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A Soft Spot in a Hard Place

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A Soft Spot in a Hard Place

PSU Art and Social Practice
Reference Points

A Soft Spot in a Hard Place

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Zachary Gough
Max Haiven
Cassie Thornton**

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Introduction

Zachary Gough

This book is a collection of conversations with people who have found ways to think beyond the limits of capitalism. Max Haiven, Cassie Thornton, and Thomas Gokey all speak critically, accessibly, and passionately about their artistic, academic, and activist work reimagining our relationship to each other and to our economic conditions beyond the confines of capitalist logic. They are part of a growing resistance movement against capitalism, and they work toward reinvigorating collective economic models. While their geographic locations—Halifax, San Francisco, and Anchorage—make up a triangle big enough to encompass a large part of North America, their work fits into a unified project of reimagining our economic reality. *A Soft Spot in a Hard Place* addresses how artists can best help combat capitalism and make change in our economic lives. It is guided by my own desire to understand what I, as a social practice artist and vernacular economist, have to offer this resistance movement. I wanted to know what other artists and thinkers were already doing for an anticapitalist movement and, more broadly, what role if any art can have in effective social change movements.

Through researching and producing this Reference Points book I have been able to deepen my own knowledge of this field and share it publicly in hopes of inviting other artists and interested people into this conversation. I selected these three thinkers/artists/activists for this book because I think they are doing incredibly meaningful and timely work, and because their work greatly informs my own. All three of them consider the imagination to be a field in which art can impact the narratives we believe about our economic lives. Max's robust academic work and dedicated social organizing revolves around changing the way we think about money,

finance, debt, and capital. Cassie makes socially engaged art that invites us to change the way we think about debt and how debt functions in our bodies and in our society. Thomas works as an artist within the activist group Strike Debt to expose the injustices of our debt systems and to help debtors resist their servitude to the 1%. I believe that these three succeed at changing the way we think about these things. But none of them would be content to stop there. Substantial, tangible change is the goal, and art is just one tool in that project.

I hope that this book will add to the important work that Max, Cassie, and Thomas have been doing. It is an invitation to join us in the project of understanding how creativity, art, and the imagination might help us refigure our relationship to money, debt, capitalism, and our economic lives as a whole.

**Economics as
a Social Practice**

Zachary Gough

There is work to do to fully reject the idea that the economy is a machine and recognize that it has no existence apart from us and the wider world we inhabit. This work is what we call reframing. Reframing involves imagining the economy differently. It means taking notice of all the things we do to ensure the material functioning and well-being of our households, communities and nations. It means finding ways of framing the economy that can reflect this wider reality. In such a reframed economy we might imagine ourselves as economic actors on many different stages—and as actors who can reshape our economies so that environmental and social well-being, not just material output, are addressed.

—J. K. Gibson-Graham, Jenny Cameron,
Stephen Healy¹

My work as an artist hasn't always been about capitalism and economics. It's an interest that grew very gradually over many years. Some of my projects relate tangentially to capital and economics rather than addressing these topics head-on: a pirate radio station in a nursing home where seniors make radio programming for each other; *Stranger Danger*, a podcast in which I interview people who picked me up hitchhiking; a course on radio-based citizen journalism where students act as correspondents to a particular group of people and report on issues related to that group; Weird Allan Kaprow's *Public Apology Karaoke*, where the public can reenact their favorite public apology or offer one of their own. In each of these projects, the capital-resistant values that inform my work can be seen in their collaborative and dialogical forms, their resistance to commercialization, and their emphasis on conversation and education.

Gradually though, as my understanding of capitalism grows, it has started to emerge more directly in the content of my work. *Art Boom*, a performative history of the future of Dawson City, Yukon, compared the present growing arts economy there to its 1890s gold rush history; and *Bourdieu, a Social Currency* used a new currency to depict the flow of power, visibility, and social capital between the delegates at social practice art conferences in Portland, New York, and Melbourne. Two projects that are in progress as of this writing deal head-on with anticapitalist concerns: inspired by the research of Max Haiven and Alex Khasnabish, *The Radical Imagination Gymnasium* with Guestwork (Erin Charpentier and Travis Neel) and Patricia Vazquez exercises the collective muscles of the radical imagination; and *Cartography of the Commons* seeks to take stock of and represent the commons, commoners, and commoning in Halifax, Nova Scotia.²

After dancing around capitalism in my work for some time, and more recently looking more explicitly at it, I'd like to propose that thinking about our economies as a social practice might help us create an economic ecology that reflects alternative, human values rather than the values of profit, efficiency, and growth implicit in the capitalist system.

First of all, capitalism depends on us to reproduce itself, and traps us into that reproduction in some very crafty ways. State austerity, the "sharing economy" and social entrepreneurship are a few examples of this that I see in my communities. Second, I argue that while capitalism may leverage our insecurity and precarity for its own survival, the good news is that this dependence on us shows that we do have agency to support other economic activities and relationships. If we can reimagine our relationship to our economic lives so that we are not passive members of a capitalist society,

but active agents reproducing our economic realities, we can then give our energies to other, sustainable economic systems based on common good rather than competitive exploitation. In order to do this, we're going to have to learn to think on the scale of how the system works, and not just watch out for our own individual survival and gain. The subtext of this is that the way in which we share our resources in society is always a social practice, something that we author collectively. If we're able to take control of our collective authorship of the economic system, what kind of system will we create?

CAPITALISM COOPTS OUR ECONOMIC AUTHORSHIP

For most of us, capitalism is the air we breathe. It is everywhere all at once, a regular part of our daily activities. If we're not practiced at looking at it critically, it can be hard to see it clearly. To use another metaphor, it can be hard to zoom out far enough to get a sense of the whole picture. Moreover, we're taught by the media that the instruments of finance and the flow of markets are so complicated that only experts can grasp their functionality. Hedge funds, derivatives, and credit-default swaps are some examples. Those same experts somehow failed to divert us from, and in fact led us headlong into, the 2008 crisis. To make it more complicated, capitalism is adapting and changing all the time. The economy I was raised in is very different from the one I see today. Even worse, when we do start to get a sense of how capitalism functions, we see that we are complicit in it, that we participate in it actively every day, that we are reproducing it with our actions. Refusing capitalism inevitably means facing the

system's threat of violence. Precarity, eviction, incarceration, bad credit, malnutrition, and stress are punishments for not playing the capitalist game and reproducing its values. This is a mechanism of capitalism that keeps it strong. Questioning capitalism involves questioning ourselves and our own actions.

Let me give you three brief examples of how capitalism works in our communities and how it encourages, nudges, pushes, and ultimately forces us into its reproduction.

