Art, Labour and Precarity in the Age of Veneer Politics

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PRECARIA

We are aware of recent contributions to an ongoing conversation about the politics of precarity that arise from the intensifying devaluation of the labour of cultural workers: Aruna D'Souza's Dying of Exposure, Yasmin Nair's Scabs: Academics and Others who Write for Free, and Barbara Ehrenreich's In America, only the rich can afford to write about poverty. Each of these authors comment on the increasing lack of job security and pay for their work as writers, and point out that only people with other income sources can really afford to write for free. A similar situation exists for other cultural workers, including artists such as ourselves.

Our involvement in this discussion took a turn with an invitation to participate in Mayworks³ Windsor in 2012, where we presented a performative relational video screening workshop called *Homunculus:* Occupy y/our life. We continued the conversation in 2013 with a subsequent work: Abundant Future: Interactive Performative Art Philosophy Embodied Value Debate Exchange. Both projects ran up against and tangled with labour, value, art, embodiment, academic politics, and our precarity as artists within a neoliberal economy.

Artists have always lived in the land of Precaria. However, in the 1970's a generation of Canadian artists fought for and won respect for artist's work and recognition for the necessity to remunerate artist's labour. While this did not impact all of the art world, gains were achieved

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³ Mayworks Festival of Working People and the Arts is a multi-disciplinary arts festival that celebrates working class culture. "Founded in 1986 by the Labour Arts Media Committee of the Toronto and York Region Labour Council, Mayworks is Canada's largest and oldest labour arts festival." (Mayworks, n.d.).

in key sectors of government and labour.⁴ Canada was the first country to instigate artists' exhibition fees and to make the fair payment of artists' labour a funding requirement. Has neoliberalism threatened these gains? Our experience with Mayworks would suggest that it has.

Mayworks, as a labour arts festival, "was built on the premise that workers and artists share a common struggle for decent wages, healthy working conditions and a living culture... Mayworks Festival is fully committed to paying artists' fees." (Mayworks, n.d.). And so we just assumed that we would receive artists' fees. However, the response to our eleventh hour query regarding payment tells a now familiar story about the erosion of these kinds of gains: "Sorry, I meant to discuss this with you but in the excitement it slipped my mind. Mayworks here runs strictly on volunteer labour. What little money the committee raises goes to advertising. But I meant to tell you to list your expenses (the car, materials, cake and whatnot) and I'll reimburse you, and I'll extract the \$ from the committee at a later date. Hope that's ok."5 These are the strange economics that occur in the context of relations of respect, solidarity, mutual support, and the desire to collaborate and share knowledge between the Mayworks representative and us, the artists. Suddenly these relations shift into something that at the same time leads us dangerously close to a charitable volunteerism we had not agreed to. This situation brings up a pile of uncomfortable questions that need to remain unasked in order for this cultural economy to sustain itself.

ART

Garrett and Jackson share settler ancestry, and within a wider social and national context, the advantages and privileges of material accumulation at the expense of the indigenous peoples and their resources locally and globally, and the cultural legacy of the 1950's postwar economy. We have also shared experiences of precarity/scarcity from an early age. We both received art educations that were structured through European power, and aspects of both of our work have been formed in reaction to that history. Working within and outside the art world/institutions/economies, we recognize the importance of a broader creative sociality and output than what is generally termed the contemporary art

⁴ In 1976, due to Canadian Artists' Representation/Le Front des artistes Canadiens (CARFAC) activism, Canada became the first country to pay exhibition fees to artists, adopting it as a funding requirement for public galleries by the Canada Council. In 1988, CARFAC's lobbying resulted in the federal Copyright Act Amendment. The Act recognized artists as the primary producers of culture, and gives artists legal entitlement to exhibition and other fees (CARFAC, n.d.).

⁵ Correspondence between Jeff Noonan and Rebecca Garrett, 2012.

world and the valorized forms that art takes within the capitalist paradigm. We feel that our position as both privileged and at the same time experiencing class (and other) oppressions complicates our relationship to the question of precarity.

