

SPECULATIVE FUTURES: SOCIAL PRACTICE, COGNITIVE CAPITALISM AND/OR THE TRIUMPH OF CAPITAL

**in Informal Market Worlds: The
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Artists have long been interested in the social and economic spheres, bringing their attention to focus on the everyday world, those ordinary things we need to survive, such as food, company, shelter and income.¹ Unlike them, art is not necessary though often much desired, thus creating a counterpoint to what we might call the ordinary. The questions of commodities and labour are often central here, both the labour to make and the labour required to buy the commodity, and then even the affective labour invested in the product, service, or indeed experience itself. This artwork is often overtly political, and even when it is not, it has a worldly “investment” that is at odds with a more aesthetic strain of art that reflects nothing other than its own formal qualities, a dialogue about materiality and aesthetics.

Much of this work today comes under the heading of social practice or sometimes participatory practice. It engages the audience in ways that undermine both the so-called autonomy of the art work and its basis as a commodity. Among the artists I will examine through this lens are Stephanie Syjuco,² the Institute for Figuring,³ Martha Rosler,⁴ and e-flux,⁵ as well as a second grouping whose project involve the production of food, among them Fallen Fruit,⁶ Oscar Murillo⁷ and Superflex.⁸ Each represents different forms of oppositional work that interrogates both the capitalist mode of production and inherited ideas of the art work. By deploying ordinary objects and alternative forms of exchange or gifting, their projects critique the basis of commodity capitalism and reflect upon the current circumstances of what might best be called cognitive capitalism.

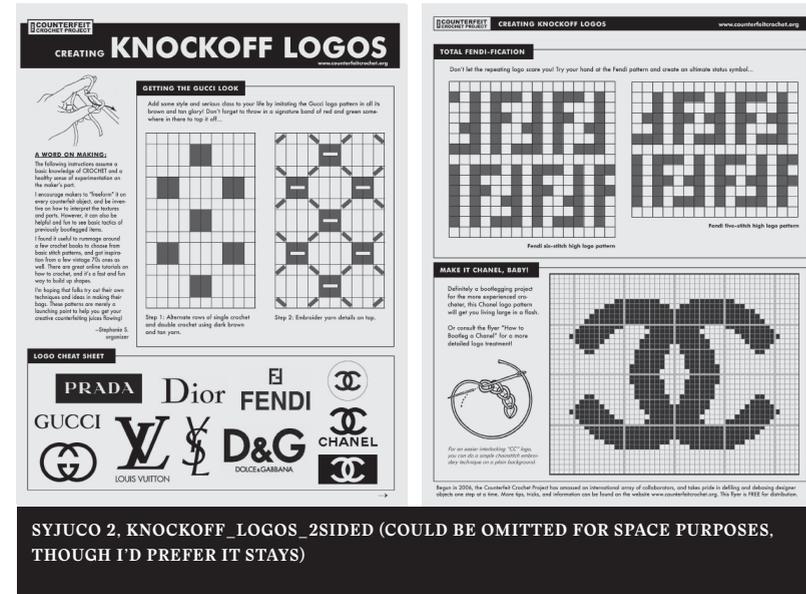
The conjoined transformation of industrialization and photography in the nineteenth century initiated a crisis in art that impelled artists to make new claims about the work of art. Chief among them is the claim for autonomy, which originates in Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* as the philosopher’s argument for a form of art that serves no practical function, devoid of purpose and is thus free of instrumental value.⁹ Taken up in the nineteenth century under the slogan of “art for art’s sake,” moving into Modernist formalism, it advocated the repression of referentiality and context beyond the context of art itself. It asks less what art is, as an object of value, than “what it *does*”.¹⁰ Art historians trace this lineage back to eighteenth century French salons and the onus placed on cultivating one’s distinctive and autonomous taste, part of creating a bourgeois political subject. Later, there are Marxist and politically inflected concepts of autonomy that are instrumental to a degree, in that they desig-



nate art as a distinctive capacity, as a valuable practice that does something no other form (philosophy, religion, science, etc.) can do: help us understand the world — and perhaps begin to change it. Many of the artists I discuss here reject the former kind of autonomy in favour of the latter, creating work that makes interventions in a world moving into post-commodity capitalism.

Industrialization loosened the flow of commodities and was superseded in the twentieth century by Fordism, a term first coined by Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks*. Henry Ford's strategy was to expand productivity by standardizing output, using conveyor-belt assembly lines, and breaking the work into smaller de-skilled tasks. With costs minimized and profits maximized, productivity and worker's salaries went up (in exchange, he says, for their putting up with the monotony and degradation of the work). Gramsci saw Fordism as a "rationalized" practice deriving "from an inherent necessity to achieve the organization of a planned economy [...] marking the passage from the old economic individualism to the planned economy".¹⁴ He was the first to acknowledge the possibility that Fordism was a strategy that could also serve communism, seeing Fordism as the "ultimate stage" of the socialization of the forces of production.¹²

Elsewhere, Fordism is credited with creating the post-war boom in standards of living, economic equality and social justice, also called socialized or liberal capitalism. Much of the work I discuss here touches upon these questions in some form, as well as tracing the shift from a Fordist to a post-Fordist economy, with which each artist has a complex and nuanced relationship. Among their foci of the work are the shimmer of commodities and their afterlife, assembly lines, excess, trash, barter, gift economies, and especially intangible economies, which have to do with the growing immateriality of how we live, which brings with it a predominance of service labour, cognitive labour, and affective labour. This work asks how we get these desired (or unwanted) objects, where they go, what alternatives there might be, and what consequences both intangible and material arise from their passage.



