



# Political Economy as Subject and Form in Contemporary Art

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## Abstract

Political economy is a theme both explicit and submerged in modernist and postmodernist art. Art production is founded in the gift. The author historicizes artistic representations of political economy, particularly postwar conceptual art and theory. African American artists explore the black image in terms redolent of the commoditization of their ancestors under slavery. Media art engages dominant modes of media industry production. Art based in conceptions of the gift embodies noncapitalist modes of social relations.

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## I. Introduction

This article concerns the relation between art and political economy. This relation is expressed directly in the representations of art and indirectly through work that involves the economy of artistic production itself. Contemporary artists have made numerous works in various media that explicitly represent the processes of political economy and the abstractions that drive its analysis. This work is usually understood as a species of political art and recently as an outgrowth of the postmodern theoretical and critical tradition of conceptualism. Yet this art has a significant modernist lineage as well as an organic connection to traditional production processes in the visual arts. The economy of artistic production is a heterodox economy founded in the gift. This is most evident in the form of patronage and social networks, such as guilds, schools, and workshops, founded in social relations and built through nonmonetized exchanges. This economy lies in large measure outside of the market and, for that reason, provides a position of sustaining social relations from which to criticize capitalist (and socialist) political economy. Artistic treatments of economic themes inherently question settled understandings, and many contest things as they are. A brief theoretical consideration of some conditions of artistic production, as well as a historical

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exegesis of the explicit and submerged theme of political economy in modernist and postmodernist art, will help to demonstrate how.

## 2. The Question of Artistic Production

Traditionally, visual art effaces its origins, that is, the ways in which it was put together and its effects achieved. Viewers respond to the illusion or effect of the finished work; how it came to be before us is of secondary interest. The drawing lies beneath the paint, which is applied in successive layers of refining detail. Questions of technique are trade secrets, left behind in the studio when the art is moved to the gallery. During the modern period, from the mid-nineteenth century on, art more and more reveals the process of its coming into being, reflecting on its making, much as the dramatist Bertolt Brecht insisted that his actors show the construction of their characters and the workings of a play's theatrical effects. In recent decades, artistic practice rather than product has become the focus of much advanced art. This shift is often attributed to the modernist example of Marcel Duchamp; before a work by Duchamp, the question "What does he think he is doing?" rather than "What is that supposed to represent?" seems more appropriate.

In visual art production, real processes (how artists live and make art) and the representation of production, both of art and of the *polis* and its economy, are intertwined. This relation is largely invisible and can resist analysis, while the progress of art as a commodity is clear and comprehensible. Production and consumption within the economy of art take place in the twin sites of the studio and the gallery. The markets and institutions of art, its galleries and museums, are the grounds of consumption of fine art by society's elite. It is here that historians who analyze the economy of art have concentrated their efforts—in the stories of provenance and patronage and the illustration of great collections. Consumption, broadly speaking, is the arena within which the artist Hans Haacke has enacted his critique of the systems of art, particularly the new economic order of corporate patronage (Haacke and Bourdieu 1995). Questions regarding how artists live and work and what their presence in society means have largely been left to the broad aerial view of sociology and the byway of memoir.

What is generally considered in discussions of the production of art is the top rank of artists. The top producers make up a small minority of artists. The others are lower ranked fine artists (i.e., less marketable), teaching artists (who live by instructing rather than selling their art), the large mass of commercial artists who do their own work in their hours off, naifs, hobbyists, occasional artists, amateurs ("lovers of art"), or "Sunday painters." What Greg Sholette calls the "dark matter" of largely undifferentiated artistic producers are the artists most people in society meet (Sholette 2001). Still, we know much about the famous, as media and academy burnish the cultural capital their work represents, and very little of the great mass of artists, the multitude of creative workers. The stars of bohemia burn brightly, while the rest is night sky.

Many special conditions are operant in the production of art. Artists rely heavily on gifts (of time, space, materials, opportunities, ideas) to make their work.<sup>1</sup> Mutual aid is as

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1. This is certainly not unique to the arts; it operates in other realms of intellectual production. The media and technology historian Richard Barbrook has suggested that an admixture of money-commodity and gift relations underlie the development of software and information over the Internet, a social democratic new economy of

important as competition. The process of production is continuously or intermittently collective, as artists come together in teaching situations and workshops, sharing ideas, techniques, and processes. In the workshops of most major artists, much production is more or less collectivized, as many artist assistants work to realize the designs of one; yet the collective nature of artistic production is routinely overlooked. The marketable artistic product must be branded: the individual producer alone is valued.

Art production is supported by a mixed economy of which the market, which vends the commodity of art, is only part. Other modes of exchange carry with them other social relations, and social relations underlie the life (the production and reception) of art. Art, in its style and content, represents economic and political relations both real and potential. This mimesis is the most complex relation between art and political economy, the mirror realm in which economic and political processes and products are represented. The labor in art and its value may be illustrated, allegorized, or explicitly represented.

