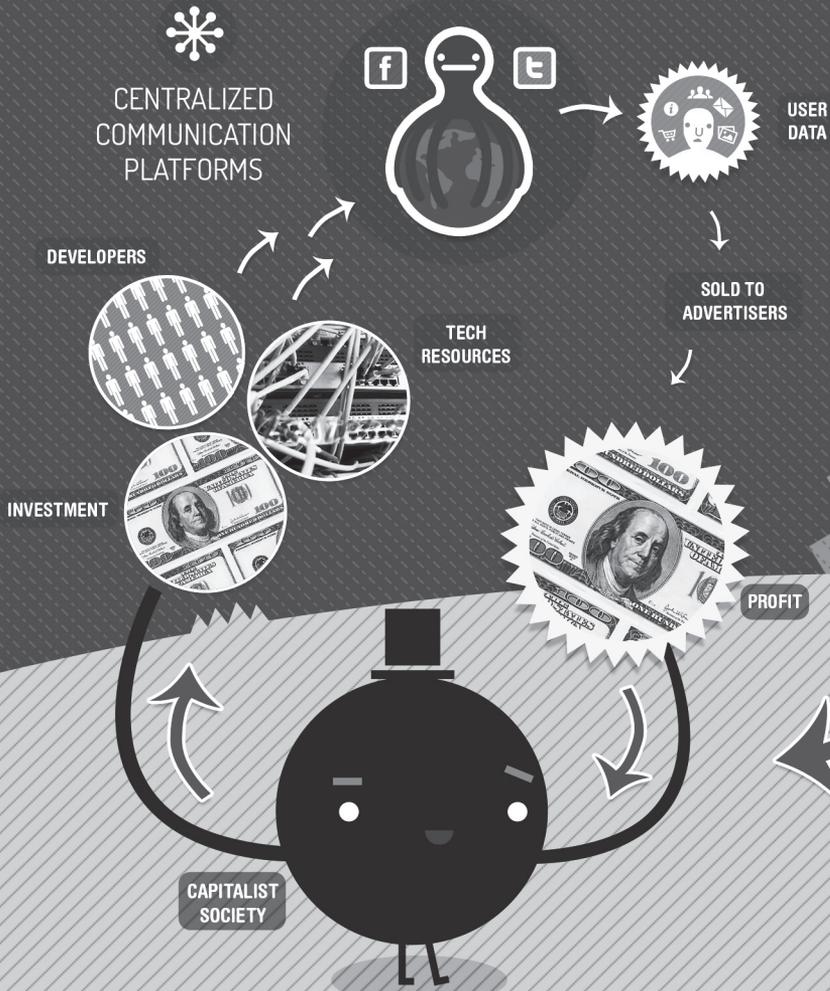
General concern regarding the censorship and surveillance on commercial online platforms is growing, and these concerns are opportunities to introduce economics-oriented critiques by arguing that these features are not unintended side effects of these platforms, but central to their business models, and that platforms that do not *surveille* or control cannot and will not be financed by capital, but only by collective or public undertaking as an expression of priorities which diverge from capitalism. Once this becomes clearer, concern over privacy settings on Facebook can be directed towards capitalism itself, instead of the idiosyncrasies of that platform or its founders.

At the same time, privacy and surveillance become wedge issues to de-legitimize alternative networks and services for the general public. Under the banner of security and 'quality,' corporations have lobbied governments to favour centralized 'unfree' network applications built on the still free but ever-fading-from-view Internet. We have seen often enough how products like Bitcoin or torrent technology can be impugned to 'enable illicit activity,' or cast as disreputable, until completely controlled and regulated by capital-concerned governments. Without acknowledging the systemic necessity, under the capitalist financing regime, of a centralized Internet, citizens' legitimate concerns about corporate encroachment into private and personal spheres are co-opted through the purposeful generation of unfavourable opinions about technologies which could help disrupt the dominance of capitalist priorities of control.

# MISCOMMUNICATION ECONOMY

#\* LEARN MORE AT  
TELEKOMMUNISTEN.NET

EXAMPLES:  
FACEBOOK, TWITTER,  
OCTO



CAPTURE OF DATA GENERATES PROFITS, WHICH GROWS THE INVESTMENTS AND RESOURCES OF THE CENTRALIZED PLATFORM, WHICH CAPTURES MORE DATA, ETC.

# HOW SOCIETY SUCKS THE LIFE OUT OF DECENTRALIZED COMMUNICATION PLATFORMS

(AMONG OTHER THINGS)

EXAMPLES: DIASPORA,  
LOREA, THIMBL



DECENTRALIZED  
COMMUNICATION  
PLATFORMS

- A SOCIAL FICTION



NO DATA SOLD



NO PROFITS



NO SERIOUS  
INVESTMENTS



SPARE TIME  
WORK

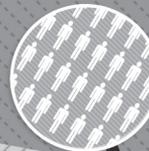
SALARY  
LEFTOVERS



DEVELOPERS  
& SUPPORTERS



SALARIES



TIME SPENT  
ON DAY JOBS

SURPLUS VALUE  
FROM DAY JOBS



CAPITALIST  
SOCIETY

DEVELOPERS, SUPPORTERS & VOLUNTEERS CONTRIBUTE  
JUST AS MUCH, OR MORE, TO THE CENTRALIZED PLATFORMS  
THROUGH THEIR EVERYDAY JOBS & LIVES

Illustration by  
Jonas Frankki

### **iMine vs R15N: the materiality of emancipation**

It is worthwhile re-emphasizing that the Internet itself is not immaterial. The Internet is only accessible through hardware which needs to be built according to unfree and often unfair industrial production rules. The industrial production of electronics is a quintessentially capital-intensive undertaking requiring global flows of materials, which, under capitalism, take place in extreme conditions of competition and extraction of labour value. Any challenge to how the Internet is run, or what it is available to be used for, must also challenge how it is produced and reproduced.

iMine<sup>13</sup> is an experimental game made to foster understanding of the intimate conditions of production of the device on which it is played. iMine elaborates the reality of labour exploitation in the mining industries.



iMine does not try to make the gameplay enjoyable or directly educational but seeks to involve the player in an experience of bleakness and drudgery, akin to that of mine workers in some of the source regions for minerals for the electronics industry, where slave-like conditions prevail. iMine is *dismalware*. iMine does not entertain the user with the story of the mining, but evokes the experience of the miner. At the beating heart of the emancipatory utopianism trumpeted by the digital devices we all use today are highly hierarchical systems of production and control.

The gameplay is designed from the start to be stripped down to the mere basics. Someone who wants to play first creates a new miner giving it a unique name and a country. After this simple registration the only thing left to do is repeatedly thrust the phone downwards and upwards as if it were a shovel digging into the ground. The website keeps track of the global iMining action going on at any particular time, and also features an extensive resource section with information on mining and the political and economic *enjeu* in the global supply chain for minerals necessary in the production of portable computing devices.

*Miscommunication Technologies* such as iMine emphasize that there can be no uniquely technological fix for the injustice which prevails, most exemplarily in the industrial conditions of the generation of electronic devices of the future. Colonial wars and security states, corporate rule and centralization will persist despite the best intentions of emancipatory technologists because the emancipatory agenda has not addressed the intractable, fundamentally economic problem of who will physically own the mines and server farms, the assembly plants, and the land they are built on.

All the liberating potential of Internet technologies are in a way compromised by the brutal pedigrees of the hardware on which they are expected to run. Hardware is created not in 'free' flat topologies but in highly organized, hierarchical, highly controlled environments. If the chipset were assembled 'freely' it may not run, or it may not interoperate smoothly with other chipsets. There is a disciplinary rigour undergirding the emancipatory rhetoric of the Internet age, which is especially evident in the production of hardware. iMine pleads for an understanding of emancipatory technologies which integrates a fundamental acknowledgement of the resistance to emancipation built into the hardware of the technology itself.

R15N is a project which pushes to absurdity the emancipatory rhetoric of mobile networked computing to its extreme. Events like the antiglobalization protests in Copenhagen or the political upheaval often referred to as the 'Arab Spring' have generated much enthusiastic hyperbole about how new real-time networks employing mobile devices can become an unstoppable democratizing force. R15N points to how economic predilections built into the provision of network connectivity may work against such emancipatory agendas. It retrieves an obsolete form of social networking, the 'telephone tree,' and dresses it up as the 'latest



thing' in robust circumventionist networking. Perfect for planning a flash mob, R15N easily becomes a nuisance as phone calls multiply, rendering the commitment made to one's community by joining the network a near-constant obligation to participate.

Communities need solidarity to catalyse political action. R15N underlines how real solidarity requires much more than an approving click on an online group. Community is a dynamic and real-time process which bleeds into every aspect of life. The potential of the Internet to help catalyse communal action, especially communal action not in concert with dominant politics, is counterbalanced by the inconvenience this will entail. R15N thus renders palpable the inconvenience of taking one's political concerns seriously, especially when they involve maintaining a critical point of view which is not supported in dominant discourse, and how this inconvenience will not be overcome by technology.

The free, distributed platforms, that cannot be controlled or censored, cannot prevail under capitalism. Not for technical reasons—in fact, the technology that enables such interaction is in many cases well-described and readily available—but for social and political-economic reasons. The productive capacity that is required to build and support free platforms will not be provided by capital. For so long as capital is the dominant mode of production, it will produce platforms that reproduce itself, thus platforms that enable the accumulation of wealth by engineering control and extraction into communications systems.

iMine suggests that critical games or critical media can only do so much to challenge the economic exigencies underlying an unacceptable status quo. The materiality of networked utopia is the key to understanding its injustices. But this materiality is a deep and complex reality, which is impossible to understand alone. Understanding the complex reality of today's hardware requires a dedicated community. R15N proposes that strategies such as hacktivism and circumventionism will not fundamentally challenge intolerable social conditions without the concurrent care and effort being dedicated to actually building up strong communities which

have committed to working together towards transforming society. As users of R15N are constantly reminded, any alternative system will depend on your competence and diligence.

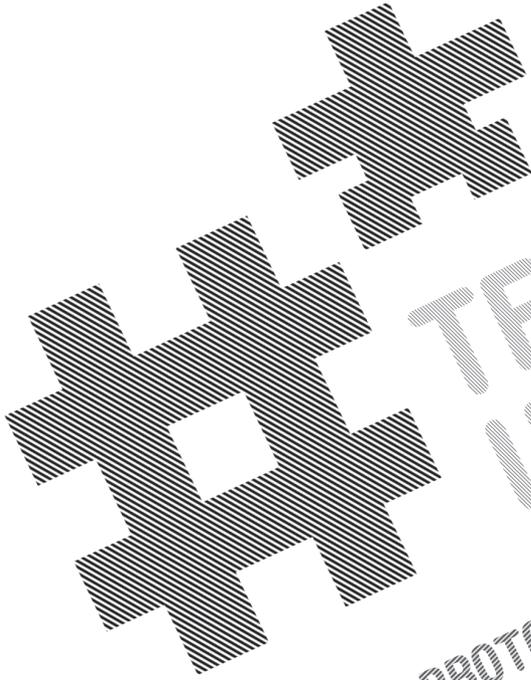
*Miscommunication Technologies* are artworks with a principal purpose: that of engaging people in provocative networked experiences in which they inadvertently but necessarily confront the unadorned material and economic conditions under which such experiences are made possible. OCTO and Thimbl articulate the pervasive structural challenges faced by those who would dare offer web functionalities built around priorities other than capitalist value extraction. iMine and R15N emphasize that the social transformation many of us yearn for cannot be generated, nourished and sustained merely through technological innovations, but only through the social innovation in how people may collaborate from the local ground outwards.

*Miscommunication Technologies* point out that the challenges presented by communication technologies are at their base social struggles, rooted not in technological choices, but in class, wealth, and power. Communication technologies reflect in their topologies the structures of wealth and power of the societies that build them. To transcend communications technologies that serve to capture profits for the financial elite, while subjugating all who use and create them, we must transcend capitalist society. In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we must have an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.

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**NOTES:**

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4. Ernie Longmire, “Basis migrates customer service from Compuserve to the Internet.” Available at <http://www.basis.com/sites/basis.com/advantage/mag-v1n3/basismigrates.html>.
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6. Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations* (New York: Penguin, 2008).
7. See <http://www.catb.org/jargon/html/S/September-that-never-ended.html>.
8. Ibid.
9. For a good historical overview of the takeover of the Internet by centralized capitalist platforms, see Ken Gagne, Matt Lake, “CompuServe, Prodigy et al.: What Web 2.0 can learn from Online 1.0,” Compuworld.com (July 2009). Available at [http://www.computerworld.com/s/article/print/9135292/CompuServe\\_Prodigy\\_et\\_al.\\_What\\_Web\\_2.0\\_can\\_learn\\_from\\_Online\\_1.0?taxonomyName=Networking&taxonomyId=16](http://www.computerworld.com/s/article/print/9135292/CompuServe_Prodigy_et_al._What_Web_2.0_can_learn_from_Online_1.0?taxonomyName=Networking&taxonomyId=16).
10. The OCTO P7C-1 prototype (2013) was developed by Telekommunisten, including Jeff Mann, Jonas Frankki, Diani Barreto, Mike Pearce, Baruch Gottlieb, and Dmytri Kleiner, in collaboration with the raumlaborberlin group, and the reSource transmediale culture berlin/transmediale and serve-u. See <http://telekommunisten.net/octo>.
11. Thimbl (2010) was developed by Dmytri Kleiner, Jonas Frankki, Rico Weise, and Mike Pearce with contributions from a small community that developed around it, including Anthony Shull, Silja Neilson, Mark Carter, and Fernando Guillen.
12. See <http://telekommunisten.net/thimbl>.
13. iMine was first produced by Baruch Gottlieb in 2011, with Horacio González Diéguez and Cocomoya, prior to Baruch’s work with Telekommunisten, and is now integrated into the *Miscommunication Technologies* series. See <http://www.i-mine.org>.



TELEKOMM  
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PROTOTYPING  
VENTURE  
COMMUNISM



# THE LOST ILLUSIONS OF AN AMAZONIAN FORKBOMB: WHAT LIES BEYOND THE PRINT CAPITALISM OF THE GUTENBERG GALAXY?

Christian Ulrik Andersen & Søren Bro Pold

+ “wellllllll we all said how pornstars were bad actors but I think we found something worse.”<sup>1</sup>

Centuries ago Gutenberg’s printing press, combined with urbanization and an increasing literacy among lay people, led to a new circulation of text. Gutenberg’s technique resulted in mass-produced books, publishers, book trade, newspapers and magazines with their journalists and critics, and even fostered the name for a whole industry: ‘the press.’ It also led to specific modes of subjectivity related to reading (e.g., close reading in silent privacy), and renewed institutions around the study and production of text—such as the university and other institutions of learning. As argued by Walter J. Ong, the historian of print, the printing press was indeed the first conveyor belt, and thus a groundbreaking technology for industrialized capitalism:

Alphabet letterpress printing, in which each letter was cast on a separate piece of metal, or type, marked a psychological breakthrough of the first order. It embedded the word itself deeply in the manufacturing process and made it into a kind of commodity.<sup>2</sup>

Publishing techniques have undergone tremendous changes within the past decades—comparable to the changes brought about by the first printing press. The computer is in itself a writing and publishing machine that combines text code with computation, and much popular computer

software includes the ability to produce text in new ways (text processing, desktop publishing, etc.). With hypertext and the WWW, text enters a new distribution platform, and a tight network woven by the automatic tracking of search engines, making it apparent that online text is not only read by humans but also tracked by machines and algorithmic ‘services.’ Furthermore, social software and Web 2.0 mark a stage where billions of users’ networked text production is integral to the manufacturing process of social web services. In a new economy that is based on language and sociality, text production is one of the main generators.

As a consequence, libraries are struggling with their identity as archives that provide public access to text, publishers’ businesses are being challenged by the free distribution of text and also new literature that is native to the network (such as fan fiction), universities are learning how to deal with open access to scientific journals and new types of research publication (wikis, blogs, etc.), and much more. But, on another level, what all of these institutional disruptions have in common is how a new economy of text affects the way we read and write, and our language as a system of producing meaning (logos). Simply put, human language and its written manifestation is being intertwined with the networked computer’s production of text. Once we start tampering with the material format of language, we change the world more profoundly: meaning itself is disrupted.

In this article, we want to examine how changes in the technical production of text affect the business of text and, more profoundly, of language. As we learn from the Marxist literary critic Georg Lukács’ reading of Honoré de Balzac’s *Lost Illusions* (*Illusions perdues*), literature is a place for exploring how technological changes affect culture and thinking, and how art can respond to this. Following the reading of *Lost Illusions*, we turn to a contemporary literary exploration of such affects. UBERMORGEN.COM’s *The Project Formerly Known as Kindle Forkbomb* was initiated in March 2011, inspired by the negative comments on Rebecca Black’s “Friday” video on YouTube.<sup>3</sup> In 2012, UBERMORGEN

worked with Luc Gross and Bernhard Bauch to build an Internet robot that could automatically generate books on the basis of YouTube comments on videos and upload them as e-books to Amazon's Kindle bookstore. The project may be seen as a contemporary literary exploration of the effects of post digital print on the institutions around text (from books and publishing to reading and writing). In this, the books not only present a new literary genre, the project is also a critical and aesthetic response to the 'Amazonian' literary machine. UBERMORGEN later parted with Gross and Bauch, who released their own version of the project as *Kindle'voke Ghost Writers*.<sup>4</sup> UBERMORGEN's current project is now entitled *The Project Formerly Known as Kindle Forkbomb*.<sup>5</sup>

Though very different in expression—Balzac being a writer and UBERMORGEN artistic software producers—the two projects both present a literary realism, a *Comédie Humaine* of interlinked stories that present a contemporary society. Naturally, each in their own way (Balzac through the writing of popular melodramas, and UBERMORGEN through the conceptual harvest of real-life dramas) also present a critique of a production system that extends beyond economic reasoning, and ask how changes in the manufacturing of words may affect such things as consciousness, language, and knowledge.

### **Lost Illusions**

In Honoré de Balzac's great novel *Lost Illusions*, a young romantic poet, Lucien de Rubempré, full of belief in his talent, travels from provincial Angoulême to Paris in order to make a career as a poet. However, his illusions are ruined when he realises how the book trade and literary world are controlled by blatant capitalism: everything, including bodies, ideas, critics, and words are for sale on the market for the highest bid. Simultaneously we follow his old friend and brother-in-law, the printer and inventor David Séchard, who tries to develop new printing technologies back in Angoulême. In short, de Rubempré betrays everybody around him, including Séchard who, as a consequence, is almost ruined and has to sell

his invention of a cheaper way to produce paper to his business rivals.

According to Georg Lukács, *Lost Illusions* is a novel about how literature becomes part of a capitalistic production process—literature’s drive to become a product (“Das Zur-Ware-Werden der Literatur”)—and how this leads to a capitalization of ideology and thinking (“Kapitalisierung des Geistes”), portrayed in detail within the novel. In other words, it is an example of a conscious exploration of a new discourse economy, and of how material changes influence the formal conditions of the artwork.<sup>6</sup> The novel explores how changes in the base (“Unterbau”) of reproduction technologies affect the superstructure (“Überbau”) of culture, economy, and thinking. In these ways, it is a novel about the commodification of literature and the capitalization of the mind and spirit (“Geist”). It is, however, not just a product of this, but also a critical, realistic, disillusioned, and clear-sighted literary exploration that demonstrates the relations between the base and the superstructure of this changing economy.

Lukács discusses how the formal conditions of the artwork become a theme in terms of both form and content. Though disillusioned by the literary market and contemporary society, the novel develops its perspective through an alternative formal, novelistic language, the use of melodrama, and characterisation. For example, it portrays the main character, de Rubempré, through a dialectical, ironic identification, making him both a tragic hero and a romantic fool. Lukács mentions how the characters in Balzac are ‘typical’ in the sense that the social is portrayed through typical characters acting in a concrete societal reality which, however, does not fully determine them. They stay ‘real’ characters with demonstrative properties that we can simultaneously identify with and see in their societal embeddedness. In his dramatic demonstration of society (in a wider context, the whole *Comédie humaine*), Balzac selects the characters most relevant to a situation and subject.<sup>7</sup> Through the characters and the events in the drama, we develop a detailed and intricate understanding of the mechanisms of the literary market and society in Paris during the Bourbon restoration around 1821–22, at which

time the novel is set. As pointed out by the literary theorist Christopher Prendergast, it subverts the commercial language and melodramatic form in order to sell criticism as literary consumption in the form of popular novels.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast to the failed illusions of the naïve romantic poet Lucien—who seeks pure romantic poetry but fails as a poet and betrays both his friends and beliefs in his attempts to succeed as a writer, journalist, and critic—Balzac himself manages to make these techno-capitalistic challenges an integral part of *Lost Illusions*. The material production process of the novel, its production and marketing, is the novel's central theme and it thereby critically formulates its relation to the printing press of its day. The mechanism of the printing press becomes a metaphor for the “social machinery,” in the words of one of the cynical journalists and critics in the novel, Etienne Lousteau, when he describes his former naïve youth failing to grasp “le mécanisme du monde”: “...I did not see the social machinery at work; so I had to learn to see it by bumping against the wheels and bruising myself against the shafts, and chains.”<sup>9</sup> In this way *Lost Illusions* demonstrates the logistics of the symbolic: how ideology and literary writing is not independent from its material basis, medium, and economy.