1. Last year, as a part of a restructuring plan to become economically viable, Canada Post announced that it would be drastically raising the cost of postage and phasing out door-to-door mail delivery.³ Gradually, Canadians are now required to find their way to a neighborhood post box to collect their own mail. This is of particular concern for two specific groups: seniors, who very much still use post as a means of communication; and people of all ages with mobility limitations. The result is that there's one more task that's been removed from the sphere of paid work and placed into the sphere of unpaid work. This is part of a larger trend of austerity happening in many countries around the world, one small example of the neoliberal destruction of the public sphere. Corporate models now are the only option for Canadians seeking what was once a public service. We accept that the organizational structure of Canada Post isn't economically viable, but do we accept that the solution is to subsidize the organization with free labor by the Canadian people? The question of public good is essentially nonexistent because of the primary focus on budgets and taxpayer dollars; the language of the debates surrounding public services is capitalist, not democratic or socialist. In other words, by focusing only on economic viability we are disregarding the more human aspects

of the equation. Since capitalism ultimately forces us to reproduce its values, we solve our problems with its logic.

2. The birth, growth, and pervasive dominance of the “sharing economy” is another systemic trend I witness in our communities. Three years ago I moved from Halifax to Portland. Recently, I went back to visit and tried to stay with friends. What I found was that since most of my friends are artists, they are also underpaid, cramped, transient, and precariously employed. Any extra space in their apartments is now listed on Airbnb. A few good friends turned me away because they’d already rented out their extra rooms; another friend offered me the space but made me pay since he’d be losing out on that income by my occupying the room. There’s a lot of public discourse around Airbnb and how it has affected rental rates and neighborhoods all over North America. The threat of eviction has turned us on each other, and the corporate overlords of the “sharing economy” now mediate our relationships and profit from our insecurity. The commons of spare bedrooms and living room couches has been enclosed. We can see that our private spaces are now thought about as a grounds for financial contracts rather than for social contracts. Where once we had a community that shared, now we have the “sharing economy.” Capitalism is the reason we have trouble paying the rent, and yet we think like capitalists when trying to find solutions to our housing problems.



3. Perversely, our desire to resist commodification and consumerism is marketed and sold to us. Last fall, I read a post online about a new app called Peerby developed in the Netherlands and designed to help people connect with their neighbors to borrow various things that they might need, such as lawn mowers, drills, cups of sugar, etc. Being someone

who's interested in counter-consumerist culture, and since I needed a suitcase for the above-mentioned trip to Nova Scotia, I investigated further. I signed up for the free service and they sent me an automated email right away.

...

Zacharygough, welcome to Peerby!



 **Liset** <liset@peerby.com>
to me 

11/29/14 



Hi Zacharygough,

Thanks for trying out Peerby! My name is Liset and I wanted to reach out to you personally, because you are one of the first people in your neighborhood to join our community. Congratulations, this makes you a Peerby Pioneer!

Being a pioneer can be lonely at times and Peerby works best when your neighbors become members too. We would love to spread the Peerby sharing spirit all over the world but for that we need help from brave Peerby Pioneers like you. Do you like to help spreading the love and make your neighborhood an even better place to live?

Here's some inspiration what you could write:

Hey guys! Need something you don't want to buy? Why not borrow it from your neighbors for free? Join me at <http://Peerby.com>

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or any feedback for us. I would love to hear from you!

Sunny greetings,

Liset

I like sharing, but am pretty skeptical when it comes to performing free advertising for anything. I was already curious about this whole social entrepreneurship thing (isn't that a contradiction?) and wondered how they made any money. Their website had a bit of information—they'd been awarded an Ashoka grant and received some awards/support from other companies like Ben and Jerry's. But what about long term?

...



Zachary Gough <zacharygough@gmail.com>

11/29/14



to support ▾

Hi Liset,

Thanks for your personalized greeting. I have some questions about Peerby, and I'm wondering if you'd be willing to answer them.

I love the idea of a community sharing app. Resources are slim, minimum wage is way down, debt is way up, cost of living up etc, you know the tune. In my neighborhood, if I need to borrow a drill I could probably go knock on the door and ask in person. But mediating this age-old neighborly sharing is great for a society that increasingly sees itself through the lens of a smart phone.

My first question when I saw your service was - how does peerby survive? Are they supported through a wealthy patron, or public funds? a branch of the library? Or do they sell our data to other companies so that they can market products that they know we don't have? So I'm wondering, how does Peerby cover its costs, pay your wages, accumulate capital?

It's an interesting dilemma! On the one hand, I'd love to have a new, contemporary way to connect with my neighbors and share our limited resources, on the other, your app offers a way that my relations with them are now commodified through social entrepreneurship and the 'creative class' branches of the capitalist system. It looks like a kind of marketing, mediating and selling to me what I already have!

Interestingly, I'm sure your intentions as an organization and as a person and worker are sincere, and that you and I share many values! I bet that the employees of Peerby believe in the work that they are doing. So my second question to you is, do you think that a public version of peerby could work? We could call it Neighborby, and run it out of the public library system, perhaps as a branch of their social network, bibliocommons. Our funding would come from large corporations' tax dollars, enterprises like Ben and Jerry's, the PostCode Lottery, and Tech Stars, and we wouldn't have to collect and sell data (anonymous or otherwise) to cover our costs. You and I could work together as librarians finding ways for folks to share a cup of sugar, drill, law mower, etc.

So you'll have to forgive me for declining your offer to be a 'Peerby Pioneer', for the time being. In fact the ways that capitalism craftily creeps into my community is at once very scary and utterly fascinating. Moreover, the thought of 'pioneering' something that already is alive and well is too reminiscent of Columbus 'discovering' the new world, as if Hundreds of thousands of people hadn't been living there for tens of thousands of years.

What do you think, Liset? Am I splitting hairs? Has the public system already failed us so much that we should accept it, and sell our creative energies to benevolent corporations so that problems can be solved within its' structure?

I'd sincerely love to hear your thoughts on this topic.

Hope you had a great Thanksgiving with friends, family and neighbors.

Zach

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According to their privacy statement, they will collect your data and use it to “improve their services.” The only information that they explicitly say they won’t sell is personally identifying information such as email addresses. Moreover, as a start-up, presumably if it becomes widely successful, it will be sold to Facebook, Google, or some other large company and folded into its large network of services. Let me be clear: this is an extremely viable business model. Peerby is intentionally designed to collect targeted, geographically specific information about us and the products that we don’t own but need. This information is ideal to sell to the distributors of online advertising. I never heard back from Liset, but I did hear back from Bart, their “community manager,” who told me that Peerby’s “social goals are at least as important as making money.” The lesson from Peerby is that even our desire to resist capitalism and consumer culture is now being marketed to us through social entrepreneurship. We need to be very careful about the ways we resist capitalism. In the craftiest ways, social entrepreneurship slips capitalism into the discrete crevices of our communities where it wasn’t before.

State austerity measures, the “sharing economy,” and social entrepreneurship are signs that the only seemingly viable ways to help survive the effects of capitalism are to use different kinds of capitalist problem-solving logic. Rather than relying on paid labor of the mail carriers, Canada Post now depends on the free labor of all residents. Services like Peerby and Airbnb deliver capitalism into places it wasn’t before, thereby further mediating our relationships and alienating us from each other. The creeping of capitalism into our communities is redefining our roles to each other; we’re no longer acting as friends and neighbors but increasingly

as merchants and consumers. In trying to put out the fire of capitalism we are fanning its flames.

