

LETS TALK ABOUT THE DEBT DUE:

Art and Debt in the 21st Century

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I

As early as 1984, the art historian Carol Duncan pinpointed a fundamental, though typically overlooked feature of high culture: that the majority of professionally trained artists make up a vast surplus whose utter redundancy *is* the normal condition of the art market.

We can measure the waste [of artistic talent] not only in the thousands of “failed” artists--artists whose market failure is necessary to the success of the few--but also in the millions whose creative potential is never touched... This glut of art and artists is the normal condition of the art market.ⁱ

Within our highly entrepreneurial contemporary “art world” the majority of artists appear to be an underdeveloped resource like an army of surplus talent, especially when viewed from the perspective of major museums, gate-keeper galleries, art fairs, biennials, magazines, journals and so forth. As students we are “pre-failed” artists, as artists we are like an inert mass of dark matter that invisibly anchors the bright constellation of €47.4 billion industry in art and antiques.ⁱⁱ This alleged failure is portrayed as “natural.” It is said to be the inevitable result of too little talent or a bad luck or an absence of hard work or whatever bogus filtering mechanism you wish to invoke. But in reality we know what it really is. Failure drives the asymmetrical political economy of art, which in turn is predicated on the uneven remuneration of ideas, aspirations, expectations, affects, labors and services contributed into it. (In financial terms, many provide deposits; few are granted loans.) Despite the “natural” invisibility of most participants —and I would add here keeping pace with Carol Duncan and Antonio Gramsci- also many other informal and amateur “creatives” seemingly situated beyond the “borders” of institutional “high culture” — these shadow players play a central, aggregate role in reproducing the actually existing art world. (Imagine the immediate financial consequences if, even for just one month, no artist purchased art supplies, read online art blog or cultural journals, visited museums, paid fees for lectures or workshops, fabricated somebody’s project, installed a museum exhibition, handled a shipment of paintings, taught an adjunct art class, or even mentioned the word “art.”)

II

A few years before the global financial crash a 2005 policy study by the California based Rand Corporation reinforced and updated Carol Duncan's observations by reporting that while the number of artists had greatly increased over previous decades, the always-evident hierarchy among artists "appears to have become increasingly stratified, as has their earnings prospects."

The number of artists in the visual arts has been increasing (as it has in the other arts disciplines), and their backgrounds have become more diverse. At the same time, however, the hierarchy among artists, always evident, appears to have become increasingly stratified, as has their earnings prospects. At the top are the few "superstar" artists whose work is sold internationally for hundreds of thousands and occasionally millions of dollars (Rand Corporation, 2005).ⁱⁱⁱ

The origins of this highly redundant art workforce no doubt go back to the entry of the artist into the capitalist economy. Consider the Dutch art market of the 17th Century that allegedly produced by the late 1600s "between five and ten million works of art" of which "perhaps less than 1%, have survived."

^{iv}Much closer to our time historian John A .Walker informs us that there was on average 850 art school graduates annually in Great Britain throughout the 1970s, with some 7000 painters active in the UK at about this time. ^v Notably there was also a wave of art school occupations in London during this time, and in 1972 artists initiated an Artists Union that was chaired by American Mary Kelly. The AU lasted several years and paralleled the efforts of Art Workers' Coalition here in New York and in Canada, as well as Artists Meeting for Cultural Change (AMCC) a few years later. In the mid-1970s AMCC plastered the streets of SoHo with flyers proclaiming among other slogans: "Who Benefits When Artists Compete?"

All of which is to say that on more than one occasion in recent decades artists have stumbled into a kind of self-awareness, or proto-consciousness about their own conditions of production. And just as we find today regarding the certification W.A.G.E. (Working Artists for the Greater Economy) is seeking to implement similar issues emerged in the past including: who gets to be included in an Artists Union? Should all types of creative labor be compensated equally? How does the collective reward or punish cultural institutions that violate agreed upon rules of conduct? [Thus the present moment is a repetition, as much as it is also a mutation of this process. Why a mutation? I want to suggest five reasons, four of which have to do with structural changes in the production and consumption of contemporary art, and the fifth relates to the broader political economy of neoliberal capitalism whose fetishization of entrepreneurship and personal risk have been a topic of discussion today.