The workings of these representations entail a “political economy of the sign,” as Jean Baudrillard (1981) sketched it—that is, a merging of representations of the economies of the real and the symbolic. Art performs this integrative function continuously. It is the outcome of intelligent, rare, and specialized types of labor; art encodes the values of that labor, labor to which other forms of work are related and compared. Art also regularly encodes obsolete labor, types of production that have little commercial utility but are remembered and valorized through works of art, handicrafts, the artisanal products of preindustrial cultures. Finally, art represents all forms of labor, past, present, and future. Its “timelessness” is the timelessness of the value of labor itself, dead or living.

### 3. Modernist Exemplars

While most explicit representations of political economy (both internal and external to the art world) have come since the Second World War, this work has historical antecedents. The clearest exemplars of this analytic impulse are found in the schools of Dada and surrealism.

In the modernist period, the twin shocks of world war and revolution jolted artists into more explicit relations to political subject matter. Like other classic avant-garde movements, the Dadaists produced “manifestations” or theatrical events to more forcefully confront audiences with their messages. In the context of the failing government of a defeated nation, the Club Dada of Berlin “advertised its own banks, advertising agencies, churches, parliaments, welfare institutions—a whole autonomous Dada counter-reality” in 1919 (Green, ed., Huelsenbeck [1920] 1998: viii). Rather than analyses of conditions, the pronouncements of the “Oberdada” Johannes Baader were theatrical advertisements for a radically decentered way of looking at things.<sup>2</sup> Baader’s basis was spiritualist philosophy, and the alternative government he posited—particularly the “central bureau for male and female welfare, and the Dada school for renewing the psycho-therapeutic day to day relation-

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cyberspace he compares to the classic artistic avant-gardes and the “anarcho-communist” models of 1960s political utopians (Barbrook 2002).

2. Baader is usually considered as a performance artist since most of his collage, sculpture, and books have been lost.

ships between adults and children” (Huelsenbeck [1920] 1998: 70)—reflected the ideas of radical Weimar psychologists like Wilhelm Reich, who did “sex-political” work for communist labor unions in the early 1930s.

Despite its formal alliance with the communist party, the French surrealist movement that succeeded Dada in the mid-1920s moved away from the material political into the realm of deep subjectivity, staking out the territory of dreams, sexuality, religion, and childhood as subjects for their art. The Dadaists continued to work on political economic questions. The German artist John Heartfield’s collage attacking Hitler as the one who “swallows gold and spouts shit” (first published in *A-I-Z* magazine in 1932 and later made into a poster) is explicit regarding the fascists’ relation to capital, showing the leader’s spine as a stack of coins. The faux financial instruments produced by Marcel Duchamp, the most influential precursor of the conceptual art of the 1960s, were more inward-turning, intramural analyses of the economics of avant-garde art. These included the *Tzanck Check*, a jocular handmade financial instrument made out to the artist’s dentist, and the *Monte Carlo Bond* (1919) issued to those from whom he solicited money to play casino games. Both of these were “backed up” by the artist’s signature (Duchamp’s father had been a notary).

Many left-wing artists sought to produce explicit representations of the political economy of Fordist industry in the United States between the wars (Egbert 1967). Charlie Chaplin’s film *Modern Times* (1936), in which the little tramp contends with factory labor first as a satyr on the line and then as fodder for the gears of the machine, is probably the best known. Surely, the most ambitious attempts to synthesize viewpoints on the work regimes of industrial capital were the paintings of Diego Rivera, especially his murals of the auto industry made in Detroit. Hugo Gellert’s comprehensive series of lithographs after Marx’s *Capital* are striking, though little known, attempts to illustrate abstract concepts like the surplus value of labor (1934).<sup>3</sup> Rivera’s *The Making of a Fresco Showing the Building of a City* (1931) for the San Francisco Art Institute schematizes processes of urban growth while visualizing its own production: the mural maker and his assistants are depicted on their scaffold working on the wall “behind” them. Made for an art school, this mural intends to depict the process of art production itself, raised to semiotic equivalence with civic administration and architectural production. It is an argument for the social importance, even precedence, of the representing act.

Rivera benefited from the formal study of cubism in Paris, and he was married to the surrealist painter Frida Kahlo. But the art movement he and other Mexican masters initiated to serve their revolution, the *muralismo* that continues as a populist tradition in California to this day, owes its popularity and instant legibility to the Beaux-Arts style in both its public art and popular culture versions. Throughout the nineteenth century, murals and public sculpture explicated American government and capitalist economy by explicitly mythologizing it for masses of new immigrants. The commercial equivalents of this system of personifications, from trade figures in the streets (Sessions 2000) to cigar box labels, naturalized the social order of colonialism in the terms of Western classical art. As a revolutionary

3. This work relates to modernist textbook illustrations in the fields of social science (see Robert J. Leonard, “Seeing Is Believing: Otto Neurath, Graphic Art, and the Social Order,” in De Marchi and Goodwin 1999; and Buck-Morss 1995). It stands in a tradition of business graphics that has only grown in importance as the speed of financial transaction has increased, and the visualization of quantitative information increasingly informs decision making.

artist, Rivera turned the visual systems of that overdetermined iconographic regime against itself.