For me, capitalism is a trap that, through the carrot of hope and stick of fear, forces us to reproduce the conditions under which it thrives. Our precarity and struggle drive capitalist innovation and ensure its continuation.

REFRAMING OUR ECONOMIC AUTHORSHIP

How can we get out of this trap? If capitalism is an economic configuration that forces us into serving as its agents, the flip side is the potential we have for nurturing other systems. In trying to solve our daily financial problems, we often use capitalist logic to guide our decisions. The example of Airbnb shows this really well: rental rates rise and we have trouble paying our rent, so we list our own apartments on Airbnb and become small-scale real estate capitalists and thereby sacrifice our roles of friend, brother, neighbor. The problem we need to solve is not our own individual financial hardship, but the widespread habit of seeking security (and wealth) at the cost of those around us—in essence, capitalism itself.

We would benefit from learning to contextualize our financial actions in the larger system. If we could see that survival tactics like Airbnb are making things worse on the whole, I think we would change our actions. The foundation of this is that capitalism needs us to think as individuals, to prioritize our individual financial security. Punishment is directed to individuals in the form of debt and bad credit scores, and rewards are handed out to individuals as private property. We're trained to desire and consume commodities as individuals through

the never-ending stream of spectacular images delivered through individualized screens and networks.⁵ When our thinking about our economic realities is limited to the scale of the individual, we hold opinions and make decisions that further our own limitations. If we could act together on the scale of a larger system, the economy could be the result of the actions of willing, liberated agents rather than of fearful, dominated serfs.

In *Take Back the Economy*, J. K. Gibson-Graham, Jenny Cameron, and Stephen Healy invite us to do just this. “By seeing the economy not as a machine but as the day-to-day processes that we all engage in as we go about securing what we need to function materially, it’s clear that the economy is created by the actions we take.”⁶ The only way out of capitalism’s trap is to restrain ourselves to think on the scale of the system and act within sustainable economic alternatives. We can start doing this by guiding our actions according to values of our shared well-being rather than values of individual security. We can remember to think of public services like Canada Post in terms of their social good rather than their potential as commodities. Instead of marketing our private spaces to others, we can transform them into cooperative housing initiatives that consider the housing needs of our entire community. Even the simple act of introducing ourselves to our neighbors, rather than depending on corporations to introduce us, is now a radical anticapitalist action.

Imagining our economies as a social practice only offers a perspective into our potential power as coauthors of our economic realities. After all, patriarchy and white supremacy could also be understood as social practices. Representational democracy could be another example.

But maybe framing our economic activity as a social practice might help us craft it in a more deliberate, artistic way. If we take control of our economic authorship, we can create a more beautiful economic arrangement, grounded in equality, mutual aid, and the common good—an economic ecology authored and owned collectively, instead of by the 1%.

1. J. K. Gibson-Graham, Jenny Cameron, and Stephen Healy, *Take Back the Economy: An Ethical Guide for Transforming Our Communities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 3–4.

2. Commoning is the act of developing, using, and maintaining shared resources that transcend the private/public dichotomy in capitalist economics.

3. Americans may also not know that Canadians already don't have door-to-door mail pickup.

4. This email was from before I realized they were in the Netherlands, and probably didn't celebrate Thanksgiving.

5. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1994).

6. Gibson-Graham et al., 8.

**Max Haiven
and Zachary Gough
in Conversation**

I first came across Max Haiven's writing when my friend and collaborator Erin Charpentier forwarded an article to me. She had been googling "creativity" and "capitalism" and came across his article "Finance as Capital's Imagination? Reimagining Value and Culture in an Age of Fictitious Capital and Crisis," in which he depicts finance as "the redoubling of the complexities and abstractions of money. It creates a world-embracing matrix of signals that allows for a form of synthetic comprehension of social totality and futurity. It functions as capital's imagination." This idea was at once really intriguing and more than a little confusing. I started reading everything of his I could find. He is a voracious scholar, and his perspective of using creativity and art to reflect on financial institutions and constructions such as money, debt, finance, and value is remarkably refreshing. He was generous enough to talk with me on one of my trips to Nova Scotia.

In this conversation I asked Max about the imagination, language, and social reproduction. We talked about how belief systems amass power. I asked him to reflect on his Tumblr collection of artworks that use money in some way, and we used those as examples to talk about how art projects might breach the logic that supports these systems of power. A lot of this was exciting for me to hear, and I drank it up. But he also put me on my heels a bit in our conversation. He was pretty quick to identify the limitations that art has in the project of ending capitalism and aiding social-change movements in general. He is absolutely an advocate of large-scale revolution and is critical of the idea that art will do very much to save us. When I asked him to go into this further, he not only reemphasized art's (and socially engaged art's) insignificance in social-change movements, calling for us to be humble in framing what we're capable of, but he also criticized people

who write about art and delineate the connections between specific practices and social transformations or revolutionary possibilities.

Max Haiven and I spoke together in August 2014 in Halifax at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design.

—ZG

ZACHARY GOUGH: So, maybe the first place to start is to talk through how you define the imagination and how is that different from what most of us think of when we think of the imagination.

MAX HAIVEN: Well, I think the key distinction that I make when I talk about the imagination is that I try and think about it as a collective practice rather than an individual possession. *Imagination* is a pretty weird word in the English language. It actually only came into use in the eighteenth century, but really it only became something that everyone used in the nineteenth century. Before that, in England and France at least, the imagination was actually a euphemism for treason or plotting to murder the king.¹ But in any case, before the late 1700s, the idea of the imagination didn't really have much traction in the English language, or in any of the Romance languages either. But as the modern capitalist system took shape, philosophers started to pound this idea of the imagination into a tool that they could use, and they were using it specifically to exalt the white, male, colonial individual. The imagination is a sort of private mental control room from which you can craft the world. You get this idealized version of the imagination where the artist emerges as a specific vocation, who is called to by the imagination, the image or the avatar, let's say, of what the imagination is supposed

to be. But the problem with that is that it denies a number of very important features of the imagination. One of them is that every creative genius was actually a part of a huge creative community of artists, musicians, interlocutors, critics, rivals, friends, collaborators. Those people get taken out of the picture when we exalt this single imaginative genius. So in that way, the imagination is a collective process rather than an individual possession. Another feature of the imagination is that for someone like Mozart, or someone like Courbet to exist, they also rely on this huge wealth of creative energy from society at large, in the sense that neither Mozart nor Courbet had to sew their own clothes, they didn't have to grow their own food, they had families who took care of them, to greater or lesser extents. They had an entire society working to elevate a tiny minority of wealthy, white, male individuals to this pinnacle of "creative genius." So when we start to think of the imagination that way, it starts to open up horizons for how we imagine the imagination, and then how we imagine creative, imaginative work that comes out of that, and I think that's very much reflected in some of the new trends of art practice today.

ZG: So, do you think our sense of the imagination could fluctuate from these subversive origins to this colonial, white—abstract expressionist, if you will—gifted, male artist and then come back to a more social-subversive action?

