

'Wages for anyone
is bad for business':
A Story of Non-Equivalence
and the General Economy
Marina Vishmidt

The following will be an attempt to render an account of Joshua Schwebel's concluding project, *Subsidy*, at his 2015 residency at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien, which consists of using his complete exhibition budget to symbolically reimburse the work of the organisational interns whose time in post coincided with the duration of Schwebel's fellowship. A prosaic gesture at first approach, it soon turns into the most apodictic of diagrams, a cross-section of the inviolable core of the institutional existence of art in capitalist society: that art must conceal the labour that went into it.¹

The essay will employ a tripartite structure which sketches out some convergent lines without holding out a promise of synthesis. I will first consider the sacrificial economy of labour in art insofar as the unpaid efforts of the artworld's 'dark matter' (Sholette) are generalised across the steeply polarising economy of austerity capitalism, and this from the standpoint of temporality: once all labour is hidden as investment, in the capital represented by each human unit as it goes up and down in value over time, the introduction of the employment contract or even its profane emblem – money – is that of a disruptive force on this combined and uneven, but abstract time. Second will be an exploration of the double ontology of art from an economic and a conceptual standpoint: art can neither wholly subsume nor be subsumed by what conditions it, and here the chief focus is on structures of accumulation and mechanisms of value insofar as they exert a torsion on the critical agenda of any practice. Finally, a double temporality: how the double temporality of capital, or, more concretely of debt (double because the present is captured by the future – by having to pay into a future – but the future must remain consistent with the present and its [financial] claims) underlies the homogeneous and empty time Benjamin identified as counter-revolutionary. Constant technological change means

1 "A contradiction of all autonomous art is the concealment of the labour that went into it, but in high capitalism, with the complete hegemony of exchange value and with the contradictions arising out of that hegemony, autonomous art becomes both problematic and programmatic at the same time." Theodor W. Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, London and New York: Verso, 2005.

more and more redundancy of human labour and less perceptible distinction overall between the speculative qualities of artistic labour and abstract labour, or labour ‘in general’. The dominance of extractive debt in the social field today enforces the intensive and extensive commodification of all activity as the contractual structure of labour is effaced by technological change and the neo-feudal social relations they bring in their train. This includes the space of art, and the ways it expels and absorbs social labour. In an era when many forms of human activity converge on a vanishing point of redundancy, this is the point where art has to make space to speak and act, retaining and negating its autonomy at the same time – as Lise Soskolne writes, “artists must acknowledge that their labour is not exceptional in its support of and exploitation by a multibillion-dollar industry, while simultaneously putting their exceptionality to work by engaging their own labour on political terms, and as a political act.”²

Temporality

If the dictum once stood that nothing about art was self-evident anymore, not least its right to exist, then today much the same can be said about what were once considered, albeit more and more problematically in recent years, art’s anti-matters: goods and services. We witness labour increasingly magicked from sight by the ‘metaphysical subtleties and theological whims’ of the sharing economy, with every social relation, every once-acquired commodity revealed as a honeycomb of further and scarcely imaginable opportunities for commodification. The promulgation of the ‘quantified self’ has abolished labour, but not in ways emancipatory movements of the left would have wished. With the diffusion of the ‘sharing’ or ‘gig economy’, the standardized

2 W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy), *Online Digital Artwork and the Status of the ‘Based-In’ Artist*.

forms of market-mediated transaction bend into erratic and contingent shapes where stable contracts of payment by a holder of assets to the one who valorises those assets through their labour begins to resemble an archaic fable. Where once the worlds of work and art were deemed to be getting closer through the emergence of ‘immateriality’ as the watchwords for the most disparate activities, it now seems equally clear that what that narrowing gap heralded was not an explosion of free and immeasurable creativity as a social power even capital could not constrain, but rather exploitation at hitherto-unknown depths and intensities, in which the likes of Uber and Taskrabbit are simply located further along the same vector. Labour which cannot be valorised in the form of a ‘job’ must trade on its spare capacities – spare rooms, spare time, soon we’ll be seeing the fractal rental of under-used kitchen utensils – in a chaotic weft of demoralizing busywork just to keep its head above water.

The labour of interns can be considered here too as a labour which cannot find its expression or equivalent in money. Intern labour appears as a vital yet un-monetizable capacity which keeps art institutions running not only on low margins but additionally works to affirm the traditional personalized feudal social relations that sustain the institution of art. Internships seemingly cannot be measured in money but in ‘experience’ and a phantom plenum of networking opportunity: a toll extracted by the institutions of the strong on the time of the weak, a time plotted on a curve always asymptotic to the level of sustainability that paid work affords in an economy where money remains the sole means of access to social power and survival. While the composition of the intern population has to remain a moderately privileged one of those who can afford to work for no money, this should not divert us from the emblematic character internships signify for all labour, as labour is converted into time invested in more time, stretching out over an indefinite period; time invested in the subject’s

human capital. A self-investment that is in principle co-extensive with one's lifetime augurs the hegemony of this transposition of capital onto self to become a 'quantified self'; one that, as Ben Borthwick has written, provides an index of how our social relations are shaped by "technology's advancement within [the] affective arena."³

