

Neither Capitalist Nor Wage-Labourer:

An Economic Examination of the Exceptionalism of Artistic Production vis-à-vis the Capitalist Mode of Production

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Abstract

This PhD by Publication is a contribution to art and art theory through the book *Art and Value* in the context of the practice of the Free art collective. This thesis situates *Art and Value* within contemporary art practices and debates. *Art and Value* addresses itself directly to misrecognitions of the relationship between art and capitalism within the humanities and social sciences. The conviction that art was a commercial activity had penetrated the discourses of contemporary art in the UK, Western Europe and North America since the 1960s and therefore constituted, in part, the *milieu* in and against which Free has operated since 2004.

The historical study of the emergence of the theory of art's economic exceptionalism in classical political economy gives an alternative historical framework in which to situate the discussion of art's relationship to capitalism. The rationale for my economic analysis of art – comprising separate critiques of the economics of art in classical, neoclassical, welfare and Marxist economics – is to reset the coordinates for thinking politically about art's relationship to capitalism. *Art and Value* does not claim to cover every aspect of art's encounter with capitalism, which would require sociological, semiotic, psychoanalytic, geographical, philosophical and historical inquiries, at the very least, but establishes the economic groundwork for the interdisciplinary study of art's relationship to capitalism. Economic analysis provides this ground; not because economics is the master discipline of the social sciences, but because the question of art's relationship to capitalism must be understood, first and foremost, by understanding what capitalism is and how the production of art has or has not been incorporated into the capitalist mode of production.



Freee Art Collective, *Advertising Wants to Convert...*, 2008



Freee Art Collective, *There Are No Experts on Happiness*, shop window slogan for *Spin-Freee-za*, a Freee project within *On Joy, Sadness and Desire*, Smart Project Space, Amsterdam, commissioned by Foundation Spinoza Centre and organised by SKOR, 2009

Introduction: From Artworks and Values to Art and Value

The economic analysis of art's relationship to capitalism is urgent because the humanities and social sciences typically address art's relationship to capitalism through claims and assertions about art's economic relations without ever testing these statements economically. Sociologists and sociologically informed philosophers, for instance, routinely declare that art has been commodified without ever providing any economic analysis of art as a mode of commodity production. My book confronted the sociological theory of art's commodification because it had been internalised as the common sense of contemporary art. As such, the book *Art and Value* is an intervention in contemporary art theory via an intervention in theories of art's commodification accomplished in part by shifting the burden of proof from sociological effects to economic conditions.

Conducted from the perspective of an artist rather than an economist or a philosopher, my inquiry began as little more than an embattled protest against routine exaggerations about art's complicity with capitalism. *Art and Value*, which is a boundary-crossing book in this respect, was written out of my lived experience of the contradictions and blind-spots within art discourse that not only misrepresented the social condition of the contemporary artist, but, more fundamentally, had a disorienting effect on my practice and the practice of others. Indeed, *Art and Value* can only be adequately understood as confronting the formalisation of Marxist and post-Marxist analyses within the 'common sense' of the art world. As an artist in the 1990s operating primarily in independent galleries and publicly funded institutions, the commodification of my art

practice appeared to be an extremely remote prospect. However, the presiding theories of art's commodification permitted no exceptions and therefore it was politically necessary, as a Marxist, to fashion various connections between my art practice and capitalism as an apparently total system. I began to take note of the different relations to capitalism between, say, an artist who operates successfully through the art market and an artist who operates through family subsidy, public funding or by having a 'second job', but I had no way of presenting these differences and no theoretical framework for analysing their political significance.

Art's allegedly 'snug' (Stallabrass 2004, p. 200) relationship to capitalism has been proposed within Western Marxist theories of reification (Lukács 1971), culture industry (Adorno and Horkheimer 1973) and commodification,¹ sociological theories of positional goods (Hirsch 1977), luxury goods (Kräussl, 2010), cultural distinction (Bourdieu 1984) and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984), as well as post-Marxist theories of the General Intellect (Haug 2010), Immaterial Labour (Lazzarato 1996) and real subsumption (Vercellone 2007). Parallel to these, art's rejection of the market has been understood since the 1960s and 1970s as a residue of Romanticism and therefore as naïve, unrealistic and perhaps as an alibi for art's privileged social position and paradoxically as a factor in the reproduction of art's actual undeclared insertion into capitalism (Burn 1975). The PhD, therefore, situates itself at the tip of the confrontation between an apparently sentimental defence of art against capitalism and a seemingly realistic insistence that art can no longer be a space apart from the workings of capitalism.

The book and art practices that constitute this PhD have wider implications and address the economics of art on a global scale, nevertheless, the inquiry arose out of the specific situation of an art practice remote from the commercial gallery system and based

¹ As I point out in the book: 'Commodification is an English term that attempts to translate the German 'zur Ware werden' – to become a commodity. Kommodifizierung, which the Germans use now, is a translation back from the English. Eugene Lunn uses it in 1974 in relation to Brecht and Lukács, Dick Howard puts it in inverted commas in an essay on Habermas the same year, and poet and Marxist cultural thinker Hans Magnus Enzensberger refers to it in 1974 too' (Beech 2005, p. 231).

largely in the public sector within a non-London-centric UK condition for contemporary art. In some sense, in fact, we might say that my emphasis on economics is the by-product of working within the Free Art Collective as a politically engaged art practice by white artists in a colonial centre whose experience of the global artworld has been structured not only by their colonial advantages but also their shared experience of being working-class kids who became artists during Thatcherism.

While observations of the various relationships between artists and capitalism had a certain anecdotal and rhetorical power, none of my research into art and politics in the 1980s and 1990s supported such an inquiry. On the contrary, my continued study of the Western Marxist tradition of art theory guided me towards (1) the conviction that all art is commodified at a structural level, and (2) the conception of art's resistance to capitalism in terms of the artwork's disaffirmative qualities. In short, Marxism provided me with a set of tools for dealing with the relationship between art and capitalism that did not fit with my experience of the differences between artists of my generation. Nonetheless, I trusted the theory more than my own heterodox views.

Although I accepted that it was naïve to assume that the avoidance or resistance of actual commercial transactions placed me outside capitalism in general, I remained unable to contradict the various explanations of my complicity in the commodification of art in particular. I was both convinced that art is a commodity like everything else and that my art practice was in some sense resistant to capitalism by virtue of its use of montage, its collaborative production, its critical philistinism and scale of operation, among other things. The former position appeared to be more theoretically secure, while the latter position was tainted by the art historical case of Conceptual Art, which over the space of a handful of years went from being defended by some as being resistant to commodification (because it took forms that were not standard forms of art objects) to being embraced by the commercial art market (Lippard 1973). Faced with such theoretical

difficulties, it took me twenty years of trial and error – mostly error – before I was able to disaggregate the question of the artwork as a commodity and the economics of artistic labour, a position that is first formulated as an economic argument in *Art and Value*.

My inkling that something was wrong with the theory of art's commodification turned into a specific question for me as an artist when I read Julian Stallabrass's book *High Art Lite* in 1999. I knew Julian and had disagreed with him in the past on various questions of contemporary art, but the 'Introduction' of his book set me on edge in a way that Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Fredric Jameson and others had not. His book took as its object only those contemporary artworks that had passed through the commercial art market. This was a perfectly respectable art historical manoeuvre insofar as he limited his field of inquiry, but this methodological virtue was at the same time a prejudicial selection of that kind of art that presented little or no obstruction to his thesis that contemporary art is a branch of luxury production for the super-rich and a tool for the branding of global corporations (Stallabrass 1999, p. 272). Stallabrass not only analysed the relationship between contemporary art and the art market, nor did he merely give emphasis to that work which had passed through this commercial system: he allowed the market to determine the field of what he called 'high art lite'. As such, he failed to contextualise 'young British art' (hereafter yBa) in terms of the wider critical practices of independent and publicly funded art practices and artist-run institutions.

In the second half of the 1990s I had collaborated with John Roberts on writing about the philistine for *New Left Review*, which was published as *The Philistine Controversy* (Beech and Roberts 2002) and on the curating of two exhibitions – *The Dog's Breath* at Bricks and Kicks gallery in Vienna and *Pals and Chums* at Camerawork in London – of young British artists who had not passed through the market. These essays and exhibitions were attempts to establish a division within young British art by framing another grouping of artists as a critical alternative to the 'official' yBas. Later, partly in

response to Stallabrass's market-led conceptualisation of young British art, I co-curated the exhibition *There is Always an Alternative* with Mark Hutchinson at Temporary Contemporary gallery, London, in 2005, which extended the cluster of critical non-yBa artists to include artists who had emerged at the same time as Hirst *et al* but outside the market and with a different set of political and aesthetic values.

No doubt, Stallabrass was tracking what he saw as the tendencies in contemporary art rather than conducting a comprehensive survey of the whole field of practices. Nevertheless, the tendency towards greater integration of the art world into capitalist value extraction appeared to depend on his occlusion of those examples of art practices that remained on the margins of capitalism. Although it is possible to respond to this episode by treating it as the result of Stallabrass's individual trivialisation of Western Marxism's critique of art, I increasingly came to believe that his rhetoric of commodification, incorporation and complicity and his tactic of selecting the worst examples of commercially successful contemporary art as exemplary of the systemic condition of art were typical of the Western Marxist account of art with its commitment to there being no outside to capitalism.

In his critique of the theory of the philistine, which I had developed with John Roberts, Stallabrass conflated philistinism with anti-intellectualism and consumerism. He associated philistinism with popular culture, which is a simplistic misreading. Philistinism was not a Pop Art for the 1990s, but it held out some hope for a left populism to which Stallabrass could not subscribe. John Roberts's interest in the everyday (Roberts 2006) already pointed elsewhere, but the artists and artworks associated with my writing and curating suggest a post-punk interest in monstrosity, marginality and what I at the time called 'unofficial hopes'. In this sense, philistinism was intended as an umbrella that brought together the anti-art tradition of the avant-garde with the indie and subcultural edges of culture and the utopian strain of Romanticism. He ascribed the philistine

argument to key yBa artists rather than to Bank, Beagles and Ramsay, Deborah Holland, Maria Cook *et al*, or to the philistine element of yBa and the philistine loves of Andy Warhol and Jeff Koons that I wrote about at the time. In some sense the philistine was also an aesthetic figure insofar as its somatic values and rejection of theoretical orthodoxy was felt rather than known. It was bolstered by Terry Eagleton's political theory of the aesthetic, but pushed further for the full scope of the aesthetic in ugliness, desire and anti-art.

My intuition was that the argument about art's commodification applied to some artists more than others and that there was a *prima facie* case for extending the field with an economic and sociological analysis of artists who had little or no contact – whether out of choice or not – with the art market, wealthy collectors, global corporations and so on. I imagined a spectrum of relations to the market and capital, and I did so, in part, because the generation of artists to which I belonged was often described as having a cosy relationship with the art market and its wealthy collectors, whereas I belonged to a critical fringe of that generation, which had no such relationship to the system of commercial galleries and the media circus that orbited it. In other words, at the beginning of this study I did not question the commodification of commercially successful art, but only aimed to demonstrate that this dominant sector did not represent the full spectrum of artistic practice. My limitations were not personal ones and I recollect them here not to base the inquiry on a personal narrative. On the contrary, my failure to question the assumption that commercially successful art was commodified indicates the hegemony of the theory of art's commodification within contemporary art theory and Marxist art practice prior to the publication of *Art and Value*.

In the period when Stallabrass's *High Art Lite* was published I was earning my living, like many other artists, not through sales but by taking various part-time jobs; I was a part-time lecturer and also worked part-time in a book warehouse. I made small-scale

artworks that used text in relation to performance and participation. In a solo exhibition entitled *Dear Sarah*, in the Project Room of the Collective Gallery in Edinburgh in 2001, I faxed the curator each day an instruction to visit an individual on her mailing list with a topic or question to discuss with her or him. Also, for group exhibitions I would use text to problematise the curatorial project of bringing artists together. For instance, for another exhibition in Berlin I described in some detail how each other artist in the exhibition might be tortured. The works were propositional, speculative and cheap to produce as well as free to use. I worked conscientiously within a Conceptualist tradition (Simpson 2003) but attempted to extend it through the use of text as script for actions, which also linked my interest in text art with the history of performance art and my engagement with the analytical philosophy of performative utterance. In another solo exhibition in 2004 in Berlin, titled *Pledge*, at Sparwasser HQ, a small independent gallery, I put an ad in the local newspaper asking people on their daily walks – walking to the bus, going to the shop, etc. – to chant silently a historical political slogan, thus, I said, turning their walk into a private protest march.



Dave Beech, *Pledge*, installation detail, Sparwasser HQ, Berlin 2004

A map of Berlin grows on the wall. It is made up of pieces of text that follow the lines of Berlin's streets. Some areas are left completely blank, while others are represented densely, the short texts overlapping and cutting across each other. This is an unconventional map; its texts reveal what Berliners think about each day, during their routine walks through the city. Dave Beech, a British artist, based in Manchester, has invited the people of Berlin to pledge part of their daily routines, to reflect on the historical/political slogans that mean most to them. It is these pledges that come together on the wall of Sparwasser HQ, forming an alternative map of Berlin.²

In 2003 I began to work collaboratively with Mel Jordan and Andy Hewitt, and a couple of years later we began to work exclusively together as the Free Art Collective. We made text works that occupied the spaces of advertising. Our first works were a series of texts, which we called slogans, that were displayed as billboard prints on the street: the first in Sheffield, the second in Venice and the third in London. The title of each work was identical with the text that it displayed. The first one said *The economic function of public art is to increase the value of private property*, and was commissioned by ixia in 2003. The second said *The aesthetic function of art is to codify social distinctions as natural ones*, which was commissioned for a project curated by Gavin Wade for the Venice Biennale in 2005. And the third said *The social function of art is to subject us to civic behaviour*, which was part of a series of posters commissioned by Insertspace in 2005.