Strategically aloof from the violent politics of his times, Marcel Duchamp concentrated on the semiotics and processes of cultural work. Initially captivated by the Dada metaphor of schematic machinery for human desires, Duchamp fashioned a stream of enigmatic talismans redolent of sexual attraction and slippery with punning word play. Some of these were “readymades,” a key innovation that radically expanded the range of possible art objects through a new mode of “manufacture”—that is, mere designation or naming of a thing as art. The process involved selection (through avowed “aesthetic indifference” but evincing a fascination with utility), exhibition, and signatory inscription. Since some of these (a bottle rack, a hat rack, a snow shovel) were consumer items, the readymade concept established a new relation between the object of art and the consumer commodity. Moreover, Duchamp produced relatively few original works. Most, as Francis Naumann (1999) points out, were meticulously prepared editions that situate most of Duchamp’s body of work in the realm of mechanical reproduction.

The juxtaposition of Duchamp and Rivera addresses the question of the focus of the representation: Is it an explicit picture of the broader political economy, or is it implicit, concerned with resituating the economy of art production itself? By the 1960s, these two positions might be seen as having devolved internationally into socialist realism exhorting industrial production and a metacritical conceptual art describing and seeking to extend limits on creative freedoms. In the nations of the Soviet bloc, these stances were directly opposed as unsanctioned “samizdat” art (so named for the unpublishable works of dissident writers circulated by hand) with conceptual import and surrealist roots dueled behind the scenes with state-sponsored socialist realism. That struggle was really over what constituted “realism,” the most accurate and affecting portrayal of the conditions of contemporary art and life.

#### 4. Postwar Neo-Avant-Garde

In the Western democracies during the Cold War, a similar aesthetic bout took place between protoconceptual modes of art making, like Fluxus and the emergent style of pop art, as a type of “capitalist realism.” Pop struck at, or worked within, the subject positions that underlie U.S. consumer capitalism, the postwar “prosperity boom” of fever-pitched consumption being exported and avidly adapted throughout Europe. The English version of pop was more critical of that ethos. American pop is dominated by the figure of Andy Warhol, the consummate “business artist.”<sup>4</sup> His work may be considered as a classic instance of the reflection of political economy in art (most often described as society in general), both in terms of the subjects of many of his works and especially its mode of production.

Claes Oldenburg opened his Lower East Side storefront studio with an exhibit called “Store Days” in 1961 (the show was soon moved, reinstalled, and reopened in an uptown art

4. “Business art” is described by the artist (Warhol 1975) and embodied in the “horizontal integration” of Warhol’s multiple capitalized ventures in film, television, and magazine production, which he pursued in addition to painting, sculpture, and editioned prints.

gallery). In 1963, Warhol opened his “Factory,” going from retail/wholesale straight to manufacture (Jones 1996: ch. 4). Oldenburg produced expressionist commodities of the lunch-counter and dime-store variety, evoking a nostalgia of consumption. Warhol produced clean stripped-down images of products—most famously the Brillo box, which “ended art” for the philosopher and art critic Arthur Danto (Danto 1992); a continuous flow of portraits of the kind that were integral to propaganda for both celebrities and political leaders; and images of universal commodities such as money and trading stamps. Warhol’s paintings were produced using silk-screen printing with a corps of assistants in an open studio called the Factory that soon became the site of his film production. Warhol routinely delegated aspects of authorial control over his production to his assistants and made a point of so doing by continuously asking for advice. Today, both Mark Kostabi and Jeff Koons work in this way, Kostabi ostentatiously so. Their continuance of a fully articulated system of executive production points to a managerial turn in the conception of artistic labor.

Warhol’s pop, and that of other American artists, is directly related to Duchamp through the formal innovation of the “readymade.” This object, selected from the world of the everyday commodity through a practice of cool “aesthetic indifference” and elevated into the realm of art through replication and exhibition performed the key act of resituating artistic practice from production to a kind of mediated consumption. Like Duchamp, Warhol was a prolific signer of things presented to him.

Duchamp also inspired the *nouveau réalistes* of Europe. Paris artists like Yves Klein, Arman, and Christo and their Italian compatriot Piero Manzoni directly engaged issues of production and consumption. Arman “accumulated” masses of similar objects, Christo wrapped things, and Yves Klein undertook the spectacular production of unusual types of painting and sculpture. Manzoni canned his own shit as “merde d’artiste,” an implicit comment on the Freudian connection of accumulation and the infant’s love of feces. Klein also questioned the relation of art and value with his work, selling *Zones of Immaterial Pictorial Sensibility* (1959). A certain quantity of gold was exchanged for a certificate, and in a formal ceremony, the artist threw part of this price into the Seine River (Stich 1994).