With this ideological re-calibration of lifetime as the time of capital, a smooth and frictionless time of appreciating human capital is the benign assumption casting work relations into an ever more brutalized and asymmetrical mould. In this landscape of competition without end, since human capital gains and losses can only ever be calculated in the currency of experience, the entry of the principle of an earlier form of contract between capital and life, the principle of equal exchange enshrined in a day's work for a day's pay, comes as a jarring disruption and suspends the relentless flow of this newer and pitilessly extractive form of labour. We can say such labour exists in a sacrificial economy insofar as it is not recognized as labour, but as a way of surrendering time to a spectral futurity in which such labour may or may not be redeemed as capital. As self-investment of time which is at the same time an investment in the institution of art and its ability to persist in time, the persistence which justifies the labour, it can only be a labour of love. However, this labour that can only enact its own vanishing as labour is suddenly revealed by the presence of money on the scene. Money is a flash that lights up the circuits of power in the institution, hence *Subsidy* (2015) takes money as its means of material realization. An institution is forced to recognize the labour of its unpaid staff by means of money, which means it is at the same time forced to recognize this time as labour time, and itself as an exploiter. Like the majority of art institutions, it operates a differential allocation of value to varieties of labour, reserving the highest grade for the

3 Ben Burtenshaw: 'How Could Intelligent and Affectively Orientated Technologies Effect the Brain?' <http://onlineopen.org/download.php?id=485>

professional artist whose labour, like that of interns, resists measure but not because it falls beneath but because it exceeds the threshold of quantifiability. It is programmatically beyond value, and all artistic labour is symbolically rewarded, whatever the amount in question. As in previous projects such as *How to Get Into a Major Museum Collection* and *Popularity* (both 2012), or *Please Do Not Submit Original Works* (2013), Joshua Schwebel probes the neuralgic point of the value regimes effective in the space of art, seeing and showing how they can by turns supply a distorting mirror and a faithful copy of the class relations of accumulation elsewhere in society.

Using institutional circuits both as a platform for such interrogative gestures and a tool to turn these circuits inside out evokes a more militant style of institutional critique than we have become habituated to in recent decades, where the mode has largely been taken up by institutions themselves in the service of self-legitimation. In this sense, diverting exhibition funds to pay interns is a gesture that can be located along a continuum that would also feature Michael Asher's architectural displacements or Andrea Fraser's enactments of the mythopoetics of the museum. Yet in its insistence on pointing not only to the enabling conditions of the art institution but to the precarized socio-economic field that traverses it, the question emerges about how to define or circumscribe the situation of the artist within this field such that this pointing can be undertaken with any degree of force.

Double Ontology

There is an uneasy agreement between the claims of art history, a discipline predisposed to conservatism, and those of Marxian aesthetics: the critical freight of art is guaranteed by the principle of otiosity:

art is futile, it can produce nothing, has no use-value. Significant as the pressure has been to which these claims have been subjected, almost from the moment of their enunciation, what do we make of them in the present? The stakes for art practices aspiring to find and keep a critical traction may still dictate the need to maintain a spectral presupposition of autonomy in a market-triumphalist world,⁴ yet the paradox identified, but not developed, by art critic Stefan Germer in the early 1990s is a condition that art cannot overcome in capitalist society: it both has to remain a space of specificity, steering away from the moralized impulse to dissolve the borders between art and life that tend to wield such spectacularly conformist results in socially repressive times and spaces, yet has to equally strive to erode the distinctive status allotted to art within the social division of labour.⁵ To get a handle on what possibilities are afforded by these circumstances, a short explication of the ‘double ontology’ of art seems to be in order.

In my reading, the double ontology cited here denotes the capacity of the artistic gesture to hold at the same time a symbolic and an actual dimension, with the latter deriving its strength from the former. At root, it is another version of the autonomy/heteronomy thesis put forward by Adorno, who wrote that art has a double character inasmuch as it exists both as a product of subjective intentionality and a social fact. It is both particular and general – its ability to achieve the highest degree of specificity relies on the general status of art as a dedicated space of social experimentation, tolerated by a goal-oriented society because it has no impact on the real – and it is precisely this assumption that enables critical practices to undermine this *cordon*

4 One of the more precise formulations of this attempt can be found in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Protest* in 2010, when Marc Leger writes: “The proper orientation for critical practice is not to find in the autonomy of the aesthetic sphere a free space for the figuring of utopian social possibilities, but to recognize in aesthetic autonomy an already compromised class practice, a self-relating that takes its own denial into account and that is constructed around its own constitutive void.” ‘Welcome to the Cultural Goodwill Revolution: On Class Composition in the Age of Classless Struggle’, March 2010.

<http://joaap.org/7/leger.html>

5 Stefan Germer, ‘Haacke, Broodthaers, Beuys’, in *October*, 45, (Summer 1988), pp. 63–75.

sanitaire when they choose action under the – equally real – cover of the symbolic and discursive. While it may be observed that this double existence can be predicated on any number of actions that register in the social field, creative or not, the peculiarity of art is its lability between suspension and mobilization of social facts: how it can inhabit the paradox of autonomy but displace it at the same time. To appreciate this, we need a concept of autonomy as flexible and rigorous as Adorno's, wherein autonomy simply does not exist except as a mark of the horizon of overcoming the heteronomy – complicity, dependence on an intolerable social reality – for which the 'really existing' autonomy of art for the sake of art never ceases to provide an alibi.