III

The first aspect of this mutated art world is the astounding size of its global market, an expansion that has accelerated since the great recession began in 2008. According to the European Fine Art Foundation average fine art auction prices have increased by 82 percent in Britain and 100 percent in the United States from 2009 to 2013, “far outpacing the growth rate of many professional salaries since the 2008 financial crash.” Clearly the stakes involved for both artists and those who profit from their work has also grown accordingly, if we look at this from a market perspective.^{vi}

The second factor is the enormous growth of professional artists already discussed by the bfamfaphd group. To reiterate, The National Center for Education Statistics indicates that over the past three and a half decades “the number of Master's degrees granted in the visual and performing arts *has been rising every year* in the last decade.” According to <http://bfamfaphd.com/> some 100,000 students in the US graduate per year with advanced degrees in fine art, which is clearly many times greater than the figure for Britain in the 1970s that Walker reported with foreboding. And of course with this growth comes the expansion of academic institutions for training new artists as well the rising tide of indebtedness at issue in this conference today. That said, with the growth of artists and the growth of art sales comes an enhanced level of power artist's possess that is operating directly inside capital: a new reality simultaneously disturbing as it is full of potential.^{vii}

Thirdly, works of art in themselves have radically changed form. They have morphed from being a relatively fixed capital asset just a few decades ago that were typically owned by well-heeled elites, to investment instruments that can be bundled together by hedge fund operators for maximum profit and available for purchase by anyone with enough cash.

Fourth, and a bit less obvious is a process outlined by Marx called the real *subsumption* of past forms of production by capitalism. Regarding art and the emergence of the “art worker” in the 1960s theorist Kerstin Stakemeier writes:

It is the real subsumption of artists under capital which transforms them into producers of contemporary art. And it is this process that in turn gave rise to the independent artist organizations of the 1960s and 1970s, while implicating artists in the dramatic social struggles of their time, including most notably the anti-Vietnam War movement. They participated in these political confrontations as one kind of ‘producer’ amongst many.^{viii}

This subsumption has in turn led to the *thorough* socialization of artistic labor, something that I would argue we can see evident in the rising number of artists' collectives today, as well as with the prominence of relational and social practice art. But this condition of socialized production is evident even with the loneliest of painters who depends on Google for visual reference materials or art supplies, Facebook for posting new exhibitions, and cellular and digital networks for other forms of support including such things as babysitters or rideshares or other services necessary for producing art today.

Finally, a fifth factor in this mutation of the actually existing art world is the radical transformation of the *image* of the artist and of artistic labor, which has shifted from the figure of a marginal producer within capital to that of the ideal worker within the post-Fordist economy.

IV

By now we are all pretty familiar with the notion of the so-called creative class, the cognitariat, the knowledge worker and what Andrew Ross referred to as the knowledge economy earlier today. And we have observed –though not without a degree of irony- the seemingly *pivotal role* artists play within this paradigm of post-industrial, networked labor. It seems that when it comes to the movers and shakers of *capitalism 2.0*, the deregulated economy celebrates deviant practices and eccentric frames of mind making the insubordinate image of the contemporary artist into neoliberalism's sexy *doppelgänger*. We know that French sociologists Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello argued in their study *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, that Post-fordist manufacturing requires horizontally structured organizations and flexible work environments, both of which they insist stem from a cultural critique of capitalism taken up by artistic circles in the 1960s. This “Bohemian” resistance to the market Boltanski and Chiapello opposed to traditional demands by organized labor focused on expanding workers social benefits, shortening work hours, and increasing wages. To whatever degree this analysis is correct or not, one thing does seem clear: artsy bohemians (or neo-bohemians if you prefer) today represent a convenient model of the anti-authoritarian, flexibly employed, self-motivated producers – or in our case, speaking now as an artist– of underemployed over-producers, because once again, *redundancy* is as central to the art world as is talent or originality or any of those elevated qualities that supposedly anchor artistic value and ultimately prices within the multi-billion dollar art market.