Our occupation of advertising spaces, originally billboard sites, was an operation that we called 'decolonising the public sphere' in response to Jürgen Habermas's argument that the eighteenth-century bourgeois public sphere had been colonised by big business, private interests and a legislative elite that deploy public relations, mass-mediated staged displays and the manufacture and manipulation of public opinion (Habermas 1989 [1962]). This operation was prompted directly by our critical reading specifically of the Habermasian theory of the antagonism between the public sphere and the 'steering media' of the market and the state. Indeed, it was the formal antipathy between the market and the public sphere that was the basis not only of our strategy of

² Text from the Sparwasser HQ website, <http://sparwasserhq.de/Index/HTMLjun4/HTMLEngA.htm> (last accessed 1 December 2017).

using commercially available print technologies for politics instead of advertising, but also of imagining a structure for contemporary art beyond the art market.



Free Art Collective, *The Function of Public Art...* (two billboards), 2003-2005

From the start, Free were animated by the conditions and economies of circulation more than the specifics of the artwork in a modernist – and Frankfurt School – sense. For us, the scaling up of contemporary art after the rise of the curator – what Peter Osborne describes as the transition from the artwork to the exhibition as the unit of significance (Osborne 2015) – was figured in terms of a shift in attention from the character of the art object to processes of publishing. In the early work the text in the piece was duplicated in its title and we claimed that this led to the situation in which referring to the piece – in a review, for example – was another iteration of the work itself. We reproduced the same work in various formats (billboard poster, postcard, badge, T-shirt, photographic document) in a bid to underline the emphasis on publishing.



Free Art Collective, *The Aesthetic Function of Art...* curated by Gavin Wade as part of his Strategic Questions projects, Venice Biennale, 8 June – 6 November 2005

For our work at the 51st Venice Biennale we produced two large vinyl prints and hung them off a bridge without permission in the full expectation that by the time the

private view came around the work would have been taken down by residents or the authorities. We had produced a large-print-run poster documenting it that would be circulated in the place of the missing work. As it happened, the vinyl prints were still in place when we had our champagne reception and launch of the poster on the next bridge along the canal. Instead of documenting an absent work, the poster now acted as a kind of memento of the event, something that the viewer could keep and take home, thus introducing to the work an element of embodiment, dispersal and mobility. It was this cluster of spatial and temporal relations to the work and its exhibition that became the basis for later work. Our concept of publishing became less attached to advertising sites and more dynamic.



Free Art Collective, *The Aesthetic Function of Art...* curated by Gavin Wade as part of his Strategic Questions projects, Venice Biennale, 8 June – 6 November 2005

Free experimented with the possibility of imposing conditions derived from the public sphere onto our own financial transactions. In place of market incentives we

developed a set of rules: we would make work to commission (no speculative production for a potential market); no commission would simultaneously act as a purchase (hence, no purchase of the work was possible at all); requests to display a work that somebody else had commissioned would be rejected (no choice by the 'consumer' from a range of already produced goods). Also, since we were all by then full-time lecturers, we decided that nobody in Freee would receive any income from Freee commissions and all the money generated, including money specified as artists' fees in our budgets, would go back into a production fund for the work.

Initially I articulated my intuitive conviction that Stallabrass had overstated his case by developing further the theory of the philistine, which I had studied for my MA at the Royal College of Art between 1990 and 1993. Philistinism, I thought, was a way of distinguishing between art with a critical mission and art that was affirmative of art and its institutions and therefore, perhaps, more readily open to commodification. My first attempts to raise the issue of the possibility that the theory of art's commodification in Adorno and Stallabrass were flawed, therefore, were written as philosophical critiques of aesthetic philosophy. It was not until I had written two whole drafts of the book titled *Art and Value* that I reformatted my inquiry into an investigation of the economics of artistic practice. In doing so, it now appears to me, my inquiry not only shifted from the alleged commodity itself to the social relations of the artist's labour, but that an approach based on artworks and their values gave way to a more structural analysis of art and value.

Art and Value emerged from the very tradition that it critiques. Its relationship to the Adornian tradition of aesthetic philosophy is difficult or impossible to trace from the textual evidence, but it was formed out of the theory of philistinism developed during my MA in cultural theory at the RCA and the book that I wrote and edited with John Roberts on the philistine controversy. Philistinism developed out of the Western Marxist tradition of deriving the politics of art from the twin analyses of (1) the immanence of capitalism

within the artwork as an expression of the commodity form, and (2) the politics of art as located in the art object itself and expressed through the social position taken from the work's relation to dominant culture and its institutions. Philistinism, therefore, took an emphatic position in relation to the condition of art formulated in the opening sentence of *High Art Lite*, namely the problem of elitism.³

The philistine controversy was largely a dispute within Adornian aesthetic philosophy, but rather than dividing the tradition it resulted in the recognition of the limits of the tradition and its philosophical methodology. The book *Art and Value* began as an Adornian critique of the theory of art's commodification, and therefore was both a methodological continuation of the philistine controversy and yet a break with the Adornian ontology of art anchored to the art object and the critical experience of it. Early drafts of the critique of Western Marxism's commodification theory that retained the methodology of Adornian aesthetics failed because the question of commodification cannot be settled by philosophical, speculative and theoretical means alone. My failure to devise a philosophical cure for the philosophy of art's commodification, if taken as an outcome internal to the project rather than a contingent failing on my part, implied the inseparability of the methodology and ontology of Adornian aesthetic theory. Regardless of whether my assessment of the limits of aesthetic philosophy was correct or not, it led me to the exploration of other methods, which culminated in the study of economics. As such, the critique of commodity theory and the development of the theory of art's exceptionalism represented for me a crisis in the Adornian project for contemporary art.

In retrospect it is possible to say Habermas provided me with the first theoretical framework for thinking about art's social existence outside of the market while Freee were theorising the public sphere as a platform for socially engaged art. What constitutes

³ The opening sentence of *High Art Lite* is as follows: 'Once upon a time, not so long ago, some of us involved in the art world thought that all would be well with contemporary art if only it were less elitist, if a little air could be admitted into the tight circle of our enthusiasm, if the public could be persuaded that the products of this world were not some con, dedicated to providing assorted posh types with an easy and entertaining living.'

the public sphere for Habermas, is that it is not driven by steering media but by social processes of opinion formation through dialogue and exchange. Habermas's theory of the public sphere, therefore, was a kind of bridge between the Western Marxist theories of art's commodification and the economic analysis of art's exceptionalism that I later conducted (Habermas 1987, p. 150). This was possible, in part, because Habermas had developed his own critique of Adorno, but there was no clear critique of the economics of commodification theory in Habermas, only a further pivoting away from economic reductivism.

Economics from an Artist's Point of View

The book *Art and Value* can be linked to the critical practice of Free as an intervention in the space of art theory that interrogates the legacy of Marxism within a contemporary Marxist art practice, which is necessarily also a sustained theoretical reflection on the condition of artistic production. It was the challenge of finding a new way into this intersection that necessitated the crossing of disciplinary and methodological boundaries. *Art and Value* begins from the Western Marxist tradition of interrogating art's relationship to capitalism, but seeks out another Marxist tradition via Classical Marxism in order to destabilise the inheritance of cultural Marxism within art theory.

My investigation into the commodification of art grew in scale as it tackled a series of disciplinary and methodological boundaries. First, I could not realise this study in the conventional voice of an artist – drawing on psychoanalysis, semiotics, cultural sociology, existentialism, deconstruction, Foucauldian social analysis and aesthetics – nor by merely extrapolating the critical discourse of the Marxist tradition that has been most salient within cultural and artistic debates – deploying immanent critique and drawing on commodification theory, culture industry, spectacle, real subsumption, etc. My second difficulty was that an artist does not typically have the training to complete an economic study of art. One would perhaps be shown up as an amateur and what was intended to be a critique of social science would result only in the demonstration of the authority of social science over the impressionistic protests of a practitioner. Later, when I had already begun my economic analysis of artistic production, I expected to restrict myself to a

Marxist study, but it became clear that Marx's remarks on the economics of art could not be fully disentangled from political economy generally, and therefore I was obliged in some sense to extend my scope to include at least the key texts by Adam Smith and David Ricardo.



Freee Art Collective, *The Neo-Imperialist Function Of Public Art Is To Clear A Path For Economic Expansion*, commissioned by Gavin Wade for Public Structures, a special project for the Second Guangzhou Triennial, *BEYOND: an extraordinary space of experimentation for modernisation*, curated by Hou Hanru, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Guo Xiaoyan, 2005

It soon became evident that classical political economy held a consistent position on art's economic exceptionalism and was a rich resource for numerous explanations for this condition. Following this, I extended the scope of the study once again to survey the economics of art throughout the history of economics – taking in neoclassicism, welfare economics, cultural economics and neoliberalism – as well as the literature on art and economics in the Western Marxism tradition from the 1930s to the twenty-first century. Finally, and only through reflecting on the book during the process of writing the PhD introduction, I realised that I had not in fact conducted an economic analysis of art at all, but, despite some occasional economic analysis, my methodology had been largely historical. Insofar as economists had developed or assumed theories of the economic

situation of art, artworks and artists, my study of economics was not an attempt to become an economist or to acquire the competences of a practising economist but to study the history of economics. I did not develop an economics of art, strictly speaking, but a reading of the key texts in economics through the lens of contemporary art practice. By endeavouring to provide a comprehensive critical account of the history of art's encounter with economics through an examination of the literature, I set myself the task of breaking the spell of the sociological theory of art's commodification and, through this, of establishing a new position for the critical artist. Or, in other words, to provide a new model of what an artist needs to do in order to be a critical artist. While it is not particularly unheard of for artists to produce books – or even write book-length theoretical texts on art and its social contexts – it is unprecedented for an artist to write a critical survey of the full scope of economic thought – classical, neoclassical, welfare, neoliberal and Marxist. However, I am not the first artist to attempt to address art's relationship to capitalism in more general or theoretical terms.

Among my predecessors it is essential to highlight the importance of Bertolt Brecht, who wrote about art's transformation by the rise of capitalist mass culture, and a generation of artists in the 1970s – including Sarah Charlesworth, Adrian Piper, Mel Ramsden and Ian Burn – and a related group based in Coventry – including Terry Atkinson, Mike Baldwin and David Bainbridge – who reflected extensively on the effects of the developing market for contemporary avant-garde art. By and large, artists have turned to philosophy, sociology and political theory to understand art's relationship to capitalism. Therefore, the only artist to have written a study of art and economics, albeit narrowly conceived, that I know of is Asger Jorn, the avant-garde Danish artist who was a founding member of COBRA and the Situationist International, who wrote *Value and Economy* in 1959 (Jorn 2001 [1962]). Jorn's book was simultaneously a critique of the application of exchange value to art and an anti-Stalinist rejection of dominant Marxist theories of art

and production. However, Jorn's scope is very narrow – merging a reading of Marx's critique of political economy with a set of abstract conceptions of process, substance, dimension and so on (Jorn 2001 [1962], p. 125) which he claimed provided a more satisfactory theory of value than that supplied by Marx (Jorn 2001 [1962], p. 124).⁴



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Art's relationship to capitalism in general and art's economics in particular has been theorised, naturally enough, by economists, sociologists, philosophers, political theorists, art critics and social historians of art rather than artists. As a result, the economics of artistic *production* has been largely absent from theories that focused primarily on (1) the artwork as a commodity, (2) the art market as a mechanism for subordinating art to wealthy collectors, (3) the investment prospects of the secondary market through auction houses and art dealers, (4) the conversion of the artwork from a commodity to an asset,

⁴ Jorn's economics of art is actually a philosophical engagement with the economic concepts in Marx. Nevertheless, Jorn misrecognises a great deal in Marx, declaring that use-value and exchange-value are the 'factors' (p. 125) of the commodity, for instance. He misreads Marx time and time again, saying at one point that after distinguishing between use value and exchange value that he goes on to distinguish exchange value into quantity and quality, whereas Marx was in fact characterising the same distinction between use value and exchange value as a distinction between quantity and quality. His critique of Marx turns on this misreading, which he turns into the non-economic abstractions 'substance' and 'dimension'.

(5) the role of the banks in financing art galleries, and (5) the impact of corporate sponsorship and neoliberal management on the art museum. One of the reasons for the absence of an economic analysis of artistic production was that the economic analysis of economists, sociologists and philosophers began at the point at which art encounters wealth – in its institutions of distribution – and by following the money in this way the theory of art's relationship to capitalism increasingly tended towards the blanket assertion of art's complicity in capitalism, leading to blow-by-blow accounts of how this cosy relationship iterated itself in countless daily transactions. Under these conditions, it was not only inevitable that as a young artist steeped in the Marxist tradition I would commit myself fully to the theory of art's commodification, but that I would also necessarily ignore as irrelevant all those aspects of my own practice that flouted this established truth.

Sociology, led by Pierre Bourdieu, and philosophy, especially following the Frankfurt School, dominate academic investigation into the relationship between art and capitalism, and the methodologies preferred by these two disciplines are not well-suited to raising fundamental questions about the complicity of art with capitalism through the art market, sponsorship and state funding. Indeed, the philosophy of art, especially its Western Marxist strain, has itself been dominated by sociology when it comes to the question of art's structural relationship to capitalist society. It is possible to say that the greatest obstacle to the economic analysis of artistic production has, since the publication of Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* in 1899, been the persuasive argument within sociology and the philosophy of art informed by sociology that art is complicit with capitalism insofar as artworks are both commodities and positional goods. This sociological narrative of art's complicity within capitalism was merely one marginal iteration of the general theory of the unity and universality of capitalism in which there appears to be no outside of capitalism. Jairus Banaji (Banaji 2011) and Harry Harootunian

(Harootunian 2015) have taken issue with the ‘parochialism’ of Western Marxism’s theory of the homogeneity of capitalism and have shown, by contrast, that each – geographically and historically specific – capitalist social formation is comprised of various parallel economic regimes and the world is characterised by multiple modes of production.