Art is completely and thoroughly contentious. Art is embodied, phenomenological and intersubjective. It registers across the senses and can include the subjective and the particular, the historically specific, in relation to the world. Despite the assertion that the meaning of a work of art resides autonomously in the art object, art, like everything else, is always relational in its production, its operations and its value within the world/context in which it is accorded meaning. Art is embedded in cultural, class, geographical, material and embodied networks. In the contextual specificities of life, art has the potential to reveal, expose, challenge and engage y represent, and at the same time, can hold contradiction without forcing or demanding a resolution.

We are artists and women who perform work. We perform in urban social settings. We perform again in the Toronto academic and/or art worlds. We each have our own individual practices as well as our collaborative work together and with other diverse communities. In our practices we generally do not take public space without those with whom we work present. In this text, we are speaking to our experiences as individual artists engaged in a multiplicity of practices on the specific issue of artists and precarious labour. Every day we grapple with the problem of how our bodies, labour and creative desires are understood, involved and impacted on living within neoliberal capitalism. Our work is about realizing forms of "community": not utopic community, but necessary community – communities as recognition of interdependent embodiments. These are communities of endurance and resistance to poverty, colonialism, prison, homelessness, gentrification and police violence.

Like many others in Precaria, we inhabit and work between many different worlds, doing what we need to do to get by, following parallel and interweaving paths, patching together sustenance and budgets. We work from locations that are frequently outside dominant economies, institutions and art streams, continually negotiating the terms of engagement, knowledge, and value. In a neoliberal climate of devalorized labour, our labour power and our bodies are taken for granted and exploited, often in gendered ways that we object to. We very often work for free as artists in communities because some things that are necessary for our survival, and that we care about, are not considered value producing within capitalism.

DARK LIGHT

Under austerity, we document increases in police and security guard violence – the policing of property and rhetoric of 'safety' in increasingly corporatized and bourgeoisified public spaces experienced by our colleagues on a daily basis.



Source: *Dark Light* video still, 2013. Mashed Economies and Monday Art Group, featuring Hazel Bell Koski.

Mbembe (2003) articulates necropolitics as a zone of death, or living death, created by economic and political dispossession and social abandonment. Necropolitics is defined by McIntyre and Nast (2011, 1472) as: "racialized hyper-exploitation determined via a calculus of death." Not all bodies are treated the same. While normative bourgeois bodies (who perform whiteness and extend themselves through space transnationally via gentrification, accumulation by dispossession and war) are supported and their lives extended, poor, marginalized and othered bodies (most often a complex of racialized, gendered, disabled, indigenous, trans, queer) are seen as a threat, as well as resource, to bourgeois cultural, economic and political dominance. In a situation where the social safety net is continually cut back, austerity provides a weapon against the peoples' communities on the ground. As Elizabeth Povinelli (2011, 22) says: "new semi-public and secret ways of making die have their counterpart in market disciplines. Any form of life that is not organized on the basis of market values is characterized as a potential security risk."

In the context of economic and state attacks we are forced to rely more and more on each other in order to survive, and so the problem of equitable relations becomes integral to our art making practice. We work with video in urban communities where people are largely excluded from the labour market and where informal economic exchanges and social reproduction comprise much of the labour performed. The emphasis of these projects is on embodied, local and lived experience: knowledge that is produced by and within communities. The conditions of work are the contingent situations of communities trying to enact democratic participation and self-representation with scant resources and while under attack. Our practices aim to reflect the knowledge of community members back to the community in a way that produces agency and ownership of the modes of representation. This is especially important in these spaces because marginalized folks are subject to forms of symbolic violence in the way they are represented (or discounted) by media, academics and artists, who either ignore the multiple structural reasons for poverty and oppression or fetishize and romanticize the victim and their circumstances. In either case, a distance from messy engagements is maintained.

We do this work politically to cultivate just and equitable exchange relations, a redistributive ethos within fluxing privilege/oppression positionalities, an alternate symbolic economy that extends into highly significant material concerns.

VENEER

"Historically the suffering of artists is as interesting as their work. Apparently, the public likes its artists to be poor. History bears this out. There is even a thirst for the suffering artist as a kind of product in and of itself. The musical Rent springs to mind but there have always been media glamorizations of the artist in the garret. The sufferings of artists whether physical or mental, have always been marketable" (Miller, 2006, 125-6).