Much of it is tinged with a utopian impulse, the wish for new forms of art that make new forms of life possible.

Looking more like a store than a gallery, a brightly-lit window is filled with hand-made luxury handbags flashing cc's, F's and GG logos for brands such as Chanel, Fendi and Gucci. On closer sight, one sees they are all homemade, crocheted out of wool with meticulous but off-scale detailing. They are made through an ongoing participatory project by San Francisco-based artist Stephanie Syjuco in her *Counterfeit Crochet Project (Critique of a Political Economy)*, 2006–ongoing. When Syjuco launched a website to solicit participants to join her in hand-counterfeiting designer handbags in 2006, she attracted the attention of the craft community, in this case mostly women who crochet, which is considered the stepchild of the finer crafts of embroidery, needlepoint, and knitting. The handcrafted articles stage a collusion between high-end luxury items and humble domestic craftwork, and in their misfit quality, they radiate a strange kind of commodity fetishism behind which lurks a subtle perhaps anarchist critique. From afar they look quite conventional, especially when seen in a well-lit gallery window, but as one approaches them a certain cognitive dissonance arises. Presenting themselves as craft, they nonetheless shimmer with consumer desire. Presented as luxury objects, they not only fall short of consumerist desire, but offer a subtle though sharp commentary of it.

The counterfeits play the line between naiveté and critique, never settling comfortably at either. The care put into their creation echoes the kind of charismatic quality that luxuries exercise over consumers, but once their counterfeit nature becomes evident, the fetish is put into quotes, into a kind of suspension. Syjuco tips her hand with the project's parenthetical subtitle, *Critique of a Political Economy*, which is the subtitle of Marx's *Capital*. Presented in an art context, most often artist-run or alternative spaces, the work itself is not for sale; the pieces belong to the individual

makers, who are free to enter into commerce with their works, presented of course as art or craft, not as brand-name originals. The critique may or may not be evident, based on the position of the viewer, but the act of provocation is hard to ignore.

The *Counterfeit Crochet Project* has been exhibited in the Philippines and Beijing, China, locations which add a particular resonance to the topic of both piracy and concepts of consumer luxury. The counterfeit is always a challenge to our material values: the appearance of things comes to supersede any concrete meaning, the ultimate manifestation of exchange over use value. It's not so much the appearance of luxury items as their signification of wealth and taste; the fetishism of the commodity is easy to read, but the operation of taste — a key term in aesthetics — is more complex. Syjuco situates this work through three axes, craft, commodity and art, and calls these articles (though I would also call them gestures or performances) counterfeits rather than piracy, referring to them as a kind of “jamming,” a reference to culture jamming.

A tactic used by many anti-consumerist activists to disrupt advertising, consumerism and media culture, culture jamming is an attempt to expose systems of domination and even spur progressive change. Many culture jams are intended to provoke questionable political assumptions behind commercial culture, and its tactics include re-figuring logos, fashion statements, and product images as a means to challenge the idea of coolness in relation to assumptions about the actual “freedom” behind unfettered consumption. Culture jamming is a form of *subvertising*, related to the Situationist tactic of *détournement*. Naomi Klein speaks of the power behind branding to create the concept of lifestyle, rootless and consumerist in base; especially for young people caught in its embrace, it reflects not so much the absence of a literal space to occupy “so much as a deep craving for metaphorical space: release, escape, some kind of open-ended freedom”.¹³ This craving might be said to have found an outlet in the Occupy movement, which indeed was spurred by the Canadian activist group Adbusters, which describes itself as “a global network of artists, activists, writers, pranksters, students, educators and entrepreneurs who want to advance the new social activist movement of the information age”.¹⁴

Art gallery itself is a site of strange commerce: Syjuco notes that one major component difference between the *Counterfeit Crochet Project* and an existing fashion structure is that there is no “store,” since nothing — not even materials, instructions, patterns, nor finished products — is for sale. “This discrepancy is a purposeful and pivotal change in the structural model of production and consumption. The ‘buyer’ is essentially the crafter-producer, closing the loop on who has access to the means of production.”¹⁵ Syjuco also notes that the *Counterfeit Crochet Project* proposes a model of participation against that of temporary labour, of skill-sharing against management, and of cultural capital against wages.

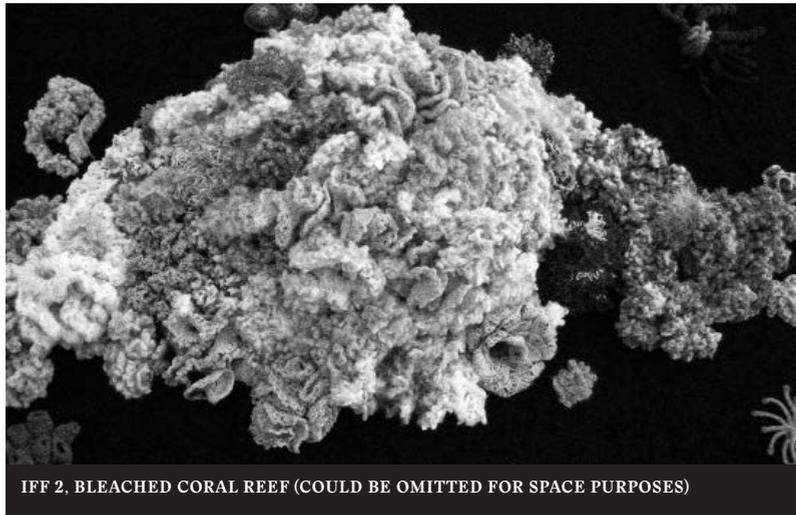
Participatory crocheting also forms the basis for The Institute for Figuring's *Crochet Coral Reef*, (2005–ongoing) conceived of by Christine and Margaret Wertheim. This unique fusion of art, science, mathematics, handicraft and community practice may well be the largest community art project in the world. The vast majority of participants are women, recruited through the website and by word of mouth; most of them think of themselves as crafters more than artists, and even the Wertheims