Freee Art Collective, *The Neo-Imperialist Function Of Public Art Is To Clear A Path For Economic Expansion*, commissioned by Gavin Wade for Public Structures, a special project for the Second Guangzhou Triennial, *BEYOND: an extraordinary space of experimentation for modernization*, curated by Hou Hanru, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Guo Xiaoyan, 2005

Sociology (especially in Bourdieu⁵) thinks of itself as a critical methodology by virtue of its relationship to beliefs and customs and social structures – in this case, the structural delusions of artists in their perception of their own activity and their relationship to the market. Having identified the sociological narrative of capitalism’s grip on everything, not excluding art, as the engine of the theory of art’s commodification and complicity, I had to develop a methodology that would be capable of mounting a radical critique not only of various specific arguments, but also of the core programme of the academic study of art’s relationship to capitalism. The theoretical critique of the theory of art’s commodification in art theory, especially in the Adornian tradition, had no methodological resources for changing course. Therefore, my approach could not take the form of a refutation of

⁵ For a fuller critique of Bourdieu’s flawed analysis of art, see Beech 2018 (forthcoming).

theory by theory, but only a systematic undermining of theory by paying attention to actual social practices.

Taking my point of departure, therefore, from Marx's three volumes of *Capital*, I wondered whether economics might not be able to cure art theory of its sociologisms in the way that Marx had attempted to cure philosophy of its speculative excesses through the critique of political economy. Like Marx, my aim was not to become an economist; I sought to engage in an economic critique of art theory that doubled as a critique of the economics of art. My methodology confronted 'economics' imperialism' – the widespread dogma that economics is the supreme social science and the related ideology that economic choices – or choices that can be re-described as economic – are always the most reliable explanations of individual actions by focusing on art practice rather than the economic transactions of artworks. One advantage of this approach was that it allowed non-economic practices to be given priority over market mechanisms. Economists, like sociologists and aesthetic philosophers, had failed to analyse artistic production as occupying a specific relationship to capitalism and instead had focused on the seemingly irrational choices of artists to accept a working life in which they had significantly less income than their similarly well-educated peers. My economic analysis, therefore, had to put economists on the wrong foot.



Free Art Collective, *The Neo-Imperialist Function Of Public Art Is To Clear A Path For Economic Expansion*, commissioned by Gavin Wade for Public Structures, a special project for the Second Guangzhou Triennial, *BEYOND: an extraordinary space of experimentation for modernization*, curated by Hou Hanru, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Guo Xiaoyan, 2005 (Images: 1. Birmingham, Oct 2005; 2. Guangzhou, Nov 2005; 3. Birmingham, Dec 2005)

Mainstream economics provided no material or methodology for the analysis of artistic production and so, my economic analysis of art had to begin as a historical study of the various encounters between art and economics. My method at this point in the inquiry was to engage in a comprehensive close reading of the key texts in classical

political economy – Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), Jean-Baptiste Say’s *A Treatise on Political Economy* (1803), Ricardo’s *On the Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* (1817), Nassau Senior’s *An Outline of the Science of Political Economy* (1836), Thomas Malthus’s *Principles of Political Economy* (1836), Jean-Charles-Léonard de Sismondi’s *Political Economy and the Philosophy of Government* (1847), John Stuart Mill’s *Principles of Political Economy* (1848) and Thomas De Quincey’s *Logic of Political Economy* (1859). This was done not principally in order to become an expert on the history of economic thought, but to discover whether, and to what extent, economists had referred to art, and if so, what role art had played in the formation of economic thought. After re-reading the *Wealth of Nations* with this purpose in mind, I discovered no mention of art at all and began to doubt my method, but I was led to re-read Smith one more time after reading Say’s *Treatise* because it spelled out a theory of art’s economic exceptionalism (Say 2007 [1803], p. 364), which Say attributed to Smith’s explanation of the high prices of rare wines (Smith 1999 [1776], p. 163). Say’s theory of art’s exceptionalism, which added rare labour to Smith’s reference to rare wine, is developed conceptually by Ricardo, extended by Senior and Malthus, and confirmed by Mill and De Quincey.



Freee Art Collective, *Art Fairs...*, T shirt, photograph and billboard poster produced for the Zoo Art Fair 2008

It was immediately clear to me that the discovery of the consistent presence of a theory of art's economic exceptionalism was highly significant, especially given the denial within contemporary mainstream economics of any economics of art in classical political economy (Towse 2010; Ginsburgh and Throsby 2006). As I persevered through the history of economics, however, another discovery instantly presented itself: the transition from the labour theory of value in classical economics to a marginal utility theory of value or price formation in neoclassical economics had coincided with the abandonment of the theory of art's economic exceptionalism. Neoclassical economists, often borrowing from the list of rare items accumulated from Smith to De Quincey – which included rare wine, statues and paintings, ancient coins, scarce books, antiquities – argue that the high prices of artworks are proof that classical economists were wrong about labour being the only source of value, misreading or misrepresenting classical economics as a theory that prices are a direct and simple expression of the amount of labour exercised in the production of any given individual product, so that, in the polemics of William Stanley Jevons, a nugget of gold found on the ground in Australia ought to be worth little or nothing while a book that takes years to write but nobody wants to purchase ought to be worth thousands.

For neoclassicism, value is independent of labour because the apparent absence of labour to reproduce the antique, the work of art and the rarity of a book does not result in the absence of value.⁶ Having studied classical political economics immediately before reading neoclassical theory, it was clear to me that the later writers neglected the specific role of the absence of labour in the pumping up of the prices of rare and unique goods. Fancy goods are overpriced, according to classical economists, because of the impossibility of increasing supply to meet demand. Ricardo had argued that the value of a good depends on the quantity of labour necessary to produce it, which should not be

⁶ While it appears that the antique etc. does not result from labour – or at least the difference between the value of a new wardrobe and an antique wardrobe is not the result of additional labour but of nothing happening to the piece of furniture, especially given that signs of additional work on the object are more than likely to devalue it – a great deal of labour is necessary for the preservation of an antique, only not in its production but in the care given to it over many decades.

conflated with the quantity of labour actually used up in its production, since necessary labour can only refer to substitutable labour producing substitutable commodities. Goods that are unique or rare are exceptional because there are no substitutes for them and no labour can produce such substitutes. As such, no necessary labour can augment supply to meet increasing demand and therefore prices rise. The absence of labour has the effect of raising prices in the case of exceptional goods precisely because they cannot be reproduced.



Free Art Gallery, *Don't Let the Media Have the Monopoly on the Freedom of Speech*, 2007

Friedrich von Wieser, Jevons, Alfred Marshall and Philip Wicksteed abandon the classical theory of art's exceptionalism (Beech 2015, pp. 96-97) without developing a neoclassical theory of art's exceptionalism and without identifying the various ways in which artistic production, consumption and price formation are specifically exceptional to marginal utility theory. For this phase of the inquiry, therefore, I could no longer use the same method that I deployed in the study of the key texts of classical economics. I could not discover the exceptional status of art within the texts themselves, but had to reconstruct art's exceptionalism concealed within neoclassical economics by identifying the anomalous character of art and artistic production and consumption that was overlooked or underestimated by them. No longer assembling textual evidence in order to construct the development of a coherent and expanding theory of art's economic

exceptionalism, I had to read the texts critically for their absence of a specific theory of art, false generalisations in which standard commodities and exceptional commodities are treated alike, unwarranted assertions about artists and artworks and misreadings of the classical theory of exceptionalism.

When the inquiry turned to the study of welfare economics the method had to change yet again, because welfare economics is concerned less with theorising or denying the existing of anomalies to supply and demand but in providing economic arguments for market failure and justifying state intervention in the economy and the provision of public goods and merit goods. Analysing the key texts – Arthur Cecil Pigou, Richard Musgrave, John Maynard Keynes, Hubert Llewellyn Smith, William Baumol, Gøsta Esping-Anderson – on alert for references to art, what stood out as remarkable in the founding literature of welfare economics was the appearance of art within a list of social programmes to which it had not previously been associated. The development of Welfare Economics between 1912 and 1959 reimagined the state as an economic agent of the macroeconomic redistribution of wealth in large part by urging the public funding of measures to address urgent social needs – health, old age, education, unemployment, housing – for which the state took responsibility to guarantee universal provision. Art does not seem a natural candidate for this list, which was introduced by Otto von Bismarck between 1884 and 1889 in a cynical and successful tactic to outmanoeuvre the demands of the growing Socialist movement before being rolled out across Western Europe by progressive and reformist governments between 1891 and 1911. Nevertheless, the Arts Council of Great Britain was established in 1946, two years before the National Health Service in the UK. This phase of the inquiry therefore had to address two related questions: first, is public subsidy a new and distinctive form of economic exceptionalism? – not insofar as it produces the high prices of rarities but, perhaps, as its modes of allocation cannot be explained by classical or neoclassical theories of supply and demand. And second, how

and why was art included within the welfare state? I am not concerned with the operational contingencies of the advent of the public subsidy of art but with the normative impulse behind them.

While the classical theory of economic exceptionalism and the welfarist case for public subsidy are both ideologically and methodologically at odds with one another, closer inspection of the latter shows that the specific case for art's public subsidy was derived from an acknowledgement of some variant of art's economic exceptionalism. Part of the case for the public subsidy of art after World War II was based on the perceived social and cultural damage that would result from the fate of art being determined by the art market alone. In principle, the discrepancy between aesthetic value and the value attributed to artworks by the market had always been in operation, but by the middle of the twentieth century this condition had been escalated by the antagonistic relationship of the avant-garde both to the art market and bourgeois taste. One of the arguments for the public subsidy of art, therefore, went as follows: if the best art being produced in the twentieth century retained an avant-garde antipathy to the market – and therefore the presiding taste of the wealthy collectors did not sustain the most progressive artists of the day – then the state, it was argued, was justified in providing support for artists. My examination of the welfarist literature, therefore, took on a more interrogative mode, tracing both the intellectual and historical prerequisites of the perception that art has a value over and above that given to it by its consumers, and the prototypes for the mechanisms through which the allocation of art might be organised beyond market mechanisms.



Free Art Collective, *The First Condition Of An Ecological Politics Is That It Halts The Commodification Of The Planet By Putting All Landowners, Exploiters, Entrepreneurs And Bureaucrats Out Of Business*, curated by JJ Charlesworth, for the exhibition *Fusion Now! More Light, More Power, More People*, Rokeby Gallery, London 21 Nov – 2 Dec 2007

Another methodological adjustment needed to be made when addressing the critique of welfare economics within neoliberalism in the second half of the twentieth century. Neoliberalism's denial of art's special status in relation to the marketplace echoes the rejection of economic exceptionalism by the neoclassicists insofar as it is driven by the infinite extension of *laissez faire*, but the neoliberal case against subsidy was structured around an opposition between market and state by the Cold War and the Western hegemony of Keynesianism. Within neoliberal economics, therefore, there was scant, if any, attention paid to the specific differences between (a) artworks and standard commodities or (b) industrial production and artistic production, or even between (c) wage labourers and artists. Neoliberal economists attempted to discredit welfarism in two ways: first by constructing a political defence of the market as more democratic than state provision, and second by arguing that everything is economic and economics is the most scientific method for understanding human behaviour. As such, my methodology for engaging with the key texts by neoliberal authors on art and against its public subsidy was to assess its various doctrines – consumer sovereignty, *homo economicus*, public choice

theory, etc. Essential to this was dissecting Gary Becker's argument that questions of taste conformed to the marginal utility pattern of addiction in which the standard pattern of diminishing marginality is inverted. This argument had been absorbed by contemporary mainstream economics as a dogma and therefore acted as a platform from which arts policy could be based. In this instance, as in the critique of neoliberalism more generally, my method in this phase of the inquiry was to subject neoliberal doctrine to immanent critique.



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My engagement with Marxist economics called for different methods. Split into two unequal parts, the reconstruction of a Marxist economics of art begins with a critical assessment of the legacy of Western Marxism in the theories of art's commodification, culture industry, recuperation and so on, but then proceeds to recover a theory of art's economic exceptionalism from Marx's writings. I argue that the split between classical and Western Marxism is not a sequence from early to late Marxism but runs through Marxism itself as a bifurcated living tradition. It has been almost impossible for the two traditions to join forces since Classical Marxism – and the economically and politically

oriented Marxism that remained faithful to it – did not regard art as economically or politically significant enough to warrant attention, whereas Western Marxism rejected economics as a method for grasping the nuances of art. Through a historical analysis of this bifurcation of Marxism and remaining alert to the treatment of art and the economic analysis of art's exceptionalism, it was possible to reset the dispute between Classical and Western Marxism in terms of the former's emphasis on the anomalous nature of artistic production and the latter's emphasis on the artwork's interaction with the markets, technologies of reproduction and consumers diminished by commodity culture.

One of the ways in which my Marxist analysis of art differs from Western Marxist accounts is that I specifically examined the various ways in which art encounters various forms of capital rather than theorising art's relationship to capitalism. Thus, drawing on the analytic insights, rather than the historical stages, of the Marxist theory of the transition from feudalism to the capitalist mode of production, the reconstruction of a Marxist economics of art turns on whether or not artistic labour has been subsumed under capital. When it is shown that artists did not become wage labourers and therefore have not entered into a relationship with productive capital, the inquiry then goes on to examine art's relationship to merchant capital – primarily through the figures of the gallerist, dealer and auctioneer, as well as the collector – and then art's relationship to finance capital in the form of art investments, art banking and the claim that art is an asset. My method for the second part of the inquiry into the possibility of a Marxist economics of art – and the development of a specifically Marxist theory of art's economic exceptionalism – was, therefore, first, a close reading of Marx's economic theory, organised for my purposes into separate studies of Marx's theories of productive capital, merchant capital and finance capital on the assumption that it is through its relation to various forms of capital that art enters directly into capitalism.



Preparatory image for *The First Condition Of An Ecological Politics Is That It Halts The Commodification Of The Planet By Putting All Landowners, Exploiters, Entrepreneurs And Bureaucrats Out Of Business*, curated by JJ Charlesworth, for the exhibition *Fusion Now! More Light, More Power, More People*, Rokeby Gallery, London 21 Nov – 2 Dec 2007

Despite constructing some economic arguments within the overall inquiry into what an economics of art must address, it was essential that the methods of the inquiry were not restricted to economic investigations. The tools developed by economists to understand, analyse and predict human behaviour were not serviceable for a study of artistic production. There have been two ways of interpreting this, one romantic and one cynical. The first confers on the artist as a special individual the force of independence, which allows him or her to resist the temptations of the marketplace, while the other understands the artist's autonomy as the effect of social processes such as class, gender and pedagogical power. My study puts forward a third option: certain practices, including the production of art, are economically exceptional insofar as their institutions protect them from the rigours of market mechanisms. Jacques Rancière confirms this in a political rather than an economic register and in the realm of consumption rather than production when he says, 'one important condition of the emancipation of the spectator is precisely the creation of places where works of art or performances of art are no longer restrained

to a specific audience or a specific function. The creation of art museums at the end of the eighteenth century was important in that respect' (Arnall et al 2012, p. 292).

