Make Whichever You Find Work

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'Art's double character as both autonomous and fait social is incessantly reproduced on the level of its autonomy.' – Theodor Adorno

"If you take hold of a samovar by its stubby legs, you can use it to pound nails, but that is not its primary function." – Viktor Shklovsky

Introduction

The recent uptake of the post-autonomist immaterial labour thesis draws cultural practitioners closer to the critical self-recognition of their own labour (waged and otherwise) as alienated, as well its formal commonality with other kinds of affective labour at large.1 Art finds itself in a new relation with abstract value, whether it's the typical forms of contemporary work or financial mechanisms. This applies both to the structural re-composition of work by 'creative' and self-propelled forms of exploitation as well as the inscription of art in social policy agendas tending to enhance market values. In an unprecedented way, art not only reflects but expands to include more and more fields of social action within its imaginative and institutional remit (political activity, work, education), the paradox remains that the social effectiveness of art is guaranteed by its separation from capitalist work. Thus, art's estrangement from labour continues apace, but, at this historical juncture, coincides with labour's estrangement from labour: labouring subjects who do not identify with themselves as labour. On the one hand all labour becomes in some sense aesthetic self-creation, on the other, formerly unalienated forms of activity are subsumed by capitalist social relations on an unprecedented scale. All this poses the contradiction that, rather than heralding the affective and structural force of 'non-production' and devalorisation in an era of de-financed austerity. However, as art expands to include more and more fields of social action within its imaginative and institutional remit (political activity, work, education), value is the capitalist category par excellence – the category and lens through which every thing, every object and all social relations are viewed. Value, with its twin poles of use-value and exchange-value, is 'the core of the real abstraction that mediates all social relations through the commodity.' [..] there's no use-value other than in the form of value in capitalist society, if value and capital constitute a forceful, totalising form of socialisation that shapes every aspect of life.

In a society organised by the abstraction of value, that is, a society in which profit is the imperative for co-operation and production, the chief product not the commodity but the class relation between capital and labour: this is why it makes more sense to speak of capitalism as a social relation rather than an economic system. This social relation has been de-stabilised in the decades of the neoliberal turn, as de-valoration and debt replaced expansion in the financialised economies of the West. Globally, the growth in surplus populations greatly exceeds those earning a living from the fabled spread of market relations to the overheated industries and real estate of China and south-east Asia. Class, like labour, is now experienced as an ‘external constraint’.4 While it can be argued that by and large most people have always related to capitalist work as an external constraint rather than as a source of pride or class belonging, the implication is that work has increasingly been de-valued not only of all political and economic salience. We only need refer to the numerous instances of factory closures in recent years in which workers have mobilised to demand bigger payouts and not to keep their jobs: the terrain of struggle has shifted to reproduction. As described by Marx this overarching dynamic has been in play since the introduction of machinery within large scale industry: ‘the machine does not free the worker from the work, but rather deprives the work itself of all content.’5 Similarly, through its own logic of inexorable expansion, art has arrived at a period of disidentification with its terms and categories. Art becomes the agent of hollowing out of all which is incorporated into it – participation becomes instrumentalisation, representation becomes parody, autonomy becomes hard labour, politicisation becomes cynicism. Doubtless, art has been involved in this endgame since reflexivity became an integral part of the concept of what art was.6 Art as we know it in the present and recent past is in fact characterised by its role as a ‘vanishing mediator’, terminally driven to dis-affiliate with its own disciplinary boundaries and to collapse the distance with all which lies outside it. The “aesthetic regime”, as discussed by Jacques Rancière, in fact nothing more than this tendency to collapse distinctions, hierarchy, representational orders and so forth, guaranteeing itself a ‘weak’ autonomy by relentlessly levelling the ossified categories of industrial modernity. However serviceable this might be as a formal sketch of the raison d’être of the 19th and 20th century avant-garde, it stops somewhat short of the specific de-naturing operations enacted by ‘contemporary’ art in an historical era where dis-affiliation and estrangement is primarily the affective and structural force of money, in relation to which art may offer a provocative realism, a ‘cultural confinement’ (Robert Smithson) of broken allegories but also real strategies situated in a social field of ‘non-art’ (labour, politics) increasingly devoid of content and ruled by contingency.