play with the designation by calling themselves an institute, an organizational body of research and study. The inspiration for making crochet reef forms began with the technique of “hyperbolic crochet” discovered in 1997 by Cornell University mathematician Dr. Daina Taimina. Initially experimenting with crochet as a way to express mathematical formulas of hyperbolic space, the Wertheim sisters adopted Taimina’s techniques and elaborated upon them to develop a whole taxonomy of reef-life forms.

Loopy “kelps”, fringed “anemones”, crenelated “sea slugs”, and curlicued “corals” have all been modelled with these methods. The basic process for making these forms is a simple pattern or algorithm, which on its own produces a mathematically pure shape, but by varying or mutating this algorithm, endless variations and permutations of shape and form can be produced. The crochet reef project became an on-going evolutionary experiment in which the worldwide community of Reefers brings into being an ever-evolving crochet “tree of life.” As with Syjuco’s counterfeit project, the participants own their work, except on the occasions that the IFF buys it; the work may enter the art market, or more likely become part of the non-profit Institute’s archive. It is a distributed collaboration that forges a transnational consciousness of the power of whimsical representations to communicate the urgency of climate change.

The direct referent for the crochet reef is the endangered Great Barrier Reef, along the coast of Queensland, Australia, where the Wertheim sisters grew up. Originating in 2005, for the first four years of its life the reef took over their home, gradually expanding to become the dominant life-form in their house. At the same time the project began to expand into other cities and countries until it has become a worldwide movement that engages communities across the globe from Chicago, New York and London, to Melbourne, Dublin and Cape Town. As a totality, the *Crochet Coral Reef* has grown far beyond its original incarnation so that today it is made up



IFF 2, BLEACHED CORAL REEF (COULD BE OMITTED FOR SPACE PURPOSES)

of many different “sub-reefs,” each with its own colours and styling. Some of these are local, like the London reef, but others are thematic, including the Bleached Reef, the Beaded Reef, the Branched Anemone Garden, and the Kelp Garden. In addition to these delicate woollen reefs there’s also a massive Toxic Reef crocheted from yarn and plastic trash — a part of the project that responds to the escalating problem of plastic trash that is inundating our oceans and choking marine life.

It is this last reef, made entirely of refuse and recycled plastics, that comments most on the global economy of waste as it feeds into climate crisis and environmental precarity. The Toxic Reef stages the relationship between coral reefs endangered by global warming and the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, a swirling gyre of mostly plastic garbage just north of the Hawaiian Archipelago. Estimates of its scale runs from the size of France to 20 times bigger, making it the largest repository of garbage in the world. Through craft, the Toxic Reef dramatizes the human role in global pollution as well as raising questions of value and global economy; if art fulfils the role of the sacred, trash represents the profane. “Detritus has ideological, social, political contexts and associations. Anyone forced to work with other people’s garbage — from office cleaners to sewage workers — recognizes this”.¹⁶ Artists have been overtly combining the two since the 1950s, beginning with assemblage that re-uses found material that follows the model of artist as bricoleur, with a consciousness of how economies of wealth are always shadowed by excess, invisible labour, planned obsolescence, and waste — trash itself is an integral part of capitalist economies.

Mierle Laderman Ukeles, an early social practice artist who started working with New York City garbage men in the late 70s, created installations and critical documentation of the role of trash and maintenance work which she calls “maintenance art.” One can still draw a connection to Gramsci’s optimism here, his certainty that the future lies with the “new man.” The “humanity” and “spirituality” of artisan labour has been destroyed, but this is precisely the archaic “humanism’ that the new industrialism is fighting,” so that the destruction of artisanal work and craft unionism is progressive. But the “deskilling” of labour does not turn the worker into Taylorism’s notorious “trained gorilla.” “Once the process of adaptation has been completed, what really

happens is that the brain of the worker, far from being mummified, reaches a state of complete freedom”.¹⁷ Fordist forms of labour predominated through the 1970s, though they had begun its gradual eclipse, marked in the west by the triumph of Reaganism and Thatcherism.

For her first solo exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art in 2012, native New York artist Martha Rosler presented her *Meta-Monumental Garage Sale*, a large-scale version of the classic American garage sale, in which Museum visitors could browse and buy second-hand goods organized, displayed, and sold by Rosler herself, with dozens of assistants. The installation filled MOMA’s Marron Atrium with unusual and everyday objects donated by the artist, the museum’s staff, and the general public, creating a lively space for exchange between Rosler and her customers as they haggle over prices. The project also included a newspaper and an active website, and if customers agreed, they were photographed with their purchases. Pictures of them with their purchases were posted to the exhibition’s photo stream on Flickr.