### **E-books and other literary machines**

It is clear that we are in the middle of a similar breaking up and economic exploitation of the technologies of words. Through its alphabetic programming, the networked computer is in itself a ‘literary machine,’ but it is also a prime motor for new and competing forms of text. Decades ago, we saw the development of networked hypertext, and the media and literary theorist Jay David Bolter soon argued that we live in the late age of print and that “the evidence of senescence, if not senility, is all around us.”<sup>10</sup> However, today (in a ‘post digital age’) we are witnessing how the computer becomes entangled in the production and distribution of books in new ways. Though it has been cast as doomed for a long time, the printed

book as we know it is not quite dead yet, but the ecology and infrastructure in and around books is changing dramatically.

Amazon's many activities are a good example of how books can be produced today, and of how various text production systems function and are interconnected. Amazon.com began as a book retailer in the early nineties with the dawn of the Internet, but soon expanded its business to include first CD and DVD retailing, and later also MP3 file streaming. Today, their business includes their own media platforms: the Amazon Kindle e-book reader, and the Amazon Fire tablet as well as an extended cloud computing service.<sup>11</sup> A central element of Amazon's business is to direct their sales strategically, providing the consumer with the products they are most likely to buy. This happens not only through user evaluation of products, but also through closely monitoring patterns in sales (users who buy one book are likely to buy certain other books), and even patterns of reading. The users' reading patterns are handled through Amazon's Whispernet, which is a cloud service that connects to the Amazon platform while reading and stores reading data, including what, when and where the user reads, and which notes and underlinings are made. The massive monitoring happens through limiting licenses and built-in obsolescence.<sup>12</sup> On top of their services as a 'bookstore' they also offer print-on-demand and publishing services through Amazon Publishing and Amazon Create Space—with direct sales through to the Amazon Bookstore.

Compared to the print press of technical reproduction, Amazon's manufacturing of words has been completely absorbed by complex business structures and computational processes. Amazon is but one example of how the current ecology of text is expanded and no longer includes just the writing and printing of text but also social media, search engines, hypertext, programming languages, and so forth. Even in the current conquering of the urban, physical space by ubiquitous and mobile computing, we witness a further development of the technologies of the word.

### The Project Formerly Known as Kindle Forkbomb

*The Project Formerly Known as Kindle Forkbomb* is a new kind of literary technology—an Amazonian printing press—producing a whole literary ecology including authors, crowds, books, titles, pricing, and metadata. As we can see from the diagram (fig. 1), it is a software-based tool, which extracts text from YouTube comments, packages it as e-books with titles and authors, sets up accounts and uploads the e-books to the Kindle shop, and defends the e-books against getting discovered and deleted by Amazon. In this way, it is not only an attack on Amazon’s business model, but also an attack that works by emulating and (mis)using Amazon’s own software platform.

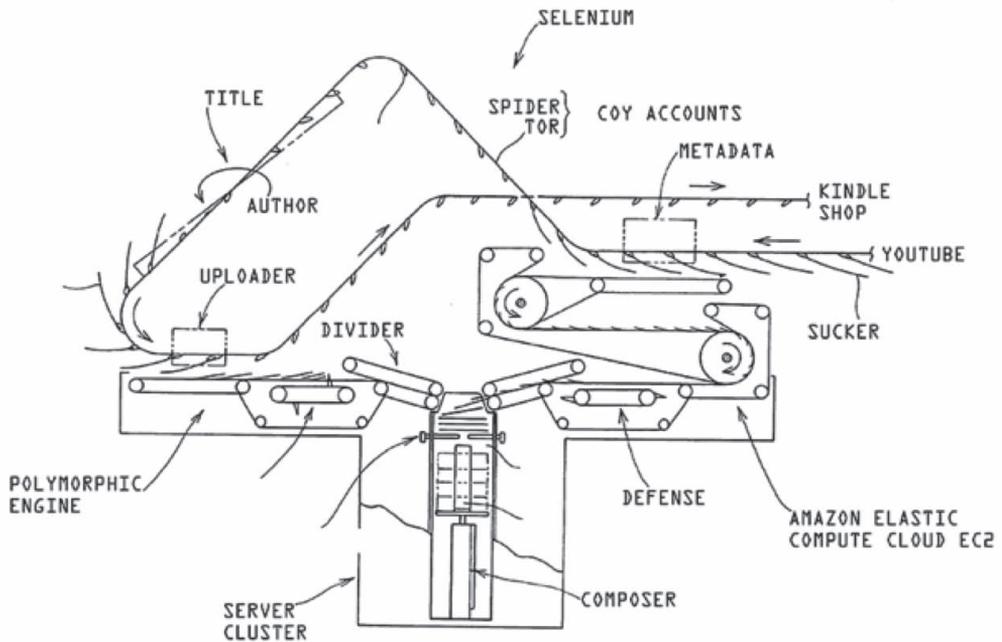


Figure 1. UBERMORGEN’s *The Project Formerly Known as Kindle Forkbomb* Printing Press.

In this way it functions as a demonstration of the mechanisms of today's production of text. It might even be seen as ideal post-print capitalism that delivers lots of cheap goods in the form of e-books to fill the endless shelves in Amazon's electronic warehouses. Just like the books by Philip M. Parker (who is currently the author of 106,577 books on Amazon), produced from databases and internet searches, *The Project Formerly Known as Kindle Forkbomb* demonstrates a new, fully automated book production, which can fill the still growing storage space on consumers' Kindles. However, while Parker produces titles like *The Official Patient's Sourcebook on Narcolepsy* with infinite boring reports, *The Project Formerly Known as Kindle Forkbomb* produces a new kind of staged drama. What are these dramas about?

### **You Funny Get Car**

One of the books produced is entitled *You Funny Get Car* by Nrnick Kencals.<sup>13</sup> The book is set up as a theatrical drama, where the dialogue consists of comments on a YouTube video in which the teenage pop idol Justin Bieber appears anaesthetized on the back seat of a car.<sup>14</sup> The comments that form the staged drama refer to several levels of experiences.

On an immediate level, the text appears as a conglomerate of a YouTube discourse that is driven by not just idolization but, more commonly, hateful humour (the comments to Rebecca Black's "Friday" video are another example of this). The comments, for instance, often express open sexual harassment (Latifa: "when you press eight, thats when biber has a dick rammed up his ass!").

On another level, the participants also discuss how to interpret the video. Although some of the comments question the authenticity of the video, there seems to be a consensus that it actually is Bieber, and that he is acting as a comedian. The participants discuss whether he is a good comedian or whether he should 'die.' This is a reference to the comedy video website Funny or Die, founded by the American comedians Will Ferrell and Adam McKay. In other words, the context of the YouTube

video of Bieber is not only YouTube. Many of the comments reveal an awareness of another context of the video at Funnyordie.com. The site features user-generated content in the form of exclusive material from famous contributors (such as Bieber). Users vote and the videos that are funny stay on the site, while the others die (or, are archived in ‘the crypt’). On a third level, we find comments that debate the sophistication of Bieber’s act. The humour of Bieber’s acting does not lie in his ability to act anaesthetized, but in his parody of another hit video on YouTube in which a young boy is on his way home from the dentist. In this, the participants reflect on Bieber’s act as an intrinsic part of a YouTube discourse driven by parodies of other participants’ self-promoted videos (again, parodies of Rebecca Black’s “Friday” video are another example of this). Their reflection is not driven by a need to judge the ethics of exhibiting a seven-year-old anaesthetized boy or making fun of him, but by a judgement of the originality of Bieber’s prank.

In this sense, *You Funny Get Car* appears as yet another level of experience in the text machinery. What sense appears out of all these different levels of experiences expressed through *You Funny Get Car*?

### **The symbolic layer of the text**

The experience of the reader is a quest for the hidden layers of the text; the layers that structure the text at hand. One may assume that this hidden layer is the missing video—the one that they are all talking about, the origin of the plot, its hidden essence, which the reader cannot see. This, however, would be a misinterpretation. The missing video merely expresses a level in the drama’s narrative (a ‘focalization strategy,’ in narratological terms, where the characters of the book seem to know more than the reader of the book). During the drama, the reader gradually excavates the text, and may even find its origin, watch the video, discover its parody, and read the comments in their original context. However, finding the context and discovering the discourse of video commenting and contemporary pop culture does not unveil *You Funny Get Car*. The symbolic, structuring

layer of the text lies elsewhere.

In a post-structuralist reading of the drama, what creates the text relates to the symbolic layers of the discourse itself. All characters are 'typical' for the context; they are 'a crowd.' They use a similar vocabulary, misspellings, grammatical errors, symbols, and so on, while furthermore expressing a similar judgmental world view (stating subjective experiences as objective facts, e.g., "so ghey," "WHAT AN IDIOT !!!!!!!," "what a fag," etc.). However, randomly attributing the comments of different real people to the characters in the play will also make them ambiguous by nature (Saoirse, for instance, exclaims both: "I bet you guys feel fucking cool because you can judge people online," and "Bieber or die? I choose pick up shotgun and fire like a maniac!"). In this way, the text makes the reader aware, not of the different experiences and viewpoints of the 13 characters but of the different experiences that relate to the different reading contexts, the different levels of experiences.

These series of experiences include not only the text in hand, but the text-machinery as such, which is included in *The Project Formerly Known as Kindle Forkbomb* (the comments on the YouTube video, see fig. 1). It even extends beyond this, to include the experience of the phenomena Funny or Die, the experiences of similar parodies, and possibly more—in total, the whole ecology of the text machinery evolving around the networked computer and popular culture. What then makes the text is not Bieber, nor his video, nor the original video of the anaesthetized boy, but the relations between the texts and the different experiences.

In pointing to this ecology of text and relations between experiences our reading of *You Funny Get Car* does not seek to identify a hidden essence of digital culture, but points to *the production of meaning* in society. This production clearly does not appear in the dialogue between the subjects in the text (their individual experiences, and their judgemental and homophobic attribution of meaning to the world), but must be seen as a textual and linguistic manifestation of a human reality (human experience, as such, producing meaning). In a post-structuralist

view, the reality of our language is a ‘symbol activity’ in relation to which the individual is merely a function, as the Danish literary theorist Niels Egebak has expressed it.<sup>15</sup> In other words, individual manifestations of language must be separated from language as a symbol activity that structures language and meaning. But whereas the production of meaning for Egebak relates to a human condition (language as a human activity), *You Funny Get Car* reveals relations to other modes of production, and in particular the ecology of technological text production: the language act is intrinsically related to the language production evolving around the networked computer: language is both the property of the human and the machine.

In other words, *You Funny Get Car* is an expression of a new kind of ‘realism,’ which mimics the text machinery of the networked computer. In Egebak’s interpretation of Aristotle, the notion of *mimesis* has the same meaning as *poiesis*, meaning not the representation but the production of reality.<sup>16</sup> The relation of language (*logos*) to reality is in this perspective intrinsically related to action—language acts.<sup>17</sup> Generally speaking, this productivity has consistently been the object of literary and artistic productivity. As a new genre of literature, *You Funny Get Car*, and *The Project Formerly Known as Kindle Forkbomb* in a wider context, is not ‘realism’ in the sense that it seeks to mirror society but realism in the sense that it deals with the production of meaning evolving around the networked computer: the language acts of our society, and the ecology of text machinery which produces our reality. It is not only language but also the networked computer that is part of the text’s symbol activity.

### **Forkbomb as *poiesis***

The melodrama of Balzac, the *Lost Illusions*, and the whole *Human Comedy* was an attempt to sell societal critique as consumption—as subversive melodrama. The disillusion of de Rubempré (and Balzac himself, being a conservative monarchist) is followed by the invention of a new popular melodrama, a new language of and use of character types

to unveil the mechanisms of a society run by capital: critique was sold as popular literary works for consumption. As mentioned earlier, Lukàcs sees the realism of Balzac as a literary demonstration of how changes in the production system affect the conditions of the artwork (as with the hopeful poet de Rubempré), but also culture, economy, and thinking, more generally.

*The Project Formerly Known as Kindle Forkbomb* is similar in the sense that it seeks to reflect how current expressions of text (for instance, comments on YouTube) are intrinsically linked to the production of reality embedded in the machinery (for instance, the processes of harvesting text, and embedding it in new contexts). But its realism is quite different from Balzac's. Though partly a work of popular culture, *You Funny Get Car* is not a popular work. The video comments are of limited interest outside their original context, and the character types appear as one blurry, homophobic, judgmental crowd. The drama is present, but appears as if it was painted with one colour only. Instead of selling critique as literary consumption, it shifts focus and sells it as literary production, a literature machine. In this sense, acknowledging that it is not only human language that produces our reality but also the ecology of the networked computer's text machinery, the literary project is to develop a *poiesis* of the machinery, to produce a language reality with the machinery.

The language production of *The Project Formerly Known as Kindle Forkbomb* first and foremost points to the machinery of language and text. This machinery is depicted in the diagram (see fig. 1), and the project aims to work as a 'forkbomb' in the system, by automatizing the networked processes that produce language today, and turning language against itself. In computing, a forkbomb is a denial-of-service attack, meaning it is a process that continually replicates itself, draining the system of its resources, and ultimately causing the system to crash. It does not sell critique as a literary work, but as a literary work that mimics the production of language—*poiesis* in Egebak's interpretation.

### The “*mécanisme du monde*”

*The Project Formerly Known as Kindle Forkbomb* functions as an algorithmic update of the way Balzac sees his oeuvre in the famous quote from his *Introduction to the Human Comedy*: “French society would be the real author; I should only be the secretary.” He continues:

By drawing up an inventory of vices and virtues, by collecting the chief facts of the passions, by depicting characters, by choosing the principal incidents of social life, by composing types out of a combination of homogeneous characteristics, I might perhaps succeed in writing the history which so many historians have neglected: that of Manners.<sup>18</sup>

Balzac thus describes his realism, in his study of Manners (“*Études De Moeurs*”), as a way of writing with French society as the real author, while he is only the secretary. In this way, Balzac to a certain degree gives up authorship and authorial control in order to render the real social complexity of his time, including how the real gets manufactured and language is produced.

However, in *The Project Formerly Known as Kindle Forkbomb* it becomes even more complicated to find the authorial origin of the text. None of the text in the books is in fact written by UBERMORGEN, but harvested automatically by software and placed inside Amazon’s software and hardware platforms as a forkbomb and automatized production of language (a veritable flooding of language). Even though the packaging of the texts as books does produce a weak authorial context (an implicit author that extracts the text from the YouTube videos and stages it as a drama), and even though we know that these texts were actually written by individuals as comments on YouTube, we also know that the names of both characters and authors of the different e-books are generated randomly by the software. As already noted, even the origin of the project is disputed, since others have released their own versions of the project. Because of the way the text has become removed from its original context, we now see the “*mécanisme du monde*”—the economy and social machinery of language and text—more clearly.

## Conclusion

To conclude, we may say that even though there are writers somewhere in this machinery, they and their texts are just as manufactured by networked software as the text and writers in Facebook, YouTube and other Web 2.0 text production platforms. Writing text is turned into raw material for an inexhaustible text production machine and business without clear origin or end. In this sense *The Project Formerly Known as Kindle Forkbomb* demonstrates a forkbomb poiesis that disrupts traditional and central notions in literature such as character, author, the coherence of the book, and the format of the book shop, to name a few. What we find instead is a network platform, Amazon, which is a new kind of textual and literary environment—a software-based literary business, intrinsic to an economy based on the production of text and language. When its own mechanisms are turned against itself (the objective of the forkbomb), and the system begins to act absurdly and hilariously (turning the text machinery into an endless production of books, presented for consumption but not quite readable in their complexity), we see how the platform deconstructs writers, readers, authors, and books into an automated, cybernetic text flow machinery (that contains potentially anything: books, crowd-sourcing of reading habits, cloud computing, electronic devices, etc.). Text flows—in the form of writing, programming, reading behaviour, monitoring data, transactions—are the stuff that makes the machine and its business work. *The Project Formerly Known as Kindle Forkbomb* lets us see the character of these texts, the symbolic activity of language, and how language and the production of meaning is not only a human activity but deeply embedded in new language production systems and businesses.

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## NOTES:

This research has been funded by the Aarhus University Ideas Pilot Project, “Disruptive innovation in digital art-activism and business,” and Aarhus University’s interdisciplinary research centre for Participatory IT, PIT. Thanks to UBERMORGEN.COM for giving us permission to reproduce the diagrams.

1. Rrixxx Kokuzno, *David Was* (:(){ :|& };;, 2012).
2. Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (London & New York: Routledge, 1988), 116.
3. The music video was a viral phenomenon on YouTube, receiving massive attention for being the worst song ever. This included hundreds of thousands of hateful comments and numerous parodies with equal popularity.
4. Available at <http://traumawien.at/ghostwriters/>.
5. It is currently disputed who is the originator of the project since these two versions exist, which we will return to later in the article. We do not wish to pass any judgement on this issue, but have mainly worked with UBERMORGEN.COM’s version, which includes the diagrams we reproduce in the text. Available at <http://uuuuuuuntitled.com/>.
6. Georg Lukács, “Ii Verlorene Illusionen,” in Georg Lukács *Werke 6 - Probleme Des Realismus Iii - Der Historische Roman* (Neuwied und Berlin: Luchterhand, 1965).
7. *Ibid.*, 479.
8. Christopher Prendergast, *Balzac: Fiction and Melodrama* (London: Edward Arnold, 1978).
9. Honoré de Balzac, “A Distinguished Provincial at Paris,” trans. Ellen Marriage, *Lost Illusions, Part II* (Project Gutenberg, 2010). Available at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1559/1559-h/1559-h.htm>; *La Comédie Humaine - 5 Études De Moeurs: Scènes De La Vie De Province [Fin], Scènes De La Vie Parisienne*, [Nouvelle éd.] publiée sous la direction de Pierre-Georges Castex ed., Bibliothèque De La Pléiade ([Paris]: Gallimard, 1977).
10. J. David Bolter, *Writing Space: the Computer, Hypertext, and the History of Writing* (Hillsdale, N.J.: L. Erlbaum Associates, 1991), 2.
11. In addition, Amazon is a retailer of all sorts of consumer goods (furniture, shoes, etc.), a main provider of crowdsourced production (Amazon Mechanical Turk), and much more.
12. Ted Striphias, *The Late Age of Print: Everyday Book Culture from Consumerism to Control* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011);

Søren Bro Pold and Christian Ulrik Andersen, "Controlled Consumption Culture: When Digital Culture Becomes Software Business," in *The Imaginary App*, eds. Svitlana Matviyenko and Paul D. Miller (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, forthcoming).

13. Nrnick Kencals, *You Funny Get Car* (:(){ :|:& };;, 2012).

14. Ibid. The original YouTube video of Justin Bieber (*Bieber after the Dentist*) can be found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=upaJHS8mfP8>. The origin of Bieber's parody (*David After Dentist*) can be found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=txqiwrbyGrs> (and has received more than 118 million views to date).

15. Niels Egebak, *Anti-Mimesis: Essay* (Arena, 1970), 9.

16. Ibid., 16.

17. Ibid., 17.

18. Honoré de Balzac, *The Human Comedy: Introductions and Appendix* (Project Gutenberg, 2010). Available at [http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1968/1968-h/1968-h.htm#link2H\\_INTR.papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2088298](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1968/1968-h/1968-h.htm#link2H_INTR.papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2088298).



## NOT-JUST-BUSINESS

Saul Albert

- + During the Wizards of OS 2006 conference Art & Copyright workshop,<sup>1</sup> I heard the phrase ‘not-just-art’ attributed to a text I wrote in 2001 about the creative and problematic consequences for authorship of Software Art,<sup>2</sup> while being aware that I had ‘breaded’<sup>3</sup> it from Matthew Fuller’s text “A Means of Mutation,”<sup>4</sup> which had kicked off the Software Art scene with the release of the seminal *Web Stalker* back in 1998. When I breaded it from Fuller, I was using it to describe a growing scene of software art peer production that had developed some kind of semantic independence from an art context because it could be understood as either software or art, or both. Perhaps these artworks could gather a user base that could run their code without the art-historical wrapper and understand it as a curiously useless utility, a strange artefact of net culture, or could repurpose it as a mundane tool for performing some information-processing drudgery.

not-just-art. Of course, once this ploy is opened and proliferates it becomes apparent that it quickly colonises all of what sees itself as art... simply by virtue of acknowledging its integration into other systems—of valorisation, decoration, sociality, etc. By the same token it also opens up what is categorised as non-art to the descriptive, critical, de-responsibilising and other potentially less fruitful qualities and operations of art.<sup>5</sup>

Writing before the Free Software scene had become a widely known paradigm for peer production, Fuller was being far less enthusiastic about not-just-art as a category than we breaders. He sat it “alongside the

categories art, anti-art and non-art” as a kind of infection; a nasty little semantic parasite capable of churning whatever you throw it at into art.

Looking at some parts of the ‘artware’ movement, you can see that the infection has run its course: it has developed a small professionalized economic context within the institutional remit of art education and curation. As Fuller points out, borrowing from other cultural contexts, escaping from purely art historical narratives, shocking its way out of the gallery for a while doesn’t prevent not-just-art from processing itself and whatever it touches into ‘just-art’ over time, reinstating a dependence on art’s context and economy. Without an economic reality other than art’s, not-just-art’s ‘independence’ becomes purely symbolic, or worse, simply designed to capture some non-art and bring it back to the gallery as a trophy from the ‘real world.’