It is possible to draw a link between the critique of labour as a ground for human emancipation (communism) in recent debates around the term ‘communication’ and the critique of labour found in critical aesthetics, from Schiller onwards, which proposed a genuinely human community bonded together by play rather than production; collective determination as a work of art. The rejection of work and the affirmation of direct social relations unmediated by the alienating abstractions of money, state or labour is an invariant across Romantic aesthetics and are also reflected in the political theory emerging at that time, such as Utopian socialism, continuing to pervade the mature writings of Marx and having great currency across the Left spectrum up to the present. But the rejection of work is not simply a constant in the attempts to re-envision social
relations on more emancipatory lines beyond the capitalist forms by which we know them; it is also the case that the arts, yet, there is a contradictory dynamic of futurity, absurdity and waste in the dominance of abstract work as well. Conceptual artists are easy to come by, whether it’s (the perhaps apocryphal) digging ditches and filling them in again in the works programmes of the Great Depression or the workface ‘work-reconstruction’ and the social櫡ewhat which outsource[d] employment services fulfil their government targets in the neo-feudalism of the ‘Big Society’. Times of capitalist crisis turn the usual reserve army of the unemployed into the biopolitical problem of ‘surplus populations’ which the state can no longer afford to support, a problem which elicits the regressive and inefficient responses from the state every time it occurs. It may be that in the shift to be currently observed from a context of New Labour agenda of social inclusion founded upon financialisation to a hardly-unexpected one based upon serfdom when the asset bubbles collapse, art could potentially again become a ‘progressive’ critique of the mode of production and the barbarism of its social relations, tied as it is for its material and critical identity to those selfsame relations.

A Kind of Disjunctive Synthesis

The artist’s political engagement cannot consist in expanding art into society but only in reducing art to the decomposition of those mechanisms that establish and maintain “the artistic” as different from other social practices.1

The project of the dissolution of art into life – for example, in surrealism, the situationism, dadaism, constructivism, productivism, futurism, conceptual and performance art – has drawn life into art’s orbit but also bound art closely to the potential transformation of general social life. The analogy with communism is that communism argues for the generalisation of creativity through the overcoming of the social domination of abstract labour and the value-form, which will also mean a dissolution of the boundary between a reified creativity and a rarefied uselessness – art – and the thing become ‘functional and active’ in a different sense.19

The disjunction, on the other hand, comes from the tradition of critical Marxist aesthetics, which argues that it is precisely the other way around; art must maintain its difference from capitalist life in order to exert a critical purchase on it. It is the degree to which the separation between art and life, between art and work, is viewed as a problem which can be overcome in the here and now or the symptom of a problem which can only be overcome via the destruction of the value-form and the re-founding of social relations on other terms that marks the difference between these two traditions. Fundamentally, they are premised upon a variant understanding of art’s role in capitalist subsumption.20 Would art disappear in communism or would everything become art? The same question can be asked about work – would communism entail a generalisation or the abolition of art? After 500 years of capitalism, are we any nearer a position to distinguish capitalist forms from their unadulterated contents, i.e., work and capitalist life, art and commodity art, life and capitalist life, even use-value and exchange-value?

Artists on the Assembly Line

‘The figure of the avant-garde artist and that of the factory worker, both ghostly and interdependent, are two poles of modern alienation… they confront us as figures calling for an equal degree of wariness.”21

The spectre of the artist intervening directly in production, has, like Rodchenko dressed in a production suit fashioned by Varvara Stepanova, combined the dual roles of the artist and critic. The avant-garde is a prefiguration of a ‘communist object’ and new materialist ethics, a critical ethics of work with art and labour’s instrumentalisation under Bolshevism. Drawing upon the insights of Walter Benjamin on collecting, we can speculate that it is only things liberated from use which cease to be commodities. The critical artist is not just one that’s been taken out of commodity exchange and put to good use in a new society; if it was really socialist, it would never be put to use as we know it.20

The Communist Imaginary

Having drawn from accounts of Soviet productivism the twin problematic of an insufficient critique of the value-form and the tendency of artists to police productive output in industry, John Roberts attempts to retrieve a ‘communist imaginary’ within relational aesthetics and socially engaged practices.21 This can be seen as an attempt to imitate the problem of ‘surplus populations’ which the state again become a ‘progressive’ critic of the mode of production, albeit in dysfunctional form at first. In this context an experimental concert held at Baku in 1922 involving the floggings of the Caspian Fleet, factory sirens, artillery, hydroplanes, and choirs can be interpreted as a kind of ‘cargo cult’, calling forth an imago of industrialisation.11

Progress was regression, seen in the light of the spurious combo of capitalist methods of industrial production and anti-marxist forms of distribution, themselves vitiated by the NEP. Likewise, the new model of artwork as embodying truth to production (faktura) did not go far enough, stops short of a thorough critique of value and pre-existing models of production. Instead, those artists who had created critical intervention in the factories effectively worked to discipline and police workers in the workplace and outside it.11

A proponent of ‘left’ productivism, Boris Arvatov, made a contribution to this debate which was overlooked at the time and has been only recently recovered. His theoretical output attempts to close the enforced distinction between production and consumption native to capitalist reproduction intact in much Marxian theory. In a recently translated text, Arvatov foregrounds the status of things as central to the communist transformation of everyday life.