MH: Yeah, I think that's a good way of putting it. It goes back and forth and there's always a struggle over its meaning. The originators of romanticist theories of the imagination of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—the Romantic poets like Keats, like Shelley in England, like Goethe

in Germany—they were thinking of the imagination as an antidote or as a way to resist industrialization and the rise of capitalism, “the disenchantment of the world” as Weber put it.² So they saw the imagination, and the return to the imagination as a way to restore authenticity and human autonomy, but very quickly that idea of the imagination as the seat of human authenticity and autonomy was co-opted as this figurehead of capitalism, or individualism. And then, say in the 1960s, you begin to see a retaking back of the imagination as a project of liberation, sort of the new left with various forms of counterculture, that were really saying that the postwar political climate was stifling to the imagination and was extremely conservative. And that expanded out to things like queer liberation, which suggested that the imagination might be applied to love, to life, to community, not just to art. But then in the 1980s, and especially in the 1990s and moving into the 2000s, you see another stage of co-optation, another stage of taking back the imagination where it’s now been subordinated to the market, where we’re all supposed to be imaginative geniuses, but that the imaginative genius is the exact same as the entrepreneur. We’re supposed to leverage our creative skills and talents on the free market, not depending on anyone but ourselves, and be a model worker of the brave new capitalism.

ZG: Here’s another question about language, especially thinking that our imagination is encapsulated within the frame or bounds of capitalist values. This also comes in reference to David Graeber’s book *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*.³ One tack that he takes is looking at how different languages use words, and how our market logic is embedded in the fabric of how we speak and communicate. Do you think

that we have the language to think about the imagination differently, and to be able to collectively imagine scenarios outside the bounds of capitalism? Or is our language too embedded in these capitalist values and histories?

MH: It's a good question. I don't know if I have a great answer for it except to say that I think language is always a site of struggle. You see the battle over different words at various times and various places. Even a word like *democracy*, which used to be the rallying cry of a project of liberation; increasingly we're seeing democracy as a weapon of imperialism, with mostly wealthy Western countries saying we need to go over to this benighted nation of dark-skinned people over here and deliver democracy to them. Or similarly, you can look at the histories of something we'll probably talk about a little later, relational aesthetics or participatory art practice. These were, in the '80s and '90s, an attempt to break out of that very individualist idea of the imagination. And yet those words, *participation*, *community*, *relationality*, those have all really, in very diabolical ways, been brought into the center of the art world and its imperialist tendencies. So I guess I'm not so concerned that we don't have the language to speak about a different idea of imagination or creativity, but that we be very careful and strategic about how we use those words, and what sorts of effects we try and create.

Actually, in David Graeber's earlier book, *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value*,⁴ he tries to explain a materialist theory of the imagination that I'm very sympathetic to. One of the things he points out, which I think is very valuable, is that societies can't do without fetish objects, and that goes for both other societies and our own. A fetish object

is basically what we, through our own social intercourse, imbue with almost mystical power. So for European anthropologists, as part of the imperial project going over to say, here, Nova Scotia—Mi'gama'gi, which it was called before the Europeans colonized it—they would take a look at a Mi'kmaq wampum belt, and say that this is a fetish because the Mi'kmaq worship this belt, which in fact they didn't (the Europeans misunderstood what was going on), but they said that the belt has no magical power, this is only their power as a society skewed and reflected back on them. And what Graeber does, and what others, like Karl Marx, have done, is to say that money is the ultimate fetish. We imagine that money has this power in and of itself, but in fact it's just our collective creative power reflected back to us in a dark mirror. There's a whole tradition of Western thought that says we should get away from fetishes altogether, we should assess the world purely in logical terms and be completely transparent about everything. Graeber and others say that that might be a nice ideal, but it's not going to happen. Societies work through these objects, that we use together, that we imbue with special power. That's just a fact of life for every society, and denying it or imagining we can overcome it is folly, and leads to quite terrible things. Because once you begin to believe, for instance, that money has its own power, money does take on its own power through the way it influences our actions.

OK, this is a bit of a tangent to say that words also function the same way. So words are magical in the sense that if I say *creativity*, I can be relatively sure that, let's say a million people read this text, they're all going to have a vaguely similar sense of what I'm talking about, even though creativity is a totally abstract concept. There's no physical object to which it refers; in fact, once we start picking away

at it, it starts to come apart altogether. But in any case there's a certain kind of magic you can perform with words. Especially words that are aspirational, or abstract. Like *imagination*, like *capitalism*, like *creativity*. So for me it's not a question of inventing a new language, but recognizing and working with the magical properties of these words, which still have a great deal of resonance, especially in an age where the vast majority of people in our society are systematically denied any real opportunity to be creative or have their creativity valued.

ZG: I want to ask you about another word, or set of words, that you use in your writing, first of all because I'm not totally sure of what you mean, and second of all because I think it ties in to what you are talking about, this magical power—I could be wrong about that. What do you mean by *social reproduction*?

MH: On a very basic level, social reproduction means the way that our society is reproduced. And it begins from the assumption that we are fundamentally cooperative beings, that we as a species don't really survive in isolation, and therefore, all aspects of our lives, even some of the aspects of our lives that we think are very personal, are in fact social and collective. So it's a way of thinking of social institutions, it's a way of thinking of human actions and agency as a process, as something that is ongoing. So, how is society being reproduced? How are institutions being reproduced? How is it that the university, for instance, is reproduced as the supreme arbiter of knowledge in our society? But more than that, too; how are prisons reproduced? How do we reproduce these social institutions? How is something called *art*, which has certain borders, how does that get reproduced? On a basic level it's a way of shifting our attention away

from understanding society as made up of these billiard balls that clunk into each other, and seeing it instead as more of an ecosystem that is constantly in the process of reproducing itself. More specifically, the idea of social reproduction comes out of a feminist interpretation of Marxism. Marx is centrally concerned with the way that all of society and all of the objects within it are the products of labor. Marx is interested in the way that labor gets solidified into commodities, the way that our personal energies get transformed into labor power that can be exploited by bosses. Workers get put into a factory, they build cars, they get paid a wage with which they buy cars, and yet there's a capitalist up here skimming off the top and using that money that he skims off the top to reproduce his own power. The feminist critique that started to emerge in the '60s and '70s was saying that's fine, but if you actually look at the vast majority of labor that is performed under capitalism, it's not productive labor like producing cars, widgets, paper, etc.; it's reproductive labor, the labor that is typically—though not exclusively—done by women in the home to reproduce labor power itself. Who is raising children to be future workers? More broadly than that though, who is doing the work of reproducing society? And this gives us a different sense of the role of someone like me. So I'm not a productive worker in the sense that I work at a university. I don't make stuff that gets sold. And in fact, my wage is paid mostly by the government. My job in society is to reproduce a certain set of relationships. On a basic level to reproduce the institution of the university, to reproduce the prestige of the university; more broadly than that, to reproduce certain types of subjects. My students come into the classroom, I discipline them by giving them assignments, they do the work, then they become different sorts of subjects who ideally, at least

from the perspective of the system itself, would then go on to take roles reproducing the system. I would like to think that in my work I break out of that, and I try to give my students the resources to refuse that, but I'm actually not sure if that is what I'm doing or not. But I guess the idea of social reproduction more generally is to say that the field of labor, and the field of capitalist power, is much broader than we typically assume.