Artists have been shown to be 'economically irrational' or 'perverse' (Abbing 2002, p. 14; Ginsburgh and Throsby 2006, p. 10; and Towse 2010, p. 300) time and time again in response to questionnaires and other studies by economists and sociologists without any economist or sociologist drawing any conclusions from this other than speculating that artists are deluded about their own self-interests or that certain myths about art prevent them from behaving in a more rational way. Mine is the first study to treat the economic perversity of the artist as a perfectly rational response to the objective situation of operating within an economically exceptional mode of production.

The Critique of the Critique of Art's Commodification

In her book *Machine in the Studio* Caroline Jones narrates the passage from the Abstract Expressionist romance of the studio to the abandonment of the studio in site-specificity and Land Art via the anti-romantic embrace of semi-industrial techniques and the social production of art in Minimalism and Pop Art (Jones 1996). Writing within the discursive framework set by the Anglophone proponents of post-Conceptualism and postmodernism, Jones applies the gendered strain of the structural and formal analysis of contemporary art to the critique of the artist as a heroic individual, which she approaches through a historical reconstruction of changing attitudes to artistic production from the 1960s. While her account shares a great deal with the work of Rosalind Krauss, Benjamin Buchloh, Hal Foster, Thomas Crow and Charles Harrison, her book on this episode in the history of art of the critique of romanticism in the second half of the twentieth century was understood primarily in terms of the evacuation of the artist's studio and is a particularly vivid lens through which to address the question of art's relationship to capitalism.

It is possible to insert the historical passage that Jones narrates into the wider transition from modernism to contemporary art, which, from the perspective of my study of art's economics, can be characterised by the *progressive retreat from art's critique of the commodity*. This story does not culminate in the escape from the studio as it does for her, but with the conviction, on the part of critical artists, that artworks are commodities

and artists operate within the economic transactions of capitalist society. Reconstructing the historical process by which artists came to shed the set of values that marked their work and products off from capitalist commodity production is impeded by the lasting legacy of the critical rejection of modernism's romantic tropes of artistic independence that have been powerfully re-described as complicit in cultural distinction, elitism, masculinist heroism and imperial mastery. My own situated engagement with these questions over three decades has been shaped from the outset by the critique of the modern myths of the artist, which blocked my formulation of a theory of artistic production as a site of resistance to capitalist commodity production.

The declaration that art is a commodity served to deflate the modernist heroism of Abstract Expressionism at the tail-end of the post-war boom. However, it has become increasingly clear that this idea offers little or no critical resistance against the neoliberal economic reductivism that has emphatically insisted that everything is a commodity since the same period. This convergence of art history and economic and political history is the crucial juncture that makes sense of *Art and Value* as an intervention into the condition of contemporary art. While the broad context that prompted my analysis of the economics of art included the persistence of Western Marxism's critical theory of art's incorporation and recuperation by capitalism and the neoliberal insistence that art is a commodity like everything else, as well as the sociology of 'cultural capital' and the extension of the anthropological theory of the gift to characterise art's relationship to economies of the worthless and priceless – and *Art and Value* subjected these discourses to close analysis – the principal context for the investigation was the discursive ratification of the dogma of art's structural commodification of artworks by artists, critics, curators and art theorists within the communities of contemporary art globally. Although the book quite rightly focuses on refuting the theoretical, methodological and doctrinal arguments that perpetuate the assumption of art's complete commodification, the inquiry that the

book presents needs to be located intellectually within the specific frames of reference within which contemporary artists operate today. It is necessary, therefore, to reconsider the investigation not in terms of its visible and internal interlocutors but in terms of a set of interlocutors to which the book is implicitly addressed – namely the widespread conviction within contemporary art and its institutions and discourses that art has been commodified.



Free Art Collective, *Knowledge Cannot Check Power by Being True...*, shop window slogan for *Spin-Freee-ozza*, a Free project within *On Joy, Sadness and Desire*, Smart Project Space, Amsterdam, commissioned by Foundation Spinoza Centre and organised by SKOR, 2009

The history of art theory's adoption of the commodification theory is the history that my study of art and economics confronts. Conventionally the narrative of the commodification of art takes one of two routes: either a genealogy of the theory of commodification credits the Frankfurt School for applying Marxist analysis to the culture industry which precipitates the theories of spectacle, recuperation, real subsumption and so on, or the transition from the guild system to the art market is taken as the model for the staged encroachment of art and its institutions by dealers, collectors, sponsors, financiers and speculators. These two narratives do not match one another since the former refers primarily to changes in the technologies of cultural reproduction – radio,

cinema, television, Internet and so on – linked to the transformation of the work of art itself – loss of aura, routinisation, standardisation, etc. – whereas the latter refers primarily to economic transactions and to the institutions of art’s distribution, consumption and display and the effects that art’s economics is meant to have on its producers. Although these two narratives lend support to one another insofar as they reach the same conclusion, they do not confirm each other’s account of what took place historically for art to be commodified.



Free Art Collective, installation, *Spin-Freee-oza*, a Freee project within *On Joy, Sadness and Desire*, Smart Project Space, Amsterdam, commissioned by Foundation Spinoza Centre and organised by SKOR, 2009

There is another narrative yet to be written, which traces the incremental evacuating of the critique of the commodity within art practice and art theory. Rather than crediting the philosophers of art with the insight of art’s commodification or witnessing the imperious expansion of the art market into every aspect of artistic activity, it is possible to examine how artists themselves turned to the commodity and to commerce and business as a model for their own activity in order to emancipate themselves from the romantic imaginary of art’s elevated freedom. There is a lineage to be constructed from Pop Art and Minimalism to Commodity Sculpture and the celebrity

art market operators of yBa via Conceptualism, which does not hinge on questions of style or form but is driven by the perception of an escalating immersion into the circuits of capitalist exchange that I will outline below. Marxist theories of art's commodification played a part in both the critical and cynical complicity of artists in the art market since the 1960s, and the dealers and speculators did not put up a fight when artists became more businesslike, but the story of contemporary art's retreat from the critique of the commodity is the story of how artists themselves lost faith with the possibility that artistic production might be antagonistic to commodity production.⁷ To acknowledge only the first two narratives of art's commodification is to presuppose the actuality of art's commodification and attempt to explain its historical emergence, whereas to acknowledge the third narrative is to open up the possibility that art's commodification is a constitutive myth of contemporary art.

Abstract Expressionism represents the last defence of the site of resistance to capitalism in art being located at the point of artistic production. This opposition can be overstated, as it is in David Craven's book *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique*, which bases its claim that Abstract Expressionism resisted capitalism on anecdotal evidence that its most prominent artists and critics associated with Marxists and sometimes used Marxist terminology. Nevertheless, it is evident that some form or other of the critique of commodity production is operative in the critical discourse of North American painting in the 1940s and 1950s. It is codified, for instance, in Clement Greenberg's opposition of avant-gardism and kitsch, which is not principally a comparison of superior and inferior culture but a contrast between art produced freely and art produced either for the market or for the authoritarian state. Greenberg speaks of art 'detaching itself from society' (Greenberg 1989, p. 5) and Mark Rothko refers to 'the

⁷ Harold Rosenberg and Meyer Schapiro were the two leading exponents of the argument that artistic labour itself was quite distinct from capitalist production. Rosenberg, for instance, described painting as 'an activity that would be an alternative to both utility and idleness' (Rosenberg 1952, p. 43), and Schapiro declared that paintings and sculptures, 'are the last hand-made, personal objects within our culture' (Schapiro 1978, p. 217).

unfriendliness of society', or 'hostility' towards the artist (Rothko 2006 [1947], p. 58). Greenberg characterises the stakes of this detachment in an attitude to production: 'In turning his attention away from the subject matter of common experience, the poet or artist turns it in upon the medium of his own craft' (Greenberg 1989, p. 6) to the 'processes and disciplines' of art. For Greenberg the emphasis on medium, craft, discipline and process is the direct result of the rejection of the capitalist mode of production insofar as 'the avant-garde's emigration from bourgeois society to bohemia meant also an emigration from the markets of capitalism' (Greenberg 1989, p. 5). Although Greenberg refers to art's attention to art as the 'avant-garde's *specialization* of itself' (Greenberg 1989, p. 8, emphasis added) – a central concept within the Weberian social theory of modernity – he does so without conflating artistic technique with commodity production, in fact specialisation could be seen as the prerequisite of the kind of exceptionalism that Greenberg plotted through the distinction between avant-gardism and kitsch.

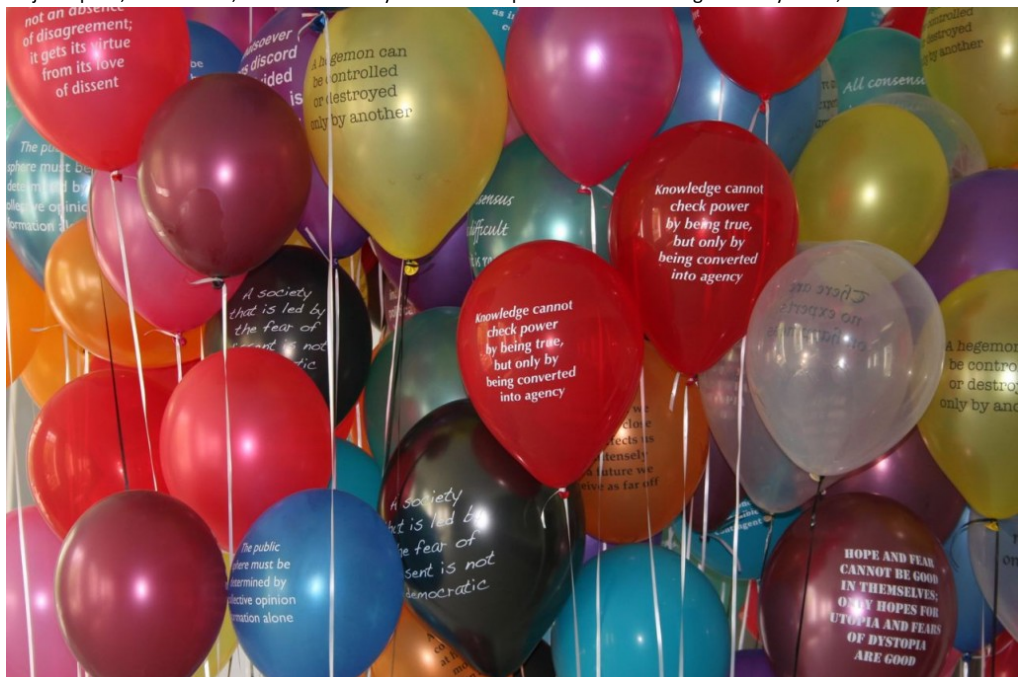
In 1957 Meyer Schapiro expressed the resistance to capitalism within artistic production even more emphatically than Greenberg. Paintings, he said, 'are the last hand-made, personal objects within our culture. Almost everything else is produced industrially, in mass, and through a high division of labor' (Schapiro 1978, p. 217). Schapiro stressed the value of the 'devices of handling, processing, surfacing', which, he said, 'confer to the utmost degree the aspect of the freely made. Hence the great importance of the mark, the stroke, the brush, the drip, the quality of the substance of the paint itself, and the surface of the canvas as a texture and field of operation – all signs of the artist's active presence' (Schapiro 1978, p. 218). His rhetoric is more directly oriented around the politics of labour than Greenberg's. 'All these qualities of painting may be regarded as a means of affirming the individual in opposition to the contrary qualities of the ordinary experience of working and doing' (Schapiro 1978, p. 218), he argued, explaining that '[f]ew people are fortunate enough to make something that represents themselves, that

issues entirely from their hands and mind, and to which they can affix their names'

(Schapiro 1978, p. 217).



Free Art Collective, installation, *Spin-Freee-oza*, a Freee project within *On Joy, Sadness and Desire*, Smart Project Space, Amsterdam, commissioned by Foundation Spinoza Centre and organised by SKOR, 2009



Free Art Collective, installation, *Spin-Freee-oza*, a Freee project within *On Joy, Sadness and Desire*, Smart Project Space, Amsterdam, commissioned by Foundation Spinoza Centre and organised by SKOR, 2009

Abstract Expressionism's emphasis on the independence of the authentic producer, the sovereignty of whom inevitably had to be protected from external forces by, among other things, a disavowal of the market, was jettisoned in the 1960s. The tone of the

defence of artistic production based on the Abstract Expressionist conception of high modernism was romantic insofar as it opposed the expressive individual to the anonymous aggregate forces of society. Not only was the politics of labour thematised in Abstract Expressionism and its discourses shaped by a sentimental and nostalgic trope of the genius as the epitome of bourgeois individual liberty, it was also predicated on the existence of a tiny minority of such producers with the privilege of working freely. The first generation of artists who rejected Abstract Expressionism's resistance to capitalism, the Minimalists and Pop artists, presented themselves, therefore, as both post-romantics and anti-elitists. Frank Stella proclaimed his intention of being an 'executive artist', in other words, a capitalist, businessman or manager. Warhol renamed his studio the Factory, that is to say, both as a site for the production of market goods and the place in which labour is social rather than individual. Both in their different ways crossed the divide between art and business that had been so dear to the Abstract Expressionist version of modernism. Stella and Warhol directly confronted what Jones calls 'the romance of the studio' (Jones 1996, pp. 1-59), a peculiarly masculinist spatial imaginary that seemed to act as a time machine for transporting modern North American artists to nineteenth-century Western Europe. Jones succeeds in associating the romance of the studio with authorship and intellectual property, but fails to acknowledge that it also embodied a politics of antagonism towards capitalism based on a specific conception of artistic labour as aesthetic experience.