‘If the significance of the human relation to the Thing has not been understood, or has been only insufficiently understood as a relation to the means of production, this is because until now Marxists have known only the bourgeois world of things.”24

Arvatov insists that the polarities which previously seemed beyond the economy were ‘relational practices’.22 Despite noting the separation within the ‘relational’ turn of liberal social activity from a critique of labour and its aestheticisation of politics, Roberts sees in this a genre of valuable ‘holding operation’ which ‘keeps open the ideal horizon of egalitarianism, equality and free exchange’.23 On the other hand, as described by Martin, relational aesthetics stands as an epiphenomenon of the current phase of real subsumption within capitalism.24 The dissolution of art into life not only presents new content for commodification, but a new form of it in so far as art and culture has become a medium through which commodification has been extended to what previously seemed beyond the economy.25

Martin therefore recognises relational aesthetics as a form of ‘capitalist productivism’ while Roberts’ commitment to a ‘labour theory of culture’ causes him to perceive a general limit in contemporary art’s inability to imagine a space for artists’ collaboration with workers. This is anomalous with regards to earlier criticisms of productivist interventions into the factory and that it elides the very question of the indissolubility between artistic and alienated labour. Having failed in the ‘factory’, radical art must shift its attention to the social factory. One of the problems of recent accounts of the relation between productive labour and artistic labour is a reliance upon post-autonomist accounts of the socialisation of work into a commodity. Central to these accounts is Maurizio Lazzarato’s concept of so-called ‘immaterial labour’ – the labour that is no longer linked to the material world but is increasingly technologised, dependent upon and productive of communication and co-operation rather than a finished product. A common misconception is that two concepts of art have been abraded in a drive towards an imaginary in capitalism which was developed by Theodor Adorno, and the autonomy of the working class as developed by the ‘workerist’ communism of 1970s Italy. Significantly, many commentators overlook
the fact that immediately after its formulation Lafraguette quickly abandoned the term and its problems: ‘But the concept of immaterial labour was filled with ambiguities. Shortly after writing those articles I decided to abandon the idea and haven’t used it since. One of the ambiguities it created had to do with the concept of immaterial labor. Distinguishing between the material and the immaterial was a theoretical complication we were never able to resolve.’

In the early 21st century, claims for the hegemony of a class of immaterial labourers could be disputed by pointing out the drive of capital towards absolute surplus extraction in the Global south. After the 2008 financial crisis, the dramatic shake out of overinflated values and optimism about the agency of this new class brought to new light the relation between the material and the immaterial. Furthermore, viewing contemporary labour through the lens of immaterial labour tended to reproduce rather than disassemble the dominant division of mental and manual labour in capitalism. Art can then be seen as the fetishisation of this division, which is refined and generalised in the ‘creativisation’ of ‘post-Fordist’ work, as well as in adding value to de-industrialised locales.

According to Stewart Martin in his 2008 essay ‘The Pedagogy of Human Capital’, terms such as ‘immaterial labour’ and ‘self-valorisation’ both operate with a problematic concept of autonomy. Autonomy can be said to have been thoroughly internalised by capital in its attempts to collapse the subjectivity of living labour as its own and through its moves to ideologically and actually reliant ultimately on domination (even and especially when it’s the ‘self-legislating’ kind), through the agency of play and the invention of ‘forms-of-life’ resistant to an autonomy thinkable only through capital’s laws. This harmonious prospect does presuppose a rupture with existing forms of ‘capitalist life’. This rupture has been explored historically in specific ‘avant-garde’ art practices, left communist movements, and in the recent period through specific experiments in art that perform and permeate the categories of art, finance and work. Viewed thus, we can outline other relationships that bind artworks to the political economy of their times.

Financialisation: Form Follows Finance

Theodor Adorno conceives of ‘aesthetic forces of production’ which inescapably imprint the artwork...

...the artist works as social agent, indifferent to society’s own consciousness. He embodies the social forces of production which inescapably imprint the artwork..."The artist works as social agent, indifferent to society’s own consciousness. He embodies the social forces of production, literature and language.”

Art manifests the existing forces of production, but can deviate from their determinations through the ‘indeterminacy’ native to the discrete agency of art (Kant). In his book Symbolic Economies, Jean-Joseph Goux relates Marx’s schema of the development of a general equivalent to the invention of forms of representation, of art, literature and language.”

He contends that modes of signification and capitalist systems of exchange develop in parallel.

Goux describes the tendency within capitalist exchange towards abstraction and the tendency to ‘dematerialisation’ in art as two sides of a general crisis of representation punctuated by historically locatable crises in the value form (1915, 1929 and 1971). Each crisis marks a limit to the existing system’s ability to represent real world goods through money, and in each case resolution of the crisis is by way of an expansion, or further abstraction, of the money-form. Put crudely, the drives towards abstraction in both art and money are from concrete to abstract.