ZG: So taking a different tack, how do fictitious, or collectively conspired, belief systems—I'm thinking specifically of money and finance, or the university as the supreme arbiter of knowledge—come to wield so much power? What is that process by which the financial instruments that you talk about in your work become imbued with such value and with power? And then also, to flip that, how powerful can a collection of artists and the public become, and how powerful can art become in the face of this finance?

MH: Well, we live in a very different system than many. There's something very specific about both capitalism as a socioeconomic system and then the particular form of financialized neoliberal capitalism we live in. But it's useful to look at other systems for an answer to this question because I think it's a little clearer. If you think about, let's say South Carolina, in the 1700s. This is a society in which a significant majority of the population are enslaved. And when you step back from it, it's hard to understand how that sort of system can be maintained numerically. Of course there are a number of terrifying ways that slavery was reproduced as a system. One of them was that slave owners became very cunning in the ways that they broke up families, in the ways that they sowed the seeds of internal division within the enslaved classes;

they used absolute terror on the bodies of enslaved people. And of course the system didn't hold, there were frequent slave uprisings.⁵ But another way that system was reproduced was by reproducing a system of belief. And that system of belief was that where the slave-owning class controlled all the organs of culture, they could basically legitimate and justify their rule. So the slave-owning class for instance did not allow the people they enslaved to learn to read or write because that would have enabled them to become cultural producers. They didn't allow the enslaved people to become religious ministers until much later because that would have given them the means to produce some sort of cultural meaning. And as a result, the slave-owning class could justify their actions and this incredible imbalance in society by exalting themselves and whiteness to suggest that whiteness is inherently better or superior to blackness. They could monopolize religious meanings to select verses of the Bible to make it appear normal and God's will that they would be slave owners. And this produced a number of different effects. One of them was that the slave-owning class was always incredibly arrogant and believed themselves to be inherently superior, and that this was the natural right and God-given order of the universe. It also allowed them to instill within the enslaved peoples a devaluation of their own selves that took many, many years to break. So there's a way that I think looking at a society like that can give us a sense of just how powerful imaginary institutions are. They are backed by very real power, but the vast majority of political systems of inequality throughout human history, at least from my very cursory reading of it, are held in place by cultures of belief, as well as brutal violence. The brutal violence is always the backup. So then the question becomes in our own society,

where we learned recently that a tiny fraction of the population controls the majority of the wealth, we're seeing levels of inequality that are almost unprecedented, comparable to those of some noncapitalist, very brutal societies. How is that society reproduced? The reality is that there is a lot of violence in the system; there is a lot of violence in countries that try to break away from it, in the sense that Western capitalist nations organize coups d'état, they arm insurgent rebels, whatever they need to do. There's also a great deal of violence within Canada and the United States; there's an epidemic of police brutality especially against racialized people; there's the continued theft of indigenous lands, etc. But by and large, the vast majority of people accept abject poverty without much complaint, and also accept that the boss out there, the "one percent," the ruling class, should be allowed to make astronomical sums while the rest of us suffer. So this gives us a sense of how deeply powerful ideas are, and these shared fictions. One of those shared fictions is the idea that we live in a meritocracy where if you work hard and are talented you are going to get ahead, which is total bullshit. Like really, total bullshit. But that in fact keeps the majority of people in line: they blame themselves for their own failures, they don't see the broader system around them that keeps them entrenched. We have a shared belief that if you're in prison it's somehow because you probably did something wrong and deserve it, which is complete fabrication. There are all these sorts of shared beliefs that animate our society, that really don't serve us very well. This is one of the lessons of the field of cultural studies, which I work in, which was trying to understand how after the Second World War capitalism was shifting to be more in belief and why it was that the forms of massive resistance that we had seen before the

Second World War were disappearing. My particular interest in this field of cultural studies was this question of what is financialization? Which is a really curious thing because on a basic level, we're looking at the most dynamic and wealth-producing sector of the economy, which produces almost nothing of tangible value. A credit-default swap, collateralized debt obligations, a futures contract, a derivatives contract—these are very valuable assets within the global financial economy, and to a very real extent they determine the life and the life chances of millions of people on the planet. But they don't exist or they exist in the same way that the imagination or creativity exist—they exist only in our shared imagination. As with *creativity* and *imagination*, I wanted to explore *financial assets*—basically, as we were talking about earlier, as fetish objects or tools for shaping our collective imagination. I also didn't want to do this in a way that suggests that the financial realm is a realm of diabolical sorcery where an elite down in the basement of Goldman Sachs in New York are dreaming up these necromantic concoctions to fool the rest of us. Because it's not quite like that. There's a way that financialization has a life within the upper echelons of finance. They are the only people who can understand a credit-default swap or spread betting or any of these totally weirdo terms that come out of that world. But there's also a way that financialization is rooted in everyday life, and that's the thing that most interested me. You were mentioning David Graeber's book on debt. The majority of people in America are highly burdened by debt; it is a horrifying weight on their shoulders. For many of us it determines what we do with our lives. People are killing themselves because of their debt. Financial difficulty, which is usually based on debt, is the single largest cause of relationship breakdown in North America. The toll that

debt is taking on us is horrifying. And it's completely imaginary. There is nothing that would materially change in the world if all of those debts disappeared. Debt is an imaginary idea that allows us to organize and reproduce our society in a certain way. And similarly, a futures contract has no meaning until it comes due, but it is a way for us to imagine a world of material assets. It's a useful tool that we use collectively to figure out how to organize and reproduce society. And the question is not "Do we need to abandon all of these tools for imagining society?" The question is "How are they serving us?" or "Are we serving them?" And I think in terms of debt we can quite clearly see that the way that we have debt working in our society is to reproduce incredible inequality, incredible misery, incredible unhappiness. And so, we should use something else. And to conclude, this is where I see a great deal of potential for the arts. They offer us alternative tools for understanding our own collective power, whether they intend to or not. There's a way in which art and money gaze at each other in a mirror. Art gazes at money longingly, because money has an incredible power to conscript and dominate our imagination of what's possible. It is the key means to understand our relationships to our fellow human beings. We need other means to imagine our relationships to each other, and to the material world we're re-creating and reproducing together. I think art can puncture money, and debt, and finance's power over the imagination. It can create a break in the seamlessness that those institutions try to create. And sometimes, art can offer enough of a breach that you can sort of see a different future beyond.

ZG: It seems like a very daunting task for artists to take on, of breaching these institutions. You have a Tumblr

collection of artworks that use money. What have you noticed through collecting those works, and what are some that are very successful at forming this breach and at unpacking this power that you are talking about?