But it’s useless to talk about ‘independent’ cultural production in describing the complex and multifarious relationships at play in peer production, when the boundaries of the author role are not clearly delineated. Rather than suggesting the independence of the artist from society, perhaps diffusion of authorship<sup>6</sup> suggests the independence of the artwork from the artist: a more profound disjuncture in the economic and semantic integrity of art history than not-just-art. Pauline van Mourik Broekman, in “On being independent in a network,” writes: “In cultural, social, economic, even geographic terms, the notion of independence is so profoundly contingent as to border on the meaningless.”<sup>7</sup>

On the one hand, she points out the problem of fetishizing the “splendid isolation” and “untainted creativity” of supposedly independent, non-funded, ethically-cleansed practices that seek to limit the influence of state or corporate benefactors through rejection or mitigation. On the other, she asks if the entrepreneurial zeal of Britain’s so-called creative economy is “independence as in Free Market,” divested of “any political dimension other than that indexed to national economic survival.” She concludes that aspects of both of these models might be the unavoidable backdrop to any cultural activity, but that through a reflexive mapping

process, a critical awareness of the dependencies, relationships, and exchanges at stake, it might be possible to mitigate these problems.

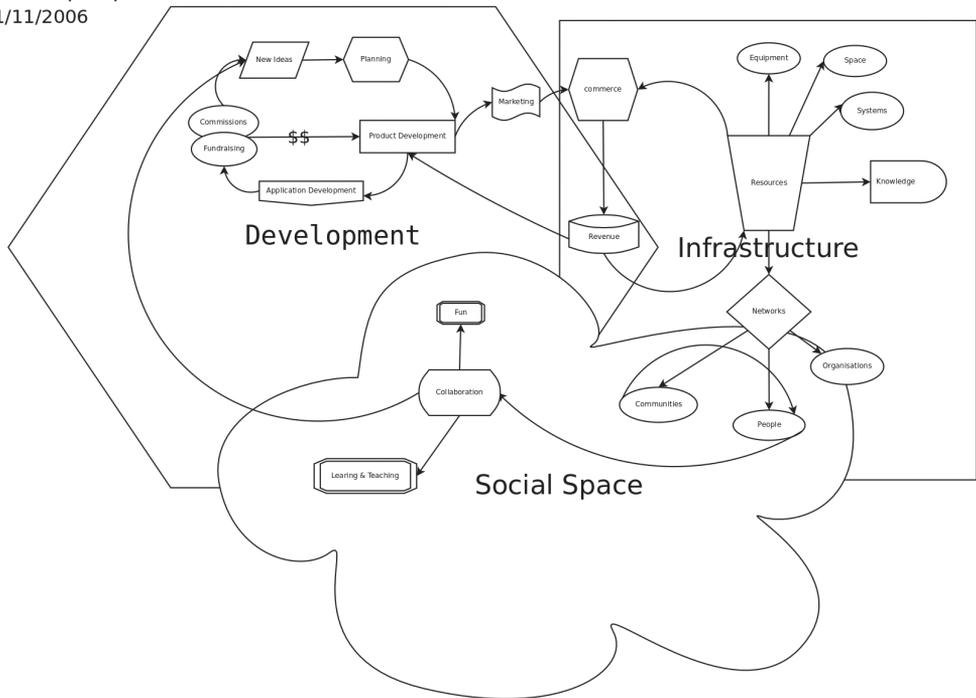
We have to be very clear then, about exactly what we mean by ‘independence.’ A definition that my colleague Mikey Weinkove from our collective *The People Speak*<sup>8</sup> gave me to take to *Wizards of OS* was “being able to tell anyone to fuck off.” Perhaps not in so many words, and not all at the same time (we don’t want to alienate all of our clients simultaneously), but while taking money from whoever writes the cheques, this could be considered a working definition.<sup>9</sup>

In her essay “Precarious straits,”<sup>10</sup> Marina Vishmidt writes that art practices, especially those that attempt to diffuse the process of creativity into a wider social grouping, are still bound, at best, to become forms of cultural/institutional critique because their experimental structures preclude their development of economic stability. In many cases, she’s absolutely right. In the absence of any economic functions other than those of the cultural institution, diffuse and delicate creative processes can be easily reduced to cultural arbitrage. Participation can become stratified into a creative hierarchy in which the artist is an apparatchik for the institution to redirect and transform the collective effort and investment of participants into an art totem, glorifying the artist, and through them, the institution, the sponsors, the state, etc. But Vishmidt chooses not to look beyond the scope of the cultural institution and its interdependent subcultures for examples.

Many cultural economies exist outside of this ‘precarious’ (in the sense of being supplicant, beggarly) relationship to cultural institutions, but at the point that they become economically viable and self-sufficient, they are no longer considered to be art practices. Various ‘underground’ art movements of the sort mentioned in Vishmidt’s article are poor examples of cultural existence outside the orbit of institutions: poor, because subcultures are usually not so far out as to be safe from being pulled in by the gravity of their ‘mainstream’ counterparts.

—find some good examples

The People Speak 0 sum culture business model  
1/11/2006



### **Zero Sum Business model**

The Zero Sum Business model was a street-level response to the economic fictions of ‘crowdsourcing’ and the ‘new economy’ that attended the harnessing of models of distributed authorship to the affective market of ‘Web 2.0’ in the late 2000s. Emerging from Free Software/Free Culture and participatory performance art, our collective, The People Speak, had become sensitized to reading the economic underpinnings of constructed participatory situations with grim immediacy. The deal people got in these situations, we thought, was often a rip-off. Building on ideas such as the “Street Performer Protocol” and critical approaches to ‘open source’ methods of regulating labour, we drew up our own speculative business model designed to match income with expenditure, while growing a mutually accessible pool of production capacities, communication, and knowledge resources. The story of how this speculative business model became a reality has almost been written several times—this is both a brief account of several of those aborted attempts at documentation and another example of one.

A few months after setting up The People Speak Network with Mikey Weinkove and beginning to develop the ideas, art practice, and economy of our small business, I attended the Wizards of OS conference in Berlin. Returning inspired by presenting at Cornelia Sollfrank and Nicolas Malevé’s Art & Copyright workshop, I half-wrote a text called “Not-Just-Business” about the contradictions of ‘independence’ in peer production-based art practices. I was writing the piece with the intention of describing participatory cultural practices that could function as small businesses. The text builds the case for art practices which are not concerned about their work being perceived and valued solely as art, and can therefore construct a ‘good enough’ form of artistic autonomy by developing a sufficiently large and mixed economy of collaborators, clients, and peers, so as not to be entirely dependent on any one funder or sector. The text stops abruptly at the point at which I make the claim that this kind of organization actually exists, with a note to self: “find some good examples.” I couldn’t find any.

I knew that was what we wanted The People Speak to become, but I couldn't finish the text by describing this kind of art/business because it didn't exist yet, and I couldn't think of any other examples I could describe in these terms, so the text remains unfinished.

Instead, over the following year, Mikey Weinkove and I began putting these ideas into practice, trying to share what we learned as we went along. The first articulation of these plans came in September–November 2006 through a series of meetings with Chris Cook (<http://www.opencapital.net/>) and Mary Fee (<http://www.letslinkuk.net/>), who were testing out the possibilities of using the new laws enabling the creation of Limited Liability Partnerships (initially developed for solicitor's firms) as legal and organizational structures capable of distributing value and responsibility in more flexible ways than were usual in standard company incorporation and shared ownership. We documented and shared our aspirations for this process on our wiki ([http://wiki.thepeps.net/index.php?title=Notes\\_On\\_The\\_People\\_Speak\\_LLP](http://wiki.thepeps.net/index.php?title=Notes_On_The_People_Speak_LLP)) with the intention of turning this into a template for other organizations and cultural groups to use and develop. Part of this process of organizational development included the production of a diagram we called the “Zero Sum Culture Business model” outlining the interconnected processes of organizational development, infrastructure provision, and the production of social and cultural spaces. The idea recognized that people were becoming increasingly aware of the value of their cultural participation; for example, in online communities that would later be sold on, with people's active participation being directly monetized as a major asset in the acquisition. We speculated that by making sure the zero-sum business model created no excess value to be hived off elsewhere—beyond the reach of the people interacting then and there in the public space—people would sense that too. We wanted to test whether this would stimulate greater and more generous participation from them and The People Speak as a collective.

Our process of organizational development culminated in late 2007 with a wiki page outlining the aims and objectives of our diffuse and—

by that time fast-growing—collective ([http://wiki.thepeeps.net/index.php?title=The\\_People\\_Speak%27s\\_aims\\_%26\\_objectives](http://wiki.thepeeps.net/index.php?title=The_People_Speak%27s_aims_%26_objectives)). Although we were clear enough about our aims—the ‘why’ of the organization (reproduced below)—the last time we updated the ‘how’ section was in December 2007. That section is full of little ‘notes to self’ about what should be in there: some clearly aspirational, as in “we should formalize our learning/teaching processes so that more people can get involved in what we’re doing”; others completely mundane, such as “our promotional DVD menu should be more explanatory.” The truth was that we just didn’t know how or if the zero-sum culture model would actually work so, once again, finishing the text had to wait for the practice.

Aims:

**Community:** To bring together and encourage networks of talented people to establish diverse and sustainable creative practices.

**Social Space:** To develop structures which engage audiences as participants in the co-creation of imaginative projects.

**Public Domain:** To invest in the Public Domain by sharing the knowledge, ideas, and experience generated by our projects.

**Economy:** To create repeatable, participatory economic models for projects that sustain and expand the network.

Writing this now in 2013, and having left The People Speak several years ago (with Mikey and the collective still going strong), I realize that I missed this chance to document the ‘how’—the detail of how we went from two artists with a bunch of projects in 2006 to a successful small business employing (by 2009) five full-time and fifteen part-time artists, designers, facilitators, software developers, and media producers, and getting people speaking in public spaces all over the world. However, I also realize that this process and the organizational development work we did in practice was actually completely mundane: purchasing insurance, filing VAT returns, organizing stacks of tangled cables after gigs. The work and what we were doing was the focus, and as soon as we had enough demand coming in, the organizational/conceptual issues faded quickly into the background, replaced by pragmatic ad-hoc roles resembling more the structure and behaviour of a large and unwieldy family than a business as such.

If that story ever gets written it will probably come out as a weirdly dysfunctional business strategy book or an inspiring self-sabotage manual for small-business entrepreneurs because the aims of the organization and its members were often at right angles to its financial imperatives. However, reading these aims brings me back to the abandoned argument from my 2006 text: for the potential of not-just-businesses to foster a kind of contingent autonomy through sufficiently diverse dependencies. The incompleteness of our documentation, and the mix of aspiration and structure with messy ad-hoc pragmatism feels very similar to the kind of heterogeneous ‘autonomies’ practiced in Free Software projects and communities.

Perhaps the Zero Sum Business model is a bit like the early days of Free Software production, where small collectives would write their own code and idiosyncratic licenses to go with them, and develop production and distribution principles that made sense given their local cultural and economic environment. Perhaps, as with Free Software, larger organizations and projects like Mozilla or Apache will start to grow to the point where the documentation and the practice become far more widely established and standardized. Unfortunately, once again, it is at this point that the text has to stop in order to wait and see what unfolds in practice.

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**NOTES:**

“Not-Just-Business” was written in September 2006; reassembled along with new reflections for this publication.

1. Video and audio streams are available at <http://www.wizards-of-os.org/index.php?id=2905&L=3>.

2. See Saul Albert, “Useless Utilities,” (2001). Available at <http://twentiethcentury.com/saul/useless.htm>.

3. To attribute it properly, I learned the particularly useful term ‘breeding,’ meaning “to steal or copy in order to make ones living,” at our Talkaoke street-corner chat show in Crisp St. Market during *Node.London* in March 2006. See [http://www.archive.org/details/talkaoke-25-03-2006-Idea\\\_Store\\\_SCAN.FM](http://www.archive.org/details/talkaoke-25-03-2006-Idea\_Store\_SCAN.FM).

4. See Matthew Fuller, “Means of Mutation: notes on I/O/D 4: The Web Stalker” (2003). Available at <http://bak.spc.org/iod/mutation.html>.

5. Ibid.

6. See Saul Albert, “Not-Just-Art” (2003). Available at [http://www.twentiethcentury.com/saul/not\\_just\\_art.htm](http://www.twentiethcentury.com/saul/not_just_art.htm)

7. Pauline van Mourik Broekman, “On being ‘independent’ in a network,” introduction to a panel at the *Free Bitflows* conference, Vienna (2004). See <http://freebitflows.to.or.at/f/about/broekman>.

8. See <http://theeps.net>.

9. Of course it could also be considered a laissez-faire attitude that is easily reified and assimilated into a speculative art economy as a romanticized notion of the sovereign, arrogant artist.

10. Marina Vishmidt, “Precarious straits,” (2005). Available at <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/precarious-straits>.



## CROWDFUNDING: MONETIZING THE CROWD?

Renée Ridgway

- + Not so very long ago the social ‘welfare states’ of Europe<sup>1</sup> provided health care for everyone and a sizeable amount of money for culture, which was generated from tax revenue. Many artists and cultural practitioners had the opportunity to apply for grants, supplemented by patronage, sponsorship, selling their work, or even having jobs. The contemporary discourse in the cultural sector has now shifted and takes its cues from neoliberal policies of management, adopting an ‘everything for the market’ attitude. This has led to Europe’s assimilation of a US-inspired laissez-faire approach to culture, and subsequently transformed cultural practices into the burgeoning imagination of the ‘creative industries.’ This is marked by a particular condition of the state withdrawal of financial support for culture, while emergent forms of online, networked platforms increasingly facilitate private donations. For example, electronic money transfers using digital technologies have enabled microfinance networks that restructure the funding support and patronage previously available to cultural practitioners. These have ensured an even quicker transfer of the private wealth of citizens to individuals within the cultural sector, such as with the phenomenon of ‘crowdfunding.’<sup>2</sup>

Instead of governmental support, increasingly more and more art workers and cultural organizations are being forced to engage with crowdfunding as a legitimate means to finance artistic practice by drawing on their networks; primarily their friends, family, neighbours,

and colleagues. With crowdfunding it now appears as if the network will not only provide attention, feedback, and reputation but also create a means of monetary support for many of these projects, as a surrogate for former governmental or public monies. While this reliance on distributed networks is celebrated, there is very little attention paid to the balance of trade-offs and returns in this model. The excessive reliance on colleagues or 'friends' entails other dynamics in these tit-for-tat exchanges, which need to be unpacked with reference to affect, exploitation, and indebtedness. Relationships with people become even more entangled and, unlike money, which is anonymous, broker agency for artistic projects resulting in a negotiation of social relations. Will crowdfunding en masse lead to a new model for the distribution of wealth, as is claimed, or is it a commodification of one's social relations?

### **Crowdfunding craze**

Every country seems to have at least one national crowdfunding platform. At the moment of writing there are over seven hundred sites worldwide. In Denmark there is Boomerang,<sup>3</sup> whilst in the Netherlands VoordeKunst<sup>4</sup> is more specifically aimed at cultural and art related activities. In the US the most visible platform is Kickstarter,<sup>5</sup> which is also the world's largest (and for-profit) funding platform for creative projects. USA Projects<sup>6</sup> is only open to artists, is non-profit and offers limited 'matching funds' for every applicant. Indiegogo<sup>7</sup> is a worldwide platform where you can raise money for anything, including for-profit ventures, creative ideas or personal needs: facilitating clean water in rural parts of the world, partnering with microfinancing institutions or helping artists without insurance who need surgery. Indiegogo also has the option of 'flexible funding' where you can keep the money you raise, whether or not you meet the goal, whilst Kickstarter and Voordekunst have an 'all or nothing' policy.<sup>8</sup> The Spanish site Goteo.org,<sup>9</sup> in contrast, only supports projects with social, cultural, scientific, educational, technological, or ecological objectives, which generate new opportunities for the improvement of society and the

enrichment of community goods and resources.

What all of these platforms share is their use of digital technologies that unite global networks, connecting projects with people and even monetary support in order to realize them. Instead of a few patrons donating large sums of money, micropatronage facilitates many patrons contributing small amounts via the Internet. Much like the buying of catalogue clothes or Amazon books, online reward-based crowdfunding delivers the goods in the mail. As with other online purchases, there is a service charge for the transaction, either Amazon Payments in the case of Kickstarter, or PayPal and banking services for other platforms. Just like other retailers, the crowdfunding platforms harvest a percentage—VoordeKunst and Kickstarter take 5% (the latter being profitable, according to its founders).

In the past few years, there has been an increase in the demand for monetary remuneration of artistic projects through crowdfunding initiatives. Artists are pressured to ask their colleagues to support their artistic endeavours (financially, and not just with a 'like'). It is routine now for a cultural practitioner to receive two or three emails in the course of a week, or updates on various social media platforms asking for financial donations to support individual projects.<sup>10</sup> Are these social networks strong enough and contacts close enough so that they would, so to speak, pay each other back? Statistics show that of the money that is contributed to crowdfunding campaigns, 75% comes from an already known network and only 25% from random or unknown contributors.<sup>11</sup> In this reciprocal relationship, would someone be able to divide up not only personal time but also personal wealth in order to produce their own works as well as supporting the artistic projects of others?

### **Crowdfunding: 7 hypotheses**

The networks of support are cannibalistic. Facilitated by online technologies, crowdfunding draws on people's own social networks to finance these artistic and cultural projects, yet the practitioner also needs

to fulfil the crowd's (and their network) requests. Concomitantly these online initiatives bring about a range of emotional and affective labour issues, quid pro quo, indebtedness or the repercussions of gifting. In an attempt to understand the link between digital technologies and new forms of remuneration in online contexts, the following hypotheses examine issues of value, affect, and ethics that are all tied up in the monetization of social relations:

*1. Crowdfunding draws on notions of community, acts of volunteerism, and the herd mentality for support.*

What makes crowdfunding so attractive is that anyone can do it, if one has a posse (patrons) on social media to back it up; or, in other words, to finance it. Following the herd has always been part of human nature and nowadays crowdsourced activities, where groups of people come together to accomplish tasks, have been occurring offline as well as online. The crowd acting as patron is presently the motor of crowdfunding platforms. Closely converging with acts of volunteerism and 'do-gooding' neighbourly support, the crowd has been the basis for many foundations of community help. In past decades US volunteerism has fulfilled a certain percentage of incommensurable labour that keeps the economy going and provides community activities for retirees. Since 2010, the present UK policy 'Big Society' demands participation from the public in the form of time and unremunerated labour as the government withdraws from basic services that supported human life: health care, housing, and education. Based on these models, crowdfunding "uses [the campaigner] to tap into a deep-seated belief in our culture that volunteering is an important social value,"<sup>12</sup> and draws on the neighbourhood<sup>13</sup> not only for time but also help in the form of financial support. Yet where does this financial support come from? Family plays a large role in continuing social reproduction and building financial capital. Many community members earn their income outside of the cultural sector (in various businesses, offices, universities, the IT sector, service jobs, management, etc.), and distribute their 'surplus' to

crowdfunding campaigns.

*2. Crowdfunding is not a sustainable solution as a replacement model of public support for arts and culture.*

As the present financial crisis and initiation of austerity measures continue to force drastic reductions in state funding for the culture industry all across Europe, cultural organizations are now also being mandated by their governments to gather up private donations as well as to crowdfund.<sup>14</sup> With less and less grant money and more and more art marketing of commodities, crowdfunding is perceived by governments as a viable alternative to grant-giving foundations. It is seen as part of the new fusion model where private/public partnerships have become the norm.

Public funding for culture is not a solution and nor do these grant proposals differ so much from actuarial applications for crowdfunding. These subsidy applications entail enormous amounts of preparation, bureaucracy and experience, years of previous ‘work,’ along with a high-risk factor. After labouring for free, the application appears before a board of paid ‘experts’ who decide the fate of the application and whether it gets funded—more likely not—effectively resulting in unpaid labour for the applicant. ‘Cultural gambling’ is perhaps not the solution to creative endeavour, yet when weighing up the odds it might still provide more autonomy and higher financial return to the artist or cultural practitioner than crowdfunding. Its original appeal was supposedly the “one-to-one relationship with the artist, without layers of grant. And weren’t donors just a precursor to grants?”<sup>15</sup>

Workers in the ‘culture industry’ are now all being asked to crowdfund, both instead of, and in addition to, applying for state or governmental public funding, because these forms of public monies no longer (or barely) exist.<sup>16</sup> Crowdfunding is now firmly part of cultural policy where this public support is considered to be ‘matched funds’ and positively encouraged.<sup>17</sup> In Europe, crowdfunding is then seen as an ersatz, serving as a replacement for state responsibility with regard to many

types of cultural endeavour. Yet in this case taxpayers would be paying double: first with taxes that are distributed according to how politicians see fit to spend them (i.e., diminishing support for culture, health care, and education); and second by distributing taxpayers' 'surplus income' through crowdfunding initiatives.