But there is another, less obvious homology between the surplus army of underemployed artists on one hand, and the anarcho-capitalist dream of a peer-to-peer perpetual motion machine that is wired directly into the networked economy. What if it is not the alleged cognitive and organizational radicalism of

artists that makes them such an attractive model to the priests and priestesses of neoliberalism? What if it is a more mundane quality that does not belong to any individual artist, but involves the accumulated productivity of art as a compound sphere of activity, one that uniquely transforms its inherent overproduction and redundancy into an asset? In other words, maybe post-Fordism is less interested in the supposedly transgressive, risk-taking, scrappy non-conformity, and all that out-of-the-box allure that artists allegedly possess, than it is the way we handle our collective precariousness while generating an astonishing level of aggregate productivity including installations, theories, performances, participatory projects, mock-institutions and so forth? What a model for 21st Century capitalism. Everyone contributes, a few are rewarded, capital is enriched. And if this is so, then the next point is obvious. *Why are we not leveraging our redundant competencies to satisfy our own collective needs? Perhaps we first need to turn around the normative rhetoric associated with debt.*

V

Lets Talk About The Debt Due for...

Lets talk about the debt due for...teaching countless thousands of students studying accounting and management and medicine and law who are exposed to critical thinking, art and aesthetics as they go on to become doctors, attorneys and hedge fund operators...

Lets talk about the debt due for... lining the walls of museums, galleries, art fairs, biennials, kusthalles with a continuous flow of cultural products, most of which are handed over by artists for institutional display far below cost if not virtually free of charge...

Lets talk about the debt due for...adorning the offices, lobbies, board-rooms, hallways, and cafeterias of corporate headquarters with “avant-garde” art works that as one CEO put it: assist his employees to ‘get outside of their box.’...

Lets talk about the debt due for... providing Hollywood producers, book publishers, music video designers and Madison Avenue’s Mad Men with visual reference materials for their mass cultural handiwork...

Lets talk about the debt due for... giving the US State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency ideological weapons for waging their Cold War against communism...

Lets talk about the debt due for... hundreds of years of producing persuasive religious icons...

Lets talk about the debt due for... giving people indelible images of death...but also lust, hate, envy, adoration, justice, honor, childhood, and so forth...

Lets talk about the debt due for...helping the propertied class visualize their assets.

Lets talk about the debt due for... the tuition dollars, magazine subscriptions, art supplies, museum memberships, fees for workshops, seminars and lectures ...

PLEASE FEEL FREE TO ADD TO THIS LIST.

Postscript Quote:

Capitalism without opposition is left to its own devices, which do not include self-restraint. The capitalist pursuit of profit is open-ended, and cannot be otherwise. The idea that less could be more is not a principle a capitalist society could honour; it must be imposed upon it, or else there will be no end to its progress, self-consuming as it may ultimately be. At present, I claim, we are already in a position to observe capitalism passing away as a result of having destroyed its opposition—dying, as it were, from an overdose of itself. ^{ix}

ENDNOTES:

ⁱ Carol Duncan, “Who Rules the Art World?” from the book *Aesthetics of Power: Essays in Critical Art History*, Cambridge U. Press, 1983, 172.

ⁱⁱ Katya Kazankina, “Art Market Nears Record With \$66 Billion in Global Sales,” Bloomberg.com March 12, 2014 <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2014-03-12/global-art-market-surged-to-66-billion-in-2013-report.html> .

ⁱⁱⁱ Kevin F. McCarthy, et al., *Rand Report: A Portrait of the Visual Arts: Meeting the Challenges of a New Era*, Rand Corp., 2005. www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2005/RAND_MG290.sum.pdf

^{iv} See the website: http://www.essentialvermeer.com/dutch-painters/dutch_art/ecnmcs_dtchart.html#.VMPLbMaXT4s and John Michael Montias, *Vermeer and His Milieu: A Web of Social History*, Princeton, 1989.

^v John A. Walker, *Left Shift: Radical Art in 1970’s Britain*, I.B.Tauris, 2001. P 25

^{vi} See: The Great Divide in the Art Market NY TIMES: APRIL 27, 2014 http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/28/arts/international/the-great-divide-in-the-art-market.html?_r=0

^{vii} See: M.F.A.s: An Increasingly Popular, Increasingly Bad Financial Decision, Bourree Lam, The Atlantic online, Dec. 19, 2014. <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2014/12/mfas-an-increasingly-popular-increasingly-bad-financial-decision/383706/>

^{viii} Kerstin Stakemeier from *It’s The Political Economy, Stupid: The Global Financial Crisis in Art and Theory*, edited by Sholette and Ressler. Pluto Press, 2013. See also John Roberts in the same volume. An excerpt is available at: http://www.gregorysholette.com/?page_id=1724

^{viii} Wolfgang Streek, “How Will Capitalism End?” *New Left Review* # 87 May/June 2014. p. 55.