## **5. Historical, Theoretical, and Collective Contexts of Recent Art**

In recent decades, artistic representations of political economy, both internal and external, have become increasingly more frequent and legible, to the point where such content may be said to constitute some artists’ principal subject. This correlates broadly with changes in the base economy of advanced capitalist societies—that is, deindustrialization and the rise of the information economy. Deindustrialization entailed the restructuring of U.S. industry, labor, and the demographics of its cities. The now surplus populations of former industrial workers were displaced by rising rents, and their neighborhoods were reconfigured as new homes for the gentry of financial and information service workers. These changes struck at art and artists in many ways. First, through the process of gentrification, the glamour of art was used (Zukin 1982: ch. 4), and artists themselves were dispersed from their bohémias, which had grown up within poor working-class neighborhoods. More generally, the lingering identification of art with manual labor has been broadly impugned, as the practice of art has become imbued with managerial and executive aspects. The fluid nature of work in an era of restructuring is mirrored by fluid strategies of art making. Changes



in the nature of artistic production have foregrounded notions of art practice, while disinterested concerns for the object of art, identified with formalist criticism, have receded. Postmodern artists have had a broader brief to investigate conditions of political economy than artists who labored under the Cold War separation of art and politics and lacked theoretical tools born of aesthetic economic integration—that is, the thinking of the spectacle.

Key theoretical developments brought the aesthetic analysis of political economy to the fore. Students in the noncommunist global revolutions of 1968 drew inspiration from Herbert Marcuse and the Situationists. The darkly colored Frankfurt School analysis of the inexorable dominance of the culture industry, inspired by a sojourn in Hollywood during the war years (Horkheimer and Adorno [1947] 2002), dovetailed neatly with the French critique of the “society of the spectacle” (Debord [1967] 1994), both pointing to a new regime of cultural labor within which artists were bound and to which they were bound to respond (Holmes 2002). The rise of cultural studies in Britain in the 1970s sketched in details of the ideological landscape of aesthetic work, and the adaptation of poststructuralist analytics to the situations of minority artists further broadened the social portfolio of artistic practice.

Another spur to engagement with political economic forms and subjects has been the rise of activist collectivism among artists. Artists collectivized to change the conditions of art exhibition in the late 1960s, confronting conservative museums that had held art and politics separate (Frascina 2000: ch. 4) to demand equity in museum exhibits for women and artists of color. This critique broadened to strike politically disengaged formalist criticism and art. By the time of Ronald Reagan’s election, nationally networked political art groups like PAD/D and Group Material sparked a return to politics in U.S. art (Lippard 1984; Felshin 1995). Key issues of the 1980s and 1990s included support for Central American liberation movements and agitation education around the AIDS pandemic.

## 6. Examples of Artists’ Recent Engagements with Political Economy

### 6.1. *The Traditions of Conceptual and Public Art*

Continuous close reciprocation between art and political economy occurred during the conceptual art movement of the 1960s (Lippard 1973; Alberro and Stimson 1999; Mariani 1999). Conceptual art was by nature self-reflexive. It was philosophical art, art about making art, about its conditions and possibilities. Individually and through groups and pseudo-institutions, conceptual artists interrogated artistic production and the role of art in society. Many emulated the methods of social scientists and anthropologists, exhibiting their raw data in aesthetic formats. (Their reliance on photographic “evidence” contributed to the valorization of photography as a fine art after the heyday of the movement; finally, the market honors the achievements of practice by trading in the relics.) The problem of the divide between practice and product, artistic process and the object of art, has continued in the work of artists who build on the legacy of the first generation of conceptual artists.

Among groups of conceptual artists, the collaborative Art & Language most closely analyzed intellectual production and the structures maintaining aesthetic markets and ideologies in the United Kingdom and the United States (Harrison 1991). They began with analytic philosophy in the mold of J. L. Austin, moving into a Marxist analysis during the

mid-1970s and working with activist art groups in New York. Later, Australian members worked closely with labor unions.

Les Levine published a catalogue of the “Museum of Mott Art” in New York, offering a range of “courses” in subjects like how to spy on your fellow artists’ studios (Levine 1974). This satirical project reflected Levine’s analysis of the actual conditions of avant-garde art production during the early 1970s. Today, many graduate art education programs offer “survival courses” to assist their graduates in negotiating the reality of artistic careers in an unironic reflection of Levine’s conceptual art.

Mierle Ukeles, a conceptual performance artist, began her “maintenance work” projects in 1969. In the early 1970s, she washed the steps of several museums on her hands and knees. This piece made visible what had been invisible—the entire sphere of domestic labor and the maintenance of social institutions by laborers. Ukeles’s aesthetic reflection on art-work as labor was congruent with the radical feminist critique of gender roles, which asserted that housework should be paid.<sup>5</sup> In extending the metaphor, Ukeles attached herself to the New York City Sanitation Department and became artist-in-residence at the Fresh Kills landfill. Recently, she has found herself a participant in public policy processes as the world’s largest landfill is closed and converted to public use.

Other artists have worked with themes of labor; Tehching Tsieh, a Chinese artist in New York, clocked in on rising and clocked out on the way to bed in his *One Year Performance* (1978). Robin Winters set up a “factory” in his loft in 1976, where he worked behind a pane of glass making odd expressionistic yellow hats from cardboard (Ross 1986).