*3. The successful rhetoric of crowdfunding campaigns masks the fact that the financial reward not only fails to account for the free labour but also does not even pay for all of the costs incurred.*

Crowdfunding is now being advertised in the media as a solution to 'interference' by the state and as less of a tax burden for citizens because the cultural sector receives less money. In turn people feel more empowered because, unlike their tax money, they have a choice in deciding what projects should be funded or not. To an outsider, crowdfunding looks fairer and even more logical under the conditions of present day financial capitalism. It is coined as the 'democratization of cultural patronage,'<sup>18</sup> promoting the illusion of democracy and participation by allowing the funder to choose where s/he spends her money, instead of governmental control and authority. Yet, with this obfuscation, what is ignored is the invisible labour that goes into every crowdfunding project, in organizing the campaign on the crowdfunding platform (some even outsource the work to professional PR firms in the light of the considerable effort involved).<sup>19</sup>

The investment of labour, materials, and time involved in the production of works for the 'reward-based' crowdfunding model cannot be overlooked. Organizations, especially not-for-profits, are also being asked to crowdfund but many don't have the staff, the resources, or the volunteers to organize a campaign besides all the regular work involved in keeping the organization up and running. If a campaign included a decent paid wage for all of the people involved, it would end up losing much of the money raised. The actual costs of organizing, raising money, and carrying out the campaign are therefore usually excluded or only paid if the project

is successful (if the amount of funding requested has been raised).<sup>20</sup>

*4. Crowdfunding campaigns make affective and unpaid labour invisible by reducing the process to questions of meeting various thresholds.*

Although everyone gets to feel good revelling in the fact that they are participating in a ‘creative project,’ these enjoyable activities are also shamelessly exploited. Tapping into the kindness and generosity of other people includes using the ‘users’ of the Internet—including those who are ‘campaigning’ as well as the ‘backers’ themselves, who decide how and where they distribute their surplus in the form of contributions. Frequently disregarded is the affective labour that has been generated by all the family, friends, neighbours, and colleagues who have been solicited and coerced: “With crowdfunding, much like the egocentricity of social media, we are asked to gather cash from the network, which is the same as gathering ‘friends’ and being ‘liked.’”<sup>21</sup>

As with many invitations we feel obliged to contribute, but this time the transactions are effectively monetizing our social networks. The crowdfunding platform “demands this social fabric, but only extracts from it, giving nothing of social value in return.”<sup>22</sup> In the case of money, the terms of exchange are fixed and commensurability is managed through anonymous exchange; using money to pay for goods and services where we do not know the parties involved. But with services rendered with colleagues or ‘friends’ or even family, other dynamics play a role in these intimate exchanges. Does crowdfunding really promote solidarity as it claims or is it rather a series of paybacks? Indebtedness surfaces and even though the debt is only temporary and resolved with reciprocity, one knows that gifting is never equal. With micro-donations, money is no longer anonymous, and one knows who donated what, how much, and for which type of reward. It becomes a continued negotiation of social relations.

*5. Crowdfunding is a business model that monetizes social networks.*

Ultimately, it is not simply about the amount of funding for cultural practitioners generated from the ‘creative projects’ but also the crowdfunding platforms obtaining their network of friends, family, and colleagues who support them. These social relations are in this way commodified and, ultimately, monetized. With the sharing of links, data, views and visits, the users are tracked and their interests and favourites are stored; and like many other websites that collate personal data, are subsequently sold to third-party profiteers. But it is the corporations who accrue revenue from social media whilst the crowdfunding platforms gain in symbolic capital and profit as middlemen. Their goal is that this network of backers who know the campaigner (75%) can be later harvested and made aware of other projects by visiting their sites and discovering more projects they can support in order to, in turn, become the unknown backers of other projects (25%). This network becomes the investor group of future projects, for both for-profit as well as not-for-profit crowdfunding platforms. Not only does crowdfunding gather investors together, it makes potential campaigners out of them.

Collecting their cut of the private wealth from these networks, as well as the members themselves, is the goal of all crowdfunding platforms. Much like future investment, the numbers of investors add up and are able to keep investing in what could essentially be a fraudulent Ponzi or pyramid scheme. And like all true community endeavours, this sense of belonging is supported by reciprocity: “The true product for sale on Kickstarter is not your art project, but your community and networks.”<sup>23</sup>

*6. Crowdfunding data so far demonstrates that risky and experimental projects (such as artistic ones) are less likely to be supported.*

Crowdfunding platforms serve as a potential partner for supporting the less traditional forms of art commodities and provide a means to finance artistic activities that do not receive public monies. However, projects that are crowdfunded are usually those that are the most popular, much like Google’s Page Rank where the indexing of linking, views, and hits is

ranked higher. This imposes a restriction on artistic freedom, because the project is now dependent upon popularity, not necessarily its content or value. The most successful crowdfunding campaigns are projects that are very popular, the artist already known, and have an extensive fan base.<sup>24</sup> More obscure projects would need a particular use-value for a specific interest group in order to be financed. If you want to develop a project for a niche culture or a small audience then you either have to attract an interest group who wants to see the project financed, or rely on your own network (75%). Alternatively, you might get lucky with the sway of the crowd (25%).

It is those projects that have a higher risk for investors that do not get funded: the ones that question, shock, startle, and perhaps scandalize the status quo, which can't be contained within a box and are not especially palatable to the general public. "Experimental projects, risky or critical, need more funding and are marginalized within the general context of crowdfunding platforms."<sup>25</sup> Populist politics extends and ever-increasingly determines the radical potentials and subversive intentions of certain artistic and cultural activities.

Is 'art' really taking on new forms once crowdfunded? These conceptual ideas are similar to the artistic proposals in grant writing, only now (if they are popular enough) they are being financed by individual investors rather than the state. The 'creative projects' are being marketed as pre-purchases, with backers receiving a share of the artistic practice in the form of artefacts, decision making, or social capital.<sup>26</sup> Are these successful 'creative projects' art, or rather examples of good 'cultural entrepreneurship,'<sup>27</sup> as is increasingly expected of artists and creative practitioners in neoliberal societies? It is an investment of time, energy, labour, and creativity on the part of the campaigner to be geared towards the market; concomitantly the backer feels like a shareholder, an investor in a speculative 'creative project' where the pay-off is not only the material reward but, for some, the enticement of future backing for one's own campaign.

*7. The distributed nature of funding facilitated by global technology networks offers a promise of support and subsidy that is disproportionately larger than the available corpus of anonymous private donations.*

Drastic cuts to the public sector and funds for culture have led to an explosion of crowdfunding projects.<sup>28</sup> The people who initiate them are acutely aware of the high-risk potential of these projects because there isn't enough public wealth available to finance them all. Moreover, the new model of micropatronage for the distribution of private wealth, to support the cultural sector, is riddled with a fundamental paradox: in order to seek financial support the cultural practitioner has to become a source of support for other stakeholders in the network. Our relationships with others then become even more entangled, with additional exchanges of money between colleagues that incite mutual support. Yet more often than not, financing is not reciprocated, and those supported do not like the project, the reward, are not interested or are cash-poor, indebted to the bank or unable to support others when called upon for a return.

The inherent trust implied in these networks builds relationships, in which one is mutually dependent on others. Where one once supported each other morally, with time and attention—a crowd of interest—one is now asked to finance the pre-production of forthcoming goods, whether they be films, videos, installations, community projects, or even more material productions, such as publications or the fabrication of monuments. The 'creative project' is pre-financed based on the trust contained within those social relations, the track record of the campaigner, and whether it is considered to be a 'good idea.' What about the results from this exchange? Would the social bonds be stronger because of mutual support? If money were part of the equation, would it then deepen the relationships with others? Would one need to stay in contact (like the Mafia) in order to be 'paid back,' for example, or would this also only happen virtually, like the monetary transaction?

With regard to public funding for the arts, Kickstarter believes that it can be "wielded as a tool for public agencies to show that there is an

incredible appetite for creative works in the public sphere.” They see the “enormous public outpouring as support for creative projects on Kickstarter sites and others as fodder for fighting for increased government support in the arts and culture sectors, as there is obviously an enormous appetite for creative engagement demonstrated through the explosive growth in this form of funding.”<sup>29</sup> Why would this private financial support of the general public encourage sustainability or incite increased governmental funding for ‘creative projects’? Rather, it shows that as long as people, patrons, and backers donate their surplus to crowdfunding campaigns, there is less of a need for public monies to finance cultural production. The question remains then, whether these backers are able and willing to support each other in terms of financial reciprocity.

### **Funding the crowds**

*From ‘taxing’ our networks to tax deductions for the wealthy, to governmental taxation for the campaigner.*

Throughout history a model of patronage has been developed where wealthy private benefactors have invested in and supported culture, through philanthropy, non-profit entities, and donations to society. The same situation of social reproduction remains where the workers’ work is being privatized and turned into someone else’s private wealth, and those with this money still decide what gets funded with their surplus. This redistribution of surplus has enabled patrons to support cultural projects as tax deductions and to finance many foundations for culture. Contributing to a crowdfunding campaign can be another viable means to avoid paying (more) tax.<sup>30</sup>

Philanthropy, although having the appearance of gifting, elicits control and censorship as well as reputation and attention with the recognition of the patron. The wealthy may use crowdfunding as a tax write-off, on condition that they don’t receive anything in return, otherwise it would constitute a purchase. In contrast with reward crowdfunding they pre-purchase concepts and buy a reward as if shopping online. With digital

transactions, crowdfunding now enables the micropatron to be rebranded as a donor, with their name appearing on the credits of the film, on the sides of the building, or on publicity materials, and so on. Crowdfunding remains a micropatronage model without liberation.

As a campaigner, the money you receive from crowdfunding is subject to tax, and depending on one's status as a cultural entrepreneur, small business person, or freelancer, taxation occurs without the benefits of either employment or the ability to use the campaign as a tax write-off. Therefore the money generated from the crowdfunding campaign is viewed as income.<sup>31</sup> One is taxed on the small amount one receives as the crowdfunding platform siphons off a percentage along with the transaction companies. The donations are also subject to taxation in certain instances as they are considered a purchase (when one receives a reward) and not a gift.

#### *A new model for the distribution of wealth?*

As crowdfunding sites continue to mushroom worldwide they are clearly a force to be reckoned with. Many of these platforms include the previously mentioned types of crowdfunding: donation, lending, equity, and reward. Debt crowdfunding is also expanding, with growth in 2012 and more expected in years to come. The legal framework for all types of crowdfunding will most likely be passed into legislation in the US and Europe in 2013. Crowdfunding platforms are becoming more and more international, harvesting money from people all over the world, with free API technology made available to make it even easier for groups of people to charge and collect money for any activity. In 2012, the amount of donations from platforms has doubled, even tripled, and 2013 promises to see an increase as the trend of crowdfunding spreads as even more people find it an acceptable means to raise money from their networks for their causes. Yet the statistics show that the ratio of funders—75% known and 25% unknown—has remained the same.<sup>32</sup>

Instead of being just another model that redistributes surplus,

perhaps there are alternatives to support cultural production that can be developed from crowdfunding. A future scenario might include a financial model in which the amount that we contribute to the crowdfunding campaign is a certain percentage of collective authorship in the project that will be financed. In this collaborative endeavour, the audience (those who contribute financial support) obtains distributed ownership of the works that are financed. If crowdfunding is made successful with the financial support of the multitude, shouldn't we also be speaking of co- or multi-authorship? In its current form, the campaigner ostensibly retains authorship yet the platform owners retain property rights over the online campaign.<sup>33</sup> If the commons are fronting the cash, why are the commons not reaping the benefits?

By breaking down the system of private property and looking at crowdfunding projects where communal good is supported by the community, for the community, and of the community, we come across some examples of 'alternative crowdfunding.' Now, more than ever, shared authorship and collective agency is what makes things happen. Producers and users are coming in much closer contact with one another, and in the process the relations between 'artist' and 'audience' are shifting.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps eventually the 'donors' who support the projects might join in the production.<sup>35</sup> Crowdfunding projects are not usually released with a free license, but there could be projects designed to fulfil these criteria, as 'crowdfunding the commons' where the "results can be shared, reused, remixed, copied, replicated in whatever form."<sup>36</sup> Therefore, "crowdfunding is a promising field because it can address many of the dynamics that underlie the crisis of the cultural economy and its transformation from a commodity to a commons-based environment."<sup>37</sup> This is the premise of goteo.org, a "social network for co-financing and collaborating with creative projects that further the common good."<sup>38</sup> In other words, it follows the principle that "those who use the platform to raise money should control the platform, collectively, and share in the benefits generated."<sup>39</sup> In order to reach a 'technical democracy' the manner in which 'hybrid forums' and

civic engagement play a crucial role is key: offline in the public aspect of confrontation and discussion, along with the organization and execution of the project, and online with the collating of funds to facilitate it.<sup>40</sup>

Crowdfunding in its present form is not a self-sustaining model.<sup>41</sup> Campaigners are unremunerated for most of their labour and paid substandard wages for the production of the project. Networks are of the highest value, being tapped into by the campaigner and harvested by the platform. Financing is sought from patrons (workers) who decide to spend their surplus income as funders. The funders do not end up with financial returns for their investment, nor do they have a share in the authorship. At the same time, personal relationships are commodified by an exchange of money that was previously not required between these networks of people. Dmytri Kleiner points out:

As such, it can never grow beyond the level of the retained income workers can sustainably divert from consumption, at the expense of workers' savings. This means, that crowdfunding cannot directly have a significant effect on the social distribution of wealth unless what it funds is itself something that directly challenges political or economic power.<sup>42</sup>

As technology enables an even quicker flow of capital, the state is no longer held accountable, and it is increasingly private bodies, either individual or corporate, who decide what will be financed and for how much.<sup>43</sup> Developing new cultural economies in our increasingly neo-feudalistic societies means looking beyond micro-networked patronage models such as reward-based crowdfunding, and instead focusing on shared authorship and collective returns. That is the future, if one wants to be remunerated for cultural endeavour that isn't exclusively market driven.

5

**NOTES:**

1. A welfare state is the concept of government in which the state plays a key role in the protection and promotion of the economic and social well-being of its citizens. It is based on the principles of equality of opportunity, equitable distribution of wealth, and public responsibility for those unable to avail themselves of the minimal provisions for a good life. The general term may cover a variety of forms of economic and social organization. See <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/639266/welfare-state>. In this article, I am in particular referring to the recent history of the Netherlands, where I live and work. However, since 2010 many welfare states of Europe have implemented austerity measures because of the 'financial crisis,' leading to drastic cuts in health, education, public transportation, and culture along with the destabilization of the euro. Yet the governments have bailed out many banks and have even nationalized them.
2. There are four different types of crowdfunding: reward-based, donation-based, equity-based, and lending-based crowdfunding. The focus within the cultural sector is reward-based, in which a non-financial reward, or 'perk,' usually a limited edition print, or a cultural artefact, is manufactured in exchange for monetary contributions. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crowd\\_funding](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crowd_funding).
3. See <http://boomerang.dk>.
4. See <http://voordekunst.nl>.
5. See <http://kickstarter.org>.
6. See <http://www.usaprojects.org>.
7. See <http://indiegogo.org>.
8. The regulation of these sites is constantly in flux. Presently the strategy with the 'all or nothing' policy is to have a 'micropatron' waiting in the wings at the 11th hour when the goal has not been reached, to bail out the campaigner at the last minute in order to obtain the financial goal.
9. See <http://goteo.org>.
10. According to Kickstarter statistics, the average crowdfunding campaigns are between USD 1000 and USD 10,000 and 'rewards' or 'perks' are offered in return, the type dependant on the amount of the donation. Assuming one supported 8 projects a month at USD 50 per project, one would pay out USD 400 a month. If one were to pay out USD 4800 a year for two years, one would spend USD 9600 on others' projects. Let's say one wants to put a project on Kickstarter and one is asking USD 9600 from all contacts, colleagues, neighbours, friends, and family. Could one trust those who one supported to contribute in return? Would all (192 people) also pay USD 50 for one's own project?
11. This information is well hidden and not publicized. The 75% to 25% proportion

was announced by VoordeKunst on 22 January 2013; and Kickstarter shows similar stats (albeit cryptically) in their “Best of Kickstarter 2012.” See <http://www.kickstarter.com/year/2012>.

12. Josh MacPhee, “Who’s the Shop Steward on Your Kickstarter?” *The Baffler*, no. 21 (2012). Available at [http://www.thebaffler.com/past/whos\\_the\\_shop\\_steward\\_on\\_your\\_kickstarter](http://www.thebaffler.com/past/whos_the_shop_steward_on_your_kickstarter).

13. Lewis Winter, a designer in Melbourne, Australia, has given financial support to 373 projects. He says: “I think Kickstarter helps people do something a lot of us have forgotten how to do—ask our neighbours for help.” Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/07/magazine/the-trivialities-and-transcendence-of-kickstarter.html?pagewanted=4&r=0>.

14. For instance, see [http://www.mondriaanfonds.nl/Nieuws/item/Nieuwe\\_regelingen/](http://www.mondriaanfonds.nl/Nieuws/item/Nieuwe_regelingen/); [http://www.mondriaanfonds.nl/Nieuws/item/Mondriaan\\_Fonds\\_voordekunst/](http://www.mondriaanfonds.nl/Nieuws/item/Mondriaan_Fonds_voordekunst/); [http://www.mondriaanfonds.nl/Activiteiten/Alternatieve\\_financiering/](http://www.mondriaanfonds.nl/Activiteiten/Alternatieve_financiering/).

15. Rob Walker, Interview with Kickstarter founders Perry Chen and Yancey Strickler (2012). Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/07/magazine/the-trivialities-and-transcendence-of-kickstarter.html?pagewanted=4&r=0>.

16. In the European Union, millions of euros earmarked for culture are even being distributed to certain organizations in the Netherlands so that they can organize seminars to teach cultural practitioners how to crowdfund! See [http://www.cultuur-ondernemen.nl/nieuws/agenda/-/asset\\_publisher/GV8h/content/crowdfunding-1](http://www.cultuur-ondernemen.nl/nieuws/agenda/-/asset_publisher/GV8h/content/crowdfunding-1). In the US, Kickstarter has now started working with “private foundations, arts councils, and city governments to wrap their minds around what Kickstarter can mean to them as a ‘complement’ for their ongoing efforts.” (Email exchange on 24 October 2012, with Stephanie Pereira, Director of Kickstarter’s Art Programme).

17. For example, in the Netherlands, VoordeKunst is now partnered with the Mondriaan Funds, whose new policy (as of 1 January 2013) includes a personal contribution of EUR 3500 for project subsidies, including money raised from crowdfunding.

18. See <http://www.eenc.info/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/DR%C3%B6thler-KWenzlaff-Crowdfunding-Schemes-in-Europe.pdf>.

19. In order to crowdfund one has to do a lot of lobbying, social media advertisement and emailing. First, there is the labour involved in organizing the campaign on the crowdfunding platform: making the introductory video, sending out emails, posting on all social media sites and lest we forget, emailing reminders. The time, energy and labour involved in running the campaign, (some campaigners even outsource the work to professional PR firms), not to mention the numerous updates and “thank-you” messages afterwards, all add up to indebtedness of successful campaigns.

20. In short, workers can expect to earn about 30% less than expected at the end of the process. See Silvia Caparrós, “Experiencias de crowdfunding en el estado Español y Cataluña,” *X-net report* (2012): 16, 17. Available at <http://whois--x.net/>.
21. John Hopkins (2012). See <http://www.mail-archive.com/nettime-l@mail.kein.org/msg01310.html>.
22. MacPhee, “Who’s the Shop Steward on Your Kickstarter?”
23. Ibid.
24. According to Kickstarter(2012), Amanda Palmer is the highest successful music campaigner so far (USD 1,192,793) although afterwards she didn’t pay local musicians while on tour (see <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/culture/2012/10/amanda-palmers-kickstarter-scandal.html>). Whoopi Goldberg ostensibly needed funds (USD 73,764) for her documentary I Got Somethin’ to tell You (see <http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1085942094/whoopi-goldbergs-documentary-i-got-somethin-to-tel?ref=live>).
25. Caparrós, “Experiencias de crowdfunding en el estado Español y Cataluña”: 16.
26. Jason Eppink’s ‘Kickbackstarter’ is an art project in which he rounded up donations as a Kickstarter campaign to enable him to decide which campaigns he deemed worthy. This ‘creative project’ was not accepted by Kickstarter as a campaign, though his website is a clone of Kickstarter’s. See <http://kickbackstarter.com>.
27. MacPhee, “Who’s the Shop Steward on Your Kickstarter?”
28. See <http://thesoholoft.com/global-list-of-crowdfunding-sites/>.
29. Email exchange with Stephanie Pereira.
30. For more detail on this, see *Daily Crowdsourcing*, <http://dailycrowdsourcing.com/crowdsourcing-help/case-studies/1004-understanding-crowdfunding-fees>.
31. A successful campaign requires hard work and in some cases, on time investment, fees and taxes imposed on results mean that many users would reconsider whether to use this mechanism to make future projects. See Caparrós, “Experiencias de crowdfunding en el estado Español y Cataluña”: 17.
32. According to Kickstarter, in 2012: 2,241,475 people (up 134% from 2011) pledged USD 319,786,629 (up 221% since 2011) and USD 274,391,721 was collected (up 238% from 2011). Of which 570,672 people backed two or more projects; 50,047 people backed ten or more projects; 452 people backed 100 or more projects. The most popular pledge amount is USD 25. Successful project average: USD 5487. Music had the most funded projects: 5,067. Games had the most money pledged at USD 83,000,000. Art had 3,783 projects launched, of

which 1837 were 'successful' with USD 10,477,939 pledged by 155,782 people. Available at <http://www.kickstarter.com/year/2012>.