MH: The first thing I noticed is that—and I think this is important, I'm not just saying this to be catty—the vast majority of art that uses money is bad. I mean really bad. And it's bad because it's conceptually lazy. It might be technically adept, but I think the first problem is that artists are not trained to do a lot of research. So a lot of artists working with money don't have a sense of what other artists have done. There's a fascinating history there, and several very good books about it.⁶ So, hopefully that will contribute to people saying there's a history to this art here that I can draw on and I can contribute to. So that's one problem, that there's a lack of history around that particular form of art. The other problem is that most artists are incredibly poor. They have made a choice to live a life where they are not dominated by money (that's why they became artists) and so there's a way in which their relationship to money is very emotive and often not very critical. They do what most of us do with money: they give it a mystical power. They sort of don't trust their own creative impulses in the face of money, and they feel so dominated by money, that all they can do with it is either glamorize money's power or, in a sort of adolescent way, reject it. This adolescence also exists in this whole new wave of art since the '80s, of which someone like Koons or Murakami or Hirst are the kingpins—as if to say, “I just make money, that's what I do.” So that's the bad side of art about money.

But there's a lot of art that does this great work of leading the audience to understand that money is this



collective fiction that we're reproducing, and that conversely money is reproducing us, in a way. It's reproducing our subjecthoods, our sense of self, sense of identity, and really working with the strange line of how money's value gets produced. An artist I really like, Cesare Pietroiusti, from Italy, does this well. He has one piece where he performs an auction in a gallery, in which the person with the largest bill to submit for this purpose hands it to the artist, who eats it. After the bill passes through his digestive system, he cleanses it, frames it, and gives it back to the bidder. He uses his body to transform one imaginary substance, money, into another imaginary substance, art. I think it's a really clever exploration of what the artist is, what the artist does, what the artist's purpose is, how money has this strange power. Probably the most famous money artist is J. S. G. Boggs, who has been working for thirty years now, before relational aesthetics or participatory art were common terms. He has a variety of practices all focused on money, but his key practice is that he'll draw dollar bills or euro bills with incredible realism so that they look pretty much identical to the real thing, but all clearly hand drawn. Then he'll go and try and spend it. He doesn't try and counterfeit. He just says "This is a piece of art. Would you accept it at its face value?" And in doing so, he tries to draw people into a process that they were already actually a part of. So, if I go to the store and I pay \$10 for a meal, we're doing a certain magic between us. In that transaction we're accepting and reproducing a certain set of cultural meanings and values. And what he was asking people to do is to slow that down a little bit and reexamine it.

It's as if the capitalist world we live in wants our transactions to be this harmonious world of pure financial concordance. And when we hear economists on the

radio, there's this constant sense that the economy is never wrong, it's just people who do bad things. And this gets leveled against the poor, the abject, and the workers all the time, in the sense that we were told that there was nothing wrong in the mortgage market in the States just before the crash in 2008. It was these horrible subprime borrowers who "use their houses as ATMs." So the market is perfect; it's humans, especially poor, especially racialized humans, who are fallible. In fact, of course, that's total bullshit. But I think what these artworks do is introduce the wrong note in the harmony of the market. And they make us realize that what we've been told to hear as melodious music is in fact noise, and noise that is not doing us a lot of good.

ZG: That's a beautiful metaphor. So I think one of the things I was thinking about as I was reading whatever I could find of yours online, was placing art on par with money, on another end of a spectrum, or as you said, in a dark mirror, because I think that, especially in regards to a social shift through relational aesthetics and participatory art, live art in the UK, social practice in the US, there's also a collective power that comes about. I see art as another form of imaginary fictitious power. So in your classes that you teach do you have to warn your students against this power? Or suggest that they use it in a particular way? I mean I don't think that art is that powerful, especially in reference to the kinds of things you're talking about, but since it kind of functions in a similar way...

MH: The context of all of this is that at the exact same time as the rise of social practice—let's just call it participatory art for simplicity's sake—oddly enough, we're seeing the rise of neoliberalism. Just to define it, there are lots of different

forms of capitalism. There's industrial capitalism from the nineteenth century; there's what we call Keynesian capitalism from the postwar period, in which there's a very strong welfare state; then there's neoliberal capitalism, which is the idea that the government should retreat entirely from social life and that markets should take over practically everything. We see the neoliberalization of education; where once it might have been understood as a public service, now we see it as a commodity to be bought and sold by individuals. And the neoliberal ethos, the idea that we're each individual capitalists trying to outcompete one another on the market, is now extremely widespread. Another way of putting it is that neoliberalism is the triumph of money over all sorts of areas of life where we assumed it ought not to be: education, health care, the use of markets to try to solve social problems. We're now seeing increasing market incentives for private companies to try to make for-profit attempts to solve problems for at-risk youth. We're just seeing money everywhere in our society, and money becomes the measure of everything. So it's curious that these new forms of art, which are very promising, in the participatory vein, come about exactly at the same time that money has come to dominate all these different spheres of life. That's I guess one point.

ZG: Interesting in the sense that they are responding to this neoliberal project and critiquing this neoliberal project, or are potentially also co-opted by it?

MH: Yes, I think so. And just to break it down, on the one hand, we see a lot of participatory art which is actively trying to recuperate all those things we've lost, to remind us of this experience of community, that now is nowhere

to be found in our own lives. So in a way it's a critique, and many aspects of participatory art, like the recent *Gramsci Monument* by Thomas Hirschhorn in New York is a good example, or Andrea Fraser's works where she is critiquing the commodification of the museum and gallery spaces—these are all anticapitalist in their ethos. At the same time, participatory art is huge business. Now almost every city in North America and Europe and in other places elsewhere have annual all-night arts festivals that are specifically about creating a participatory art-lite that is there really just to draw new business to the downtown, very firmly sponsored by businesses both big and small. But in essence these are commodity spectacles. Participatory art has been embraced by many of the largest museums as a way to draw in nontraditional art audiences with the sponsorship of someone like BP. So, for instance, the Tate in England, in partnership with British Petroleum after they devastated the livelihoods and the ecosystems of the Gulf of Mexico, has really embraced participatory art as a way of bringing in people who don't like art. Because it's fun, you can bring your kids. It's a free-ish entertainment. So there's a way that participatory art and neoliberalism are having this strange dance over the last forty years in curious ways. So I think that's one aspect of the problem. I think there is a real potential for that art to bring people together in communities and to rethink and reimagine their relationships. That's the thing. Capitalism operates through money and through finance, and on a certain level finance and money become the dominant means for us to imagine our collective social power. But they are bad ways, dark ways of imagining. They perform a dark magic, rather than a good magic, to extend that metaphor. And what art can do is give us other ways to play around with

how we might orchestrate our human affairs. The difficulty with that though is that money allows us to orchestrate large projects, for example the auto industry. Which is an incredibly complicated piece of human cooperation. Millions of people need to collaborate. From the people in Brazil who are going down in the mines to dig ore for steel, to the people who are digging the petroleum and other chemicals out of the ground to turn it into plastics, to the engineering labor, to the design labor, to the people involved in safety, to the people who are building highways, to the people who are getting the gas to the gas station, to the government regulators, to the critics of the government regulators, to the lobbyists and on and on. In order for us to have a society based on cars, we need to orchestrate a huge amount of human labor; and art, frankly, cannot match that. All that art can really do is point out the flaw in the present system and sort of give us a little bit of a glimpse of how we might organize things otherwise. And this is the problem that artists, people like Andrea Fraser or Martha Rosler, point out. One of the things that's been produced over the last couple of decades of performance and performative participatory art and its incorporation into the art world, is a sort of artistic hyperbole around what art is capable of. Now art is supposed to save the postindustrial city. It's supposed to create jobs. It's supposed to lead to "social cohesion" and "citizen participation" and "inclusion" and all these other neoliberal buzzwords. And increasingly we're seeing artists themselves embrace this rhetoric and these grand claims about what art can do, often in terms of "marginalized populations." This language is how grants and commissions are won these days. And of course, the condition is that one remain largely silent or cryptic about why some human beings are "marginalized," who's

really benefiting (developers, landlords, politicians). There is a complete fetishization of terms like “dialogue,” “engagement,” “participation,” and “community” that’s really quite atrocious.