In large part the rejection of Abstract Expressionism's romantic elitism was announced by the twofold shift away from the terrain of production to the arena of consumption, and from the handicraft activities of the lone individual to the semi-industrial techniques of management within a new model of the socialised production of art. Neither Stella nor Warhol converted the artist into a capitalist strictly speaking, but the choice of the rhetoric of business to signal their difference from the Abstract

Expressionists confirms to some extent the opposition of North American high modernism and capitalist commodity production. Despite the rhetoric, however, Stella's use of technicians and Warhol's busy Factory were closer to the guild workshop than the industrial workplace both in scale and in the relationship between the employer and the employees. One of the most conspicuous changes during the transition from the guild system to the wage system was that the 'master craftsman' was an exemplary practitioner, whereas the new 'masters' (capitalist employers of wage labour) derived their authority from wealth alone. In the historical transition to the capitalist mode of production, the social legitimacy of the employer was transposed from being based in a shared craft (Sewell 1980) to a form of social legitimacy that separated bosses and workers, namely the possession of capital. Within a conceptual framework that can be drawn from an analysis of the distinction between the guild workshop and the capitalist mode of production, Stella and Warhol were not capitalist employers of technicians and assistants since they derived a large proportion of their authority within the production of their work by being the artist and not merely the capitalist.

Jones narrates this episode in the history of New York art in terms of a confrontation between the individualism of Abstract Expression and 'the new social nature of the American artist' (Jones 1996, p. 52) in the early 1960s, which she ascribes to a 'long-term fascination with the technological sublime' (Jones 1996, p. 55). Glenn Adamson characterises her achievement as 'a rich account of the decline of the studio as the normative concept applied to places of artistic production' (Adamson 2007, p. 14). Jones charts the transition from the modernist studio as the sovereign territory of the heroic individual to the various postmodern work spaces of artists who began to work with technicians and assistants or operated out of office-like spaces sending instructions for works via fax, or those artists who had no studios at all, working in-situ on site-specific works. She describes the passage from one paradigm of production to another through

the opposition between artisanal and mass or industrial production, although she refers to production processes that, at best, consisted of serial production. It is not the specific character of production that concerns her, even less the actual difference historically between the artisan mode of production and the industrial mode of production. She focuses on the transformation of the studio itself, from the confined space of a lone expressive personality to the open and multiple workplace in which the artist manages assistants, technicians and hired workers.



Free Art Collective, badges, various

Jones chronicles the modernisation and urbanisation of art after Abstract Expressionism as the historical moment in which the 'machinic sublime' is introduced into the studio. The machine that she discovers in the studio is not a synecdoche of technology exactly but a metonym for modern urban life in general. Artists become more machine-like, more efficient, more productive and less emotionally intense, she argues, in opposition to a romanticisation of the artist as isolated from modern everyday experience. She describes this in the context of John Cage's work as 'a mechanistic antidote to ego' (Jones, 1993, p. 633). She also puts stress on the geographical displacement of the studio from a lodge in the country to a loft in the city and she frames the transmutation of the artist's studio as an urbanisation of the artist. Her account pivots

on an uncritical deployment of the opposition of city and country that structures her other binaries (romantic/ realist, individual/ social, emotional/ machine). Hers is a story of the birth of contemporary art out of the discredited remains of high modernism told as the narrative of the artist becoming as sober as a machine. The sublime romance of the heroic expressive individual is replaced with the equally sublime romance of technology, tough urban experience, the realities of earning a living, the discipline of market forces and the cool operations of the streetwise networker.



Free Art Collective, installation, scarves, *Part of the Game*, NGBK, Berlin, 2014

Jones does not acknowledge the political significance of the deployment of the rhetoric of business by the new generation of artists, noting only that they rejected the romanticism of the heroic individual artist in the studio and remaining silent about their real or feigned embrace of capitalism. On the contrary, Jones aligns the Abstract Expressionists with capitalism through their attachment to individualism, and the role they were assigned in the Cold War. She allows the impression to settle that the abandonment of the romantic individualism in Abstract Expressionism places this new generation of artists in a more critical relationship to capitalism. Jones neglects to specify the relationship between Pop or Minimalism and capitalism. Given that the tropes of independent production in Abstract Expressionism were primarily drawn from the lexicon

of the worker and the tropes of anti-romantic social production of the 1960s generation were drawn from the lexicon of management, it would be possible to reconstruct this episode in terms of a confrontation between the romance of workerism and the counter-romance of the entrepreneur, but Jones pursues the theme of the great North American tradition of the technological sublime instead. This, of course, can be read as an undeclared method of justifying the counter-romance of the entrepreneur.

Hostilities between the 1960s generation and the Abstract Expressionists were announced, she notes, in terms derived from business and commerce. Stella's refusal to 'rely on the agonized self to generate art', and his turn to 'the housepainter, the industrial surface, the manufactured object, the fabrication workshop' was shocking because these were commercial forms of painting. Similarly, Warhol's statement that 'somebody should be able to do all my paintings for me' was an inflammatory gesture in 1963 because it cast the artist as a manager, owner, employer or entrepreneur. Neither claim was literally true, but these speech acts were first and foremost rhetorical bricks thrown through the windows of high modernism's affirmative institutions. These discursive violations were justified conjuncturally by the perceived fossilisation of the Romantic discourses in abstract art's expressive facture. The history of the critique of high modernism is the history of displacing and reorienting the discourse of independent production into a set of positions taken up against the heroic individual artist and the disembodied viewer of his works. What these statements by Stella and Warhol suggest, however, albeit hyperbolically, is not the presence of a machine in the studio but the arrival of the capitalist in the studio.



Badge making

Jones's narrative of the critique of Abstract Expressionism in particular or modernism in general comes to a halt with Land Art and those artists who produced work not in the studio but *in-situ*. While the exodus from the romantic imaginary of the studio arguably brings to an end the romance of the studio – despite the persistence of heroic individualism and so on within the romance of the trope of the artist in the wilderness – the trajectory of the vacating of art's critique of the commodity is not completed until Conceptualism, especially the debates between the English and North American branches of Art & Language that come to be driven by questions of art's relationship to capitalism. High modernism's principled rejection of the commodification of culture, both in its myths of the artist and its objections to kitsch – which was understood as the culture specific to capitalism – was not fully refuted until the politicised wing of Conceptual Art condemned the romance of art's independence from capitalism.

After the waning of Abstract Expressionism, the problem of kitsch, which for Greenberg *et al* was fundamentally integrated with the problem of commodification and production for the market, was transposed into the perception of an elitist scorn for popular culture and its pleasures. One of the preconditions for translating the question of kitsch from the critique of capitalist culture to the critique of high modernism's elitism is

the establishment of the perception of art as ineluctably lodged within capitalism itself. While Pop art embraced what had previously been regarded as kitsch and Minimalism produced artworks out of industrial raw materials that connected art directly to capitalism and its values, it was not until the Conceptualist politicisation of art that the artwork is regarded as fully and unavoidably a commodity.



Badge making with participants

By the end of the 1960s art appeared to be identical with commodity production and any defence of art against its complicity in capitalism was equated with the bloated romanticism that had been rejected along with Abstract Expressionism's elitist conception of artistic creativity. Every trace of the critique of how markets incentivise meeting demand with supply or how consumer sovereignty clashes with art's self-determination

was lost in translation. From now on, autonomy didn't mean self-determination; it meant the elitist disdain for the popular and the uninitiated. Bundling the resistance to capitalism along with the emphasis on artistic production, both taken as romantic forms of preserving elitism, has resulted in subsequent generations of artists extrapolating on this critique of Abstract Expressionism, confessing ever deeper complicity with capitalism as proof of one's post-romanticism. Within a few years of Stella and Warhol's dream of becoming a capitalist in the studio, the polemical exaggeration of art's complete absorption by the market had apparently come true.

On the cusp of the new generation of Conceptual artists who insisted that art must be understood within capitalist society, in a now legendary lecture given at the Museum of Modern Art in 1968 Leo Steinberg said:

For far-out modernism, we can now read 'speculative growth stock'; for apparent quality, 'market attractiveness'; and for an adverse change of taste, 'technical obsolescence'. A feat of language to absolve a change of attitude. Art is not, after all, what we thought it was; in the broadest sense it is hard cash... Another decade, and we shall have mutual funds based on securities in the form of pictures held in bank vaults. (Steinberg 2007, p. 56)

If the Abstract Expressionists and their advocates patrolled the border between art and the market, and the generation of young artists in the 1960s first broke with the sentimental defence of the artist against society by associating themselves with business and the market and then extended the critique of Abstract Expressionism through the elaboration of art production as the analytical inquiry into art or the discursive activity of a linguistic community, Steinberg's lecture represents a reluctant passage between the two generations. Exaggeration was satirical in his grotesque image of art sucked into the circuits of surplus value. If Steinberg's comments can be read as a warning, he was too late: Stella and Warhol were already presenting themselves as anti-romantic executives and Conceptual artists were turning their attention to the social context of artistic production, including its relationship to the market. Before the markets and the banks could convert art finally and completely into capital, the new generation of artists were,

first, masquerading as capitalists, managers, business executives and factory owners, and then confessing their complicity within capitalism in general and the art market in particular. If Steinberg's prospective narrative of art's colonisation by capital appears realistic and feasible, it is because the other narrative, in which artists turned against the alleged romanticism of art's resistance to capitalism to embrace certain aspects of the capitalist world established a *cordon sanitaire* between contemporary art and the romance of artistic production as resistant to capital.



Badge display

Stallabrass, writing a few decades after the insights of the 1960s generation of artists had crystallised into a dogma of art's complicity in capitalism, retrospectively detects no overstatement in Steinberg's dystopian image of art fully immersed in capital, explaining the novelty of Steinberg's observation on the fact that 'contemporary art was still settling into its accommodation with money as the market outgrew its old condition as a tiny and specialist area' (Stallabrass 2004, p. 70). One of the dangers for critical theory today is that no exaggeration of the complicity between art and capital seems possible. Steinberg, however, speaks of a 'feat of language' and thus casts the whole relationship as a *reading*. Theories of art's proximity to capitalism today relinquish the need to distinguish between the deployment of the rhetorics of capitalism and charting

the historical processes of primitive accumulation, the subsumption of labour under capital, and commodification of non-commodities. Steinberg's rhetorical conflation of art and finance took place not only in an era of growth for the New York art market, but in the immediate aftermath of a challenge by artists such as Stella and Warhol against the allegedly bloated romanticism of Abstract Expressionism's rejection of commercialism.

From the mid-1960s onwards, there is a radical uprooting of the art object and its characteristic forms of labour by the generation of Conceptual artists, who play such a key role in the transition from modern to contemporary art (Bailey 2016), which can be schematised as the historical passage from the dominance of Abstract Expressionism to its localisation. Initially this rupture is oriented around technical and ontological questions about the relationship between language and art, attempts to do away with the art object altogether, the critique of the primacy of the visual in art, the rejection of the old competences of the artist and so on. Benjamin Buchloh retrospectively characterised 'the most radical artistic practices of the sixties and their subsequent developments' as involving the critique of 'the commodity-status of the work of art'. (Buchloh 1990, p. 119) Conceptualism, however, was a very broad category of practices and it is only the politicised wing of Conceptualism that came to see art and ideas as ineluctably commodified. Art & Language, based in Coventry and New York during the 1970s and since then in Banbury, initially drew on analytical philosophy and then the theory of science before turning to political theory, particularly Marxism, to reflect critically on art as a social practice. In fact, the trajectory of Art & Language, as a research project, can be grasped by the passage from the philosophical inquiry into what art is to the political inquiry into art's rootedness in capitalism. If the critique of Abstract Expressionism in the 1960s ushered in the vacating of art's critical distance from commodity production, initially in terms of the embrace of capitalism and its dominant forms of production, Art &

Language not only deepen this perception of art's systemic commodification but do so within a radical critique of capitalism.

Art & Language switched from holding an uncompromising philosophical position on art's ontology in the mid-1960s to staging aggressive political discussions on art's relationship to capitalism, imperialism and revolution in the early-1970s. Unlike their predecessors in Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism and Pop, these artists neither entertained romantic ideals about the artist as a free individual, nor overstated their desire to become managers, capitalists or employers. Instead, capitalism was conceived by them as the social totality in which they operated and in which the art market was the social precondition of art practice. Breaking up as an international group in 1975 over contradictory positions on art's relationship to the class struggle, including several firm concepts of the artist as a worker or a bourgeois actant, Art & Language were haunted by their own complicity with capitalism. While Joseph Kosuth, concerned above all with the philosophical question of art's ontology, distinguished between analytic and stylistic conceptualism, other members of Art & Language were more concerned with rejecting conceptualism as a marketable style of art objects in favour of conceptualism as the political critique of the individual artist and the experimental implementation of a community of speakers and listeners. In 1971 Art & Language New York (initiated by Burn and Ramsden) expressed their hostility towards the 'caricature of the individual artist as possessor of his or her own person and capacities, owing nothing to society for them' in a posture of 'the "purity" of the individual' that 'generates an individual increasingly ignorant of the dynamics of the very community within which he is enmeshed'. (quoted in Bailey 2015, p. 41) And already in 1970 Terry Atkinson had marked an expansion of Art & Language's agenda by announcing that the group would 'go for the contextual questions not the object questions' (Atkinson 1970, p. 42).



Free Art Collective, *Public Kiosk*, G39 gallery, Cardiff, 2016

Sarah Charlesworth, writing in Art & Language New York's *The Fox* magazine in 1975, complained that the New York art world was dominated by 'socially convenient (marketable) formal models of art (i.e. painting and sculpture)' and 'socially convenient (non-controversial) theoretical models (formalism, art for art's sake)'. (Charlesworth 1975, p. 1) In the same year, Sandra Harrison, another occasional member of Art & Language, asserted that artists 'are self-employed', explaining 'They do not sell their labour. They do not receive salaries. They are supported in various ways. To use the language of proletarian class struggle is to sink into fantasy' (Harrison 1975, p. 15). These were urgent and far-reaching issues for Art & Language in the middle of the 1970s as they struggled among themselves to identify a political purpose for art after Conceptualism that located itself pragmatically rather than sentimentally in relation to the workers' movement and the real politics of the working conditions of artists in an artworld

dominated by the bureaucratic structures of the museum and the financial dependence of artists on the art market.