Unveiled in 2004, four years after the Tate Modern’s Engine room, MOMA’s atrium reflects museological trends toward outsize spectacles and entertainment park aesthetics. At four stories of precious space, the atrium has been criticized as both too corporate and too much like a shopping mall. Notoriously difficult to activate, Rosler filled the space with 14,000 pieces of well-organized junk. On the atrium’s oversized walls was clothing of all types, from bras and panties arranged by colour, to t-shirts with feminist or anti-war slogans. If these held no appeal, there was Rosler’s record collection, including such enduring favourites as Burl Ives’s greatest hits and cast albums from the musicals *Kismet* and *Pajama Game*. There was a child-sized piano, a Macintosh Classic, stuffed animals, old pornography, and a yellowed, still-talking PeeWee Herman doll, watched over by an enormous u.s. flag suspended above, also for sale. You could take home a washing machine or a us\$4,000 black Mercedes station wagon from the 1980s, with frayed upholstery and no engine because MOMA refused to have it on the floor; but delivery was offered neither through the artist nor the museum.

The *Meta-Monumental Garage Sale* at MOMA is a successor to a work originally held (as *Monumental Garage Sale*) in the art gallery of the University of California at San Diego in 1973. The work was advertised simultaneously as a garage sale in local newspapers and as an art event within the local art scene. A chalkboard on site bore the legend, “Maybe the Garage Sale is a metaphor for the mind,” and a slide show of a seemingly typical white family, bought at a local estate sale, played continuously while an audiotape loop offered a meditation on the role of commodities in suburban life. Held over eight times since then in museums in Vienna, Barcelona, Stockholm, London and elsewhere, the garage sale implicates visitors in face-to-face transactions within a secondary, informal cash economy — just like garage sales held far outside any art setting.

A sign at the entrance announced “everything clean, nothing guaranteed,” and indeed MOMA required Rosler to fumigate the 14,000 items before the show, lest insects or fungi migrate upstairs into Picasso’s “*Demoiselles d’Avignon*.” In this flea



ROSLER, META-MONUMENTAL GARAGE SALE

market without fleas, everything was negotiable, and Rosler perhaps set prices high to set the haggling process off with vigour. She was on site every day for two weeks, willing to let some things go at reasonably low prices, while fending off low bids for other, seemingly equivalent items. With money changing hands in plain sight, the art space becomes a transactional place, exposing not just consumerism but the re-valuation of formerly un-valued and unwanted things. “One of the main issues in an art gallery is value,” said Rosler. “The price tags are not visible and yet you know they are there.”¹⁸ These two forms of value are juxtaposed, a dialogue between the sacred and the profane, highlighting a system that designates the same things as priceless art or junk. It is one legacy of Duchamp’s readymade, but while his work is an argument around the autonomy of art, work such as Rosler’s repositions ordinary objects in relation to the political economy of art and is lodged in a broad critique of social, cultural and economic values.

Before staging her first *Monumental Garage Sale* in 1973, Rosler “was struck by the strange nature” of local garage sales, “their informal economic status and self-centeredness, but also the way they implicated the community in the narrative of the residents’ lives.” Speaking to MOMA curator Sabine Breitwieser, Rosler states that her first sale was designed to create a space “where the question of worth and value, use and exchange, are both glaringly placed front and centre and completely represented and denied.”¹⁹ Rosler points out that the work originated during the oil shock of 1973, when gas rationing was imposed and the US economy entered a recession and

“stagflation” that led to the slow dismantling of the socialized liberal economy that had created the great prosperity of the post-war years. In 1973, alternative modes of economic exchange still held a degree of promise, but by 2012, they work in the shadow of a rampant neoliberal economy that has remade not only the forms of value, but those of labour.

While Rosler’s garage sales echo older forms of mercantile exchange-based economies, a wave of time bank projects initiated by artists in the last decade investigate systems of exchange that do away with money entirely. My local *Time Bank*, the Echo Park branch, was founded in 2008, and it addresses both a real world and online community in which hours of service, help and expertise are exchanged on a purely equal basis. For example, I can trade an hour of revising your manuscript for an hour of John Doe’s help in cleaning my garage. Time banking operates on principles of reciprocity, based on the proposition that everyone is an asset and deserves respect, that some work is beyond monetary price, and that social networks are necessary. It can be described as a form of social banking, and it is an exercise in radical equality: “Time Banking builds relationships by connecting untapped resources with unmet needs. Through reciprocity we celebrate that everyone has unique gifts to share.”²⁰

While time-based exchanges date back to the socialist movements of the early nineteenth century and were the subject of anarchist Peter Kropotkin’s 1902 *Mutual Aid*, in the last decade they have permeated art world discourse. Julieta Aranda and Anton Vidokle of e-flux created their *Time/Bank* in 2010, though their website stresses that it was conceived of as much as two years earlier, betraying a bit of authorship anxiety attached to a rather anarchic project. Their “currency” is designed by no less than conceptual artist Lawrence Weiner, a kind of name “brand,” and it can be exchanged for other currencies, biological time, ideas, services, and commodities.