Artists are the least paid of the so-called professions and generally live under the poverty line. Artists dangle between self-employment, casual contract work, artists' grants, and the very remote possibility of success on the art market (a star system that promotes exceptionalism). The fact is that artists must work for free in order to pay their dues, never knowing if they will ever be able to make a living. This is the norm and what most in the art world believe will produce the most excellence in the field. In this way the art world works in sync with the structures of neoliberal late capitalist power and under a condition of extreme surplus value extraction.

Artists don't just exist within neoliberal economics. In the European tradition, a certain mythology of the artist is put to work propping up the iconic bourgeois hero who today morphs into the ideal neoliberal subject: the autonomous individual whose independence, desire for liberty, flexible life of self-expression and consumption, personal success and lack of accountability, cannot be tamed by a trade union. In short, the ultimate self-exploiting individual whose personal fulfillment takes priority over social responsibility. Actual living artists are increasingly joined by working people whose labour value has been restructured and devalued by neoliberal economics: sessionals, contract and part time workers in all sectors, as well as fully employed people who are forced to work unpaid overtime. And now everyone is expected to bring their creativity to work for minimum insecure wages. Art mirrors, or expresses in a concentrated form, the unfair conditions of capitalism in the neoliberal era.

Even when artists make it into that elite class of those who do manage to sell their work, problems of market exploitation arise. Unlike with the commodity form where labour is consigned to the hidden abode, with art, both the art object and the artist are fetishized on the market. The artist's brand name continues to add surplus value to the art, while the artist does not receive any percentage of future sales or exhibits of their work. As Goldberg (2014, n.p.) notes: "The seemingly unstoppable U.S. [art] market grew at a rate of 10% year-on-year to a total of \$21.1 billion in sales. This is mostly thanks to its business-friendly regulatory environment, reasonable tax rates for buyers, tax advantages for sellers, favourable trade regulations, and first-sale doctrine – meaning artists cannot control or profit from subsequent sales."

The mythical persona of the art star and their signature is the integral structuring component of the art economy. We observe the art market operating when well known American artist Richard Prince recently appropriated another (female) artist's Instagram photos, and created prints which he put his name on and sold for \$90,000. Instead of suing Prince, the artists' response was to sell her original prints of the same work online for \$90 each in order to devalue the status or value of "his" works on the market.

Art works are bundled into portfolios and traded as futures. As Max Haiven (2011) notes, fictitious capital has an investment in maintaining

relations and systems of value and controlling the future in order to protect investments. Collectors pay large sums for Prince's work with the expectation that it will increase in value. In order to protect the value of their investment, they must also defend the value system out of which the art object was created, namely, that of the bourgeois male subject who feels entitled to appropriate young women's cultural production. The use value of the art object, the socially relevant meaning in its form, is a *veneer* over its fetish form. The art object doubles as an investment receipt, a form of private property purchased by an investor, a bond that is backed by the symbolic and cultural value system of hierarchized capitalist relations. When art enters the marketplace its transformative potential is extinguished.

Artists are imbricated in other markets too: in the gentrification of neighbourhoods that they are then priced out of to make room for condo lofts for the service workers to the global citv elites. Globalizing/gentrifying cities such as Toronto work with corporations to host spectacularized festivals that take advantage of artists who are desperate for exposure in order to entertain the city's cosmopolites and boost the city's symbolic capital as a centre for culture. Heather McLean (2010, 7) writes:

"Before we race out to pound the pavement to save festivals promising 'world class' artists, red carpet openings, and overall 'revitalization' with culture, we need to stop and think about the causalities of corporate friendly arts policies that are being framed as the 'progressive' and only option. The 'restructured' AGO workers and underfunded grassroots arts spaces are solemn reminders that 'creative cities' policies have been a vehicle for accumulation by cultural entrepreneurs and for advertising by major corporations, but no answer for a democratic and inclusive arts policy...They promote neoliberal artistic competition and economic development at the expense of under-funded, often unpaid workers and artists as well as residents displaced by the steady advance of gentrification promoted by the 'creative cities' policy agenda."