Robin Winters was a member of the artists’ group Colab, which was concerned with social themes in art. Another artist in that group was Peter Fend, whose work is closely bound up with the political economy of oil. Although he was inspired by earthworks artists such as Robert Smithson and Dennis Oppenheim, Fend rejected the name “artist” for himself. In his work, mainly disseminated through lectures and maps, he envisions the elimination of nation states and the geographical reconfiguration of the world according to watersheds. Energy will come from water-based biomass cultivation (Weibel 1994). Fend blames the oil companies of the West for the current unstable geopolitical world order and every war of the twentieth century and many of those in the nineteenth. This systematic anticorporate animus links Fend with Mark Lombardi, whose work in the 1990s consisted of elaborate chartings of the relations between various principals in high-order global criminal conspiracies (Hobbs 2003) like the BCCI (Bank of Credit and Commerce International).

Latter-day conceptual artist J. S. G. Boggs renders paper currency in meticulous obviously handmade drawings and attempts to spend these at face value for goods and services. Collectors of the artist’s work then approach those with whom the artist has made an exchange and try to purchase the “bill,” which, together with the receipt and change from the transaction, constitute the completed artwork (Weschler 1999). This work is a long-term in-

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5. This critique has been advanced in the work of the 1970s feminist collective Redstockings and the group Zerowork. Antinuclear activist Helen Caldicott has extended this, arguing that air, water, and the fertility of the land be included in the gross economic calculations that guide governments and political economists. All of this, she says, like the unpaid labor of women, has been taken for granted and left out of account. These ideas are reflected in the conception of the present political economy as “autistic” and in emerging formulations of a “conservation economy” based on an ethic of sustainability.



vestigation of the conditions of monetary exchange, its face-to-face moments, its psychology, and the relation between official currency and handmade art.

The subject of Boggs's work is monetary exchange, a zone of economy Duchamp and Klein clearly marked out in their precedent work. Still, despite his deliberateness, Boggs has had frequent trouble with the law for counterfeiting. This kind of artwork seems to invite attention from the police. The Japanese artist Akasegawa Genpei was also brought into court for depicting a 1,000-yen note, and an extraordinary show trial ensued (Tomii 2002). Nineteenth-century American still life artists who produced *trompe l'oeil* renditions of U.S. stamps, coins, and currency often had trouble with the law. Bruce Chambers correlates this school of painting and these legal disputes with the contemporary arguments over hard and soft currency (Chambers 1988). It seems astonishing today that paintings of barrels of money should once have been burned by the U.S. Treasury Department. These works clearly could not deceive anyone that they were being presented with real banknotes. Questioning currency through representation is sufficient to make law officers anxious; art paints doubt on the monetary sign (Holmes 2000).

Ukeles and the California performance artist Suzanne Lacy, whose work is based on structuring human encounters, have been featured in recent exhibitions of "new public art." These kinds of art and projects address specific communities and occasions with a high degree of interactivity and participation (Jacobs 1995). Much of this work is political, but more of it is symbolic and ceremonial in form, and its antecedents may be discerned in traditions of public pageantry. The prospect of a more engaged mode of art making, in turn, has increased foundation arts funding in the United States for community art projects in which art methodology is instrumentalized to serve various social ends, addressing "at risk youth," the problem of the "digital divide," and so forth.

At the same time, a concomitant model of practice called "service art" was enunciated by Andrea Fraser (Fraser 1996). This mode of work is based on an aspect of conceptual art called "institutional critique" (Buchloh 1990), that is, art that questions the precincts within which it is exhibited. Within this framework, artists are invited to perform analytic and critical work on the institution of the museum and its collections.<sup>6</sup> This generally neoconceptual work is presented in the form of exhibitions and publications. One recent project of this kind was titled *Capital*, by Neil Cummings and Marysia Lewandowska (2001). Part of a series called "Contemporary Interventions," *Capital* was a "juxtaposition" of the Tate Gallery and the Bank of England. Since the seventeenth century, the bank has managed debt and underwritten markets, while the Tate, founded by a gift in the nineteenth century, performs parallel functions that undergird a "symbolic economy"—that is, the museum maintains collections and exhibits new art.

## 6.2. *Explicit Engagements and Representations*

But not only artists working in intermedia and conceptual modes have recently addressed political economic questions. Carl Andre, a sculptor of the minimal school, worked

6. Much of the ground traveled by this mode of work has been prepared by Hans Haacke, who began in the early 1970s to make art about the patronage undergirding museums. His well-researched installations have targeted corporations that sponsor particular forms of artistic content (usually classical) even as they engage in exploitative labor practices and overlook political murders.

with basic units like bricks, bales of hay, or squares of plate metal. This use of structural commodity forms in his work was in tune with his interpretation of Marx and his close identification with the working class. Andre applied the ideology of an art, also called “primary structures” and “ABC art,” to the selling of his work as well, at one point asking a percentage of the buyer’s annual income as the price for his art (Andre [1969] 1985). The Fluxus artist and prolific object maker Joseph Beuys was influenced by the philosophy of Rudolf Steiner (e.g., his 1923 lecture to workers on the sacred labor of the bees). Beuys evolved a theory of organic sculpture, which in later life he elaborated in “chalk-talk” lectures as “social sculpture,” an “expanded concept of art” that sought to mobilize mass human creativity. This work, construed as pedagogic performance, led Beuys into politics, including the German Greens (Turner 1996: 891–93). He also founded (on paper) a political party for animals.