33. For example, see Indiegogo's Property Rights statement: "Except for your User Content, the Service and all materials therein or transferred thereby, including, without limitation, software, images, text, graphics, illustrations, logos, patents, trademarks, service marks, copyrights, photographs, audio, videos, music, and User Content (the 'Indiegogo Content'), and all Intellectual Property Rights related thereto, are the exclusive property of Indiegogo and its licensors."

34. Felix Stalder, "Crowdfunding the Commons: Goteo.org Interview," (2012). Available at <http://www.shareable.net/blog/crowdfunding-the-commons-interview>.

35. Axel Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life and Beyond: from production to produsage* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008).

36. Eric Kluitenberg (2012). Available at <http://www.mail-archive.com/nettime-l@mail.kein.org/msg01336.html>.

37. Stalder, "Crowdfunding the Commons."

38. Ibid.

39. MacPhee, "Who's the Shop Steward on Your Kickstarter?"

40. Organizations such as Brickstarter are attempting to improve upon the Kickstarter model with a social economy. The voices of the people contained within the platform gather together and use tools to form collaborative proposals; communities are involved in the experience and can follow the progress of the project as well as participate. The involvement of citizens in everyday decision-making about their environment is likely to result in outcomes that are more inclusive, holistic, faster, scalable, and better, as they are decisions "owned" by the citizens: in other words, sustainable. Dan Hill, "Conversation with Rodrigo Araya," (2012), Tironi Asociados, Chile. Available at <http://brickstarter.org/conversation-rodrigo-araya-tironi-asociados/>.

41. See Caparrós, "Experiencias de crowdfunding en el estado Español y Cataluña": 16.

42. Dmytri Kleiner (2012). Available at <http://www.mail-archive.com/nettime-l@mail.kein.org/msg01335.html>.

43. In regard to the general direction of patronage, investment, and funding regarding the arts, the figure of the High Net-Worth Individual is ever-increasing as are private trusts. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/High-net-worth\\_individual](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/High-net-worth_individual).

"Why it's you Ben! I warn't noticing."

"Say—I'm going in a swimming, *I* am. Don't you wish you could? But of course you'd druther *work*—wouldn't you? Course you would!"

Tom contemplated the boy a bit, and said:



'AIN'T THAT WORK?

"What do you call work?"

"Why ain't *that* work?"

Tom resumed his whitewashing, and answered carelessly:

"Well, maybe it is, and maybe it aint. All I know, is, it suits Tom Sawyer."

"Oh come, now, you don't mean to let on that you *like* it?"

The brush continued to move.

"Like it? Well I don't see why I oughtn't to like it. Does a boy get a chance to whitewash a fence every day?"

That put the thing in a new light. Ben stopped nibbling his apple. Tom swept his brush daintily back and forth—stepped back to note the effect—added a touch here and there—criticised the effect again—Ben watching

every move and getting more and more interested, more and more absorbed. Presently he said:

"Say, Tom, let *me* whitewash a little."

Tom considered, was about to consent; but he altered his mind:

"No—no—I reckon it wouldn't hardly do, Ben. You see, Aunt Polly's awful particular about this fence—right here on the street, you know—but if it was the back fence I wouldn't mind and *she* wouldn't. Yes, she's awful particular about this fence; it's got to be done very careful; I reckon there ain't one boy in a thousand, maybe two thousand, that can do it the *way* it's got to be done.

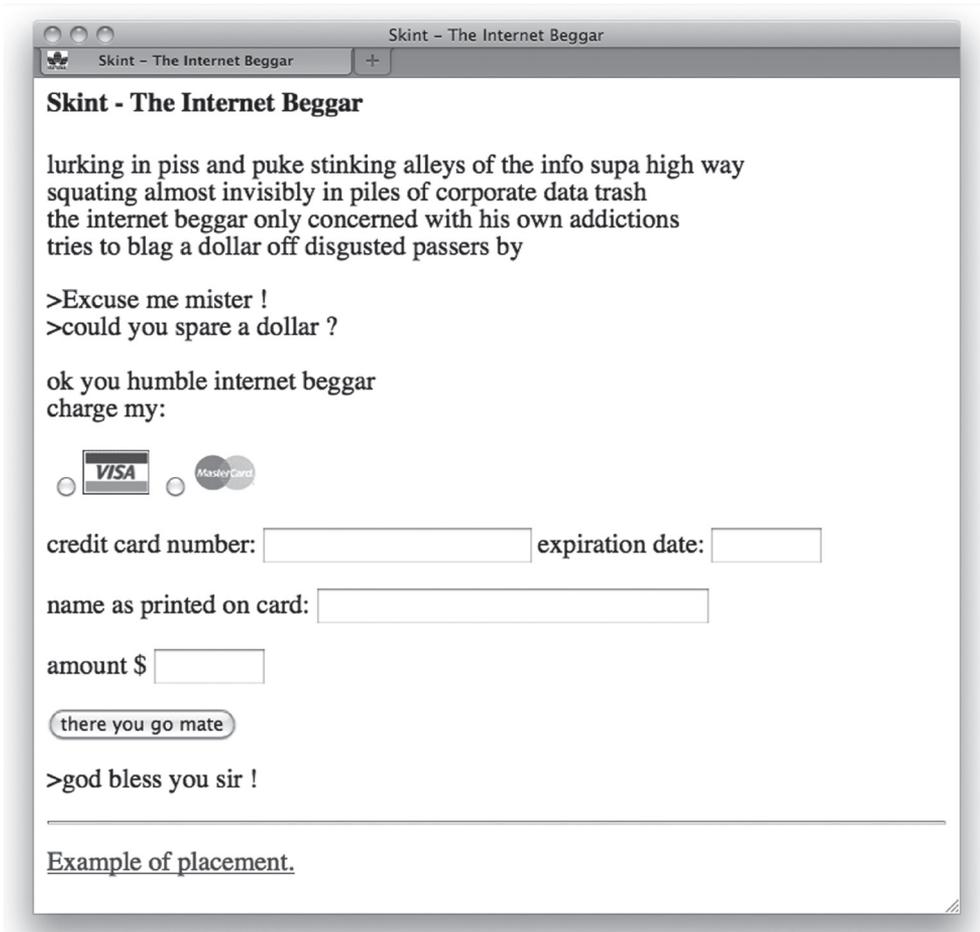
Page from Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876). Illustration by True Williams. Source Gutenberg.org.

In the story, Tom has to whitewash the picket fence but does the chore with fained pleasure, making his friends consider the task a privilege and to be so envious that they not only takeover the job of painting the white picket fence but pay him.



# SKINT - THE INTERNET BEGGAR (1996)

Heath Bunting



Available at <http://www.irational.org/skint/>



## FRIENDS WITH MONEY

Geert Lovink & Nathaniel Tkacz

+ I like challenging authority.  
—Max Keiser

It is time to combine radical critiques of global finance with investigations into emerging revenue models, payment systems, and experimental currencies. We believe that these trajectories should be linked and feed off each other. It is not enough to demand a reform of the financial sector and hope for a return to Keynesian employment policies. Our attempt is situated inside contemporary network cultures. For the past decades the informal nature of networks meant that the buzzing communication sphere was perceived as an autonomous realm, a world apart from ‘official’ reality with its formalized social and economic relations. The rise of high-speed trading over the past 15 years has shown how fast niche software, still under development, can take centre stage. This is not just about memes that come and go. So far, relations between networked subjects have rarely been primarily monetary in nature but that can change overnight. Until recently, if money circulated in the Internet economy, it either did so through traditional direct purchases of goods and services (for instance, through e-commerce) or indirectly, behind the back of the user, through advertisements such as web banners and the sale of private data. If we want to step up our critiques of the Googles and Facebooks of the world and their culture of organized cheating, it is important to start to

make the economic dimensions of the digital more explicit and visible. An important first step could be to remove the terms ‘free’ and ‘open’ from the marketers. The gesture of giving away for free should once again become a genuine gift, with financial exchanges taking place on a peer-to-peer level.

In economic textbooks it is commonly written that money functions first and foremost as a medium of exchange. Indeed, money’s other functional qualities—storing and measuring value—lend themselves equally to its status as media, perhaps the first of all computational media. Conversely, the functioning of finance and general economic activity has always rested on complex systems of media. Despite this recognition in mainstream economics of money-as-medium, few have taken such a coupling seriously. It is now impossible to conceive finance without reference to its mediation and its situated-ness in network cultures. There are new and emerging media of finance and it is time for the arts, humanities, and activism to get involved in the discussion of its protocols and architectures.

The dominant economic model of the outgoing neoliberal Internet era remains the Free. The Free works in various ways that combine new and old (media) techniques. The Free operates through advertisements and data profiling, where ‘you are the product.’ The Free operates through ‘harnessing user contributions’ where you create a product, a product for other users, but not *the* product, which remains ads and data profiles. The most novel operation of the Free, however, comes about with the rise of (social media) platforms. Here the Free is fundamentally speculative, based on an imagined timeline geared completely towards the future. In the future there will be revenues and profit. The Free ushers in a new form of anticipatory capitalism, where it is not so much imagined or prototype products and services (to be pitched to venturists) that are anticipated and fed back into the present for speculation, but entire markets. The platform tries to steal market share from other platforms, but only to create its own internal market. ‘If you build it first, all business will come to you,’ is the mantra of anticipatory capitalism. The promise of the successful

platform is a mass of platform-dependents—‘users’ who are locked in via their own emotional ties and previous identity work (self-presentation)—who have nowhere else to go. Instead of markets, anticipatory capitalism creates monopolies. More accurately, it creates private monopoly markets: markets under the control of a single enterprise.

The flipside of the Free, or better, its back end, is the Withdrawn. The exchange of goods and services takes place ‘once removed’ from the interface and the sharing of content—and although promotional creep continues, it cannot become too visible, too present, or the game is up and the crowds will leave. The Withdrawn must not be understood as a retreat, but a shying away. It is value extraction as shameful practice: ‘Just don’t let me see it.’

The ideology of the Free only benefits first movers backed by venture capital (VC), who aspire to become monopolists. The VC construction makes sure there is enough investment to knock out competition through cynical tools (labelled for outsiders as ‘creative’) such as viral marketing, creative bookkeeping and internal management tricks. In order to get the highest market share as soon as possible, investments are necessary right now: cloud infrastructure, marketing, global presence. In 2008, *Wired* editor-in-chief Chris Anderson summarized the Free ideology just before it lost its innocence and its secret, seductive side.<sup>1</sup> In the wake of the unfolding global financial crisis, Free remained the default for many services, but they also lost their aura of invincibility. ‘If you’re not paying for it then you are the product’ is now a common insight, shared in frequent Facebook debates. The criticism of free and open goes back as far as the late 1990s<sup>2</sup> and has become louder and more pronounced over the past few years.<sup>3</sup> But what is to be done if you do not want to join the innovative entrepreneurial rat race? What if you have other ideas about sustainable growth, and paying the ones who really contribute (not just those who work in infrastructure)? What if you prefer ‘slow communication’ and prioritize local and networked economies that have disassociated themselves from the destructive global banking circuit?

Whether general and abstract critiques of money-as-such are justified and are a healthy guide in life, remains to be seen. Thanks to David Graeber's bestseller *Debt*<sup>4</sup> and the related anti-debt movements, there is a growing attention to the mounting debt problem of students, house owners, and other members of the declining middle class. But disgust of money outright (which, in times of crisis can so easily be politicized and mutate into organized anti-Semitism) also keeps us away from how we can imagine redistributing wealth, rebuilding public infrastructures, and designing new models of value creation. In times of economic crisis we do not merely need more money; we push for drastic measures on the top in combination with new models for small (networked) units to generate income.

Today's real-time flows of global finance reflect the technical infrastructure they are conducted on. Screen interfaces, information visualizations, financial models, and trading algorithms comprise the media ecology of contemporary financial practice, organizing routine operations and guiding decision-making processes in a probabilistic fashion. To note the complexity of the situation has become a common trope of government regulators seeking to simplify the system. But the unknowability of the 'deep waters' and 'dark pools' of finance runs deep. Attempts to democratize finance through electronic markets and high-speed trading platforms—in the name of transparency and openness—turn out to be nothing more than a libertarian dream of programmers who, in the end, only seem to contribute to secretive 'algo wars,' leaving only the biggest, most sophisticated, connected firms to seriously compete. As a result of this, author of *Dark Pools*, Scott Patterson, speaks of "an algorithmic tragedy of the commons, in which all players, acting in their self-interest, spawned a systematically dangerous market that could threaten the global economy."<sup>5</sup>

Competitive advantage increasingly derives from securing state-of-the-art material infrastructures, geographical proximity to the main switches of trading platforms (known as 'co-location'), the ability

to generate the best predictive models, and the capacity to act on these models using the patented financial algorithms of automated trading. With these technical, material, and legal barriers—barriers to entry in economic speak—it is not possible for ordinary citizens to know the contemporary state of the arts in the world of finance (even if they are willing to trawl through the piles of books that attempt to diagnose what went wrong in 2008). The experts themselves also work in a space of known unknowns, not only trying to counter future market uncertainty (via derivatives, futures, swaps, etc.), but also the strategic actions of competitors and the unpredictability of their own automated trading tools (due to developments in machine learning). Models have come to replace the seer and strategy takes the specific form of game theory. Indeed, while the ‘gamification’ meme continues to trend, becoming the preferred means of society (to any end), Aristotle had already formulated a vision of finance as the gamification of the economy, M-C-M, and Rudolf Hilferding did the rest in his 1910 classic *Das Finanzkapital*. All the rest, from 1929 to 2008, is history.

In global finance, electronic trading has come to replace the spectacle of the trading pit and its market makers. As anywhere, computational processes are now totally routine, and because of this, economic practices develop computational characteristics. Consider how automated high-frequency trading co-emerges with a distinct form of technical accident: the so-called flash crash of May 2010, which reportedly wiped out one trillion US dollars of wealth, was the catastrophic result of algorithms working *as designed* but in conditions unforeseen. As a ‘flash crash,’ the computational glitch takes on decidedly financial traits (and ramifications). Indeed, flash crashes have become increasingly regular in high-frequency trading to such a degree that we can rightly call contemporary finance ‘glitchy.’ Whereas a decade ago it was cool for traders to look down on small investors and pension savings of ordinary citizens who could not keep up, creating a ‘hunter-seeker battlefield’ that fed ‘Uncle Joe and Auntie Millie to the sharks,’ the present situation has

turned against autonomous computer systems themselves. Either these financial weapons will be decommissioned altogether, ending the arms race, or we will see a desperate attempt to reform, postponing the Big Breakdown with meaningless speed limit regulations.<sup>6</sup> To be clear, we are not suggesting that it's a simple matter of cleaning (or regulating) a few bugs in the system.

Attempts to know the operations of finance at the level of practice and with technical rigour have been made by those working in the small field of Social Studies of Finance—an offshoot of Science and Technology Studies. Some of their insights have included: 1) that financial markets are “post-social,” where traders’ primary relationship is with screens and other telecommunication devices and where a “global market is entirely exteriorized and embodied on computer screens”<sup>7</sup>; 2) that markets are multiple and can be designed in different ways (leading to different outcomes and consequences); 3) that the devices and material infrastructures of financial markets are central to the operations of finance (its design); 4) that methods of economic description, such as modelling, are equally inscriptive (that is, they act on economic situations as much as describe them, influencing how decisions are made or become embedded in tools that can significantly reconfigure the market). All of these insights are now taken for granted. The question for this field is the extent to which their technical and material analysis connects to the political (as Chantal Mouffe calls it), and therefore to lived antagonism. For example, Donald Mackenzie ends his recent book by calling for an opening up of the “black boxes of finance,” noting that “market design is a political matter” which must include “a nuanced politics of technology” that actively seeks to shape processes of innovation.<sup>8</sup> Despite such desires, which are admirable, the kind of (ontological) politics performed in this descriptive work has remained largely invisible throughout the ongoing crisis. It is also unclear to what extent a commitment to tinkering with dominant market structures can be generalized as a political strategy or whether, instead, more radical (technical) interventions are required.

Critical responses to the ongoing financial crises have taken several forms. One trajectory has oriented itself largely around negating the present—especially the asymmetrical bailout of those ‘too big to fail.’ ‘Occupy,’ ‘Strike the Debt,’ ‘End Austerity,’ and ‘Down with the 1%,’ are some of the refrains of this tendency. Proponents of a more pragmatist attitude argue that we will somehow weather the storm. When there is no alternative, capitalism comes to resemble the weather: sometimes it rains, there are droughts—and that’s it. We can argue to what extent the weather is human-made, but in the meantime we will have to stick with its (predictable) ups and downs. Even though we can imagine organizing the social along different principles, for the time being we are stuck inside the Capitalist Sphere and can only speculate on the implications of all the cybernetic networks coming down together.

Another response is the legitimate call to first of all get a better understanding of the dark world of finance—and high-speed trading in particular. These efforts go back to the work done by Saskia Sassen who, as early as the 1990s, drew convincing lines of dependencies between electronic trading, global cities, social movements, and Internet cultures. A more technical approach comes from the software studies academics that emphasize the importance of gaining a better understanding of the role of algorithms and bots.<sup>9</sup> Yet another trajectory, the one that interests us most, focuses on the development of alternative forms of money and finance outside of the mainstream banking system. Microcredit and barter, crowdfunding, P2P banking, time banks, mobile money and net currencies are examples of these parallel strategies. We can ask ourselves how the production of such financial alternatives is positioned in relation to the broader critique of global finance and whether it is actually possible to operate as autonomous systems outside the influence of national banks, the US dollar, and the influence of credit card companies? If there is “no right life in the wrong one,” as Adorno stated,<sup>10</sup> how should we read these exercises, presuming that they resist the rhetoric of innovation (if not actively, then at least in a passive way)?

### **Tales from the cryptocurrency**

Alternative forms of exchange emerge for a number of reasons, including structural failure, group marginalization, and more strategic, proactive interventions. Digital money is no exception. In the 1980s, Michael Linton developed a computerized system for the facilitation of LETS (Local Exchange Trading Schemes), which he named LETSystem. This system sought to “marry the efficiency of commercial barter with the liberatory potential of the countercultural exchanges.”<sup>11</sup> In the 1990s, David Chaum’s DigiCash was thought to be the game changer.<sup>12</sup> Chaum was a pioneer in applying cryptographic techniques to currency, effectively turning money into a cryptographically encoded string of numbers. In 1994, Steven Levy wrote a feature article in *Wired*, which detailed this Dutch project and others of the day in what we can now understand as the first serious flirtation with digital cryptocurrency. Passages from this old piece could have been written yesterday:

David Chaum has devoted his life... to creating cryptographic technology that liberates individuals from the spooky shadows of those who gather digital profiles. In the process, he has become the central figure in the evolution of electronic money, advocating a form of it that fits neatly into a privacy paradigm, whereby the details of people’s lives are shielded from the prying eyes of the state, the corporation, and various unsavoury elements.<sup>13</sup>

After DigiCash we had Mondex and more recently MintChip. Is there anything we can learn from these historical forerunners?

Today, Bitcoin has taken over the cryptocurrency mantle. The first thing that must be asked of Bitcoin is: Why now? Has the ‘free’ consensus finally broken down? Is it that Levy’s words (and Chaum’s sentiments) suddenly ring more true as the reality of the Big Data Society unfolds before us? Or can we put the early success of Bitcoin down to the technical achievements of Bitcoin’s chief architect and mythical figure, Satoshi Nakamoto? Is it the open source or distributed architecture? What role does the global financial crisis play, especially considering the coincidence of a sharp spike in the currency’s value with the collapse of the

Cypriot banking system in March 2013?

Bitcoin realizes the crypto-libertarian dream of the global private market; that is, a market that does not depend on state facilitation and regulation. Through the use of public key encryption technologies combined with distributed P2P software architectures, Bitcoin enables semi-anonymous transferral of funds between users. Early on, the most visible antagonistic capacity of this new currency was its facilitation of illegal marketplaces (the sale of illegal goods), most notably Silk Road. Such illegal transactions can be 'seen' by governmental eyes but not easily regulated or traced back to users. More damaging for states, though, is the potential for this currency to simply scale up and be used for mundane 'over the counter' purposes. What happens to the ritual of tax when a critical mass starts operating in a private economy? The simple answer is that governments would never let such a situation develop. And isn't it a 90s dream to see cyberspace as a separate cosmos with its own laws? The most disruptive potential of Bitcoin might very well be its range of less controversial and more pragmatic functions. It could be used, for example, as a default currency for remittances, greatly reducing, if not eliminating, the fees associated with sending money across borders. Here, the otherwise antagonistic and disruptive capacities of Bitcoin come to resemble the more palatable Schumpeterian creative destruction, where current economic practice is overturned (outcompeted), but only in such a way as to reaffirm the overall logic.