There's nothing like "slumming" it with some weekend drunks and starving artists, many from really oppressed communities, to make one feel culturally in touch – or maybe you're doing research for your next ad campaign. There's a neoliberal aesthetic of the art spectacle that has big funding, government and corporate, that supports jet setting large-scale art projects that can also be read as both anti-social and un-ecological. In practice, these capital motivated cultural tours are often sites of macroviolence performed against individual women's bodies, as is the case in other problematic spaces such as sports, extractive industries and war zones. Unless we understand and critique art as imbricated in the totality of cultural/economic relations we cannot understand its potential as a radical form.

CAGES

On October 4-5, 2014 a group of people set out to intersect the mass spectacle of *Nuit Blanche* in various locations in downtown Toronto with a guerrilla mobile projection. *test#1:cages* was a project by media activists, and individuals who were arrested during the G20 in 2010. *test#1:cages* linked the policing of the G20 to ongoing everyday violence perpetrated against vulnerable communities by the state security apparatus. Footage taken by the police of the inside of the temporary cells or cages was acquired using a two year freedom of information process during the making of the film *What World Do You Live In?* which documented the illegal incarceration of Gabriel Jacobs, one of the many innocent citizens



Source: *test#1: cages*: The site of the arrest of Gabriel Jacobs, the test#collective, October 4, 2014.

arrested. *test#1:cages* moved across multiple locations where violations occurred, jogging public memory of events that have been erased or forgotten, giving witness to violent police tactics and a concerted effort to violate the civil rights of dissenting citizens. The video projections incorporated images and testimony of the assault, mass arrest and brutal incarceration of citizens during the largest mass arrests in Canadian history.

LABOUR

"We offer an experiment in systems of art-exchange that do not emphasize financial capital, but rather celebrate abundance and connection. We believe that art is not a commodity for speculation but rather a fundamental part of the commons, inherited and shared by all." (Occupy Museums, 2012, n.p.)

The necessity to sell y/our labour to survive is taken for granted. The violent histories of colonization and the privatization of land that created these conditions are remembered only vaguely. We are given money in exchange for our alienation. And what of money? This form of measurement that abstracts and forces equivalences, values and devalues our exchange relations with increasing arbitrariness. Are wages ever an adequate measures of our life energies and labour investments? The bottom line is that being forced to sell ones' labour to survive, whether it is art labour or flipping burgers, is a violence period.

We agree that the concept of labour needs to be extended well beyond the paid employment that someone might offer us (Ferguson, 2008; Gibson-Graham, 2008; Kuokkanen, 2011) (which might also be something quite different than what our communities actually need, or what we are inspired to do or contribute), to everything we do in life to sustain communities. A de-alienated labour relates to desire and the things that people have to offer, and what they want to do in the world. As Max Haiven (2011) points out, culture and economics are both also spheres of imagination, belief, values and ethics. We want to see labour as the essential creative moment: economy as in weaving a social fabric, an interdependent drive to create, share and exist. We can't live on a reductive view of economics as capitalist exchange, it does not satisfy, it does not feed or give enough. At the edge of capitalism, in its cracks and crevices, at home after work, among friends and community members, unpaid labour is performed. Alongside historical forms of gendered social reproduction labour, housework and childrearing, is everything else that we need to live, or the most important things, or the things that actually

give us pleasure that we love to do. The incredible output of artists fits in with this understanding of social reproduction labour as an unpaid form that both supports capitalism and is a basis for resistance, of imagined new worlds. This is where we are now.

Not only do we often do this work for free, in many instances we actually pay to do this work. Yup, that's what we said. We redistribute the dollars that come into our possession towards community resistance. In the film *Beauty and Truth*, Alice Walker states: "Activism is the rent I pay for living on the planet." This is a different kind of exchange that's more important to us than the possibility of our individual monetary advancement into the middle class. Escaping into privilege might always be an option for some of us, but it also feels true that the more we participate in community cultural economics of informal exchange the farther we move from this possibility.

We conceptualize "just relations" as a critique of systemic privilege within capitalist colonialism. There is no correct position: it's a practice, a concept, a tradition of engagement; it's an ethic. Just relations are not defined in a normative, legalistic sense: resistance to hierarchization of embodiments takes place both in response to powerful economic and political structures and as they manifest within our struggnles. We place ourselves within a history of liberation thought and practice. Our own genealogies include working out of traditions of participatory engaged direct cinema, community arts, and our long time involvement in overlapping liberation movements and decolonizing struggles, including: Afrikan decolonizing struggles, Palestinian resistance, Indigenous rights, prison abolition, punk anarchist feminism, disability activism, liberation theology, anti-imperialist, anti-apartheid, anti-poverty, housing, and squatting movements. As people with working class experience we have occasionally engaged in the union movement; however, we mostly identify and draw from our association with more informal sectors. Many of these movements include groups that have been on the forefront of organizing with women, queer, working class, poor and disabled folks within larger community identifications.