Tom Otterness, also from the Colab group, has continuously produced public sculpture in the traditional medium of bronze casts that comments on the human relation to money and its attainment. The characters in Otterness’s work are gendered universal human signifiers, almost cuddly cute, with a Disney-like accessibility. But unlike the Disney world of bowdlerized fairy tale, Otterness’s figures inhabit a world of work, struggling over coins, cooperating, and pulling apart. His massive *Tables* (1991) seems like an overarching allegory, a toy train set of political economy. Figural incidents cycle themes throughout the work: combative domestic partnerships, the struggle for subsistence, homelessness, striving to accumulate wealth, the effort to build collective images (like the giant holding a sickle), and the loss of collectivity. The work also represents the studio crew itself, that is, the people who make his sculpture. The material processes and physical routines of art making are explicitly represented in the allegory: raising the giant socialist humanoid *is* putting up a monumental sculpture.

Otterness inherits Diego Rivera’s encyclopedic ambitions and, like him, a chunk of Beaux-Arts tradition. This is clear both in Otterness’s traditional studio method of artistic production and his insistence on the legibility of his imagery and its universality: his work builds a synoptic mythos of capitalist society. Despite the apparent good humor and accessibility of the work, Otterness is an Aristophanes; his world is often a dystopian struggle of all against all, of man versus woman, with humans as animals and moments of low comedy.

Another artist using traditional means to image economic worlds is the cartoonist Ben Katchor. Katchor limns the diverse strategies of obscure hustlers and business innovators in his dioramic narratives. His best-known character, Julius Knipl, “real estate photographer,” endlessly schleps through a metropolis of oddball entrepreneurialism, encountering schemers and dreamers whose marginal ventures seem to be collapsing in Knipl’s wake (Katchor 2000). Katchor’s works make up a kind of faux memoir, a fictional remembrance of a past construed as brimful of volitional businesses, enterprises founded—like artistic practice—solely on a moment’s desire that such an opportunity should exist, even if bringing it into being proves that it does not. Behind Katchor’s work lies the thick array of industrial leagues, unions, and mutual societies of Jewish working-class organization in the high industrial age. Explicit in the work is a piquant nostalgia for vanished labor and obsolete microeconomies.

### 6.3. African American Artists

The 1980s saw the resurgence of pop-type art-making in the work of “appropriation” artists like Sherrie Levine, Jeff Koons, Richard Prince, and Meyer Vaisman. This work renewed the interrogation of the relationships between art and advertising, the art object, and the retail commodity, sharpening the critique early pop art had mostly only implied. Prince, for example, reproduced details of the Marlboro cigarette cowboy ad campaign as his own work. The photographs for this campaign were, in their turn, modeled on classic nineteenth-century Western paintings, photographs, and film stills. Prince’s take, then, pointed to the circuit of exchange between art and advertising.

The artists who embraced Warhol’s “mirror of consumption” and his bland icy cool were not the only ones analyzing the commodity. African American neoexpressionist painter Jean Michel Basquiat routinely painted lists and inventories of commodities, drawn in urgent script amidst a hailstorm of painted symbols, motifs, and effects. Basquiat’s rosters of things are set in an expressive field of marks and patches of color. He expressed pathos through marking itself in scratch and scrawl, smudge and smear, graphic emphasis and erasure. The commodities Basquiat listed (like cotton, sugar, coffee, oil, tin) were grown and extracted in the Americas under regimes of slave labor. This matter of history is an urgent issue today for many African Americans seeking reparations for slavery. Basquiat’s work also inventories and represents recordings, the commodities produced by musicians, and the clothing and equipment used and valorized by boxers. Both athletes and artists are themselves managed human commodities, like sex workers sold to buyers by “art pimps.”<sup>7</sup> The ways in which African Americans have long fit into the larger American economy, exalted within the niches of music and sport, are clearly redolent of their explicit commoditization under slavery.

Much of Basquiat’s imagery, as Robert Farris Thompson points out, derives from the symbology of Kongo religion, the African world disfigured by the slave trade, and the harshest modes of nineteenth century colonization. Religious forms of old Kongo are prevalent throughout the diasporic worlds of both North and South America (Thompson 1985). Kongo is also the source of an extraordinary diversity of what numismatists call “primitive” or “odd and curious money”—that is, nonmonetized tokens of exchange used in a variety of economic and social interactions (Einzig 1966).