Like the current economic order, Bitcoin privileges specific forms of exchange, and of relating to people. It is currency as *Weltanschauung*. And like all systems, it will produce its own 'animal spirits.' In order to come to terms with Bitcoin, we must account for its value but also its 'values,' as is the domain of economic sociologists and anthropologists. In fact, these two notions need to be reunited. What are the values that underpin the design of Bitcoin to give it value? Besides the thrill of financial speculation, can we speak also of a certain geek-cool, of a hacker geek value?<sup>14</sup> Do you have any Bitcoins? How cool.

Is it possible to single out certain technical and material aspects of the currency system as explicitly political? Regular Bitcoin commentator and free market enthusiast Jon Matonis describes the currency as non-political because, in the last instance, it is not backed by the sword of Leviathan.<sup>15</sup> But this obviously rests on the narrowest definition of politics, and on the fantasy that markets are somehow outside politics. Even the liberal legal scholar Lawrence Lessig was able to acknowledge the political dimensions of software within his own quasi-legal paradigm through his formula ‘code is law.’<sup>16</sup> And so, as code, we could ask, what are the laws of Bitcoin? Or, what values have become law?

As noted, Bitcoin is underpinned by public key cryptography—a technique of privacy specific to the realm of communication. As Jean-Francois Blanchette recently put it, cryptography is a form of communication that takes place “in the presence of adversaries.”<sup>17</sup> But cryptography is more than the communication of secrets. It is not equivalent to a whisper. Rather, it is a form of privacy that resides in public, ‘in the presence’ of others. We might equally refer to it as the persistence of privacy in a world enamoured by open communication. The question is, however, if and how the cryptographer’s imperative shapes Bitcoin, besides the very fact of making it possible? Is there any relation between the politics (or privacy) going in (design) and out (use)? Other than supporting the dream of the private market, what are the concrete practices that are emerging through this currency system? One thing that has become very clear is that it is now possible to see money as an artefact of design. No longer imagined as a universal commodity (gold), or as the monopoly creation of governments (fiat), basic questions about the function, source (of value) and purpose of money are on the table once again. Perhaps it was the recent existential crisis of the fiat monetary system, and its failure in hiding its designed existence—whether it be quantitative easing or selective bailouts—that has somehow led to this situation. Whatever the case, these basic questions will have to be addressed by every experimental currency—and not just at the level of discourse.

### **AdVentures in crowdfunding**

New creative projects have long relied on either venture capital or grants from governments, foundations, and other third sector institutions. Workers in the creative industry more generally hold on to the dream of permanent, well-paid, creativity-quenching work, but sustain this dream through a patchwork of one-off projects, forced voluntarism, underpaid and supplementary gigs. They are caught in a precarity-idealism nexus: ‘the dream job is just around the corner’... ‘soon they’ll give me a permanent contract’—and so they go on.... These issues were explored in detail by the *MyCreativity* network of the Institute of Network Cultures from 2006–2008.<sup>18</sup> Since then a range of networked funding initiatives have emerged, holding new promises for the creative class that one day there will be ‘content justice.’ In the short run, prospects remain bleak. Ever heard of Amazon writers, Netflix directors, iTunes bands?

Crowdfunding platforms assume many forms, but the model usually looks something like this: A person or group needs money to fund a project. They pitch the project on a website, inviting the ‘crowd’ to contribute funds. The pitch will include a specific project quote (e.g., \$10,000) and a deadline by which the quoted figure must be met. If enough people ‘pledge’ money and the target figure is reached, the project becomes active and the pledged funds are collected. If the figure is not reached, the ‘pledged’ funds remain with the funders. This ‘all or nothing’ model is used on sites like Kickstarter and Indiegogo. Project funding also often includes ‘tiers,’ with the option to contribute a large or small amount of funds, with different ‘returns.’ Returns range from tokens of appreciation, the product itself (if there is one), to exclusive or ‘individualized’ versions of the product for the higher tier contributors.

Seeking to bypass government patronage, venturists, and other intermediaries, crowdfunding has become a boutique industry. The games industry in particular has embraced the logic of crowdfunding, which begs the question of the relationship between funding and fan cultures. One of the most successful projects in the games industry so far has been the

OUYA console, which was backed by over 63,000 funders, raising a total of USD 8,596,474 and receiving over nine times the amount requested (904% funded).<sup>19</sup> And while indie and documentary films have also been turning to crowdfunding for some time, at the time of writing (March 2013) crowdfunding is experiencing its first awkward alliance with Hollywood. A film based on the teen-detective TV show *Veronica Mars* surpassed its funding goal of USD 2,000,000 in less than a day and finished with a total pledge of USD 5,702,153 (with 91,585 funders). According to the pitch, “Warner Bros. wasn’t convinced there was enough interest to warrant a major studio-sized movie about Veronica and the project never got off the ground.”<sup>20</sup> Here the funders double as an audience-in-advance. It is tempting to see such mainstreaming as a step forward, but given this Hollywood moment it can be read as a simple case of risk outsourcing, dumping the costs but not the profits on fans, and what seems clearer is that the platform itself comes with no guarantees.

For workers in the creative economy, the dream of crowdfunding is that it represents a viable alternative to the venturist and (research/cultural) grant models from either private foundations or the public sector, cutting out a whole chain of parasitical intermediaries. Promotion, for example, takes the form of (Facebook) liking, embedding, and tweeting. Popular projects rise to the top and enjoy increased site visibility. ‘Interesting’ projects find themselves on site-sanctioned curated lists. Some appear on ‘featured’ pages. Kickstarter sends updates on ‘projects we like’ to site subscribers. Really popular projects make headlines. All this, of course, increases the chance of funding success.

Research into crowdfunding is now trying to unlock the secrets behind successful projects, often through quantitative techniques which function through correlation and pattern detection. The number of friends on Facebook, the inclusion of a video in the pitch, geographical location of the project, pitch duration (shorter is better), and being ‘featured’ on the funding platform all correlate with success.<sup>21</sup> In short, be popular and live in a cool city. What is needed, however, is a better understanding

of how the logics and mechanics of crowdfunding shape the process of funding in ways that differ from older models, such as Inge Sørensen's comparative investigation of funding documentary films in the UK.<sup>22</sup> Unsurprisingly, it turns out that different funding models favour different documentary genres. Why and how do some projects circulate like memes and attain their funding goals many times over? What does the long tail of failure look like? We might equally ask more radical questions such as whether or not crowdfunding could become a machine for producing the commons, where private inputs are translated into common outputs, leaving no room for the Warner Bros. of the world? Kickstarter is the most visible crowdfunding site thus far, but what are the alternatives and local analogues and how do they differ in terms of design and output?

Beyond these structural enquiries, we must also consider the experiential and psychic aspects of these new funding models. What would Georg Simmel make of all this? Is crowdfunding better understood as the democratic distribution of the mindset of the financier, and therefore as an intensification of the logic of finance? What is the effect of turning funding into an act of web browsing? Or, when do design interfaces and 'user experience' become key criteria in funding outcomes? Ian Bogost thinks sites like Kickstarter are instead better understood within a trajectory of reality television and that focusing on products (outputs) misses something crucial:

When faced with the reality of these products, disappointment is inevitable--not just because they're too little too late (if at all) but for even weirder reasons. We don't really want the stuff. We're paying for the sensation of a hypothetical idea, not the experience of a realized product. For the pleasure of desiring it. For the experience of watching it succeed beyond expectations or to fail dramatically. Kickstarter is just another form of entertainment.<sup>23</sup>

Entertainment it may be, but we might also ask: why are we willing to pay for a 'hypothetical idea'? It's not just a hypothetical product we are investing in, but also an idea of funding by other means.

### **Mobile Money in Africa**

Whereas in the West, US-American credit card companies remain in control, when it comes to Internet payments elsewhere in the world, things look different. Over the past few years the alternative payment methods of using mobile devices have grown at exponential rates across many parts of the so-called developing world. In a time when traditional banks were not interested in providing service for the poor, telecoms took over this job, expanding their initial monetary system to purchase airtime and SMS credit to an expanding range of services, from P2P payments to water and electricity bills, school fees and transportation. Today, Mobile Money is at the front and centre in development discourses. It is tied to a new understanding of development; one which eschews outdated notions like charity and instead seeks to foster the entrepreneurial spirit of the poor, while making a buck along the way. Mobile Money is positioned as a way to 'solve the unbanked problem' and to foster new financial literacies and the responsible management of money. Meanwhile, many at the other end of the financial spectrum are looking for a way out. As the Mobile Money industry matures, new telco-banking arrangements are being forged and local state regulation is being rewritten. Underpinned by the new narrative of development as commerce, these processes are further legitimized by the eager participation of NGOs, who have equally bought in to the idea that 'there is a fortune at the bottom of the pyramid.'

The question of who, in the end, will dominate the Mobile Money space remains open. Will it be the Asian and African telcos or rather Visa (who currently owns much of the underlying software that mobile money companies utilize)? Will large global banks one day wake up and buy themselves into this market? And what about the proposition of a Bitcoin clone developed for peer-to-peer Mobile Money payments? The strength of the current platforms is precisely that they are making use of the existing national currencies (and treasuries that issue them) and are not tempted to go in the 'virtual' direction of parallel currencies. Policy-wise this is also what the term 'financial inclusion' seems to suggest. No

exodus and no outside. With an estimated 80% of adults in Africa still ‘un-banked’ the potentials are obvious. Around three billion people worldwide lack access to formal financial services. Are there lessons to be learned from the ‘microfinance’ saga? We also need to consider the wider position of Mobile Money in relation to the new media of exchange unfolding ‘at the top,’ such as Microsoft, Google, Apple, and Samsung who will all have their own strategies for how to integrate monetary transaction in future smart phone architectures. Will the telcos and their Mobile Money initiatives eventually fold into the existing banking system or will it be the other way around?

Big questions remain. Who is in charge of what and where should we go to make our demands? Is it justified to expect that we will have to develop our own alternative money flows? Is barter the way to go? How can we turn the demand to redistribute wealth into practice? Can we disarm the online traders, taking away the toys from the boys? What is ‘slow money’? How do alternative visions of finance, such as P2P banking or the All Street initiative sit within these developments? In short, what is the status of experiments from Bitcoin to Kickstarter in the larger picture?

If we turn to the troubled cultural sector we can see that the creative industries meme is not offering concrete revenue models for artists besides corporate sponsorship and the (morally) bankrupt model of intellectual property. In this time of economic crisis we can no longer only criticize financial capitalism but need to imagine, and practice, alternatives. What are the long-term prospects of crowdfunding platforms? Is there a way for the precarious cultural workers to earn money directly, cutting out the intermediaries, through a peer-to-peer economy, using Bitcoins? It is not difficult to see that being as free and open as facilitating ideologies of the 1990s no longer appeals. If there is anything in need of disruption, it is the global finance sector.

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**NOTES:**

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14. See Alan Liu, *The Laws of Cool* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004).
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19. See "OUYA: A New Kind of Video Game Console." Available at <http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/ouya/ouya-a-new-kind-of-video-game-console?ref=most-funded>.
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## THE MIDDLE FINGER RESPONSE

Guido Segni

+



### **CROWD WORKERS OF THE WORLD, UNITED IN A GESTURE**

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# CRISIS THEORY FOR COMPLEX SOCIETIES

Brian Holmes

- + Once every forty or fifty years the development model of industrial capitalism runs up against an unforeseen obstacle, whose presence is undeniable even though its contours remain largely invisible. Imagine a disaster scenario: something like the wreck of the Titanic. Rivets pop, metal bulkheads groan, leaks appear below the waterline; passengers mill about in a panic, and many lose their lives in the attempt to escape. Yet all this happens very slowly, to the point where most of us don't fully understand what's going on. The shipwreck of capital is interrupted by a series of patch-ups and repairs that fail miserably against a background of unrelated events (elections, birthdays, wars, scientific discoveries, earthquakes, and so on). Finally, after extended periods of tumult and boredom that can last for decades, the crisis is over. A whole way of life has been sucked into the whirlpool.

There is something surreal about structural transformations taking place in slow motion. Their origins are uncertain, their existence is widely denied, and no one can celebrate the day when they end. Typically we can only grasp their nature and significance much later, from vastly different perspectives. We are speeding through a freeway interchange, or maybe surfing the Internet, when suddenly we realize that the world we once knew has undergone a far-reaching metamorphosis. Exactly this could happen to you, some ten or fifteen years in the future. Without intending anything special, you'll turn away from the rear-view mirror and

say: “Look now, society wears a new skin. Life is totally different.”

I’ve had such an experience. It was in the early ’90s, at San Francisco International, while awaiting a flight back to Paris. I stepped out to the sidewalk for a breath of not-so-fresh air, and watched an ascending jet as it executed a perfect, computer-controlled turn above the bay. Suddenly I realized that this huge flying object was just a small part of an integrated transnational processing system that had reorganized my existence. It was as though the weight of the airliner had vaporized into a communicational pulse. My own body and the entire surround—the airport, the jet, and the continents it interlinked—were caught in a seamless mesh of continuously modulated data. The sky itself took on a different texture. This was both an intellectual insight into a new mode of production, and a troubling question about the nature of personal identity. The slower, more bureaucratic, more nationally focused world of the ’60s and ’70s—the world in which I had come of age—was about to vanish from everyday awareness. The era of global networks surged up, bringing accelerated economic growth and kaleidoscopic social change. It was right around that time, shortly after the Zapatista rising of 1994, that I learned a new word: neoliberalism. The concept, and the social order it gradually revealed, would shape my political experience from that point forward, through the counter-globalization movements at the century’s turn and then on into the present.

As I learned in those years, while studying the crisscrossing histories of economics and social movements, the crisis of the ’70s had been the focus of intense theoretical analysis. For the Italian autonomous Marxists and their political allies, the ’70s marked an insurrection against the factory discipline of the mass manufacturing era and a turn towards a more flexible, self-organized mode of production. From their viewpoint, the key trait of the new era was a greater possibility for social cooperation at the grass roots level, which they called “invention power.”<sup>1</sup> Other theorists of the time—corporate consultants in the neoliberal camp—put forth a strangely parallel interpretation. They saw the crisis of the ’70s as

a failure of state planning, demanding a return to market mechanisms (which was their idea of self-organization); and they understood the long recession years as a crucible of innovation, which meant both new technologies and new organizational forms. For them, the driving force was not cooperation, but entrepreneurial competition.

Among both leftists and business consultants, the crisis was often understood as a turning point in what are called 'long waves' of industrial development. These are fifty-year cycles that crest in abundance and prosperity, then fall back into social and economic chaos. Of course, there was a difference in the opportunities that each group saw in the long waves. For one side, they were a chance to make a million—and for the other, they were a chance to make a revolution.

So what is today's crisis good for? For many people, rising temperatures and volatile weather patterns argue against the application of any economic logic—even of the profit-sharing kind traditionally proposed by the Left. In the era of climate change, economic growth itself is the problem. I take the issue seriously, and like many others, I think it is fast becoming the central problem of our time. If the long wave chronology of economic development is compelling today, it is because there is a crisis and the possibility of a new beginning. It is at such moments that social movements play an important role. From the perspective of those who do not command state or corporate power, the overriding question is how to turn the passions and aspirations of grass roots movements into levers that can move the larger society. Given the ecological urgencies, there is an increasingly serious desire to change the entire system. For centuries, capitalism has served as the organizing schema for the production and distribution of the fruits of industry. But it's clear today that if the current crisis has any use, it must lie in the chance it offers for overcoming the central value of competition that has driven industrial capitalism to its current dead ends.

If we want to seize the opportunity and work towards a strategy for changing the course of social development, then we need to take the

decisive facts of economics—namely, surplus profits and the powers they bring—and situate them within a broader matrix of forces. These forces include science, technology, and organizational form, on the one hand, and institutions, state politics, and cultural ferment, on the other. Their interplay is what makes society complex, lending every process or event its multi-causal nature. What’s more, the interaction of these multiple forces unfolds over historical time, not in strictly repetitive cycles but instead in dynamic patterns that could be better represented as a rising set of overlapping waves or even as a continuous spiral, marked by quantitative and qualitative transformations at every turn of the screw. The present expresses the past at a higher power of complexity. To understand this dynamic—and to grasp its potentials—means taking on its global character, in every sense of the word. Because the political question is there. Who will recognize the systemic nature of the crisis? How to develop a strategy at the world scale? What alliance of forces will be required to produce a solution that cannot come from any single, isolated position?

Over the next decade, progressive movements will be confronted with the risks and opportunities of what can only be described as a world-historical crisis. Defining what this crisis consists of—and in particular, identifying the former stabilizing alliances that have now broken down—is a first step towards a positive resolution. But a first step is not enough. In order to pursue the egalitarian ideals that have always been at the basis of the Left, we need to create a concept of revolution that corresponds to this moment in time, and find ways to act on it.

To that end, I have established a research programme for the analysis of the last two systemic crises of the capitalist world economy, and of the resolutions that were found for them. This research programme is based on a series of concepts and references developed in collaboration with Armin Medosch and the members of the Technopolitics group in Vienna.<sup>2</sup> The study begins with the United States, which in the mid-twentieth century became the centre of the world political economy. It then turns outwards, toward a global conjuncture marked by fading US

hegemony. The point of the analysis is to understand successive changes in the organization of productive forces, the dynamics of class relations, the forms of the state and the deployment of invention power. Their transformation over the last century has given rise to societies very different than those analyzed in the classic political economy of Adam Smith, or even in its critique by Marx. Without clear concepts of production, class, the state, and the power of invention *as they have co-evolved* across the successive crises, it is impossible to move ahead to coherent action in a complex society. And as we will see upon arriving at today's crisis, the creation of practice-oriented concepts also involves a re-examination of the self, both individual and collective.

Undertaken in this way, history is directly useful for political action. When it is turned towards actuality it can offer concrete reference points to help you explore who you are, to relate your own geographical and class origins to those of other individuals and groups, to assess your agency, and to gain an insight into what we are all now becoming in relation to each other. History shows what contemporary social relations are made of and how they have been produced.

To develop a historical perspective on the transformations currently underway we will need a certain number of theoretical instruments for establishing the chronologies, structuring the narratives, distinguishing important details, and relating them to larger wholes. Think of it as a set of lenses for varying the distance, the depth of field, and the granularity of focus. In this essay I'll introduce a number of existing theoretical proposals on the cycles of capitalist growth and the crises that punctuate them. Subsequent phases of the project will involve reworking these theories in order to engage more concretely with recent history, retracing its paths into the present.

### **Long waves**

After the First World War, a short and feverish burst of prosperity was followed by the violent global recession of 1920–21, which struck North

America as well as Europe. Revolutionaries inflamed by the Bolshevik victory of 1917 wondered if this would be the final crisis of capitalism: a catastrophic fulfillment of the tendency to a falling rate of profit theorized by Marx. Addressing the Third Congress of the Communist International, Leon Trotsky took a different view: “Capitalist equilibrium is an extremely complex phenomenon,” he observed. “Capitalism produces this equilibrium, disrupts it, restores it anew in order to disrupt it anew, concurrently extending the limits of its domination.” This dynamic equilibrium was the life of the beast: “The fact that capitalism continues to oscillate cyclically after the war merely signifies that capitalism is not yet dead, that we are not dealing with a corpse.”

Reviewing the long-run data, Trotsky pointed to recurrent boom-bust cycles of some eight to eleven years. He maintained that these widely recognized business cycles were themselves inscribed in longer upward or downward trends. “How,” he asked, “are the cyclical fluctuations blended with the primary movement of the capitalist curve of development?”