By drawing analogies between, for instance, avant-gardist innovation and 'endless market expansion', Ian Burn argued,

While it may once have seemed an exaggeration of economic determinism to regard works of art as 'merely' commodities in an economic exchange, it is now pretty plain that our entire lives have become so extensively constituted in these terms that we cannot any longer pretend otherwise. Not only do works of art end up as commodities, but there is also an overwhelming sense in which works of art start off as commodities. (Burn 1975, p. 34)

If we are to take Burn at his word, the dystopian extrapolation of 1968 appears to be realistic by 1975. Overstatement now appears understated and it does so, it seems, because art has been dragged further and further into the business of money-making.

There can be no shock in the statement that art is embroiled in the market after the mid-1970s because it appears rather that there is no denying it.

While some Conceptual artists overstated the freedom of ideas and words from the systems and structures of capitalism, the politicised wing of Conceptualism confronted the discrepancy between the utopian qualities of text art and the evident circulation of them within the New York art market. However, even if certain conceptual artists can be characterised as romantic in their interpretation of language as a resource for the production of art, none revived the Abstract Expressionist romance of the artist. There is a political indeterminacy at the heart of Conceptualism's discursive location within and against capitalism: the labour process and the social relations of labour are taken to be resistant or oppositional to capitalism but the art market appears to incorporate art into the logics of capital regardless. Oscillating between the two on occasion, but giving more weight to the latter overall, Conceptual artists are justified in being seen as the first generation of artists who are fundamentally committed to the proposition that there is no alternative to capitalism for artists and art. The red herring of dematerialisation, which has been revived in the last ten years – in which the production of ideas or cheaply

reproduced Xeroxes, etc., was claimed to undermine or prevent the art market to buy and sell Conceptual Art – is based on the error that it is the physical qualities of the object that determines whether it is or can be a commodity. Sharing some of Hannah Arendt's conceptual distinction between labour and work, the hope that dematerialisation might provide a means of escape from capitalist commodification underestimates the commodification of labour independent of the production of the commodities.

If the Abstract Expressionists made the error of identifying the resistance to capitalist commodity production through a particular morphology of aesthetic labour, the Conceptualists believed that non-commodity production could be systemically incorporated into the capitalist mode of production at the point of circulation and consumption. Both are feasible up to a point, but economic analysis supplies a certain clarity in these matters. It makes sense, for instance, that insofar as industrial production radically modified the processes of production required to cut costs, control labour and increase productivity and efficiency that the onset of capitalism would be experienced as the establishment of a particular set of unprecedented morphologies of labour. This is true and in many ways the politics of labour takes the shape of struggles over the labour process, including disputes over whether the capitalist or the labourer controls the labour process itself. The question of the real subsumption of labour is the precise formulation of this political issue. However, it is possible to deploy labour processes developed for capitalist purposes in non-commodity production and capitalists can exploit unaltered labour processes through the formal subsumption of labour. Hence, while labour processes are markers of the politics of labour, it is the economic relations of production that determine whether a certain form of labour corresponds to the capitalist mode of production.

Similarly, while non-commodities can be incorporated into the capitalist circulation of commodities by being bought and sold on the marketplace, it is only on a case by case

basis that non-commodities can turn into commodities in this way. And when they do, this process of commodification does not alter the social relations of production that produced them. Unpaid labour does not magically turn into wage labour by virtue of its products being converted into commodities within circulation. No formal or real subsumption of labour takes place through the commodification of non-commodities. Any complicity of the artist as non-wage labourer that appears to result from the commodification of artworks therefore is accomplished through non-economic mechanisms and remains outside the capitalist mode of production. Greenberg's phrase 'the umbilical cord of gold' (Greenberg 1989, p. 8) registers art's insertion into capitalism through the agency of money itself or through the acts of consumption where the wealthy make transactions with artists via gallerists and dealers. It seems as if selling artworks for money captures artists within capitalism, despite the fact that this transaction does not subsume artistic labour under capital. Neither selling their labour as labour-power for wages, nor acting as capitalists who advance capital with the intention of accumulation, the artist who sells works on the art market is neither converted into an entrepreneur nor subsumes their own labour to capital. At best, artistic labour is disciplined by the subsumption of artworks under revenue by art sales.



Freee Art Collective, *Fuck Globalization*, Dartington College of Arts, 2010

I lived my own version of the passage from Abstract Expressionism to Conceptualism, which I ultimately came to theorise via the concept of the philistine that stood in direct opposition to Greenberg's concept of kitsch and embraced certain aspects of Pop art and Minimalism. My art education began in earnest when, as an eighteen-year-old, I came across the Open University television series *A315 Modern Art and Modernism: From Manet to Pollock*. This introduced me to key writers such as Clement Greenberg and T.J. Clark, as well as Mike Baldwin, who scripted and voiced a critical commentary on the museum, and Terry Atkinson, who provided a critique of Duchamp and his legacy. Despite being impressed with Baldwin and Atkinson's programmes, my initial response to being exposed to these debates on modernism was to feel the full force of Greenberg's arguments and the works of the Abstract Expressionists. If the critique of Abstract Expressionism is taken to be epitomised by the critique of the heroic expressive individual, then my early reading of Greenberg's meticulous formalism blinded me to the critique because my interpretation of Abstract Expressionism was not based on these fictions of the author but on a scrutiny of the technical and formal qualities of paintings. Art & Language's critical engagement with art's ontology and art's apparatus and social predicament and Greenberg's analytical criticism were not entirely incommensurable, perhaps, because I came to Greenberg through Conceptualism.

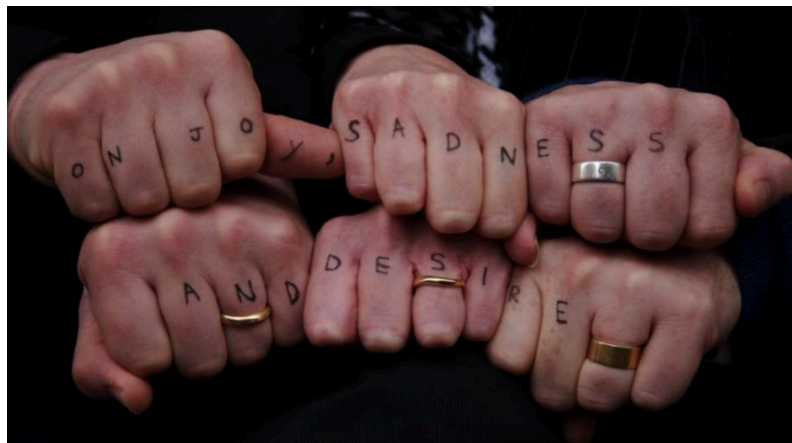


Freee Art Collective, *Fuck Globalization*, Dartington College of Arts, 2010

Even after I quit painting in the middle of my first year on a BA painting course, my work remained located within a Greenbergian framework via the lens of Kosuth and Art & Language. There was a vivid way of reading Minimalism and Conceptualism as extensions or generalisations of Greenbergian modernism. Meeting Atkinson, Baldwin, Ramsden, Kosuth, Harrison and others (such as Paul Wood, Michael Corris and Dave Rushton) as a BA art student did not uproot my conviction that Conceptualism was an extension of the Greenbergian position rather than a fundamental critique of it because, by the time I met them in the mid 1980s, they were no longer Conceptualists and no longer subscribed to their original critique. At the height of their so-called 'return to painting' these figures were rediscovering the virtues of Abstract Expressionism via Neo-Expressionism, Pollock via T.J. Clark and Greenberg via Harrison. My works at the time, in collaboration with Mark Hutchinson, were large-scale reflections on the non-aesthetic activity of artists that doubled as an investigation into the broken surface of the image. Greenberg and Abstract Expressionism remained in play within a set of investigations of wider questions about art's social relations. Like Art & Language, we focused on the artist as a producer but hoped to deflate its social status and de-romanticise the image of the artistic personality by depicting the artist engaged in routine or trivial operations. We made a series of Rayographs using all the objects in the studio to depict images of the artists taking a single step outside and lighting a match to illuminate the image. We also made a series of painting that began as fictional flags which were taken on a walk around the city, an image of which was painted over the flag so that the two images shared the picture surface.



Freee Art Collective, *Fuck Globalization*, Dartington College of Arts, 2010



Freee Art Collective, postcard for *Spin-Freee-oza*, a Freee project within *On Joy, Sadness and Desire*, Smart Project Space, Amsterdam, commissioned by Foundation Spinoza Centre and organised by SKOR, 2009

In hindsight, it is clear that I attempted to retain the intellectual rigour of a Greenbergian approach to picture-making within a broader set of questions about art's spatial and social construction. None of the heroic expressive loner elements of the Abstract Expressionist conception of artistic creation played any role in the work, and the emphasis of the works on production were sober, mechanistic, serial and urban. We had no need to embrace consumerism or management, therefore, to counter the romanticism of Abstract Expressionism. As a consequence we based our ontology of art on the production of artworks and divided our attention between the activity of artists and the properties of the artwork. With hindsight it is worth noting that we understood artistic production as an act of production generally, no longer existing in a separate category of aesthetic labour. We had no conception of the difference between wage labour and the

social relations of art because our focus on production was entirely driven by its qualities as an activity.

We spoke of art's complicity in capitalism and certainly regarded any simplistic notions of art's autonomy as guaranteeing the artist's individual freedom as romantic and politically inept. We were reading Raymond Williams, Nancy Fraser, Carol Duncan and others, but our ideas never left the orbit of Adorno, Atkinson, Janet Wolff, Jameson and Roberts. We never questioned whether artworks were commodities, nor whether artistic labour had been incorporated into the capitalist mode of production. We had a much more generic sense of the totality of capitalism and the necessity of understanding art within that system. Nevertheless, we held on to some version of the idea that collaborating in the production of art rather than working as individual artists embodied a politics of artistic production that was critical of the dominant authorial model that appeared to be rooted in notions of private property and intellectual property rights. We were convinced, for instance, that art was socially produced despite being presented as the work of individuals. We would have been more likely at this stage to understand our critique of the author as a critique of the Abstract Expressionists rather than sharing with them a critique of the capitalist mode of production. *Art and Value* provides a set of arguments that could be used to realign the critique of the individual artist within rather than against the critique of the capitalist mode of production.



Free Art Collective, *Manifesto for a New Public*, spoken choir reading, part of *Bread and Roses*, London, 2012

I have experienced the 1960s critique of the Abstract Expressionist conception of the artist in reverse. Initially convinced of art's complicity in capitalism and seeing North American high Modernism through the lens of a meticulous critical discourse, I have only lately re-examined the post-war myth of the artist as a hyperbolic rendering of art's actual economic exceptionalism. In this light, the history of post-war conceptions of the artist, as elaborated in Jones's conception of the machine in the studio, can now be characterised as a system-wide evacuation of art's resistance to capitalism at the point of production. Whether through the post-romantic turn to consumerism or the Western Marxist emphasis on consumption in the analysis of capitalism, the resistance to capitalism has either been abandoned altogether or transposed to the terrain of the commodity rather than the terrain of labour.



Free Art Collective, *Manifesto for a New Public*, spoken choir reading, part of *Bread and Roses*, London, 2012

I received two types of critical response during the public presentation of these ideas in their early form. Some members of the audience would reject my economic analysis of art's non-capitalist mode of production by arguing that artists enter into capitalist transactions not through production but through the art market, including the argument that the real subsumption of art was achieved through unspecified processes of wider forms of consumption (e.g. consumerism determines the world in which art is made, including the artist as a subject of consumerism). It was argued on more than one occasion that my study ought to focus on the art market rather than on the social relations of artistic production. The second response was to defend the Western Marxist tradition by pointing out that its exaggeration of the commodification of art was polemical and therefore politically powerful. Both responses were orthodox positions within Western Marxism, which had, since Lukács, stressed the subject within a conception of contemporary capitalism determined heavily by technologically mediated social relations of consumption. From Lukács onwards resistance to capitalism had been conceived within critical cultural theory as predominantly a question of providing the means by which a critical subject might be preserved within a broader culture in which the subjectless subject prevails. It was also orthodox to stress political readings of art rather than providing economic analyses of art's social relations.

My book directly confronted the emphasis on consumption, technology and the subject in Western Marxism's theory of art and culture by inverting the established relationship between politics and economics in critical theory. So, although Joshua Decter is right to reject Lewis Hyde's distinction between 'pure commodities' and the work of art as a 'gift' (Decter 2013, p. 155), the inversion of the opposition which casts commodification as realistic and the rejection of commodification as romantic is equally unsatisfactory. Rather than provide a more rounded critique of art's various modes of complicity with capitalism, I followed an experimental line of argument, a theoretical 'as if', in which I bracketed off political and cultural questions in order to inquire into the strictly economic question of whether artistic production corresponded in any way to capitalist commodity production. If there are non-economic mechanisms through which art enters into close relationships with capitalism, these were ruled out of the inquiry. It is not that such relations are of no importance, but that I was convinced that the more urgent task was to break the spell of the idea of art's complete and utter incorporation into capitalism before addressing such nuanced questions. Hence, while *Art and Value* subjected the theories of art's commodification and the Culture Industry⁸ to economic analysis, it is nonetheless the case that the Frankfurt School was justified in using the Marxian lexicon of political economy in its cultural critique, not because artistic labour had in fact been converted into capitalist commodity production but rather to drive a stake into the heart of the romantic theory of art, which elevated art above commercial priorities. With the economic analysis outlined in *Art and Value*, then, it becomes possible, for the first time, to revisit this romantic conception of the artist's elevation from commercial incentives in material terms.

⁸ Culture Industry, as theorised originally by Adorno and Horkheimer, was an analysis of changes to the reception of mass culture brought about by technological innovations in its distribution, focused particularly on sound recording, cinema and radio.