At the same time, the actual financial instruments around the institution of slavery (bonds, stock certificates, and other commercial printing) depicted the human capital as part of the landscape of production. Slaves were the means of production of the bounty of plantation agriculture, and their appearance as “staffage” (the deindividualized tiny figures that populate landscape paintings) is part of the history of landscape representation. This history is unlocked and its violent, hungry ghosts released in the work of Kara Walker, whose hypersexualized ultraviolent silhouette works draw on the visual and literary conventions of the period of plantation slavery.

7. Basquiat cried out this term he favored for “art dealer” during the Glenn O’Brien “TV Party” cable television show in 1981. In the film *Piñero* (2002), the poet is approached by a Hollywood agent anxious to represent his successful play *Short Eyes*. “Oh, you want to be my pimp?” Piñero says. The conflation of art dealing with prostitution by two heroin-addicted artists recalls the heterodox interrelated criminal economies of Warhol’s Factory (prostitution and drug dealing) that impressed the young Warhol actress Penny Arcade as wedded to art. (For a discussion of some of this, see Doyle 1996).

The analysis of political economy by African American artists is consistent and pointed. As it is for feminist artists, the question is not general or abstract but relates directly to specific conditions of oppression, both historical and in the present day; that is, issues of political economy come to bear on the body. For example, in William Pope.L's (sic) performance piece of 2000, he eats a copy of the *The Wall Street Journal*, dealing with a market that subsumes human beings by literally consuming a representation of it.

#### 6.4. Media Art

With the rise of the Internet and its subsequent integration into the wider economy, artists who had been working with new media involved themselves with the evolution of the global political economy. Video artists built businesses to provide themselves with the means to realize work in this new world, like Wolfgang Staehle's international network called "The Thing." Others turned from cultural work to political activism around vital questions of corporate and state control of the Internet, like Paul Garrin, whose "name dot space" initiative seeks to overturn the root domain names that govern and channel the Web.

This involvement grew naturally out of media artists' continuous parodic engagement with the dominant modes of production within the media industries. Artists are creatures of the margins of the culture industry, which hires them in artisanal roles or buys their work for conversion to the norms of mass entertainment. These are the terms under which many avant-garde films have been produced, as signified in the title of one: "The Life and Death of 9413—A Hollywood Extra" (1927). Recent pieces by the team of performance artist Michael Smith and television director Josh White have created meticulous gallery representations of these very margins, representing historical layers of artistic production. Their complex fictional installation works have included the office going-out-of-business sale of a lighting design company called MUSCO (1997; named for a 1960s collective of electronic artists) and the fictive offering for sale of a video artist's Soho loft with all the revealing accumulated detritus of an abandoned career.

Early in the 1980s, Julia Scher tied herself to the industry of video surveillance within which she had worked as a menial. Making and installing closed circuit surveillance systems has long been a growth area in the new tech economy. These systems have become ever more imposing parts of the apparatus of state and corporate control after September 11, as the Surveillance Camera Players group demonstrates through their tours of urban camera networks. Scher, a droll participant in the paranoid state that engenders comprehensive surveillance, parodies the tactics of the industry from inside in her installations, ironizing and humanizing its pretenses of omniscience.

Like the Bureau of Surrealist Research that mimicked a scientific institute in the 1920s, the simulation of new industrial routines gives artists platforms for critical work as they assume the guise of economic actors. The Swiss group Etoy, with their red jump suits, containerized corporate headquarters, and pop military "invasions" of international exhibition venues, work like deadpan clowns of the dot-com information industry. Rather than multiple art editions, Etoy's exhibition artworks are described as stock certificates of varying denominations. In 1999, Etoy found themselves embroiled in real-world legal action as a heavily capitalized toy company attempted to wrest their Internet domain name from them in the courts. Supported by the technology art community, the group successfully staved off the corporate "raid" and made a video game out of the effort of resistance called "Toywar."

The electronic art group RTMark (also spelled @TMark) provided major support for Etoy's battle with the corporate pretenders to their name. More explicitly activist than exhibitionary, the RTMark network has supported the "dummy" Web sites satirizing reactionary politicians and corporate bad actors created by the Yes Men. RTMark's parodic engagement with globalizing capitalism extends to the system's financial apparatus. Their Web site functions as a networking bulletin board and investment service for acts of cultural sabotage worldwide. These include a multiplicity of "culture-jamming" strategies and devices developed by artists and designers. RTMark is part of a rising international network of artists and cultural activists addressing problems of corporate globalization (Greene 2004). Much of this work is strident, satirical, and merges with electronic civil disobedience or computer hacking. Other artists use the tools of data analysis and display developed by systems analysts for corporate needs, like the floors of exchanges. This work comments directly on political economic questions by using the forms and tools of the digital economy itself—that is, through the manipulation of data flows and the presentation of financial information.<sup>8</sup>

## 7. Conclusion

Historical essays open doors and suggest perspectives more than make arguments. The argument is in the presentation and the examples selected. This compacted and episodic recounting of some artistic engagements with issues of political economy, both explicit and reflexive, may strike some readers as a fractured history of inconsequential forays, mere narcissistic symbolic gestures, or as a set of incoherent propositions. I should rejoin that this sequence of artistic expressions and analyses proceed directly or indirectly from the conditions of creative work itself, its traditional processes and procedures, and the adaptations artists have had to make to survive. This argument emerges from considering the production of art, not its reception and consumption. Much of what has previously been generalized, and thereby segregated from mainstream aesthetic production, as political art could be construed as a sustained episodic critique of capitalist political economy from the point of view of intellectual production.