Drawing on Goux’s theory, George Baker has argued that Francis Picabia and Marcel Duchamp’s development of the ready-made was a response to the proliferating commodities of the early twentieth century: ‘...the ready-made responded not to the commodity as an object, but to its existence as a form of exchange, a tool of circulation, a temporary pitstop on the endless racetrack of money.

Francis Picabia’s work, Via a Viis, 1918, bore the phrase ‘The measure – that which disfigures’, points to the centrality of the measure to capital’s expansion and equilibrium. Capitalist exchange is the mediation of all production through a general or universal equivalent – money/gold. Money is therefore the measure which disfigures all by quantifying all. The ‘emergency’ suspension of the gold standard by Britain, Germany and the US during the Second World War coincided with a crisis of representation in art that resulted in Duchamp’s ‘readymade’ and ‘automatic’ forms which bring artistic representation and economic exchange into an uncomfortable collision.

Art is both an innovator in forms of representation – extending the limit of what can be represented – and, at times, its undoing – eschewing equivalence and disrupting orders of measure. Art as a special commodity rebels against its commodity status by seeking a transvaluation of all values. ‘Great 20th-century avant-garde art – and poetry in particular – from Celan to Brecht and Montale, has demonstrated the crisis of experiential units of measure...’

This emphasis on immoderation, disproportion and the crisis in units of measure is to be credited greatly to avant-garde art and this is also where it edges up to communism.”

Arguably the movement towards financialisation created a dynamic where art and capital showed parallel tendencies to escape from engagement with labour and create into the self-reflexive abstraction of value. As gold became paper and then electronic signs, money increasingly became autonomous light. The productive labour. The movement of self-expanding value, appearing as money making money on financial markets, dissolves all prior values and relationships into abstract wealth. Similarly in art, expansion of its claims upon material previously alien to it tends towards the hollowing out of this material’s substance. One notable aspect of commodification in art is its proximity to deindustrialisation. The early stages of the period of advanced financialisation or ‘neoliberalism’ saw a re-engagement with industrial material and (vacant) industrial spaces by artists. Another is the tendency towards abstract thought and linguistic claims with the integration of systems and new technologies. In this sense, the conditions set by the movements of finance provide the material and conceptual parameters for art. Art operates in these conditions but also upon them to transform their terms. Both speculative commodities, art is backed by the credibility of the artist and money by the credibility of the state. As such, like credit notes, art is a gamble on the future which will not necessarily pay off: ‘Artworks draw credit from a praxis that has yet to begin and in no way suggests whether anything back their letters of credit.’

Yet art is engaged in an endless testing of its own condition which anticipates negations of the determinations of the value form and the social system that makes it inside, rather than beyond, its tensions. And if the complicity between money and art has led to uneasy games with both, the strain of this relationship has also ushered in forms of critical reflexivity. Some recent artworks which enact this are Melanie Gilligan’s four-part video Crisis in the Credit System: Anja Kirschner and David Panos’ The Last Days of Jack Shepard, which connects the 2008 financial crisis to the South Sea Bubble; Horst Stewarts In Pree Fall (2010), or Goldin & Senneby’s Looking For Headless. 10,000 cents by Aaron Koblin and Takashi Kawashima uses the digital labour management of Amazon and Mechanical Turk to create a replica $100 bill.

Throughout art’s development in advanced capitalism, tension with commodification has also been preformative in other ways, for instance by gravitating towards uselessness and negation. The critique of commodification reaches an apothecosis with art’s confrontation with contemporary finance, for in finance art’s negation of use has been mirrored, refracted and become abstract domination. If, in art we find the outline of an emancipatory practice to come then it is important to bear in mind that this remains a model and not a programme; it is ‘a model of an uncapturated labour, not the model through which the emancipation of labour will be accomplished.’

What is There in Uselessness to Cause You Distress?

‘If the thing is useless, so is the labour contained in it, the labour does not count as labour, and therefore creates no value.’