But there’s a dialectic to it. Art is forced to take on such hyperbolic ambitions for particular structural reasons. The reality is that in a society like ours where everything is dominated by money, for various historical reasons that would take too long to get into, art still has this weird autonomy. We place all of our hopes for social change in art, because there’s no other space left. What, the university is going to create revolutionary change? It’s already been bought and paid for. We no longer have community, we no longer have strong social movements. So I think people turn to art, and the defense of art, and the excitement about participatory art, because it’s the last space left. But really the only thing that’s going to transform this are massive, very radical social movements, that are willing to take on the bastions of capitalist power. And then there’s a shift that needs to be thought about, how do you go from art that is specializing in puncturing the mythology around money and capitalism, as much of it does, to art that would support, uplift, enable and empower those sorts of social movements. And for various historical reasons most artists are very reticent to answer that second question, because it seems that you are just doing propaganda. Or you are lending your seemingly autonomous voice to something that has scary implications, like revolutionary violence or something. But that question still needs to be held open.

ZG: I guess what I really want to know is how artists can lend themselves to social change movements while using

this knowledge that finance, money, capitalism, and debt are all fictitious belief systems that leverage the collective imagination. They are social practices, and participation and participatory art becomes part of the question of the forms that reflect this kind of knowledge of collective engagement. I'm reminded of Darren O'Donnell's book *Social Acupuncture*, where he uses acupuncture as a metaphor for how artistic interventions can function on the societal body.

MH: I mean I guess as a teacher of artists who isn't actually an artist himself, I try to attune students to the fact that art doesn't stand outside these performative economic processes that make up our world right now. And also that, even more than that, art in some really interesting new ways is really implicated in the reproduction of those sorts of institutions. So for instance, we can look at the role of the art world and the art markets in reproducing finance capitalism in offering a certain set of commodities to a financial class. On one hand they're going to an art auction and on the other hand they're going to Art Basel Miami Beach, and then they're going back to their financial worlds. They somehow import some of the logic and sense of the art worlds into that financial world and vice versa. So there's a certain spectrum of complicities that I want to sensitize my students to. On the other hand, I don't want to lose all faith in art's possibility, because that's a horrible thing for one person to lose and it's a horrible thing for a society to lose. And the reason is not so much because I think we need to arrive at a pure art that escapes the capture of the disciplinary and productive mechanisms of a speculative society, such as the one we live in; it's because we don't really know what creates change. As much as many theorists and scholars have tried, we don't have a formula for revolution.

And by revolution here I mean the revolutionary change that's necessary. I don't know what that revolution is going to look like, if it's going to be a peaceful one within the range of liberal democracy, or whether it's going to be some sort of violent uprising, who knows. It's clear that we need it, but it's not clear what sorts of actions and collaborations and aesthetics are going to be necessary to bring it into being. This is why I'm tempted to say that both revolutionaries and revolutionary artists need to have a great deal of respect for luck and for chance, and a great deal of humility in terms of their own practices. There's all sorts of revolutionary changes happening in our world right now; even the most active and the most brilliant of their organizers never could have predicted. This is something you hear again and again coming out of the Arab Spring, out of what happened in Hong Kong, for instance, and what happened in Canada with Idle No More. That the organizers who'd been toiling away for decades in really grim circumstances were shocked and surprised when these things exploded onto the scene. And I think art has something to do with that, but what it has to do with those surprising uprisings and revolutionary moments is not something that we can necessarily scientifically isolate. You have artists like Rebecca Bellmore, who's been working for decades and decades and decades doing really provocative, thoughtful, careful community-based and reflective work with indigenous communities, somehow all of that artistic labor did contribute to the conditions that allowed this huge indigenous uprising like Idle No More to emerge. Or in Nova Scotia someone like Ursula Johnson, who's been working with basket-weaving techniques with performance, doing close work with communities; all these things contribute to a situation where revolutionary moments

can occur, but I think it's just not easy or straightforward to explain how those two are connected. Ironically, I think a lot of art writing, which is a huge component of the art economy and the art world, sort of stakes its reputation on the ability to draw that impossible link between this sort of work, or states that this sort of practice is excellent because it leads to this sort of social change, transformation, or revolutionary possibility. Of course, we still need to keep writing that sort of work—it's still an important means of reflection—but I think that artists and those who write about them need to have a great deal more humility about the fact that we just don't know most of the time.

1. "Treason Act 1352," Wikipedia, last modified April 14, 2015, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treason_Act_1351.

2. Max Weber, "Science as Vocation," originally a speech delivered at Munich University, 1918 (Munich: Duncker & Humboldt, 1919), <http://anthropos-lab.net/wp/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Weber-Science-as-a-Vocation.pdf>.

3. David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (New York: Melville House, 2012).

4. David Graeber, *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dreams* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

5. Robin Blackburn, *The American Crucible: Slavery, Emancipation and Human Rights* (New York: Verso, 2011).

6. Paul Crosthwaite, Peter Knight, and Nicky Marsh, eds., *Show Me the Money: The Image of Finance, 1700 to the Present* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014). Marc Shell, *Art and Money* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). Katy Siegel and Paul Mattick, *Art Works: Money* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004).

**The Unspeakable
Thing**

Cassie Thornton

I first met Cassie a couple of summers ago when she came to Portland (actually she biked from New York) for a show curated by Tori Abernathy at Recess Gallery. Her project was *Send Debt to Space*, in which she'd interviewed people in downtown Portland and collected audio recordings of them screaming their debt-related angst. She then used my pirate FM radio transmitter in the gallery to broadcast the looped audio. FM waves, she told me, go all the way to space. The tension of the reality of actually sending something to space, with the symbolic gesture of tossing our debt into the infinite trash can in the sky struck a chord with me. What would happen if we really did send our debts to space, or just canceled them altogether? One of the things I admire most about her work is how she goes very deep on one subject: all of her work is focused on debt. A lot of her earlier work was about trying to depict the materiality of debt. She often guides people through visualizations to try to give their debt some kind of form that can be looked at, talked about, and touched. Another way she addresses debt is by using nonempirical knowledge systems and practices to address debt and finance. Astrology, meditation, witchcraft, and dance are used to display the systems of finance and debt as pseudoscientific. Her written thesis, *Application to the London School of Economics*, asked Richard Serra through a hand-delivered letter to consider some of his works as material representations of debt, and asked that one work be sold to help pay off the debts of her classmates at the California College of the Arts. Currently she's working on a series of alternative credit reports. One of the main systems of enforcing debt repayment, and preventing a debtors' strike, is the threat of a bad credit score. By designing and implementing an alternative credit report system, she's

combating the fear tactics of the financial system to incentivize debtors to join a growing movement to go on debt strike.