Though originally conceived of as a social exchange of services, Aranda and Vidokle’s provocation is to include the commodity of art in the purview of the time bank and to train their focus on the “creative class.” *Time/Bank* was preceded by e-flux’s 2008 Pawnshop, which placed over 60 artist’s works in a pawnshop just as the financial crisis began. Artists in financial need were given cash in exchange for their work, which if not retrieved after 30 days was available for purchase. Two contradictory models of value collide, transforming a holding pen for pawned objects into a gallery space. “A pawnshop is a stage where merchandise and money dance in a choreography that could have them circle back and cancel each other out, but in fact rarely does. What better place to question how the value of the artwork and the worth of money might be set, and reset?”²¹

Aranda and Vidokle insist that the basis of *Time/Bank* is not barter. Their hope was 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.”²² They evoke a kind of distributive justice, a socially just allocation of goods in a society. Envisioning an alternative economy not bounded in space but still measured in time, their desire is both utopian and pragmatic, seeking to validate intellectual or art work that primarily

produces discourse or ideas. It follows along Deleuzian lines, wherein artists create affects, pre-personal “intensities,” and percepts, in Deleuze’s words, “an aggregate of perceptions and sensations that outlive those who experience them.”²³ Percepts are blocks of space-time independent of their perceivers, packets of sensations and relations, a way of expressing the intangibles that contemporary artists produce. Either of these may have material qualities, including that of language, but their power is in a kind of dematerialization.

At the core of these many artists’s projects is an investigation of the transformation to a post-Fordist economy in which recombinant capital, ventures not specifically engaged in production but in hyper-accelerated financial flow, the extraction of money from capital, is in a kind of alliance or exploitive relation with cognitive and precarious labour. This “cognitariat” are workers whose main production is knowledge, such as artists, programmers, scientists, lawyers and teachers; Franco “Bifo” Berardi defines cognitive labour as “the kind of activity that generates semiotic flows and generates wealth, surplus value and capital in the semiotic field through a semiotic diffusion of merchandise and of goods”.²⁴ Italian Marxist Antonio Negri argues that the originality of cognitive capitalism consists in capturing the innovative elements that produce value, and hence “capitalist development and the capitalist creation of value are based more and more on the concept of social capture of value itself”.²⁵

The recourse to immateriality in the work of this group of artists does not just simply parallel the transformations of capitalism but is often a strategic critical commentary on it. They examine a transformation of labour as it has been understood for the last two hundred years gradually being displaced as the primary generator of value and capital. The “dematerialization” of the art object as traced by Lucy Lippard from 1966 to 1972 reckons with conceptual art, earthworks, minimalism, maintenance art, and early performance art, working between the two poles of art as idea and art as action. “In the first case, matter is denied, as sensation has been turned into concept; in the second case, matter has been transformed into energy and time-motion.”²⁶ In other words, matter is either transformed (i.e. energized) into performance art or abstracted into a concept. Lippard strategically deploys the words of conceptual artist Sol LeWitt: “When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes the machine that makes the art”.²⁷ While many of these pieces were originally not for sale or conceived of to circumvent commodification, they were being bought and sold within five years of their creation, proving in a sense the the determining power of the market.

Following up their highly influential analysis of late capitalism in *Empire*, Marxist theorists Hardt and Negri brilliantly trace the trend toward the prevalence of immaterial production in their 2009 work, *Commonwealth*. Intangibles such as information, knowledge, affects, codes, images, and social relationships, for example, are coming to outweigh material commodities or the material aspects of commodities in the capitalist valorization process. This does not mean that the production of material goods, such as automobiles and steel, is disappearing or even declining, but rather that their value is increasingly dependent on and subordinated to immaterial factors and goods. “The forms of labor that produce these immaterial goods (or the imma-

terial aspects of material goods) can be called colloquially the labor of the head and heart, including forms of service work, affective labour, and cognitive labour, although we should not be misled by these conventional synecdoches: cognitive and affective labour is not isolated to specific organs but engages the entire body and mind together. Even when the products are immaterial, in other words, the act of producing remains both corporeal and intellectual. What is common to these different forms of labor, once we abstract from their concrete differences, is best expressed by their biopolitical character.”²⁸ Hardt and Negri develop the concept of biopolitics to describe forms of resistance to capitalism, using life and bodies as weapons of escape from economic domination, from practical interventions such as barter economies to the tragic extremes of suicide terrorism.

Fallen Fruit, a collaboration founded in 2004 by artists David Burns, Austin Young and myself, began by working within our own Los Angeles neighbourhood to map and deploy the fruit found growing in or over its public space — often overlooked and gone to waste, a form of urban trash. The first maps were a way to interrogate land use in Los Angeles, with an urban ecology devoted primarily to ornamentation rather than production. How could the vast amounts of fruit growing in public space be activated as a public resource, and indeed be deployed to create a new, utopian kinds of publics? In 2006 we began an ongoing series of *Public Fruit Jams* that invite the general public to join us in making jam together, mostly in an art space rather than a community space — the setting of an artists space allowed the event to take on a speculative and playful air. Fallen Fruit brings street-picked fruit and participants often bring home-grown fruit, but no one is turned away, nor is there ever an admission charge. Groups that arrive together are asked to separate and sit with strangers, and the collective jam making proceeds slightly anarchically, deprived of recipes.

Working along a general formula, the participants must negotiate which fruits to use and this negotiation provides the nucleus of a prolonged social interaction. If one participant brought figs, and another lemons and lavender, the outcome might be fig-lemon jam with lavender. As Fallen Fruit claims no expertise, communal knowledge-sharing initiates a set of social bonds that cross generations, races, and cultural differences. The talk often turns to the neighbourhoods where the fruit has been picked: what grows where, what once grew, and what might grow. “The subject of place is always related to migration and of course food: Americans move an average of every five years. The event becomes a forum on how we live, eat, and use space that is neither theoretical nor abstract: everyone is an expert on the taste of a banana”.²⁹ Fruit becomes a neutral way to talk about ethnicity and also ecology, the conditions of heterogeneous and often gentrifying urban neighbourhoods.