Very simply. In periods of rapid capitalist development the crises are brief and superficial in character, while the booms are long-lasting and far-reaching. In periods of capitalist decline, the crises are of a prolonged character while the booms are fleeting, superficial and speculative. In periods of stagnation the fluctuations occur upon one and the same level. This means nothing else but that it is necessary to determine the general condition of the capitalist organism by the specific way in which it breathes, and the rate at which its pulse beats.<sup>3</sup>

With these declarations Trotsky anticipated the more well-known studies of the Russian economist Nikolai Kondratiev, who developed a statistical analysis of long economic cycles lasting from forty-seven to sixty years, which he presented in a 1925 article. By using data on prices, interest rates, wages, and foreign trade in France, England, and the USA, as well as figures for total coal and pig iron production in the world, Kondratiev was able to identify three long waves of growth: rising from 1789 to a peak around 1814, then declining until 1848; rising again to a peak around 1873, then declining until 1896; and rising once more to a peak around

1920 (followed by a sharp fall, as we know, in 1929). He expressed these findings as curves in the long-run data, using a nine-year moving average to smooth out the variations of the typical business cycle, which he called an “intermediate cycle.” As he wrote: “The long waves really belong to the same complex dynamic process in which the intermediate cycles of the capitalistic economy with their principal phases of upswing and depression run their course. These intermediate cycles, however, secure a certain stamp from the very existence of the long waves. Our investigation demonstrates that during the rise of the long waves, years of prosperity are more numerous, whereas years of depression predominate during the downswing.” He also observed that an especially large number of technological inventions tended to be made during the slumps, but only applied during the upsurges. For Kondratiev, “the long waves arise out of causes which are inherent in the essence of the capitalistic economy.”<sup>4</sup>

Since their initial publication these observations have generated their own repeated waves of interest, particularly during the major downswings that have followed at even intervals, in the '30s, the '70s, and again today. What successive generations of researchers have found significant is not just the regular recurrence of upswings and downswings, but also the qualitative difference of each wave, arising from the specific elements that compose it. Here the economist Joseph Schumpeter made a decisive contribution. In his book *Business Cycles* (1939), he proposed that the revival of growth after each depressive phase resulted from the introduction of a cluster of innovations, which he defined not simply as inventions, but instead as new production and distribution techniques focused around a particular set of commodities, infrastructures and services. Together these innovations revolutionize the way business is done while also changing the expectations of consumers and the structure of markets: a process he later termed “creative destruction.” For Schumpeter, the innovator is an entrepreneur who can offer investors the prospect of making a profit in an otherwise stagnant market. The impetus given by a group of mutually supporting and highly desirable innovations then

relaunches a growth cycle that will transform the entire economy, lifting it out of the downswing. To illustrate this, he gives a crucial example:

The motorcar would never have acquired its present importance and become so potent a reformer of life if it had remained what it was thirty years ago and if it had failed to shape the environmental conditions—roads, among them—for its own further development. In such cases, innovation is carried out in steps each of which constitutes a cycle. But these cycles may display a family likeness and a relation to one another which tends to weld them into a higher unit that will stand out as a historical individual.<sup>5</sup>

It's a complex idea: a succession of distinct business cycles is shaped by the effects of a leading technology into a historically singular wave of economic development. Following in Schumpeter's footsteps, a circle of theorists who gathered from the late '60s onwards at the Science Policy Research Unit in Britain (SPRU) took this analysis much further. In their view, each of the Kondratiev waves brought together a group of key technologies with a cheap energy source and characteristic modes of transportation and communication, as well as a particular approach to scientific investigation. Distinct ages of industrial development, or 'techno-economic paradigms,' could therefore be identified. Here they are: the age of the textile mill (1780s–1840s), of steam power and railways (1840s–90s), of steel and electricity (1890s–1940s), of Fordist mass production (1940s–90s), and finally, of microelectronics and computer networks (1990s–present).<sup>6</sup> Each of these waves begins with major technological and organizational innovations, then grows to a maturity phase and finally ends with a period of stagnation and crisis. Investment in technology is suspended during the crisis, while new inventions accumulate. Then, when conditions are right, available capital is sunk into the most promising innovations, and a new long wave can be launched.

The SPRU researchers did not conceive of each technological period as starting from a blank slate, but instead, as layering a new and dynamic growth sector onto older, relatively stagnant branches of industry which would be transformed or ultimately swept aside by

creative destruction. The process was complex: they stressed the idea that important elements of the new techno-economic paradigm were always under development in the previous one. The automobile, for instance, grew increasingly common during the third Kondratiev wave, dominated by the production of steel and electricity; but only in the post-WWII period did Henry Ford's approach to assembly-line mass production restructure all the developed societies into consumer cultures centred around the exaltation of individual mobility. Similarly, computers and feedback control systems were invented in the '40s and advanced continuously from then onwards; but only in the '90s did they display their capacity to transform international trade along with the intimate lives of their users. All those who lived through the rise of the networked society will have felt the power of technology to reshape both business and subjectivity.

The power issue is the problem, however. Doesn't this whole discussion come down to technological determinism, or worse, to the boosterism of the neoliberal consultants? Since the rise of the microcomputer in the '80s, business theorists from George Gilder to Alan Greenspan have borrowed Schumpeter's concept of creative destruction to celebrate the digital revolution. Today, the latest generation of these gurus has one true gospel: 'disruptive innovation,' they call it. The phrase was launched during the wild gyrations of the New Economy, in a 1995 article by Joseph Bower and Clayton Christensen entitled "Disruptive Technologies: Catching the Wave." Then it was all about aggressive start-ups producing smaller hard drives for your computer—while now, the solution to the deepest crisis since the Great Depression is sought in Web 2.0 business models that are supposed to infuse a last gasp of profitability into an economy that can't quite register little details like human-induced climate change. These disruptions signify even more job losses to come—but they are also likely to fuel the volatile business cycle of the 2010s. So, we too will have to report that capitalism is not yet dead!

The SPRU researchers, to their credit, have always tried to go beyond such a superficial relation to technology, broadening their models

to include not just business processes (innovations in organization, distribution, and marketing) but also issues of social reproduction. The Venezuelan technology analyst Carlota Perez has given the strongest formulation of this programme:

We propose that the capitalist system be seen as a single very complex structure, the subsystems of which have different rates of change. For the sake of simplicity we can assume two main subsystems: on the one hand a techno-economic, and on the other a social and institutional, the first having a much faster rate of response... A structural crisis (i.e., the depression in a long wave), as distinct from an economic recession, would be the visible syndrome of a breakdown in the complementarity between the dynamics of the economic subsystem and the related dynamics of the socio-institutional framework.<sup>7</sup>

In other words, there has to be a proper ‘fit’ between the organization of production and the prosperity of the society in which that production takes place. When there is no such complementarity, the continued development of the production system runs up against a severe crisis. That is what happened in the ‘30s—and it’s happening again today. To understand how such crises unfold it is not enough to look at technological innovation. We will need another set of lenses, in order to focus on labour, culture, conflict, and political mediation.

### **Institutional forms**

Why do the long waves break? Major economic crises are remembered as periods of dearth and penury: bread lines, soup kitchens, unemployed masses in the street. But if you look back at the films and photos of the Great Depression, you will see something even more striking. Then as now, opulence coexists with poverty, while new machines taunt idle hands with the spectacle of high productivity. The fundamental problem of advanced industrial capitalism is not scarcity but *overaccumulation*, or the concentration of wealth at the top, to the point where it ceases to circulate through the average person’s pocket. Technology has as much to do with labour repression as it does with wealth and progress. This is our reality today: there is *too much* production, but it is unaffordable,

inaccessible, and useless for those who need it most. No one has captured this situation more vividly than John Steinbeck, in his novel of Dust Bowl migrants in '30s California:

The men who work in the experimental farms have made new fruits: nectarines and forty kinds of plums, walnuts with paper shells. And always they work, selecting, grafting, changing, driving themselves, driving the earth to produce. And first the cherries ripen. Cent and a half a pound. Hell, we can't pick 'em for that. Black cherries and red cherries, full and sweet, and the birds eat half of each cherry and the yellowjackets buzz into the holes the birds made. And on the ground the seeds drop and dry with black shreds hanging from them... Men who have created new fruits in the world cannot create a system whereby their fruits may be eaten. And the failure hangs over the State like a great sorrow... In the souls of the people the grapes of wrath are filling and growing heavy, growing heavy for the vintage.<sup>8</sup>

Economic crises may begin with spectacular financial crashes, high inflation, surging unemployment or other calamities of the market; but what emerges from the crucible of anger are overtly political conflicts over the dysfunctions of the 'system.' Everything comes back into question: the techniques of production, the wage relation, the prices of basic goods, taxes and redistribution, the conditions of daily life, the rules of the political process, and even the whys and wherefores of existence. These conflicts arise from the losses incurred by particular groups and the harsh conditions faced by others, but also because the usual blinders fall from the eyes of a great many, revealing the dangerous state of decay that has overcome all those things that capitalist economics treats as mere 'externalities'; namely, the natural environment, the health and well-being of the human population, the shareable forms of public culture, and the institutions that were supposed to protect all that. Karl Polanyi's anthropological account of the societal collapse of the '30s, *The Great Transformation* (1944)—an essential document for our research programme—provides what is still the most probing analysis of the constitutive civilizational blindness that inevitably leads to crises of systemic inequality, environmental decay and armed violence. Yet despite the knowledge that accumulates, there is no guarantee of who wins and loses in these conflicts, or even less, of some

ultimate justice. Everything depends on the forces involved, on the manner in which the problems are named and disputed, and on the character of the coalitions that struggle for a solution. As history shows, the grapes of wrath can be pressed into many different bottles.

What is revealed by the study of severe economic crises is something like a syntax and a basic vocabulary that recombines its historical material into an original form, structured essentially as a response to problems that came into being through the resolution of the previous crisis. The ‘innovations’ that result from this reconfiguration or redeployment of capitalism are not only technological and organizational, and they can in no way be restricted to business processes. Rather, production, marketing and finance co-evolve with the demands of the labour force and of consumers, but also with a set of emergent institutional forms that seek, for better or for worse, to address the issues facing society as a whole. Here the state inevitably comes to the fore, in matters of regulation, infrastructure, social services, monetary equilibrium, trade negotiation, citizenship rights, and security. Social movements, civil-society organizations and more diffuse cultural trends also play important roles. In every new configuration of society that has emerged so far, certain defining axioms of capitalism have remained invariant: the dispossession of the weak, the exploitation of labour and of nature, the private appropriation of socially produced wealth. But let’s not prejudge the future!

To generate the narrative of a historical process which is both additive and transformative—*dialectical*, in a word—I will draw on two closely related schools of critical political economy. Both came together to explain the breakdown of the postwar boom in the United States, where Keynesian planners believed (quite wrongly as it turned out) that they had overcome the most violent fluctuations of the business cycle. The first of these two schools is known as the ‘Regulation Approach.’ It was launched single-handedly in 1976 by a Frenchman, Michel Aglietta, with his book *A Theory of Capitalist Regulation: The US Experience*. It’s important to realize that he took the crisis-prone nature of the capitalist economy as a

given. Precisely *because* there is a tendency for the profit rate to fall—due to competition, rising wages, technological expenses, worker resistance, and so on—Aglietta asked how the profitability and growth of the postwar economy was maintained at a high level for a relatively long period of time. He also asked how the very factors of stabilization ultimately helped precipitate a new period of uncontrollable volatility.

To begin, he describes the depression of the '30s as resulting from an imbalance between an extensive producer-goods sector (steel, oil, electricity, railways, machine tools, etc.) and a consumer manufacturing sector weakened by the absence of mass markets. In response to this contradiction, the postwar period inaugurated a new *regime of accumulation* based on Henry Ford's key idea that high wages for factory workers would supply the factories with an entire nation of consumers. A regime of accumulation is basically the combination of technologies and organizational models that I discussed above. The new regime of the postwar period, which Aglietta called 'Fordism,' was *intensive* in the sense that it required a thorough-going transformation of everyday life, so as to incorporate consumption norms promulgated by industry. The controlled expansion of the consumer market was therefore able to overcome one of the major contradictions that capitalism had encountered in the '30s, namely, the absence of effective demand. But what about the social conflicts of the '30s, and their resolution by the New Deal institutions?

Aglietta's main contribution was to identify a series of *structural forms* allowing workers, corporations, and the state to carry out a dynamic adjustment—or 'regulation'—of continuously evolving social relations. There were five key structural forms: collective bargaining to balance the labour-capital relation; welfare (or more broadly, transfer payments) to prop up demand; the vertically integrated corporation and the financial conglomerate, to facilitate the fixation of prices and the reduction of competition; and fiat money issued by the central bank, which was crucial for the expansion of counter-cyclical spending, including the defence budgets of the Cold War. Together, these institutional forms constituted

a *mode of regulation* that dampened the inherent volatility of capitalism. However, they harboured their own contradictions—particularly the printing of fiat money, whose inflationary effects would be a major factor in the decline of the Fordist accumulation regime.

The Regulation Approach has continued to develop since the '70s, with subgroups in France and elsewhere. Interestingly, a very similar research agenda came together independently in the US itself from the late '70s onwards, around a core group of researchers including David Gordon, Thomas Weisskopf, Samuel Bowles, Richard Edwards, and Michael Reich. Here the main concept was that of 'Social Structures of Accumulation' (SSAs).<sup>9</sup> To carry out their work the American researchers adopted the chronology of the Kondratiev waves, developing detailed analyses of the mix of social institutions that first supported and then interrupted capital accumulation in four successive periods from the early nineteenth century onwards. They also paid particular attention to the forms of labour control in each period, and they placed strong emphasis on the role of political conflict, both in the break-up of a social structure of accumulation and the formation of the next one. Quite usefully, they distinguished between an early phase of experimentation, a subsequent phase of consolidation, and a final phase of decay, the last of which overlaps with the experimentation phase of the next long wave. All of that results in a precisely articulated description of shifting institutional balances, punctuated by decisive moments of rupture. The SSA theorists are invaluable for the study of US political economy.

With such sophisticated work available on the marketplace of ideas, is it necessary to do anything else? The problem of both the Regulation Approach and the Social Structures of Accumulation researchers is that they have tended—at least until quite recently—to take the high growth and relative stability of the postwar period as a norm. Their studies also tended to remain within the existing conceptual map of national economic and political institutions. This made it difficult for them to identify the institutional forms of neoliberalism, which overflow national borders.

What we need is to understand how a highly transnational wave of capitalist expansionism developed out of and against the earlier Keynesian–Fordist national states, while leaving their older institutions to live on as shrunken and distorted shells. Only by closely observing this process of layering and gradual supersession will we be able to grasp the more radical break that appears to be in germ right now. But to do so requires yet another set of theoretical optics.

### **Hegemonic transitions**

Trotsky opened up the question of the long waves with his remarks to the Comintern in 1921. He came back to the subject two years later in a text on “The Curve of Capitalist Development.” This time he directly critiqued Kondratiev’s idea that the long fluctuations, like the shorter business cycles, arise from causes inherent to the capitalist economy. Instead he presented a sweeping view of the world market and the political/military forces that periodically reshape it:

As regards the large segments of the capitalist curve of development (fifty years) which Professor Kondratiev incautiously proposes to designate also as cycles, their character and duration are determined not by the internal interplay of capitalist forces but by those external conditions through whose channel capitalist development flows. The acquisition by capitalism of new countries and continents, the discovery of new natural resources, and, in the wake of these, such major facts of “superstructural” order as wars and revolutions, determine the character and the replacement of ascending, stagnating or declining epochs of capitalist development.<sup>10</sup>

To support his argument he presents a graph showing the eight- to eleven-year business cycles curving around a trend-line of growth or stagnation. Every forty years there is a “turning point of capitalist development.” Between these turning points are intriguing notations: “Event A, Emergence of a new political party, Event B, Revolution, Event C, Social reforms, Victory of literary school X, Event D, War,” etc. Not only institutional reform, but also political opposition, artistic invention, and colonial conquest are given their place in this long-run chronology.

How relevant could such an analysis be for our time? Let's look directly at events that reshaped the global market during the most recent long wave. The New Economy boom of the mid-1990s—marking the consolidation of what I'll be calling 'Neoliberal Informationalism'—came just a few years after the collapse of the Soviet Union that Trotsky had helped to establish. It also followed in the wake of the 1990–91 Gulf War, which assembled the largest international coalition in history, ostensibly to protect the sovereign borders of Kuwait. Advanced mobile computing technologies—largely developed through the debt-funded Star Wars programme of the '80s—were put on display for all the world to see, in the form of the so-called 'Revolution in Military Affairs.' To the eyes of the more cynical observers, the missiles flashing through the skies above Kuwait City and Baghdad appeared to be aimed at securing Western access to Middle Eastern oil. But didn't they also secure the global market for the ICT revolution?

In the decade that followed, fibre-optic cables were laid on the sea floor between all five continents; Internet connections were installed in major cities on a flood tide of venture capital; software packages were hawked on every street corner (usually as illegal copies, to be sure); networked business models proliferated everywhere, and a glittering cosmopolitan urbanism spread across the earth. The former Third World countries, written off a decade before as a sinkhole of bad debts and guerrilla insurgencies, were now seen as an enticing investment portfolio of 'emerging markets' in the context of a New York-centred investment boom. After the long stagnation of the '70s and the uncertain recovery of the '80s, the final decade of the twentieth century witnessed an industrial and commercial expansion that recalled the heyday of the railways or the automobile. The United States had emerged victorious from the Cold War, and the prize was a unified global market. For a short period, even the most delirious business venture seemed entirely plausible if it came out of Silicon Valley. After all, it would offer the highest technology—and helicopter gunships to protect it.

The role of state power, particularly that of the leading or hegemonic state, is crucial in establishing the geographical framework of accumulation at the outset of a long wave. This is one of the “external conditions through whose channel capitalist development flows.” Yet the kind of military power asserted in the Gulf War could also be conceived as a long-term investment akin to those made in infrastructure: an investment in “world-market control,” as one of the SSA theorists explained.<sup>11</sup> Looking back, we can see the Spanish–American war of 1898 as a similar long-term investment in world-market control, lifting the obstacles to US corporate expansion into Latin America at the very outset of the third Kondratiev wave. Even more clearly, the multi-theatre operations of the Second World War established the framework for the spread of Fordist production across the world, while also securing the conditions of global resource extraction on which that production depended. Leftists usually call this imperialism—and rightly so. However, to ignore the function of leadership, and the self-interested consent that it implies from other states, is to miss something very fundamental about the dynamics of world society.

The key theorist here is Antonio Gramsci. He distinguished cultural and ideological leadership, or what he called *hegemony*, from the coercive state power that invariably accompanies it. At the outset of his *Prison Notebooks* (1929–35) he defines hegemony as “the ‘spontaneous’ consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group.” He goes on to remark that “this consent is historically caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production.” In our terms, then, hegemony would be the affective sense of belief that binds a productive process to the institutional forms that insure its social reproduction, thus constituting a so-called *historic bloc*. Gramsci was particularly interested in the pivotal role that grass roots leaders—or what he called “organic intellectuals”—play in constituting the historic bloc, but also in contesting it and pressing for a different political-economic order. In this way he

opened up the question, not only of how individuals are conditioned by social structures, but more importantly, of how individuals acting within social movements can exert a shaping effect on those very structures.

However, Gramsci went even further. He extended the concept of hegemony to the interstate arena, by asking the question: “Do international relations precede or follow (logically) fundamental social relations?” His answer: “There can be no doubt that they follow. Any organic innovation in the social structure, through its technical-military expressions, modifies organically absolute and relative relations in the international field too.”<sup>12</sup> With that reflection, hegemony takes on a meaning in international political economy. The production relations imposed by a dominant class, plus the cultural/ideological forms articulating them into a larger power bloc, become a kind of operational model that will be ‘spontaneously’ adopted by other social classes in other nation-states (with a veiled threat of coercion if the model is not adopted). This is the interstate function of leadership, which is oppressive for those who refuse it, but also very productive for those who accept being led. The Canadian theorist Robert Cox placed the Gramscian concept at the basis of his analysis of *world order*:

I am using the term hegemony here as meaning more than the dominance of a single world power. It means dominance of a particular kind where the dominant state creates an order based ideologically on a broad measure of consent, functioning according to general principles that in fact ensure the continuing supremacy of the leading state or states and leading social classes but at the same time offer some measure or prospect of satisfaction to the less powerful. In such an order, production in particular countries becomes connected through the mechanisms of a world economy and linked into world systems of production. The social classes of the dominant country find allies in classes within other countries. The historic blocs underpinning particular states become interconnected through the mutual interests and ideological perspectives of social classes in different countries, and global social classes begin to form. An incipient world society grows up around the interstate system, and states themselves become internationalized in that their mechanisms and policies become adjusted to the rhythms of the world order.<sup>13</sup>

Once this idea is taken on board, it becomes clear that a thorough examination of the twentieth century’s two great economic crises, together

with the one that is unfolding today, would constitute not only a study of the vicissitudes of American power, but also of the changing configurations of world society. This means, among other things, that when George H.W. Bush pompously declared in 1991 that the Gulf War sought to lay the foundations of a 'New World Order,' he wasn't kidding. The geopolitical aim of the international coalition assembled for that conflict was to reinstate the alliance system that had been forged during WWII, and that had subsequently faltered during the crisis of the '70s. Clearly there were deep interests in achieving this restoration, interests that could cut across a range of national social classes. At stake for all these classes was the underlying pattern of production relations that had constituted a political-economic order. Moreover, this initial form of US hegemony—what may be called the Keynesian-Fordist world order—also provided the basis for all the postwar variations on welfare-state social democracy. And even though the radical Left, in all its forms, has been defined precisely by its refusal to accept the compromises of the social-democratic project, still we have to recognize that the institutional forms of that compromise have had profound effects on all the social classes of the developed world.

The New World Order of the '90s was, nonetheless, a monumental failure. This became clear after Bush's incoherent son assumed power in 2000, launched two disastrous wars in response to the Al Qaeda attacks, and set the stage for the worst global financial crisis since the Great Depression. The historian and world-systems theorist, Giovanni Arrighi, provides the conceptual tools for an analysis of the arc of US hegemony, from its beginnings in the late nineteenth century to the present debacle. What Arrighi does is to overlay a longer imperial cycle, or 'systemic cycle of accumulation,' on top of the three Kondratiev waves we have been considering. He shows, first, how the United States emerged from the shadow of the declining British hegemony and entered into a decisive phase of rivalry with Germany over which state would be the successor to empire; then, how the American-led world-system was constructed on the foundations laid during WWII; and finally, how the US hegemony

entered its 'financial autumn' from the '70s onwards, abandoning its industrial dominance for a new role as the computerized manager of globally circulating financial capital. In the course of this process, Arrighi observes, accumulated industrial capital and technological know-how has been redistributed to other poles of the global economy. In particular he focuses on the seemingly inevitable rise of East Asia and especially China as the new global centre of capitalist growth. The complex conditions of inexorable American decline, gathering Chinese power, and onrushing climate change are what define the current crisis. At this point we can no longer look back to the past, nor confine ourselves to theory. The seemingly distant, impersonal forms of world order return, via the current structural crisis, to press upon our own lives in society—to the point where some of us want to press back.