To witness this double ontology in action, we could refer to some arbitrarily chosen – due to the multiplicity of the sample – yet telling examples in recent practices. One could be the Incidental Person, a rubric developed by John Latham and the Artist Placement Group in the early 1970s, referring to an artist situated in a public or private workplace who lets go of her artistic identity insofar as it restricts her field of action and precisely through the non-specificity and malleability that remains, becomes a 'specialist of non-specialism', evoking a sort of Romantic derangement of instrumental rationality through her distance from the purposive behaviour performed by the employee. Here art is a kind of catalyst that empties out its own agenda if this agenda is understood as the production of particular kinds of objects or propositions, yet reconstitutes artistic distinction at a 'higher' level, using at once Kant's classic version of autonomy as a 'purposeless purpose' and using it to create fissures in everyday routine on a limited scale. Another instance could be the work of Jesper Alvaer, who used his commission from the art centre of a small, Catholic city in Poland to secretly institute an affirmative action programme for single mothers in the art centre's staff recruitment policy, a group stigmatized

by the socially conservative ambiance of the town. Here the double ontology was displaced also onto the accidental participants in Alvaer's project, many of whom realized there was a deliberate policy on the part of the art centre but not that it was instigated by a specific artist. They were thus both performing as participants in his project, executing a limited sort of artistic agency, and as employees of the art centre at the same time. Alvaer placed a significant part of the *Employer and Employee* project (2008) under wraps for four years so as not to jeopardize the status of his participants, which would have at the same time undermined the integrity of the work. Such a drama of double ontology is perhaps in alignment with that of Schwebel's intern payment programme, inasmuch as both projects have recourse to the suspensive power of art to surreptitiously advance transformative effects in reality that can perhaps not be achieved as directly by other, more prosaic means. To think about double ontology here also invokes a consideration of ethics. Though these implications are many, perhaps most materially, we can propose that these projects show that actions performed in the framework of art can neither wholly eclipse ethical questions nor prevent these questions from resonating as formal problems at the same time. The paradox of being both different and not different from other activities means art can neither wholly subsume nor be subsumed by its conditionalities. Ethics and aesthetics contaminate one another, and the tensions generated in this unwholesome traffic are the measure of art's deixis. Which is to say, how far art can point, not just beyond its own realm at the 'real' but at its own capacity to dismantle the securely normative distance between the position of pointing and the 'over there'. An apposite reference here could be artist and writer Irena Haiduk's suggestion postulation that "Polite art points. It points at things that stand out. [...] Pointing is only good for assassinations or picking groceries."⁶ Schwebel's undertaking,

while conceiving of itself simply as a highlighter or indicator of the financial despotism for which unpaid art workers are a microcosm, does more than simply point: it interrupts the circuit, it calls things by their names through the only language that works: money.

In performing its double ontology, artistic production seems to be doing a double shift, or, compressing two modes of existence, two regimes of value – at least – into one. A double shift expressive of the double ontology, but one also with specific correspondences to two types of ‘double freedom’: Marx’s sarcastic term for the free labourer who is free of customary restraints, but also freed from access to the means of survival, as well as the double freedom of autonomy in Kant – the artistic act is free of purpose, but this also makes it free of any consequences. The stakes for works like *Subsidy* and others cited in this essay then would seem to lie in how they mediate these forms of doubleness in a time when the difference between the economy of art and the general economy is no longer so apparent.

In elaborating this through the prism of *Subsidy*, there is no need to elide the history of artist and artworkers self-organizing as labour, whether in the form of unionising or the form of the withdrawal of labour, and all the advances as well as quandaries these cases can’t help but trigger, as well as the types of solidarity and coalition organizing in the art field can render possible. There is a clear history of such efforts, past and present, and these are publicly visible in Berlin, where several organizations are concerned with artist fees and working conditions, all grappling with the problematics of the double ontology of art. Schwebel is not concerned to instigate such a campaign with this work, which refutes the kinds of commentary that would pigeon-hole it in the unhelpful terms of a charitable venture or as the artistic authorship of class conflict. What instead is getting diagrammed here is how the double ontology of art, working its double shift, can both

dramatize and interrupt the double temporality of debt as it extends backwards and forward in a time configured as the hollow time of (self-) investment. Labour gets lost in this echo chamber, and money always seems far away, as though a vortex had opened up in the relation between money and labour. We have seen that this is a condition which can be increasingly generalized to all labour as it morphs into the capitalization of fragments of this empty time, with the internship straddling this contemporary economy of sacrifice and the older feudal modes that never went out of fashion in the institution of art. In the paradigm of the double ontology, art is both a space where conditions such as money, labour and time can be both suspended and confronted, draining them of their force. By turning his artistic autonomy into a payroll, by encouraging the circulation of money, Schwebel also succeeds in calling a halt to a lethal current of time.