The different jams produced at the event are often traded by the participants before they are taken home, and Fallen Fruit has spoken of the jams as the “by-product or even side effect of the basic social experiment this work engages in.” While the collaboration has produced many images, graphics, videos, sculptural objects and installations, Fallen Fruit cites the *Public Fruit Jam* as “a key template of [their] collaboration”.³⁰ The emphasis on social relations displaces the market economy



FALLEN FRUIT 1, PUBLIC FRUIT JAM (DOCUMENTATION) 2008

through barter and shared labour, with echoes of premodern and pre-mercantile communitarianism. While there is no exchange of money (the events are funded either through grants or art institutions), there is an exchange of labour — both physical (the making of jam) and affective (the building of community). Money is hidden, concealed within the greater apparatus of the art world economy, in which affective labour is transformed into immaterial commodities; the system of grants (a genial form of venture capital), and even more importantly the way artists build their “portfolios” to increase their future investment value.

Food and gardening form the basis of a great many social practices, with diverse examples such as the Bitter Melon Council, Fritz Haeg’s *Edible Estates*, and Amy Franceschini’s *Futurefarmers*. Chicago-based artist Michael Rakowitz,³¹ who couples ethnic cuisine with political awareness, says “Cooking is like building.”³² His project *Enemy Kitchen* began in 2004 by preparing and eating shared meals based on the recipes of his Iraqi-Jewish mother. The conversations that occur over the course of preparing the foods are a core of Rakowitz’s practice, but getting to that moment can be “really stressful.” Chicago has one of the largest Iraqi expatriate communities in the US, and the *Enemy Kitchen* was deployed on a food truck, with local Iraqis as cooks and Iraq war veterans as their assistance and servers. The project creates a forum for Americans to engage with both Iraqis and Iraq war veterans, who they might otherwise never meet, and the food truck’s mobility brings the conversation to the street.

Amy Franceschini’s *Victory Garden* project³³ in San Francisco provides a striking contrast, enlisting residents to plant back and front-yard edible landscapes and providing workshops and tours of participating gardens. Franceschini, a founder of the collaborative group *Futurefarmers*, created a demonstration Victory Garden in front of City Hall in 2006 in conjunction with San Francisco’s Museum of Modern Art. The highly successful programme has since become an ongoing, city-funded initiative and a model for other urban agriculture projects around the United States. Franceschini declared it “a victory of self-reliance, independence from the industrial food system, and community involvement,” and describes the impact of the project



FALLEN FRUIT 2, PUBLIC JAM JAR (COULD BE OMITTED FOR SPACE PURPOSES, THOUGH I'D PREFER THIS ONE STAYS)

in even broader terms. “It addresses the disconnection we have with everything we consume,” she explains. “It’s a point of initiation to a deeper connection with food. As soon as people started farming and realizing how difficult it was, a lot of other questions unfolded.”³⁴

Rirkrit Tiravanija’s famous food installations of the 1990s often took the form of stages or rooms for sharing meals, cooking, reading or playing music; architecture or structures for living and socializing are a core element in his work. In his best-known series, begun with *Pad Thai* (1990) at the Paula Allen Gallery in New York, he rejected traditional art objects altogether and instead cooked and served food for exhibition visitors, asking nothing more of them but their engagement. Tiravanija’s work forms one of the core examples of what curator Nicholas Bourriaud called relational aesthetics, “a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space.”³⁵

The artist is viewed as a kind of “catalyst” in relational art, and Bourriaud appropriates the language of the 90s internet boom to describe the work’s operations, deploying terms such as interactivity, user-friendliness, and DIY (do-it-yourself); in later statements, he defines relational aesthetics as addressing work that originate in the changing mental space opened by the internet. But “if relational art produces human relations,” asks Claire Bishop, Bourriaud’s most prominent critic, “the next logical question to ask is what types of relations are being produced, for whom, and why?”³⁶ She argues that “the relations set up by relational aesthetics are not intrinsically democratic, as Bourriaud suggests, since they rest too comfortably within an ideal of subjectivity as whole and of community as immanent togetherness.”³⁷ They often erase the antagonisms and contradictions inherent in the modern world, creating simple and palatable solutions to intractable problems.

How do artists such as Tiravanija make money? Like many artists whose work resists immediate commodification, his work is supported primarily through museum and gallery commissions as well as a secondary “line” of multiples and ephemera connected with exhibitions. Since the early 90s, Tiravanija has published multiples in the form of backpacks, cooking utensils, and maps. These commonplace objects serve as tokens or signifiers of the artist’s earlier projects and might also stimulate new interactions, whether actual or conceptual. Similarly, Fallen Fruit has issued editioned wallpapers, videos and prints and un-editioned “Everyday Objects” such as cutting boards, knives and wooden spoons emblazoned with quotations from their work. The invisible aspect of social practice art making is the accrual of cultural capital, a concept originated by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu: valorized forms of knowledge or fluency, and especially forms of institutional validation, of which the most abstracted is reputation or fame. This has little concrete value but can be monetized in terms of high paying positions and opportunities, or simply derivatives, the way bloggers or YouTube celebrities sell advertising space or generate publicity for others: an attention economy in which page hits are often monetized into income streams.