Art continually steps to one side of political economy, since in gifts it has a place to stand (Hyde 1983). Ideas around the gift economy are lenses to order artistic experiment and the critical analysis of political economy. Just as art-making entails routines of obsolete labor, so the production of art involves noncapitalist modes of economic and social exchange. Multiple varieties of gift exchange are part of both the material and ontological economy of artistic production.

Gift exchange is a key concept in economic anthropology, famously elaborated in Marcel Mauss's ([1925] 1967) analysis of precapitalist contracts and tribal economics. This has become the cornerstone in an anthropological critique of economic individualism (Hart

8. Some of this work was gathered into a theoretically political context in the exhibition "Empire/State: Artists Engaging Globalization" (Whitney Museum of Art 2002). Alex Rivera parodied globalized labor in *Cybracero.com* (1997-2002). Josh On, Futurefarmers' piece *They Rule* (2001) carried on the work of Mark Lombardi; while Marisa Yiu's [*BRANDSPIDER*] (2001) and Laura Kurgan's *Global Clock #1* (2001) used digital display techniques. This work is a kind of hyperbolic extension of the instrumentalized graphic design represented by Gellert's *Capital* series, discussed above.



2000: ch. 5). George Bataille of the surrealist circle argued that within a general economy, surplus and its necessary sacrifice, not scarcity, is the driving impulse. The ritual of material sacrifice among the Kwakiutl Indians of the American Northwest was a key example for both Mauss and Bataille, and the Situationists named their journal after it: *Potlatch*.

This linchpin concept for those artists-turned-theoretical-revolutionaries has remained a navigational aid for the status of art in the littoral zone between commodity and gift. In one enunciation of the classic distinction between commodities and gifts, commodity exchange is about establishing equivalencies between values of objects, while gift exchange establishes social relations (Graeber 2001). Some art is a commodity in the market; most art is a gift, produced and exchanged to serve personal and social purposes.

The concept of the gift is of limited utility as a descriptor of systems of exchange. It is more useful as an ethical and philosophical idea. It is in this sense that it has been used by the curator Antonio Somaini in an exhibition “as a guiding thread for a reflection on the relational nature of art”<sup>9</sup> (Maraniello, Risaliti, and Somaini 2001: 27). He is attracted by the forms of ambiguity in the figure of the gift (liberty and bondage, joy/generosity, and loss/waste) as a theoretical tool to organize a display of art.

In a globalized capitalist system deep into its triumph, alternatives are only slowly being perceived. Artistic engagement with political economy is a potentially valuable source of new perspectives and ideas. Might the precapitalist past of the gift be the prologue for a postcapitalist future? Does contemporary artistic experiment within the realms of political economy and its own production prefigure as much as it reflects?

The artist, like the scientist, has increasingly come to seem like a kind of prototype of intellectual labor. Brian Holmes is optimistic on the prospects for art to “gain freedoms”: “Art can become the locus of a fundamentally political use value, inherent in . . . the processes of cultural and intellectual exchange” (Holmes 2000). Much new gift-related art self-consciously embodies noncapitalist modes of social relations. And like the Surrealists of the 1920s, contemporary art made under the sign of the gift draws attention to other cultures where social relations are being commoditized by the political economic processes of globalization. These suggestions are not prescriptive, but neither are they wishful thinking. It is presumptuous to perceive in this spare historical sequence some kind of nouveau avant-garde teleology. But I do suggest that artists are continuously and deliberately defining and enlarging an area of freedom within a world of increasingly hegemonic corporatism. Surely this territory is elitist, and corporate progress as well as progressive ambitions require that it be maintained. But it is a dark alley for capital. Making art is about doing what one wants to do, about volition and desire. The impulse not only creates something new in the world but also creates new conditions for new things to come into being.

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9. The exhibition titled *Il Dono* included artists whose work revolved around the gift, including Matthieu Laurette whose “free shopping” project exploits commercial refund offers. (It did not include the Thai artist Rirkrit Tiraviniya, whose work is most closely identified with the gift concept, and is a key example for Nicolas Bourriaud, the curator and theorist of “relational art.”) Since it traveled to the United States, *Il Dono* is one of the more prominent recent European exhibitions addressing economic aspects in the wake of European currency consolidation. The Documenta 11 exhibition in Kassel, Germany, in 2002 was replete with social work, including Thomas Hirschhorn’s *Bataille Monument* to the dean of surrealist economics, a project which set up an economy of its own production and exhibition within the financial limits of the commission that enabled it.



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