We primarily draw inspiration from those in low income communities with whom we work. In our experience, there is an ethic and culture of sharing that we step into and take direction from – it's not a big deal – it's just getting by. During a community meeting in a social housing complex a neighbour pokes her head in the door to check that everyone has enough to eat since it is a week before cheque day and she is concerned that people don't have enough money to buy food. This is also a critique that models on a local and interpersonal scale what needs to happen on a global economic scale. We regard this redistributive aspect of our work to have political import, as prefigurative of alternative economies. In contrast to the neoliberal belief in the central competitiveness of humans, it is our belief that human society has always been inherently cooperative in order to survive and thrive (Alfred, 2005; Anzaldúa, 1987; Kuokkanen, 2011; La Duke, 2005; Lappé, 2011; Mann, 2005; Marx, 1988; Mohanty, 2010; Roy, 2011; Shiva, 1992; Simpson, 2004).

EXCHANGE

The performative workshop *Abundant Future* (2013) was held at *Cool Hand of A Girl* in Toronto. *Abundant Future* was an effort to engage questions and extend a conversation concerning artists' labour and value that arose at the Mayworks Windsor 2012 performance, *Homunculus: Occupy y/our body.*



Source: Abundant Future: Interactive Performative Art Philosophy Embodied Value Debate Exchange. Mashed Economies.

An excerpt from the performance script reads:

We have chosen a selection of organs to represent our will or volition or passion or investment of caring deeply. We are trying to understand our embodiment within capitalism and to questions about relations between theory, embodiment and social practice. This is deeply personal and at the same time inherently social. These organs function as symbolic metaphors at the same time as they are filtering out toxins, pumping our blood, letting us breathe. Our organs can be seen as media membranes of exchange with the environment.

List: heart, brain, lungs, adrenal glands, kidneys, liver, phallus, ovaries...

These organ presented here as cakes represent for us the conflicted conditions in which our bodies exist in trying to nourish ourselves in a society with heavily industrialized food production. We recognize the material implications of words. We recognize the material. There are aspects of the body that cannot be spoken. We make material forms to be able to voice things that we can't say with words.

Once we began investing in the stories of our own organs, they quickly led us to stories that we encountered through the news media. We relate to all these stories, our own and those of others, as metaphor or dilemma. We respond to these stories from another location in a landscape of uneven development by which our bodies are differentially supported/disciplined and yet our organs are connected across space through economy.

The body asserts itself in living. Does the body speak through living?

We are now going to create an opportunity for exchange by auctioning off the organ cakes.

These cakes took approximately 10 hours each of our labour power, and about \$60 in raw materials.

The audience can bid with any kind of currency. It can be money, labour power, an in kind exchange, an object, art work...whatever is considered fair or affordable.



Exchanged for



Source: Abundant Future: Interactive Performative Art Philosophy Embodied Value Debate Exchange: Vegan, Gluten Free Brain Cake Exchanged for Labour Power.

WHAT WORLD?

"Bourgeois subjects, the new citizens of the nation-state, knew themselves as respectable and civilized largely through a spatial separation from those deemed to be degenerate and uncivilized. Degenerate spaces (slums, colonies) and the bodies of prostitutes were known as zones of disorder, filth and immorality. The inhabitants of such zones were invariably racialized, evacuated from the category human, and denied the equality so fundamental to liberal states." (Razack, 2000, 116-117).

We are always thinking about the spaces that we come from, spaces that are down a gravel road or the side of a field, alleyways that people don't see, the corners of parks and abandoned industry. If you walked through the city and then talked about your trip, you wouldn't include any of these spaces. Spaces beyond the law and beyond regulation where women always get fucked over. Spaces of police violence, of informality, of homelessness and rough living which are also spaces of refuge, wild urban nature, community and queerness. Interconnected social and geographic spaces that mirror society's indifference and are regarded as waste, as potential, as "terra nullius" – as prior to and in need of bourgeois development.