In art from the 1960s onwards, though tendentially earlier, some might say from Duchamp, developed late capitalist modernity offered some exits for practitioners who saw the division of labour between art work and regular work as a political issue, a ‘cap’ to ‘use work’ within art, rejecting the making of art objects and socialisation as an atomised elite subjectivity by exiting the art world and art practices and becoming invisible or imperceptible.
in its terms. There was also the rehearsal of work in the art domain, from proletarian stylistics to managerial protocols, marking the shift to the so-called ‘post-industrial’ in the West. Also, there was the problematising of the distinction of art work and domestic labour. Conceptual art itself was premised on an expansion of art’s competence via the dissolution of its borders. The strategy of disappearance was enacted, by, among others, Hannah Arendt who wrote from art sociology, art making and art institutions, Charlotte Posensenske who went into social activism, Carsten Ægner, who went into tactile therapeutic interventions (all of whose work has since then of course been re-capitalised by critics, curators and collectors). The industrial/post-industrial shift was reflected in the work of Tehching Hsieh and Robert Morris, for instance, and the problematising of artwork/housework was seen in the works of L’Adernman, Mike and Mary Kelly, who followed the premises of de-materialisation, feminism and psychoanalysis. Seth Siegel’s career as a curator, lawyer and artist in one would be exemplary of the classic conceptualist act of expanding art’s competencies by blurring its borders. The paradoxical identification with extra-artistic labour while rejecting artistic labour entered another phase with artists such as Gustav Metzger (leader of an art strike and proponent of auto-destructive art), a pre-eminent operator of the ‘creative/destructive’ vector at the time and the Artist Placement Group.35 The Artist Placement Group (APG), operating in the UK and Europe from 1966-1989, initiated ‘placements’ of artists in firms and organisations, creating a forerunner to artist residencies. The main differences to the Artist residency as it exists now was that the artist was re-defined as an Incidental Person (IP), a kind of de-skilled and disinterested agent whose insertion into ‘alien’ organisational sites promised no specific outcome. The earlier cited repudiation of art, whether it was negative, e.g. withdrawal from art, or positive, e.g. expansion of art’s remit, henceforth must bethink. The IP bracketed both ‘art’ and ‘work’ in the emergent concept of the ‘professional’ as a neutral and unmarked social being. For the early 19th century Utopian socialist, the Comte de Saint-Simon, politics was a ‘science of production’ and the role of artists was itself a product bound up with the multivalent aspects of art, use and poiesis.46 Here we can see prefigured the deployment of artists in industry as promoted and practised by APG. The significance of this Saint-Simonian precursor is not only that from a certain perspective APG reproduce the role of the artist as part of a problematic managerial vanguard of a new system, Saint-Simon’s ‘prosperity’ is not productive in the capitalist sense but emancipates workers from work to pursue ‘additional incomes’. Traditionally, capitalist modernity has excluded art from instrumental economy because it was seen as an exception, a free creative practice which was pursued for different ends than other business or professional activity, and untainted by politics.47 But this can also of course be re-framed as placing art in a service of a higher instrumentality, the one of displacing and reconciling bourgeois contradictions. The Adornian complex of art as the absolute commodity captures this sharply, if heteronomously.48 The concept of the Incidental Person then could be read as a subversive affirmation of this: putting purposeless purpose to work. APG’s ‘technical solution’ exposed them to accusations of having social-democratic illusions, fetishising management, and the naivete of an explicitly non-antagonistic research-based approach. Nevertheless APG’s placements were guided by a characteristically obtuse notion of ‘use’, artists are inserted into social contexts now precisely because they are deemed useful for executing state or corporate goals. Such an outcome is already evident in the history of the contortions APG went through in trying to ‘sell situations’ to UK culture bureaucracies in the 1970s, as they alternately embrace and back off from the entrepreneurial and employment potential of the ‘placements’. They assert that they aim to ‘provide a service to Art, not a service to artists’, while the notion of the Incidental Person is itself predicated on a loss of self-evidence of what Art is or even its right to exist, as Adorno put it. The IP is a ‘de-materialised’ artist. The very absence of instrumental benefit in the long ‘time-base’ impact of the presence of the IP in organisations was framed by APG as economically productive in the visionary sense today’s business climate needs. By the early 1980s, the concept of ‘human capital’ had begun to circulate in policy circles, and APG’s proposals started to make more sense, importantly, ‘human capital’ was taken in the most diffuse of senses as well, contrary to the accounting fictions that characterised the later ‘creative economy’ paradigm. A few implications arise here. One is the IP’s repudiation of the Productivist legacy of sending artists into the factories and improving the labour process: the IP brief was totally undetermined – APG took artistic alienation from productive life very seriously. Voidly 49 and use-value and useful labour was behelden to a vision of artistic neutrality which can be seen as readily morphing into the non-specialised but semi-adaptable ‘creative’ of today. The negativity of non-specialism has to harbour a moment of refusal or open itself up to be colonised by whatever capitalist forms of life are in the air at the time. And there has been a lot written, by Benjamin Buchloh and others, about the aesthetic of administration really translating into the artist adopting the position of the manager or bureaucrat, rather than worker, thus reinforcing the division between mental and manual labour. A return to APG’s attempts to expose commodity production to the transformative non-instrumental ends of aesthetic pursuit can be derived from the self-activity of workers at one of the companies they targeted for placements: Lucas Aerospace. While APG were unsuccessfully approaching management at the company, the Lucas Aerospace Combi Shop Steward’s Committee was countering management-imposed restructuring with their own alternative corporate plan. The plan proposed the recuperation of the company around the production of ‘socially useful products and human centred technologies’ developed by the workers themselves. Setting out to address ‘the exponential change in the organic composition of capital and the resultant growth of massive structural unemployment’ directly, the Shop Steward’s Committee practically rejected the division of manual and intellectual work, forming a ‘unique combine of workers within Lucas between high level technologists and shop floor semi-skilled’.50 Wary not only of the traditional command structure of management, Lucas workers were also conscious of the incursions into the abode of production by the autonomous sphere of finance experienced as a second order of remote command.51 The plan was developed on company time and in fact conditioned by, the negativity of labour expressed by stopping or slowing production. The Lucas Corporate Plan posed the problem of the emancipation of labour as a struggle over the control of work and the use-value it produces. Yet this approach strategically included both a rejection of and a compromise with the market.52 What’s The Use? Because all capitalist commodities are products of abstract labour, the dimension of use-value supposedly unrelated to social form is subsumed in this homogeneity and abstraction insofar as use-value is part of the commodity. Use-value bears the same relation to exchange-value as concrete labour does to abstract labour; it is its opposite (particular, individual), but subsumed into the general form of value which hollows out particularity. Moshi Postone identifies ‘labour’ as a capitalist category and thus a reified one.53 This is related also to the de-socialised or idealised positioning of use-value, and ultimately testifies that the art into life versus critical autonomy of art cannot be resolved within the form of value so long as the social form of their production is determined by value. The form of social labour in capitalism is nowhere the same as concrete labour, or even the ahistorical ‘metabolic interaction with nature’: ‘Labor’ by its very nature is unfree, unhuman, unsocial activity determined by private property and creating private property. Hence the abolition of private property will become a reality only when it is conceded as the abolition of ‘labour’ (an abolition which, of course, has become possible only as a result of the practice that is to say, has become possible as a result of the material activity of society and which should on no account be conceived as the replacement of one category by another).54 Until recently, communist theory poised the problem of production as one of separating use-value from exchange-value, yet these insights suggest that destruction of the capital-labour relationship must also bracket off and destroy use-value as a constitutive category presupposed by value. The only way that has any ground for emancipation is a perspective common to left communist theory like the Frankfurt School, German ‘werkritik’ (value-critique) and the ideas around ‘commmunisation’ circulating today. Don’t worry, mate, it’s only art, it’s not worth it, or the Labour of the Negative ‘It is the sphere of the exchequered gesture, in which the artist’s special personality gives to the rest of humanity the example, in the form of spectacle, of those forms of life that they are forbidden to assume… Art is given a monopoly on the how of act. The setting up of an autonomous sphere wherein the how of every gesture is endlessly weighed, analysed, subjected to know-how, has not ceased to show up the prohibition on any mention of the how of existence in the rest of alienated social relations.’55 Increasingly, artistic labour apes forms of service work in its performance of affect and forms of social provision, whilst capital (at least in the West) appears to be going through an anti-productivist, if not outright destructive turn. Current attempts to bind more closely to the market sectors not organised according to the law of value – art, but also education – testify to capitalism’s pre-emptive extraction and exploitation of the very reproduction of the capital-labour relationship and thus of the social division of labour that holds art and labour as separate realms. The tendency towards uselessness and negation propelled by the real subsumption under abstract labour and the commodity-form of all those expanses of social experience which...
used to provide capital with a dialectical contrast and a ‘standing reserve’ can also be seen in the alienation from labour which simultaneously makes itself felt in art, in work and in radical politics. Returning to Symbolic Economies and its schema of resonances in abstraction, it may be ventured that a common tendency of all progressive social movements at the time Goux was writing (1969) was a rejection of labour, even in the labour movements, who fought hard to wring more money and more life, not more work, from capitalists and the State. Jean-François Lyotard was writing his famous ‘evil’ book, Libidinal Economy several years later, arguing that alienated labour is a source of self-destructive jouissance and can never be affirmed as a productive praxis once freed of its value-form integuments. This accords with the ‘communication’ position – labour, and the class politics emerge as a hated situation enforced by capital which has nothing to do with emancipation. One also hears sometimes that neoliberalism won because people did not want to be workers any longer; but they didn’t realise that not being workers meant getting rid of capitalism. The ongoing reproduction of the social relations of capital, with the politics of its class relations shattered, meant that competitive individualism becomes the only credible form of human autonomy – and the community of capital the only form of the human community. This situation registered quite early in the stronghold of competitive creative individualism that is supposed to have prototyped it – in line with the the tendencies explored in the preceding discussion on financialisation and form.