Free Art Collective, *Manifesto for a New Public*, spoken choir reading, part of *Bread and Roses*, London, 2012



Free Art Collective, badge display, 2016

From Art and Capitalism to Art and Capital

Although I am the sole author of the book *Art and Value*, the inquiry and the PhD is

rooted in the Free Art Collective and its critique of the economic, institutional and discursive practices of contemporary art in the UK and Western Europe, which extends the avant-garde's desire to transform the aesthetic subject into a critical subject into the production of the conditions under which individuals recognise themselves as agents of social change. While researching and writing the book my art practice within the Free Art Collective experimented with platforms for the reconfiguration of art's social relations. Instead of thinking of art's encounters as structured by economics – artisan and patron, commodity producer and collector, artist and gallerist, etc. – or as oriented around the artwork – essentially, variations on the author and viewer, including the montagist and the critical viewer, the appropriationist and the semiotic reader of signs, etc. – we established relations based on collective processes of agreement and disagreement. We are less interested in art activism, or 'artivism', than activation, which we understand as a process through which individuals come to identify themselves as members of a political community with historical agency. In doing this we reject the standard concepts of participatory art in which the presumed passivity of the viewer is replaced with the presumed activity of the participant because this conception of the social turn fails to distinguish adequately between the activity of the social agent and the active passivity of the participant towards the managerial conduct of the artist. This is why Free is critical of theories of agonism (Mouffe 2013) and dissensus (Rancière 2009): our practices do not drive primarily at those familiar processes of generating critiques of power, whether this is embodied in institutions or anthropomorphised in political leaders, but at creating the conditions under which participants can develop techniques of social action, collective opinion formation and publishing.



Free Art Collective, *Revolution Road: Rename the Streets!*, commissioned by Wysing Arts Centre, Cambridge, as part of the exhibition *Generosity is the New Political*, 2009



Free Art Collective, *Revolution Road: Rename the Streets!*, commissioned by Wysing Arts Centre, Cambridge, as part of the exhibition *Generosity is the New Political*, 2009

Free have devised new techniques for artistic participation which we call 'real montage', 'spoken choirs' and 'communities of publishing', which address those individuals normally excluded from the sober arguments of the public sphere. Through open and intensive workshops, the artists foster a non-aggressive environment of open exchange that establishes solidarities as well as opening up clear disagreements, not only between participants but also with the artists and the project itself. Using techniques designed to make participants feel at ease in expressing their opinions to one another, groups of participants work together to develop shared demands and publish these through the production of text-based art. Collective text works are published using T-shirts, badges, banners and placards, magazines, newspapers, songs, chants, declarations, chalk boards and shouting. The works are not produced in order to be interpreted or appreciated. The works establish the conditions for participants to agree and disagree as a member of a shared community of value-exchange leading to forms of publishing their opinion on issues of shared concern.



Free Art Collective, *Revolution Road: Rename the Streets!*, commissioned by Wysing Arts Centre, Cambridge, as part of the exhibition *Generosity is the New Political*, 2009

An example of our platforms for the production of a public held together by

agreement and disagreement is the spoken choir. Free publish a manifesto, written through a process of modifying an existing text – usually a historical manifesto – by asking ourselves what we need to change in order to agree with it. We then invite others to join us in a closed reading (no audience, just the participants speaking and listening to each other) based on the following process:

INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE SPOKEN CHOIR

Free invites you to participate in a spoken choir of their new manifesto.

In order to participate you need to

1. print off the pdf (hard copies are also being distributed)
2. underline every sentence that you agree with
3. bring the manifesto to the event
4. read out those sections that you have underlined.

The first condition of participating in a spoken choir is reading the text not as the viewer reads a piece of text art or as a participant in participatory art reads the invitation to participate. The reader is presumed to have opinions or to be capable of generating opinions and bringing these to the text. The invitation is not to read the text as the expression of an author's point of view but to identify precisely in the text where and when the reader and the authors agree or disagree. Simultaneously rejecting aesthetic modes of encounter and the ethics of participation, the spoken choir foregrounds the social activities or reaching agreement and disagreement, rather than interpretation or taste, on the one hand, or subsuming participants under the managerial dictatorship of the benign artist.

The reading of the manifesto is not a performance in the conventional sense because it is constructed precisely without invitation to an audience – no onlookers, no observers, etc. – and is constructed specifically to exclude any accidental audience. The 'choir' stands in a circle and reads aloud everything that each individual has previously underlined. Any passer-by is excluded from the group and cannot join in spontaneously since they have no access to the text. This exclusion expresses the belief that engaging in processes of agreement and disagreement requires reflection and preparation; that

political engagement is not a form of self-expression. Participation in Free projects cannot be reduced to executing wishes designed by the artist(s) in the way that most participatory art does. There is a politics of social organisation that is usually neglected in the desire to manage groups ethically or invite people to participate in politically progressive actions. One of the reasons why we do not engage in art activism is that it presupposes agreement between the participants and their management by the artist. Our work is political by virtue of producing political publics and its political interrogation of modes of collective action, specifically as this extends beyond the immediate context of the group itself through processes of publishing.



Free Art Collective, page design for a book on Freee (forthcoming)

There are two stages of political contestation. First, there is debate among comrades, and second there is struggle against one's shared enemies. Art activism typically collapses the former into the latter. Free focus on the former and stop just short of the latter. We put our emphasis on the political interaction rather than political action because this is also the process of politicisation. However, this is not because we share Habermas's commitment to democratic discussion as against direct action. We

are interested in the political activity of publishing as an activity, not merely as a mode of transmitting arguments. The techniques we adopt, adapt or invent are aimed at collective decision-making and opinion-formation, not the bourgeois democracy of representatives or the democracy of the elected majority opinion, and not the public sphere of social media that publishes private trivia. One of the key principles operative within Freee artistic strategies is the difference between the techniques required to convert the passer-by into a member of a critical public and the aggregate decision-making of market forces. In this respect, the art practice has been instructive in thinking about the non-market mechanisms and processes that the *Art and Value* book theorised as essential to acknowledging the limits of capital.

More recently, however, the established theories of art's incorporation by capital have been supplemented with a new, intensified culture of economic scrutiny with a cluster of theories and political movements with the purpose of binding art practice ever tighter with the operations of global capitalism. The question of art's commodification has been dwarfed by a set of arguments that have been developed within contemporary art around art's funding, the economics of the artist's use of assistants and technicians, the alleged economic exploitation of audiences and participants, and even the idea that artists benefit from the value-producing activity of the online social media activity of countless others. Commodification theory has been displaced partly because Marxist theories of art's incorporation by capitalism have been replaced with ecological, feminist and neo-colonial theories, and because the discourses of art's Institutional Critique have been extended to engage with funding bodies and economic relations.

In the UK one of the most conspicuous new economic campaigns within contemporary art in the last five years has been activism based on the perceived rights of artists and interns to be paid. Freee, which was based on the principle of not paying the artists – because we are salaried academics – came up against this new principle on a

number of occasions. Writing a budget for a public art institution that did not include an artist fee became either impossible or a deliberate point of contention by us. Refusing to be paid allowed us to address broader and deeper issues about the economics of art and art education. In some instances, however, we would simply include an artist's fee and then reassign the fee to other purposes. Our difficulties with the new policy was not merely a clash between our original working principles and the new economic context for working with public art institutions; we rejected the principle itself. In part, the problem of the campaign to pay artists seemed to us as if left-wing activist artists were the agents of capitalism, extending the reach of wage-labour into a sector that had not commodified labour. Also, it seemed to us that the campaign to pay a small group of educated workers was both (1) an expression of their sense of entitlement and (2) likely to exacerbate social inequalities rather than reduce them. The campaign to pay artists would only be acceptable to us if it was linked to the historical project to abolish the wage system or was integrated into a wider campaign for wage increases generally, the elimination of third-world debt and the provision of incomes for the unwaged and unemployed, for instance.



Free Art Collective, *Manifesto for a New Public*, spoken choir reading, part of *Bread and Roses*, London, 2012

My inquiry into the economics of art was based, therefore, in part on our intuition that the campaign to pay artists was little more than a politics of consolidating

entitlement. The analysis of the non-subsumption of artistic labour under capital, and how this placed the artist in a potentially critical relationship to capitalism, was in part an attempt to elaborate the political position of the Free Art Collective on not being paid, but the research, analysis and argument went much further in the book than our practical engagement with the issues had demonstrated to us. Our convictions about not being paid, now extended beyond the contingent condition of being salaried academics as well as unpaid artists, will now be extended in our disputes with funders and organisations so that negotiating contracts becomes a site for the contestation of a range of institutional anxieties about free labour and unpaid activity.



Free Art Collective, *Manifesto for a New Public*, spoken choir reading, part of *Bread and Roses*, London, 2012

During the same period it has been suggested with some ethical force that participants in art projects produce value from which artists profit. Questions were being raised around the work and our response to these questions did not conform to the ethically charged consensus within the British art activist community. Given our serious misgivings about the payment of artists, Freee has rejected the terms of this debate. Similarly, Freee responded to prominent issues around the sponsorship of art by 'Big Oil' in a comradely exchange with Platform and Liberate Tate (Evans 2015). Apart from the fact that these campaigns invert the critique of art's institutions into a defence of them

from external agents, for Free the campaign to rid art's institutions of oil money does not go far enough. We have called for the complete abolition of all corporate sponsorship of art and even, in a magazine in the UK and an exhibition in New York, the global abolition of all advertising. Paying to occupy the public sphere, including art galleries and museums, is precisely the technique used to colonise the public sphere by big business. The purpose of corporate sponsorship and advertising is to convert its readers and viewers into consumers whereas the purpose of the public sphere, at least in principle, is to convert consumers and the like – i.e. the individual bearers of private interest – into critical thinkers through discursive social exchange.



Free Art Collective, *Manifesto for a New Public*, spoken choir reading, part of *Bread and Roses*, London, 2012

Conclusion

artworks have been commodities for a very long time and certainly they have been unequivocal commodities from the time of bourgeois autonomy in art, when people started to make art outside of the direct patronage of the state and church. This development goes back to the 16th Century. And I'm not sure that it's accurate to say that a painting of that period was more commodified or less commodified than a painting is now.

Julian Stallabrass, 2010

The principal question of this PhD is the relationship between art and capitalism *via* a history of economics. The established theories of art's integration into capitalism are systematically disproved through an economic analysis of the relationship between art and capital. Against the case for art as a standard commodity and artists as standard economic agents, the book retrieves the historical category of economic exceptionalism in classical political economy, and extends it to resituate art socially in relation to wealth, capital, markets and class. Given that both art and capitalism are notoriously complex and contested fields of study and that both raise stubborn problems regarding definition and ontology, the inquiry addresses the relationship between art and capitalism through the lens of the specific relationship between art and capital. Not only does this approach aim to provide a much-needed focus on the economics of art, it hopes to spark further sociological, anthropological, political, technological, psychological studies of art's

relationship to capitalism. While the priority of the economic over the social, political and cultural cannot be asserted in principle as an abstract condition, the problem of economic determinism operates whenever economic analysis is taken as the sole driver of historical or sociological studies, not when the economic is dominant within an economic analysis. What side-lined economics in the study of art in the early twentieth century was the argument that economic analysis could not adequately provide the basis for an interpretation of the social meanings of artworks. What could not be ruled out by such an argument is the economic study of art's economics. And while the economics of art cannot be taken to be the foundation of the whole gamut of studies of art, it is, I would argue, vital for the specific study of art's relationship to capitalism. It is possible to argue that economics only forms part of an interdisciplinary engagement with the broader issues of how art operates within capitalism, in which sociology and anthropology, for instance, might have more detailed insights to offer regarding the location of art within the social structures of cultural division or the differential distribution of cultural subject positions. However, the relationship between art and capitalism cannot be established theoretically without an analysis of art's economic encounters with capital, revenue, wages, surplus-value and debt.

If an economics of art is necessary in principle for determining art's relationship to capitalism, it becomes urgent as soon as we acknowledge that art's operative 'common sense' has been structured by a set of assumptions about art's integration into capitalism and the artist's complicity with markets and funders that have been developed independently of any economic analysis. Theories of commodification, recuperation, spectacle, culture industry, real subsumption and the General Intellect, while all having their roots in Marx, have been developed through sociologically oriented studies of art. In the absence of an economic analysis of art's relationship to capital, sociological methodologies – principally functionalism and structuralism – were able to exaggerate

art's incorporation in capitalism without fear of refutation. If we take commodification theory as typical in this regard, it is evident that the theory of art's commodification from Lukács and the Frankfurt School to Jameson, Stallabrass and Sven Lütticken has never felt obliged to conduct any economic analysis of art's commodity status, or to investigate whether or not artistic production corresponds to capitalist commodity production. The lack of an economic evidential basis for the relationship between art and capitalism has allowed theorists to construct interpretative schemas for art's commodification that only need to be feasible or believable rather than testable. Any anecdotal evidence of the non-correspondence of artistic production and commodity production was typically marginalised, dismissed or integrated into the mediations of art's relationship to capitalism rather than taken as a challenge to the basic theory of art's commodification. Indeed, it is possible to say that theories of art's relationship to capitalism were developed in such a way that any counter-argument based on art's relationship to capital would be rejected as immaterial to the central social questions about art's relationship to capitalism, which always appeared to be the more substantive category. In my investigation, I have reversed these priorities and based my argument for art's relationship to capitalism on art's relationship to capital.

By reorienting the question of art's relationship to capitalism through the question of art's relationship to capital, several specific questions which had been, at best, marginal to Western Marxist theories of art's integration into capitalism, become pivotal. In general, we can convert the assertion that *'artworks have been commodities for a very long time'*, as Stallabrass claims in the epigraph of this chapter, into a set of specific questions such as: What kind of commodity are artworks?, Are all artworks commodities?, And are all artworks the same kind of commodity?, as well as investigating at what point in the processes of production, circulation and consumption artworks do become commodities. Are artworks commodities from the start or do they become commodities

through their sale, purchase, consumption or resale?