The work I have discussed here has been part of a paradigmatic shift over the last fifty years in both the art world and the broader world as reflected in how people live their everyday late capitalism. My penultimate example is the most recent one, artist Oscar Murillo’s seven week participatory installation, *A Mercantile Novel*, recreating a candy assembly line from a factory in his family’s hometown in La Paila, Colombia in late spring of 2014. Murillo brought 13 Colombian factory workers to work an eight-hour assembly line making chocolate-covered marshmallows in a blue-chip New York gallery. The space was divided roughly in half by industrial shelves housing palettes of candy-making supplies, and through the cracks the workers and the visitors can spy each other “at work.” Visitors were encouraged to participate by eating the Chocmelos[®], packaged three in a silver foil bag designed by Murillo with a stylized Colombina logo and a yellow smiley face. They were urged to take extra bags, share them with friends around the city and elsewhere, and to post pictures of themselves eating the candies on Twitter, Instagram, and the show’s own website, *mercantilenovel.com*.

The exhibition’s press release stresses how Murillo frequently invokes his cultural heritage in his practice and “broader issues of migration, sub-localities, and displacement inform many of his works. By turning the gallery into an operational production site, he opens up considerations not merely about trade and globalization, but also about individual relationships and communities, roots and immigration.” But contact between the producers and consumers of the candy were minimum, and the only time visitors could enter the “factory” section was when the workers were on break; the separation was for hygiene and sanitation, but added to the mysterious quality of the installation.

The work’s true participants might better said to be the 13 workers, most of whom had never left Colombia before and all of whom were visiting the United States for the first time. Murillo asked the workers to video-record their trip, as if to signify

that they were the ones investigating New York and not the other way around. They were housed in comfort in Crown Heights, given special tours through the city, paid equitably for their labour, taught English two days a week, and ate lunch every Friday with the very fashionable New York gallery employees. Their presence seems to exalt labour and offer us analogies to art making itself, a celebration of disappearing Fordist labour tailor made to fit some of Claire Bishop’s stinging critiques: contradictions are erased in the name of universalism and reconciliation. The press release reads as a near-parody of social practice statements: “As such, the Colombina factory becomes a catalyst for a consideration of socio-economic conditions in the United States, Colombia, and beyond, while also inviting visitors to reflect on the nature of societies, both personal and universal.”

Despite the uncritical tone of the exhibition, we might take at face value Murillo’s statements that the generations of his family who had worked at Colombina’s factory in La Paila, including his parents, were treated fairly and were grateful for the security of their employment. The work rings with optimism, from the sparkling assembly line to the twinkling candies, a faithful reproduction of the originals, made with equipment imported from Colombia along with the workers. Visitors hear and smell their labour, but have no sense of the labourers since they are allowed into the production area only when the workers are on break. Likewise, the artist is mostly absent, almost occupying the space of a factory owner or a representative of benign corporate power such as Colombina, a multinational corporation doing business in 49 countries, which supported Murillo’s exhibition and promoted it on their website.

Murillo himself embodies a triumph of class mobility, the son of two working class Colombians who immigrated to London when he was 10 years old. He was barely finished with his masters from the Royal College of Art before his paintings started to sell; now at age 28 and dubbed “the next Basquiat,” his record sale is already at us\$400,000. Murillo is primarily known for his large, scribbly, minimalist graffiti-like canvases, often painted with a broomstick, mixing dirt into the paint, and containing enigmatic single words in English or Spanish like “yoga” and “bingo,” with many of them foods such as “milk,” “burrito,” or “mango.” Lest we think participatory pieces such as *A Mercantile Novel* are a ploy for some kind of street credibility, Murillo points out that installations and performances have always been present in his work, from yoga-based events to parties in Paris at which Colombian foods were served. In the summer of 2012 at the Serpentine Gallery in London saw *The Cleaners’ Late Summer Party with Comme des Garçons*, in which the artist (who himself had worked as a janitor in commercial galleries) invited all the janitors to dance with the art world, with dance competitions and raffles. The designer brand, as Murillo says, “which is usually very exclusive, became a democratized item.”⁵⁸

Rising in sixteenth century Europe through geographic exploration of foreign lands by merchant traders, mercantilism was a system of trade for profit, although commodities were still largely produced by pre-industrial production methods. Most scholars consider the era of mercantilism as the origin of modern capitalism, having paved the way for imperialism, and nation states. The title of *A Mercantile Novel* is misfit, since what is essentially celebrated here is an idealized version of Fordism, with its flexible joining of capitalist and socialist paradigms. This nostalgia



is also countered by a raw display of art marketing: collectors could buy one of the gleaming crates stocked with one shift's worth of the candies for US\$50,000. On one wall was a huge blown-up photo of Murillo's mother in her Colombina work uniform, head down, seemingly exhausted from her labour — Losing her job in the mid-1990s prompted the family's move to London. On a stainless-steel shelf below the photo were a row boxes of Jeff Koons-branded Dom Pérignon, with different sketches by Murillo of the Venus of Willendorf, an ancient fertility totem, each one hand drawn on copies of his mother's employment file. These are strangely broken up glass vases filled with melted Chocmelos, a seeming tribute to labour, candies, luxury, and fertility.