The struggle over the wage and struggle against waged work has not been entirely alien to artist groups who have agitated around the issue of artists’ fees or institutionalised in artists unions. The strength of those collective formations is by and large associated with the strength of the union movement and/or social democracy in their respective national bases (so Scandia and Canada have strong artists unions, while the attempts in the UK and the US have either failed or never coalesced). Less official groups include the Carret Workers Collective in London, or W.A.G.E. (Working Artists in the General Economy) in NYC, who demand reimbursement for ‘critical value’ in ‘capitalist value’. This latter is certainly a materialist critique of the non-reproduction artists are tasked with advancing for everyone – at least they should be paid for it. Yet the barrier to this provocation, which is also implicit to it, is, as Paolo Virno puts it, ‘Nowadays artistic labour is turning into wage labour while the problem is, of course, how to liberate human activity in general from the form of wage labour.’ This question of liberating human activity is bracketed in the question of artistic labour, which, in its post-object phase, appears as labour which cannot find value on the market. Thus it is, in Marx’s definition given earlier, ‘useless labour’, and as such can only model liberated human activity for free. This shows that the art sphere has a problematic relationship to the commodity not only at the level of the artwork, but at the level of labour. If the problem of measure comes up here, it also comes up in the relationship to temporality. Guattari and Lazzarato, among others, have contributed to the idea that the potential importance of art in capital is not its symptomatic distance from abstract labour, but its capacity to interrupt or displace the capitalist time – whether it is homogeneous and empty or fractal and just-in-time – which structures that labour and the ‘multiplication of the “enterprise” form within the social body’. Art can introduce an ‘order of difference’ into this experience of rationalised time, ‘a window of meaninglessness in order to produce a new meaning’. So art is capable of exposing the problem of measure, whether applied to labour or a temporality which ultimately comes down to labour-time under the form of value. Further, art stands between a conscious process and an unconscious one, closely tied to the development of individuality and difference, from which it is possible to outline a generalisation of art different to that which we live through today.