Free Art Collective, *How to Talk to Buildings*, commissioned by Simon Schama's *Power of Art*, 2006

Are artists workers or capitalists, or do they not correspond to neither of the two key economic actants of the capitalist mode of production? If (some or all) artworks are commodities, are they capitalist commodities in the sense of being produced by converting capital into commodity capital for markets at which surplus value can be realised? What kind of capitalists are art dealers and gallerists – productive capitalists insofar as they relate to artistic producers or merchant capitalists insofar as they sell artworks? What is the significance of the historical failure of artists being converted into wage-labourers? What is the significance of the fact that artists continue to own their own means of production and the products that they produce? If markets existed long before the historical emergence of the capitalist mode of production, then is it possible for the art market to thrive without artistic production being capitalist commodity production? If artworks can go through a process of commodification – similar to the process that Marx describes, in which products produced outside of capitalism, e.g. ritual objects produced by tribes in the colonies, are introduced into capitalist markets and exchanged as commodities – then do we not need to analyse the commodification of art on a case by case basis rather than as structural, necessary and always already occurred?

The investigation, of which the book is the most developed argument, is best understood as putting the understanding of the relation between art and capitalism on a new footing. In attempting to unseat the conventional idea of art as a commodity, the investigation is both an intervention into economics generally – as well as the economics of art specifically – and a challenge to the common sense of art theory. *Art and Value* is a contribution to knowledge that deploys economic analysis as a critique of the speculations, conflations and misrecognitions of the philosophical, sociological, historical and economic approaches to the relationship between art and capitalism. There is an enormous scope in the ambition of this critique, but, even though the work engages in a set of questions that sit at an intersection of various disciplines, it does not seek to engage in each discipline separately. The study does not attempt to produce a new economics of art, a new sociology of art, a new philosophical theory of art and so on. Although various branches of the literature on the commodification of art exist independently of one another – sociologists and philosophers do not always read each other and both may ignore neoclassical economists who study the same phenomena – my investigation is located primarily within the field of art theory. Some of the material that I discuss does not originate in art theory – particularly the economics of art produced within mainstream economics – but rather than regard this as falling outside my field, I decided in effect to extend the field to include this material. Hence, one of the contributions to the field is to incorporate the critique of ‘cultural economics’ into art theory itself. Art theory is an internally diverse discipline which imports the findings of a range of other disciplines, including political theory, sociology, psychoanalysis, semiotics and philosophy. It is only insofar as these disciplines have been lodged in art theory or are pertinent in addressing its specific set of concerns that they were interrogated in this study. Hence, *Art and Value* aims (a) to add economics to the list of tributaries to art

theory, introducing the economics of art to the community of art in a way that expands the lexicon of art theory, and (b) seeks specifically to utilise economic analysis to unseat the assumptions of art theory drawn from sociology, history, philosophy and so on regarding art's economics.

Art is economically exceptional insofar as its prices are not efficiently regulated by supply and demand, its producers have not been converted into property-less wage-labourers, its merchant capitalists do not purchase goods from manufacturers or wholesalers at a discount for resale, its customers are not incentivised by reduced prices, its products are singularities with little or no market substitutability, the productivity of artistic production cannot be increased with mechanisation and automation, and a number of other anomalies. In fact, as many as twenty distinct indicators of exceptionalism can be detected in the literature from Adam Smith to David Throsby via Marx and Gary Becker. *Art and Value* provides the first comprehensive historical survey of these indicators. Its main aim, however, is to bring this series of anomalies together into a sustained analysis of art's non-compliance with the capitalist mode of production.



Free Art Collective, video *Have you heard the one About the Public Sphere?*, starring Norman Collier, a commission for Hull Time Based Arts 2006

Traces of the political, philosophical, ethical or aesthetic claims that art *ought* to be removed from economic forces remain in contemporary art theory, most conspicuously

perhaps in the discomfort felt towards the business affairs of very successful artists, the extortionately high prices of some contemporary art and the proximity of corporations and very wealthy collectors to art. What separates this argument from previous attempts to protect art from the incursions of the market is that the theory of art's economic exceptionalism is neither a variant of the normative defence of art from the economic and from economics – exemplified by British Victorian aestheticism – nor a reiteration of the philosophical idea of art's autonomy – prevalent in both Kantian and Western Marxist aesthetics – but an economic analysis of the actual operations of art's mode of production.

Why conduct an economic analysis of art as an aspect of the theory of art? Given the 'vulgarity' of thinking about art and aesthetics economically, and given the urgent political need to resist the spread of 'economics imperialism' over every practice and discipline, a strong case could be made to reject the economic analysis of art. I argue that the case for an economic analysis begins with two questions. Historically, why has the claim that art has been commodified not previously been tested through an economic analysis? And today, with the emergence of a battery of issues around the precariousness of the artist, corporate sponsorship, unpaid internships and so on, why has economics played little or no part in the attempts within art theory to respond to these economic scenes. What I discovered during the writing of this book prior to my turn to economics, is that the theory of art's commodification in Western Marxism, which continues to inform contemporary art theory, corresponds to the historical moment at which the Marxist social theory of art replaced economic analysis with sociological interpretation. Sociology appeared to be superior because it allowed Western Marxist theorists in the 1930s to distance themselves from the economic and class reductionism of the Second International and, in the case of writers such as Lukács, to navigate the terrible regime imposed on political and economic thought under Stalinism. Economics and art were

divorced for the benefit of a more nuanced and mediated social theory of art.

Without an economic analysis, art can appear sociologically to be integrated into capitalism, even when artistic production is not converted to the capitalist mode of production, by the high social status of artists, for instance, the correspondence of art history with the history of imperialism, the match between cultural division and social division, the high prices of artworks, or the role of the state in the functioning of national museums of art. Adorno argued that art's freedom from church, state, academy and tradition – the prerequisites of art's modern autonomy – is not only a development simultaneous with the onset of bourgeois society but is a consequence of art's own domination by the 'commodity-form', a conclusion which Adorno draws from observations of new modes of cultural consumption. Gail Day has surveyed the many ways in which writers in this tradition have treated art as 'homologous' to capitalism (Day 2001). And Peter Osborne recently claimed, for instance, that Robert Smithson's complicity with North American capitalism is brokered principally through his 'absolute artistic individualism' (Osborne 2013, p. 107).

The conviction prevalent within art theory that art is utterly immersed in capitalist relations is feasible because there is no doubting that the contemporary world is dominated by money, markets and capital and therefore art's economic transactions are vital to its meaning and make-up. Armed with a sociological understanding of art's incorporation into capitalism, evidence of any kind of association between art, artists or art's institutions with money, the wealthy, business or economic exchange has typically been interpreted as proof of art's complicity and commodification. Art theory has proceeded as if the stronger the claim made about art's recuperation the more critical and far-sighted the argument is. As such, art theory has not been nervous about exaggerating the power of the art market over the production of art, over-stressing the

alignment between artists and their dealers, gallerists, collectors and publics, or underestimating doubts about the full incorporation of art into capitalism.



Freee Art Collective, *The Three Functions*, Vitrine, Leeds, 2005

Since the theories of art's commodification and incorporation were developed within art theory through findings that were supplied by aesthetic philosophy, the sociology of culture, the social history of art and the political analysis of art, these disciplines and their methodologies were among the means by which the common sense of art was reproduced, they could not be drawn on to provide an independent assessment of the extent and character of art's embeddedness in capitalist society. Economic analysis provides a parallax view that, while it does not render redundant the philosophical, sociological and political inquiry into art, it does have the tools to test the economic claims of the social model of art under capital.

As part of the economic analysis of art, my book draws clear distinctions between different *social mechanisms* used for distributing, allocating, funding and incentivising artistic production. Such distinctions have been absent from art theory, which has tended instead to stress the metaphorical similarity between competition for esteem and competition within markets, or conflating symbolic economies with monetary transactions, for instance. Distinguishing between economic and non-economic mechanisms is not a method for cutting art off from society or its economic realities, and its purpose is not to determine whether art has a relationship to capitalism or whether decisions about art have economic consequences. Analysis of art's transactions based on

the distinction between the mechanisms of markets governed by the laws of supply and demand, on the one hand, and the allocation of resources based on merit, quality, privilege, custom and bureaucratic priorities, on the other, aims to specify precisely what kind of relationship between art and capitalism is operative on a case-by-case basis.

Art and Value provides a radical reassessment of the operations of the art market and the economics of art's public sector. An economic analysis of the relationship between the capitalists who inhabit the artworld and the producers of artworks and the institutions between them, shows, contrary to established opinion, that art persists in enjoying economic relations that are anomalous to the capitalist mode of production. Acknowledging the wide variety of ways in which artists and artworks enter into capitalist society, mostly through non-economic mechanisms since artistic labour has not been subsumed under capital as wage-labour, the theory of economic exceptionalism installs a new grammar for thinking about art's relationship to capital and a new agenda for art in relation to capitalist society, the art market, the state, corporate funding, the wage system, and so on. For instance, even though it is clear that gallerists and art dealers, as well as corporate funders, collectors and other bearers of money, influence and pressure artists to produce works that meet the tastes of collectors or promote the interests of big business, it is vital to acknowledge that their influence and pressure is applied through skills of manipulation, persuasion and coercion, this relationship between a capitalist and a producer is not conducted through an economic mechanism. Thus, by rejecting the conflation of economic and non-economic mechanisms, I deliberately built into my economics of art a barrier to 'economics imperialism', and call into question the custom of applying economic terminology to non-economic phenomena for polemical purposes. Insofar as market mechanisms can be isolated from judicial and legal mechanisms, for instance, or pedagogical and normative mechanisms, the question about whether certain activities are economic or not, or whether or not they can be subject to economic inquiry,

can be reoriented to ask whether the collective decision-making processes under question are realised through economic or non-economic processes. If it is objected that most, if not all, transactions and processes of social decision-making are a mixture of economic and non-economic processes, then this does not discredit the need to distinguish between them, but implies that the distinction needs to be adhered to even within economics itself.

The economic analysis of the interplay of economic and non-economic mechanisms in the production and reproduction of art not only shows that art is economically exceptional, but also that economic mechanisms play an extremely minor role in the production, distribution and consumption of art. This finding is a surprising outcome of the economic analysis of art and goes against the dominant critical theories of art's insertion into capitalism. What *Art and Value* demonstrates is that the lack of demand for artistic labour does not diminish its size, the lack of demand for its products does not discourage producers from producing art, the high prices of artworks neither suppresses the activity of purchasers nor prevents most non-purchasing consumers from enjoying artworks, and so on. In place of the theory of art's commodification, *Art and Value* detects the opposite: neither artworks nor artistic labour have, in any structured sense, been commodified. Artworks enter the art market and circulate as commodities, but art is never a standard commodity, standard luxury or standard asset. Art is economically exceptional.



Free Art Collective, *How to Talk to Public Art*, performance, video, 2006

Concepts such as ‘cultural capital’, ‘human capital’, ‘the social factory’ and ‘real subsumption’ blur the distinction between economic and non-economic mechanisms, using metaphor and allegory and homology to extend the territory of capital beyond the economic to give the impression that capitalism has penetrated every aspect of social, domestic and personal existence. This dystopian exaggeration of the extent of the grip of capital on non-economic processes guards against complacency and points towards a revolutionary politics rather than a reformist or ethical defence of certain aspects of existing society. It has the disadvantage, however, of portraying capitalism as omnipresent and omnipotent. In other words it is the revolutionary version of a politics of permanent resistance. Distinguishing between economic and non-economic mechanisms allows us not only to restrict the power of capital to the economic, but to demonstrate how even the economic operations of capital are dependent on non-economic forces. From seeing capital everywhere we come to see it almost nowhere and therefore can begin to identify a spectrum of critical procedures to reduce its effects and eliminate its power. This can be used politically to devise more precise reformist politics that targets capitalism in particular but also to imagine and construct a post-capitalist society.

Art's economic exceptionalism and the distinction between economic and non-economic mechanisms is essential for a transformed understanding of the relationship between art and capitalism in general and a necessary precursor to the reorientation of art's political engagement with capitalist society. *Art and Value* provides a new economic map for the politics of art. Art theory is challenged either to modify its conception of art's relationship to capitalism or develop a refutation of the theory of art's economic exceptionalism. However, while the book is an intervention in art theory, it has clear ramifications for art practice. Artists, curators, critics and philosophers persuaded by the apparently realistic and sophisticated assumption of art's complete incorporation by capitalism have too easily dismissed those artists who have attempted to operate outside of the art market or produced artworks that resisted commodification. Art theory and therefore art's operative 'common sense' has been structured by a set of assumptions about art's integration into capitalism and the artist's complicity with markets and funders. State funding for the arts has not been adequately theorised on the left as a genuine alternative to the commodification of art, because the distinction between economic and non-economic mechanisms has been neglected in a theory of capitalist society in general made up of the two major powers of capital and state. And the fact that artists have not been converted into wage-labourers has occasionally been received on the left as a loss or a privilege rather than a mechanism of resistance to capital. Thinking about techniques and formats that might resist commodification or recuperation necessarily led to pessimism and defeat because everything can be bought and sold. In place of this, the theory of art's economic exceptionalism offers a new landscape of non-economic transactions, non-subsumed practices and non-capitalist social forms.



Free Art Collective, *Protest Drives History*, street performance, Stockholm, 2014

List of Works Submitted

Book: *Art and Value*, Leiden: Brill, 2015

USB stick includes:

Public Poster, Free Art Collective (jpeg)

Scarves with slogans, the Free Art Collective, 2014 (jpeg)

Badges with slogans, the Free Art Collective, 2015 (jpeg)

T-shirts with slogans (jpegs)

Manifestos, Free Art Collective (all pdfs):

- *Fuck Globalization*, 2010
- *Economists Are Wrong*, 2011
- *21st Century Political Art*, 2013
- Freee manifesto published in *Anarchist Studies journal*, Vol. 23, No.2, 'To Hell with Herbert Read', 2015
- Open Letter to Engage, 2016

Documentation of spoken choir readings:

- Instructions (pdf)
- 3 images of the spoken choir for Bread and Roses, London (jpegs)
- 2 images of the spoken choir for IMMA, Dublin (jpegs)



Free Art Collective, *Protest Drives History*, street performance, Stockholm, 2014

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