Source: *What World Do You Live In?* Community video by Rebecca Garrett and the Sanctuary Community, 90 min, 2014.

The work we do in these social spaces (and more interconnected public spaces such as shelters, drop-ins and city parks) has difficulty registering in the larger world for a number of reasons. There is a persistent tendency to see the work we do in such spaces as volunteer or charitable labour. That definition just doesn't fit, and the moral ladenness of the category offends. In fact, it is a term that covers over and keeps at a safe distance the reality and the challenge of the possibility of working radically across difference. What is the value of art made by, with and for communities of endurance and resistance?

The collective output of the communities in which we work produces its own aesthetic, language and knowledge form that speaks to the conditions of social abandonment under which we create. We re-create the community in every instance, through the very complex labour we perform. Ideas, activities, material engagements and exchanges, connections with others, daily life chatter, knowledge, gesture, nurturing – all these things are taking place as praxis. Reducing this complex to a reading of the discrete art object is not adequate.

The reproduction and cultural labour of mending and tending the social fabric under conditions of necropolitics is devalorized in the art, activist and academic worlds. People don't want to have to actually encounter and engage oppression up close on the daily life street level. Because the art world (and academia) is dominated by conceptual aesthetics, the embodied and experiential knowledge and creativity of the rest are negated. The farther one travels away from the contemporary art/academic/activist discourse (towards those abandoned, neglected social spaces) the more illegible the work becomes, and the more illegible you become to those who are distributing the money, the more vulnerable you become to neoliberalism.

The segregation of activism, art and academia from community is unforgivable. We need a radical redistributive cultural economics to support ALL the labour that people do, artists and non-arts identified folks alike. A redistribution that doesn't depend on over work, overproduction and overconsumption. A redistribution that is ecological and considers embodied difference. Such redistribution must occur through public mechanisms that recognize the inherent sociality of the economy, and not through private or corporate avenues that maintain those hierarchies by which capitalists have gained their monetary and political power. We don't know if the state can be transformed, but we do know that change necessarily happens from the community up.



Source: What World Do You Live In? Community video by Rebecca Garrett and the Sanctuary Community, 90 min, 2014.

DISCLAIMER

We believe that it is important to talk about the economics under which we work including that we are writing this piece for free. We are assuming that you, dear reader, may in some way also be implicated in and benefitting from the vast institutional economy of which this journal is surely a part. We would like you to consider the value of this writing within an institutional economy and look at it upside the economies of art we have presented. As D'Aruna asks: is your ability to write and publish for free based on your privilege as a paid academic? Can this writing be transformative within the contradictory context in which we work?

"If you can't see unpaid writing as part of the neoliberal machinery of affective exploitation, you should stop writing about its evils. Nothing, nothing that you ever write for free, about the problems of our time, including relentless war, the exploitation of workers, queer or trans politics, the banking system, or the prison industrial complex will ever be valid, until you confront your own role as a neoliberal. Until then, you're just another hypocrite...and just another scab." (Nair, 2014)

Nair offers a critique of people who can afford to write or make art for free. Ehrenreich points out that those who could be writing about poverty and social justice issues because they know them first hand, can't afford to write because they are busting their asses at low wage jobs. And so we appear to have a situation where the whole epistemological layer of lived experience is being evacuated from the discourse, before it properly arrives; and where activist writing (and the same can be said for art) slides into neoliberal muck. Nair and D'Aruna talk about their oppression in relation to privilege and Ehrenreich discusses her position as privileged in relation to those with more dire class oppression. This discussion reflects a competitive and comparative regard of privileges as a logic of neoliberalism that obscures the issue of just relations that requires us to work according to a redistributive ethic in a larger economic context.

We are proposing a different future. Nair is right that under capitalism, complicity with veneer politics is our condition. However, working and making art is also part of our resistance struggle, part of our survival, and thus we can't go on strike or stage a refusal. Where do we sit as artists, and here as authors, in this complex of relationality to precarious labour, paid and not? This is the contradiction.



Source: Abundant Future: Interactive Performative Art Philosophy Embodied Value Debate Exchange. Mashed Economies, 2012.

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