Conclusion

The problem of the historic avant-garde, especially the Soviet example, is that it is the problem of communism – does work need to be valorised or neglected, and under what conditions? Besides Adorno, the history of philosophical aesthetics since Schiller and Hegel’s potential importance of art in capital is not its symptomatic distance from abstract labour, but its capacity to interrupt or displace the capitalist time – whether it is homogeneous and empty or fractal and just-in-time – which structures that labour and the ‘multiplication of the “enterprise” form within the social body’. Art can introduce an ‘order of difference’ into this experience of rationalised time, ‘a window of meaninglessness in order to produce a new meaning’. So art is capable of exposing the problem of measure, whether applied to labour or a temporality which ultimately comes down to labour-time under the form of value. Further, art stands between a conscious process and an unconscious one, closely tied to the development of individuality and difference, from which it is possible to outline a generalisation of art different to that which we live through today.

or as exception that proves the law of capitalist social relations, and it has less relation to the negativity of labour-power than to the negativity of the ever-mutating form of value. Contra to the thesis that the dissolution of the borders between art and productive labour (or art and politics) heralds emancipation, this may be read instead as an index of the real subsumption of generic human capacities into the self-valorisation process of a capital which is no longer measurable and whose value comes from or how to capture it; a process self-referential and totalising as the expanded field of art. In looking at this relation, we must remain vigilant about turning critical categories into positive ones. The history of socialist politics as well as the ideologies of capitalist futurism and the divagations of socially constructed aesthetic art are not shortage of examples of doing the opposite. However, artworks do not simply pass through a moment which bypasses use value, but that cannot be subsumed under exchange value: they also connect with a form of activity which presages non-objective relations between subjects, activity which distanciates “the subject as congealed technology.”

[art] is the outcome of an activity that is not a free act of consciousness but is nonetheless an activity, and not merely a thing in itself that does not appeal to consciousness. The productivity of genius hereby exposes an activity in which consciousness and non-consciousness relate to each other as alternative modes of an absolute activity that is their common foundation.

Once art starts to ‘model the shift to the service-based economy’ it becomes strictly speaking impossible to distinguish it from non-art. In its articulation with the consolidation of artistic subjectivity, but also in its epitomes in the creativity of finance and the development of human capital, we’re back to the autonomy-heteronomy nexus. Art is the apotheosis of exchange-value and the total eclipse of the use-value in the Modernist artwork, but if ‘form follows finance’ with the centrality of abstract wealth to social relationships, then it can be argued that art’s attempts to repeat labour and the extra-artistic practices within its institutional sphere is not just recapitulating all those practices’ submission to exchange-value in their desire to become useful, but use-values’ own equivocal and submissive relationship to exchange-value as the reality of capitalist existence. In this sense, current art is tied to the ‘non-reproduction’ of the class relation between capital and labour, and also the loss of distinction between art and labour under the form of exchange-value which forms in which it has taken under financialisation – debt, precarity, innovation, rent-seeking, etc. Yet, this typology can also be seen more dialectically when the use-value embodied by artwork can no longer be practically or philosophically distinguished. Viktor Shklovsky’s samovar hammering a nail finds its contemporary complement in a mannequin arm breaking the glass window of a Tunisian shopping centre. As a period in which culture has begun to use every which way draws to a close and we can expect job-creation schemes to rival gallery press releases in their fantastic non-solutions to advancing doom, art’s capacity to both real and not-labour may appear anew in the ruins of its social synthesis, side by side with all those useful things (education, social security, jobs, growth, justice…).