The aesthetic chaos (or at best eclecticism) here might turn us back to my original question of the role of social practice in relation to both commercial art making and to the activism at the heart of its origins. Murillo's work demonstrates how easily this kind of work can enter into the commercial gallery system, and how any form of resistance, such as simply giving things away, can be co-opted to simply sell a product. David Zwirner's gallery has been a pioneer in this sense; already in 2007 Rirkrit Tiravanija recreated his 1990 *Pad Thai* for the delectation of the New York blue-chip art scene. Both artists' "social" work is available to collectors in limited editions, much like the seemingly uncommodifiable conceptual art of the 1960s. Lawrence Weiner originally claimed that "Once you know about a work of mine you own it. There's no way I can climb inside somebody's head and remove it".³⁹ Now his works are bought and sold through certificates of ownership that permits the owner to re-create the physical work; that instantiation would have to be destroyed if its certificate is sold—rather like a financial security represents a share of a corporation. The collector accrues social capital in showing how non-materialistic his taste is, refined to the purity of an idea. He can buy an idea that subverts buying and selling.



My final counter-example is the Superflex collective's work, *Guaraná Power* (2003–ongoing), a soft drink created in collaboration with guaraná farmers cooperatives from Maués in the Brazilian Amazon. The farmers had begun to organize themselves in response to a cartel of multinational corporations, PepsiCo and AmBev (owned by Anheuser-Busch), whose monopoly had driven the price paid to farmers for the rich-in-caffeine guaraná seeds down by 80%, while the cost of their finished guaraná sodas to the consumer has risen. As local guaraná sodas, once a regional specialty, were bought out one-by-one by PepsiCo or Ambev, the farmers in the Brazilian Amazon were obstructed from starting small competing guaraná soda brands by the multinationals. In collaboration with Superflex, they created a new brand and marketing campaign, which among other means promoted itself through the facilities of art field — galleries, exhibitions and biennials.

The intention of *Guaraná Power* is to use global brands and their strategies as raw material for a counter-economy, reclaiming the original use of Maués guaraná as a local drink, not just a symbol of multinational economic domination. *Guaraná Power's* original packaging pirates and *détourns* that of Guaraná Antarctica, a formerly regional brand of guaraná soda since bought by AmBev, with "for energy and empowerment" written on the neck. Superflex calls work such as *Guaraná Power* "projects for tools" which are not the fixed property of the artists, a museum or an art buyer: they only come into existence when they are used by people. As participatory practices become increasingly institutionalized and marketed, Superflex's work stands foremost in the arena of activism. Their practice is grounded in the faith of a counter-economy against neoliberal capitalism, and has always had an uneasy relationship with the superstructure of the art world. *Guaraná Power* was pulled from the São Paulo biennial by its president, who cited it as possibly upsetting "third parties." After the multinationals started legal proceedings against the artists and farmers for trademark infringement, Superflex had to redesign the brand, but it remains on the market today.



SUPERFLEX, GUARANA POWER

The tools that Superflex designs are adaptable, nomadic and slippery, resisting capital, rather than cohabiting with it, as does Oscar Murillo. They are pirated “supercopies.” The brand name is a raw material that is culture jammed, much like Stephanie Syjuco’s counterfeits, or even Fallen Fruit’s *Public Fruit Jam*. Rosler’s use of cast-offs, Ukeles’ deployment of garbage and Institute for Figuring’s *Crochet Coral Reef détourn* abjected materials into social commentary. It is noteworthy that the social practice work I’ve discussed here takes as its subject things which are generally marginalized from the commercial art world, such as food, rubbish, knit work, money, and luxury goods. While these subjects are addressed, they are more rightly appropriated as social forms that place art in the service of the social. All of them convert forms of potential financial exchange, or its derivatives, such as waste, into social exchanges that turn consumers of art into participants and collaborators in the work.

After facing resistance and now acceptance in the art world, social practice is currently at a crossroads. Though it doesn’t claim autonomy in the modernist sense, the critical autonomy it has achieved seems easily erodible. Not only is it increasingly entering the commercial gallery system, it has also relied extensively on social media, without which it could arguably have never developed. It relies heavily on volunteers (termed “participants”) and unpaid affective labour, such as Facebook, bloggers, Pinterest, Twitter, etc., where the attention economy of both posters and readers is monetized as their labour is peppered with ads to generate income streams. Artists must address not just issues such as labour that is temporary, nomadic and

precarious, but the turn from industrial or Fordist capitalism to what many commentators call cognitive capitalism. Here, “the accumulation process is centered on immaterial assets utilizing immaterial or digital labor processes and production of symbolic goods and experiences”.⁴⁰ These socio-economic changes have ushered in through the Internet as platform and new web 2.0 technologies that have impacted the mode of production and the nature of labour. If indeed artists aim to practice an emancipatory politics that places human freedom at its centre, they need to re-examine their practices along three axes. The first is that of pleasure vs. labour, in which most forms of pleasure are monetized and many forms of labour unpaid. The second axis is the commodity vs. service, in which artists increasingly create services and experiences rather than commodities, services that often create value for institutions rather than artists. Finally, we come to the contest between neoliberalism and the forms of social democracy that it seems to be vanquishing globally. Much of this work idealizes utopian forms of social democracy without coming to terms with its imminent disappearance: a future in which no one is paid enough, if at all, and money accumulates ever more disproportionately in the hands of the one percent. Peddling fantastic and unattainable utopias will do nothing to stop it.

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