### **Social movements**

For the growing numbers of people around the world who do not fit into any 'historic bloc,' the only substantial chance to participate in political life is offered by social movements—and by the cultural, ideological and organizational initiatives that arise to articulate them as a challenge to the reigning powers. A prolonged economic crisis like the one that began in 2008 offers immense opportunities to mount those kinds of challenges. So far they have only been taken in fragmentary and halting ways. Why?

It should be obvious by now that the structure of entrenched interests extends very deeply into society, far beyond the border of single countries or the ranks of ruling elites. The recognition of this historical structure in one's own body is difficult. Yet crisis demands exactly that, because it breaks down the artificial construct of 'the individual' as it is experienced in capitalist societies (individual desire, choice, ownership, satisfaction, security). Individuality in the dominant sense of the word is only maintained by access to commodities that claim to replace more fundamental, yet also more problematic, relations of interdependence. The concept of *reification*, or the replacement of social relations by

things, comes into play here. Political-economic crises are positive to the extent that they offer chances to go beyond reification and deal instead with more profound and problematic human realities. That is clear in the black power and feminist struggles of the '60s and '70s, and even more, the current questions of indigeneity and precarious existence. Such an approach does not require abandoning Marxist concepts, but instead, thoroughly transforming them. It is impressive to realize that one of the sharpest Marxian theorists of political-economic contradictions in the '70s—James O'Connor, the author of *The Fiscal Crisis of the State* (1973)—went on to focus on the crisis of modern individualism, before turning to social ecology. In 1984, O'Connor analyzed the break-up of the Keynesian Fordism in psycho-sociological terms:

In modern capitalism, a terrible and painful ambiguity exists between individual labor and social labor, individual needs and social needs, and individual and social political life. In this reified context, no unambiguous definition of self is possible. Self instead becomes the battleground on which psychologically bloody conflicts are fought.... In practical terms, these struggles against material and social reification and for "social individuality" are the most useful weapons at hand to combat the attempt by capital and the state to ideologically construct and politically use the current crisis to restructure economic, political and social life with the sole purpose of renewed capitalist accumulation, including a new "long wave" of ideological innovation.<sup>14</sup>

Today we are, in effect, the inheritors of that long ideological wave known as neoliberalism, which for decades (precisely the decades of economic expansion) appeared to be the unsurpassable horizon of our time: a reified hyper-individualism, monumentalized by the new mirror-architecture that proliferated from the '80s onwards. Those were the decades of free-flowing bank credit and labyrinthine postmodernism, which strengthened each other through the mediation of computer keyboards and fibre-optic cables. In more recent years, however, the real material interests that the working and middle classes of the core industrial nations used to have in the existing economic order have been vanishing before our eyes, beneath the pressures of automation, outsourcing, unemployment,

and predatory finance, as well as state violence, structural abandonment, and environmental decay. Under these circumstances, a threatening letter from the bank, an unpayable medical bill or the loss of a job or a house can prompt a radically new awareness of the damages wreaked by the structural trend to overaccumulation. As a new fiscal crisis of the state simultaneously destroys social services across the developed world, Steinbeck's haunting phrase suddenly takes on a visceral meaning: "Men who have created new fruits in the world cannot create a system whereby their fruits may be eaten."

The Occupy movement bore witness to a generational shift in consciousness that touched people of all ages, binding some of us together into what could be called a 'political generation.' Meanwhile, the effect of the crisis has been much more intense in a number of European countries—Iceland, Spain, Greece—and has led to outright revolution in the Middle East. The question is how to go ahead. What's missing is a road map to an alternative society.

From my view, the meteoric rise of formerly dominated countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America does not absolve the historical core of the capitalist world-system from a major role in shaping whatever the next fifty years will look like. It does appear increasingly probable that ecological problems, class conflicts, and rapidly expanding social movements will soon provoke a political clash in China, whose resolution—whether democratic or authoritarian—will undoubtedly have great influence throughout the world-system. Elsewhere, relative decline opens up either the reactionary possibility of aggression (amply taken by US elites and their allies over the last decade) or the contrary possibility of translocal collaboration in the face of increasingly urgent problems. That second possibility has been developed very extensively by an emergent meshwork of autonomous initiatives spanning the divides of class, language, geography, and culture. In retrospect, the counter-globalization movements of the '90s and early 2000s appear as a watershed in the transformation of the historical Left, particularly with respect to modern individualism. A crucial theme of those

movements was the development of ecological and social *commons*, which can be defined as reservoirs of cooperative potentials, shared between humans and humans as well as humans and nature. The governance of the commons also entails the development of non-state public spheres, which are crucial to any positive change in the capitalist state system. Indigenous peoples' movements have played a major role in their elaboration. So have the networked social movements of the precarious generation in the core countries. Yet the emergence of progressive experiments at the level of the nation-state, particularly in Latin America, can hardly be ignored. What appears crucial, at this juncture which is certain to be marked by profound institutional change, is the development of intellectual cultures geared toward practical transformations, which will be indissolubly technological, organizational, legal, philosophical, emotional, and artistic.

Multiple paths head in that direction. The value of a reflection on crisis and its aftermath is to stress the ways in which dramatic rupture, or even revolution, is inscribed in a continuity. To live with dignity through the coming years, and to fulfill our responsibilities to the future, we need to propose and realize a radical break that is neither apocalyptic nor messianic, but instead, pragmatically utopian. Nothing less will do it. For the organic intellectuals who carry out this work—that is, for people who turn the common capacity of language to an intense and passionate curiosity—that might suggest a reinvention of what Marxists used to call *praxis*. In other words, the merger of complex thinking into concrete activity. Such is the aim of a disciplined and experimental discourse that seeks to engage with the material-ideational-affective forms of society as a whole. In short, the research programme that I am proposing here is about the transformational effects of intellectual engagement in social movements.

Consider the alternative. Amid the shipwreck of informational capital, which undoubtedly represents the chance of our lifetimes for a radical change in the course of social development, neoliberal managers steeped in technological opportunism are calling for more of the formulas

they have applied obsessively since the '70s (i.e., disruptive innovation). The idea is to deploy networked communications to destroy existing enterprises and open up new markets for the restoration of corporate profits. The gurus believe that Schumpeter's revolutionary doctrine of 'creative destruction' can also be applied to social institutions, which for them, after all, are just business processes.

To take one example, Clayton Christensen in his latest book quite rightly observes that the university—arguably the central institution of the contemporary knowledge-based economy—is in crisis, due to its unsustainable expansion on the back of crippling student debt. So he and co-author Henry Eyring propose to seize the technological advantage and transform all but the most elite institutions into online learning facilities offering vocational training slanted to immediate corporate needs. The prototype is a notorious American for-profit school called Phoenix University, whose reputation has recently plummeted due to its extremely low graduation rates and fraudulent enrolment practices. No matter. Since they are all about business models, let's check out their offer:

Traditional universities' overproduction of master's and Ph.D. degree holders relative to their own needs for new faculty members has created a pool of qualified online instructors who are willing to work for a few thousand dollars per course... This means the online university can match teaching supply to student demand—an instructor is hired, or contracted for, only when a class is likely to have enough students to generate an operating profit. Also, an online instructor's teaching performance is easily monitored, and an underperformer has no contractual right to further employment. Along with well-defined learning outcomes, the ability to cull ineffective instructors may be another reason why online courses have achieved average cognitive outcome parity with their face-to-face counterparts.<sup>15</sup>

It's hard to believe that the achievement of "average cognitive outcome parity" for cut-rate wages beneath a regime of continuous electronic surveillance is the stuff that educational dreams are made of. This, however, is exactly the kind of future that is being planned out for all the sectors of the informational economy. The irony, in this particular case, is that an economy built around the promises of knowledge should

culminate in a systematic programme of self-blinding, carried out first by the reduction of critical and scientific thinking to commodities, and then by the brutal elimination of any knowledge-commodity that does not find immediate success on a market.

These entrepreneurial restructuring plans are bound to fail, because they do not address the major contradictions of Neoliberal Informationalism. But other plans will assuredly be made, for better and worse, by the political coalitions that are gradually emerging to deal with the more intractable elements of the crisis. The important thing is to be part of that process, to contest it, to interrupt it, to create spaces outside it and, ultimately, to propose something better. If our living bodies are the irrepressible source of a shareable invention power, then we can disrupt the current programmes of institutional change—and construct a better destiny for revolutionary praxis in the twenty-first century.

♾

**NOTES:**

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Disrupting Business



### Saul Albert

Saul Albert is a researcher in the Cognitive Science group at Queen Mary, University of London, currently writing a PhD thesis entitled *Accounting for Taste: the pragmatics of aesthetic assessment in conversation*, funded by the RCUK Digital Economy Programme. He started developing playful approaches to participatory culture, technology and governance at the intersection of net.art, DIY culture and the Free Software movements in the late '90s. In 2006 he co-founded The People Speak Network, a participatory art collective bringing open-ended conversation to public spaces by building “tools for the world to take over itself.”

### Christian Ulrik Andersen

Christian Ulrik Andersen is Associate Professor in digital aesthetics and culture at Aarhus University, Denmark. His research addresses interface criticism in diverse contexts including games, cities, and business platforms. He has published the book *Interface Criticism* (co-edited with Søren Pold), and he is also the co-editor a series of peer-reviewed newspapers published in collaboration with reSource transmedial culture (Berlin) as well as the journal *A Peer-reviewed Journal About*, aprja.net (with Geoff Cox).

### Tatiana Bazzichelli

Tatiana Bazzichelli is Postdoc Researcher at Leuphana University of Lüneburg and programme curator at transmediale festival, Berlin. She is also an affiliated researcher at the Faculty of Arts, Aarhus University in Denmark, where she received a PhD degree in 2011. In 2009 she was a visiting scholar at Stanford University. She wrote the books *Networked Disruption: Rethinking Oppositions in Art, Hacktivism and the Business of Social Networking* (DARC, 2013) and *Networking: The Net*

as *Artwork* (Costa & Nolan, 2006/DARC, 2008). Active in the Italian hacker community since the end of the '90s, her project *AHA:Activism-Hacking-Artivism* won the honorary mention for digital communities at Ars Electronica in 2007. <http://www.networkingart.eu> & <http://www.disruptiv.biz>

## Franco “Bifo” Berardi

Franco “Bifo” Berardi is a writer, media-theorist, and media-activist. As a young militant he took part in the experience of Potere operaio during the years 1967-1973, then he founded the magazine *A/traverso* (1975-81) and was part of the staff of Radio Alice, the first free pirate radio station in Italy (1976-78). Involved in the political movement of Autonomia in Italy during the 1970s, he fled to Paris, where he worked with Félix Guattari in the field of schizoanalysis. He has been involved in many media projects, such as Telectreet, and Recombinant.org. He has published the books *Poetry and Finance* (2012), *After the Future* (2011), *The Soul at Work* (2010), *Felix* (2001), *Cibernauti* (1994), *Mutazione e Cyberpunk* (1993); and contributed to the magazines *Semiotext(e)*, *Chimères*, *Metropoli*, and *Musica 80*, as well as currently collaborating on the *e-flux* journal. Coordinator of the European School for Social Imagination (SCEPSI), he has been teaching at Ashkal Alwan in Beirut, PEI-Macba in Barcelona, Academia di Brera in Milano, and has been lecturing in social centres and universities worldwide.

## Heath Bunting

Heath Bunting was born a Buddhist in Wood Green, London, UK, and is able to make himself laugh (currently, reduced to only smile). He is a co-founder of both the net.art and sport-art movements and is banned for life from entering the USA for his anti-genetic work. His self-taught and authentically independent work is direct and uncomplicated and has never been awarded a prize. He is both Britain’s most important practising artist and the World’s most famous computer artist. He aspires to be a skilful member of the public and is producing an expert system for identity mutation. At 01:42 on 31/12/2011 at his home in Bristol, he invented web 3.0 and is offering it for sale for 100 million dollars.

## Paolo Cirio

Paolo Cirio is a media artist known for his controversial and innovative political artworks. He has won several international awards, exhibited in major museums and currently is a fellow of the Eyebeam Art and Technology Center in New York. Cirio’s work deals with various issues related to the emergence of digital media in fields such as copyright, privacy, transparency, finance, advertising, geopolitics, democracy and

fiction. Cirio himself has defined his works as sculptural performances of the power of information. <http://www.paolocirio.net/>

### **Geoff Cox**

Geoff Cox is Associate Professor in the Dept. of Aesthetics and Communication, and Participatory IT Research Centre, Aarhus University (DK). He is also an occasional artist, Adjunct faculty Transart Institute (DE/US), Associate Curator of Online Projects, Arnolfini, Bristol (UK), and part of the self-institution Museum of Ordure. His research interests lie in the areas of contemporary art and performance, software studies, network culture and a reappraisal of the concept of publicness. He is an editor for the DATA Browser book series, and previously co-edited *Economising Culture* (2004), *Engineering Culture* (2005), and *Creating Insecurity* (2009). His latest book is *Speaking Code: coding as aesthetic and political expression* (MIT Press 2012).

### **Baruch Gottlieb**

Baruch Gottlieb is trained as a filmmaker, working in the interstices between film and video on the biographical materiality of communications systems, the social relations which generate the hardware of technical consciousnesses. He is author of *Gratitude for Technology* (Atropos Press, 2009) and an active member of the Telekommunisten collective, contributing to many projects. He currently teaches at UdK Berlin, and is praxoretiker in residence at the Vilém Flusser Archive. Find him at <http://baruchgottlieb.com/>.

### **Brian Holmes**

Brian Holmes is a cultural critic and autonomous researcher. After working with politicized artists in Europe during the counter-globalization movement, he traveled around the world in the framework of the collaborative project “Continental Drift.” Now he lives in Chicago and works with a group called The Compass, exploring the “Midwest Radical Cultural Corridor.” His books include *Escape the Overcode: Activist Art in the Control Society* (2009) and *Unleashing the Collective Phantoms: Essays in Reverse Imagineering* (2008). Text archive at <http://brianholmes.wordpress.com>.

### **Dmytri Kleiner**

Dmytri Kleiner works at identifying the way social relations are embodied in economic and communications systems, and how profit and power is captured and maintained. He is the author of *The Telekommunist Manifesto* (2010) and an active member of Telekommunisten, contributing to the group’s ongoing series of Miscommunication Technologies, including

deadSwap, Thimbl, R15N, Miscommunication Station and Octo. He can be followed at <http://dmytri.info/>

## Geert Lovink

Geert Lovink is a media theorist, Internet critic and author of *Zero Comments* (2007) and *Networks Without a Cause* (2012). Since 2004 he is researcher in the School for Communication and Media Design at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (HvA) where he is the founding director of the Institute of Network Cultures. His institute has recently organized conferences and research networks around topics such as online video, Wikipedia, the culture of search, Internet currencies, digital publishing and alternatives in social media. He is also media theory professor at the European Graduate School (Saas-Fee) and is connected to the Centre for Digital Cultures at Leuphana University Lüneburg (D).

## Georgios Papadopoulos

Georgios Papadopoulos combines economics and philosophical analysis with an exploratory artistic practice. His research gravitates around money and its socio-economic functions. He holds a Master in Philosophy of the Social Sciences from the London School of Economics, and is pursuing a PhD at the Erasmus University, Rotterdam. Between 2008 and 2009 Papadopoulos was a researcher at the theory department of the Jan Van Eyck Academy, Maastricht, and in 2012 he was awarded the Vilém Flusser Residency for Artistic Research. His last book, entitled *Grexit*, assembles an archeology of the current financial crisis in Greece and the European Union.

## Søren Bro Pold

Søren Bro Pold is Ph.D, Associate Professor of digital aesthetics at Digital Design, DAC, University of Aarhus, Denmark, part of the Participatory IT Research Centre (<http://pit.au.dk/>) and founding member of DARC (Digital Aesthetics Research Centre). He has published in Danish and English on digital and media aesthetics – from the nineteenth century panorama to the interface; for example, on electronic literature, net art, software art, creative software, urban and mobile interfaces, and digital culture. Together with Christian Ulrik Andersen he edited the anthology *Interface Criticism - Aesthetics Beyond the Buttons* (2011).

## Oliver Ressler

Oliver Ressler lives and works as an artist and filmmaker in Vienna, and produces exhibitions, projects in the public space, and films on issues such as economics, democracy, global warming, forms of resistance and social alternatives. His projects have been in solo exhibitions at the Berkeley

Art Museum, USA; Platform Garanti Contemporary Art Center, Istanbul; Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade; Centro Cultural Conde Duque, Madrid; Alexandria Contemporary Arts Forum, Egypt; Bunkier Sztuki Contemporary Art Gallery, Krakow; and The Cube Project Space, Taipei. Ressler has participated in more than 250 group exhibitions, including the biennials in Prague, Seville, Moscow, Taipei, Lyon, Gyumri and Venice. A travelling show on the financial crisis, *It's the Political Economy, Stupid*, co-curated with Gregory Sholette, will take place at Gallery 400 in Chicago. <http://www.ressler.at/>

### **Kate Rich**

Kate Rich is an Australian-born artist and trader. In the 1990s she moved to California to work with the Bureau of Inverse Technology (BIT), an international agency producing an array of critical information products including economic and ecologic indices, event-triggered webcam networks, and animal-operated emergency broadcast devices. At the turn of the century she headed east to Bristol, UK, where she launched Feral Trade, a grocery business and underground freight network. Feral Trade forges new 'wild' trade routes across hybrid territories of business, art and social interaction. She is currently moving deeper into the cultural infrastructure, developing protocols to define and manage hospitality, finance, sports and survival in the cultural realm.

### **Renée Ridgway**

Renée Ridgway is an artist, freelance curator, writer, and educator based in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. She studied fine art at the Rhode Island School of Design (BFA) and Piet Zwart Institute (MA). Her international exhibitions include shows at Manifesta8, P.S.1 MoMA Hotel, New York, Centraal Museum Utrecht, Museum De Lakenhal, Gouda Museum, and Conflux Festival (<http://reneeridgway.net>). Ridgway is also co-initiator of and contributor to n.e.w.s. (<http://northeastwestsouth.net>), a collective online platform for the analysis and development of art-related activities. N.e.w.s. is presently conducting research for its forthcoming book *Arbitrating Attention* that rethinks the social and economic conditions of art in the twenty-first century.

### **Guido Segni**

Guido Segni (aka Clemente Pestelli) lives and works at the intersections between art, pop Internet culture and data hallucination. Mainly focused on the daily (ab)use of the Internet, his work combines a conceptual approach with a traditional hacker attitude in making things odd, useless and dysfunctional. In recent years he moved from one identity to another producing works, actions and interventions under pseudonyms, collectives and multiple names (Dedalus, Guy McMuskier, Angela Merelli, Anna

Adamolo, Guy The Bore, Umberto Stanca, Silvie Inb, Fosco Loiti Celant, Guru Miri Goro, Leslie Bleus, Luther Blissett). Co-founder of Les Liens Invisibles, he has exhibited in many galleries, museums and art & media-art international festivals. He currently teaches at the Accademia di Belle Arti of Carrara and he is part of the editorial committee for the project "A typo". <http://www.guidosegni.com>

## Stephen Shukaitis

Stephen Shukaitis is a lecturer at the Centre for Work, Organization, and Society at the University of Essex and a member of the Autonomedia editorial collective. Since 2009 he has coordinated and edited the Minor Compositions imprint series (<http://www.minorcompositions.info>). He is the author of *Imaginal Machines: Autonomy & Self-Organization in the Revolutions of Everyday Day* (2009, Autonomedia) and editor (with Erika Biddle and David Graeber) of *Constituent Imagination: Militant Investigations // Collective Theorization* (AK Press, 2007). His research focuses on the emergence of collective imagination in social movements and the changing compositions of cultural and artistic labour.

## Nathaniel Tkacz

Nathaniel Tkacz is an Assistant Professor in the Centre for Interdisciplinary Methodologies, University of Warwick. He holds a PhD from the University of Melbourne. He is co-editor (with Geert Lovink) of *Critical Point of View: A Wikipedia Reader* (2011) and his work focuses on the political dynamics of network cultures. His research page is available at [http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross\\_fac/cim/people/tkacz/](http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/cim/people/tkacz/).

## Marina Vishmidt

Marina Vishmidt is a London-based writer and critic occupied mainly with questions around art, labour and the value-form. She has just completed a PhD at Queen Mary, University of London, on *Speculation as a Mode of Production in Art and Capital*. She has held posts including the DAAD Research Grant at the University of Hamburg (2012), the Montehermoso Research Grant (2011/12), critic-in-residence at the FRAC Lorraine (2009) and a fellowship at the Jan van Eyck Academie (2007/8). She holds an MA from the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy. Co-editor of *Uncorporate Identity* (2010) with Metahaven, and *Media Mutandis: Art, Technologies and Politics* (NODE. London, 2006). She is a regular contributor to catalogues, edited collections and journals such as *Mute*, *Afterall*, *Parkett* and *Texte zur Kunst*. She also takes part in the collective projects Unemployed Cinema, Cinenova and Signal:Noise. She is currently writing a book with Kerstin Stakemeier on the politics of autonomy and reproduction in art (Textem, forthcoming).