Notes

1 Though there are others, the two primary accounts we are referring to are: John Roberts, ‘Introduction: Art, ‘Enclave Theory’ and the Commonism Imaginary’, Third Text 23.4, 2009, pp 353-367, and Stewart Martin, ‘Artistic Commonism – a sketch’, Third Text, 23.4, p.492.

2 See, for example, Theorie Communisme, ‘Self-organisation as the act of the revolution ; it then becomes an obstacle which the revolution has to overcome’, http://dilectum.org/library/self organisation-the act-of-the-revolution-it-then-becomes-an-obstacle-which-the-revolution-has-to-overcome


4 See, for example, Theorie Communisme, ‘The Present Moment’, http://dilectum.org/library/present-moment-theorie-communisme

5 In his study of the interactions between a group of workers and utopian socialists in 19th century France,
Jacques Rancière describes the tensions between these two worlds as a simple, but rather profound, concept, and how we pursue any and every desire to do otherwise, and our patrician mentors who found and forged in them an image of the self and Rancière's account of the fault is with the middle-class leftist's 'lack of vision and will' of a class revolution. To the Communist's thought, the question seems as a structural contradiction: after the failure of the worker's movement, can be overcome. See Jacques Rancière, *Rights of Nature, trans. John Drury, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999 and Theorie Communiste Op Cit.


7 The reference point for this is usually located in G.F.W. Hegel's lectures on aesthetics, and is discussed at length by Rancière in several of his writings. See Hegel, *Aesthetics*, trans. J. B. Baillieu, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1969.


17 A whole history might be written, by focusing on the labour of narration – the opposite pole to an aesthetics of productivity – would bring to light strike works, spoil works, and artists who simply slip out of the ordered tradition of art history to exit artistic production completely. A series of abstract works was a practical critique of both work and art. Critics of the Bolshevik enthusiasm for science and technology, even those not Russian Mensheviks and anarchists, but also key Marxist theorists such as Rosa Luxemburg and Amadeo Bordiga. Artists peers on the German left celebrated the refusal of labour (strikes) and the critique of both the existing organization of productive forces and work itself (good examples are painter Gerd Arntz and writer Rolf Marx-Traverse). Dada simultaneously mounted a critique of the division of the labour, the art object and the commodity.

24 Ibid., p.482.


40 Critiques of APG from the Left claimed that the placements served to legitimise corporations. The APG response to that was that the systems of time and measurement used by their critics on the left and the Right, as well as the designation Left and Right and the usurpation of the inapplicable to a project that was trying to work with a different conception of time and according to the argument being the subjective unit of time or ‘unit of attention’. See Claire Bishop, 'The Rate of Return', *Artforum*, October, 2010, p.231-237. Peter Esery, 'Content is Half the Work', *Preze*, issue 11, November-December, 2007; Howard Slater, 'The Art of Governance', http://www.opendap.org/2007/12/howard-slater-the-art-of-governance, (2007). My thanks to Thomas Mole, ‘The Individual and the Organisation’, http://www.artistsorganisers.com/Artist-Placement-Group-APG-John-Ham-Buchanan-Slater.

41 Slater, op.cit.

42 Among the products developed were: a mobile cart for the collection of industrial waste, financial planners, monitors and other nonproductive workers who are simply there to act as paper boys for external capital. This is part of the wider process in which financial capital increasingly dominates industrial capital, a monetized stage in which the production of capital becomes more important than production itself.

43 This approach is summed up by Lucas engineer Mike Cosley, ‘...[we] sought a mix of products which would be profitable by the present criteria of a market economy and ones which would not necessarily be profitable but which would be socially useful' Mike Cosley, Op.Cit. (second edition), p.119.

45 The image that has now become external to the production process are the separate stakes and market analysts, financial planners, monitors and other nonproductive workers who are simply there to act as paper boys for external capital. This is part of the wider process in which financial capital increasingly dominates industrial capital, a monetized stage in which the production of capital becomes more important than production itself.


51 John Roberts, *Intangibility of the Model*, p.209. Two specific art practices that consistently take on the genre of the ‘model’, whether it is modelling global chains of production or the transactions of ‘the economy’, are those of Mike Rottenberg and Matthew Sosin, who undertake this through films and conceptual representation of objects. Mike Rottenberg, ‘Heres, ‘model’ is used in a narrower sense than in this passage, but clarifies the relation in the production of knowledge which will be taken up above.


53 Howard Slaster points out that Metzger and Lazzarato’s strike projects can be seen as examples of working class cultural forms making an entrance into the privileged field of art: ‘The Spoiled Idols of Lost Situations: Some Notes on Political Conceptual Art’, http://www.infoool.org.uk/fhs/us.html

54 Ibid., p.12.