Here she talks us through one of her experiential pieces for an exhibition at the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts (EFA) project space for *To Have and to Owe*, a research platform and series of public events geared toward understanding debt and the social relations surrounding debt in 2012. The piece existed as a papier-mâché sculpture of debt out of ATM receipts and a ritual to transform our relationships to debt. She talks about her project as taking ownership of the process of the collective fetishization that Max Haiven mentions in the preceding section. She concludes by referencing the Rolling Jubilee and the way it invites us to reorient the way we think about debt and how it exists in our imagination.

—ZG

I was at a Strike Debt meeting in New York in the summer of 2012 when two women came up to me and said, “Are you the Cassie that makes art about debt?”

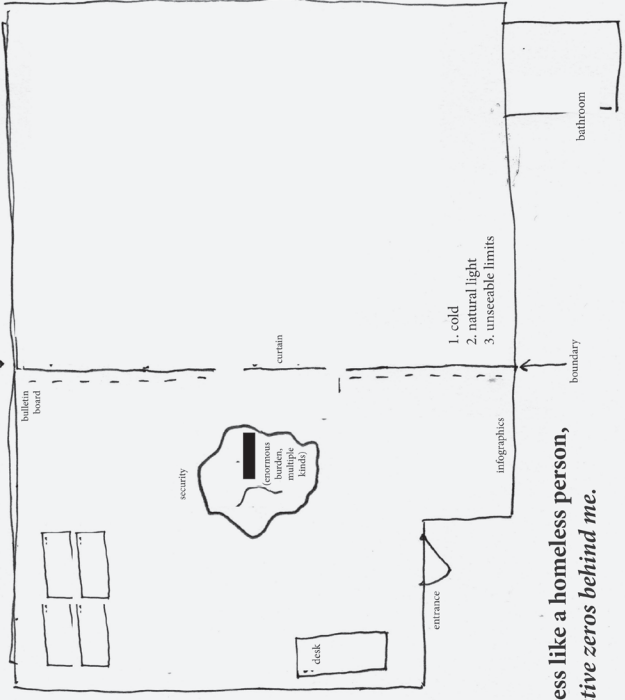
And I said, “Yeah.”

And they said, “We’ve been looking for you.”

A different kind of debt collection. These two women were Laurel Ptak and Leigh Claire La Barge, curators of *To Have and to Owe*. After several meetings with the duo, I realized that this project was more than symbolic. Laurel was viscerally, emotionally, and psychologically interested in debt because of her own experience of it. This project was not just an academic pursuit for her. Once I knew that, the project became much more important to me, and I became interested in why she needed to fill this gallery space with debt.

Hoping to have it shape a transformation

The space is repellent. It has the same structure as debt. I'm standing in front of the boundary. It is an anchor. I want an understanding of the other part of the space. I have the sense I am pecking into the abyss when looking into the other room—I am at the border.



**I should dress like a homeless person,
I have negative zeros behind me.**

unconscious

conscious

Hoping to shape a transformation

In preparation for "To Have and to Owe," curator Laurel Ptak searched for her debt with her eyes closed in the Elizabeth Foundation Gallery, led by Cassandra Thornton. Sitting down and searching for over an hour, Laurel described the artifacts she found of the ungraspable financial collapse. As *the sham* of debt was revealed, the layout for the show emerged. The following description is of Laurel's search for her debt.

conscious

Clarity, a crispness to the air suddenly.

I hope to unburden myself, I stopped paying my credit card debt.

This area hasn't changed at all. I'm attracted to the other [conscious] side, with curiosity. Does it feel different after all this has changed? Not quite enough space for my body...it's the same as in the beginning. I feel compelled to look at the window to daylight that makes sense to me. There's a different quality of light, I see the city as an abstraction. Gobs of metal and tallness. I feel a sense of work, production, labor, transactions. This feels separate, there's a feeling of living outside that I want to bring inside. But it's not there yet.

There is alienation imbedded in the debt-path.

The desk. Seems immovable, undrasable. There's no quality that could interest me. I turn on the computer, see something irrational, abstract and colorful.

The space is devoid of color, blank, color feels empty from it. The floor is gray through and through.

All you have to do is just change your phone number if you have less than three thousand in your account, the debt evaporates.

It is cold. Really cold. Colder than metal, really foreboding, beyond the limits, tongue on a cube or the floor. The limit of the space is so unscalable, like looking past a frozen lake, can't get past it. I didn't want to go in [beyond the boundary] before I was asked to do so. Cold travels through my shoes, I can stand still and then it makes me more aware of my physicality. It's coming more into view, like now I can see the walls, most of the time I was facing the curtain. It was the intuitive way to look back. The curtain had a really, really white feeling.

No lights are on, there's natural light. The light feels like it's coming from the sky but I am aware that it's not possible. If I look up I see sky, blue, slightly cloudy. It seems natural it doesn't seem the roof was ever there. Just the light, that's the only thing. Sky seems clear and concrete but when I look around it keeps vacillating between the walls and the expansive landscape. Seems very unstable. The floor looks like ice on a perfectly frozen surface/concrete.

I feel like throwing a chair at the back wall, which is unclear [the wall]. I feel aware of wanting it to go far but I'm not strong. It's a beige metal chair and I want to throw it. I feel like there would be a sense of relief to throw it, getting rid of something. When I throw it, it goes into an abyss, it goes infinite, it's hovering in a precise forward motion. I'm not strong enough to do this but it doesn't seem like it can stop.

I can see the walls on the sides of me. Normal walls, been there a long time. Not too strong, average in every way and I need a tool to open it [the wall]. A wood wedge, triangular, it's not the best tool. I could scrape it for a while, though this is not the best method for getting down to it. Seems futile, the scraping of the most mundane construction. I try kicking it, wedging the tool in where the floor meets the wall. The wall is coming apart, off the ground, it might fall over. It's gratifying to feel the place where it separates, the floor from the wall. I tried to take a chunk but unmoored the whole wall without much effort. It's tilting, away from the floor, leaving a space to see outside. It's a lot more quiet and empty out there. Sky is disconnected from the sky I saw above, it seems artificial, it wouldn't be connected to the sky [but I can see through the missing roof]. The sky wouldn't govern this lighting which is artificial, blank and unknowable. It doesn't follow the rules of the natural world. I'm attracted to this, I feel conflicted about how much freedom I have or if I have an obligation to hold the building together.

I want to mold outside space into a room. I'm starting to feel the wall is like a white real pure form of clay. I can feel how it could be made into a different form, pure, without laws of construction, gravity. A space more connected to desire instead of logic, it's the outdoor space that is inseparable from this space, it's becoming the space. The floor is stable but the walls are becoming a bit, more rounded features, imprecise, growing more organic, somehow.

To begin my work for the exhibit, I wanted to explore Laurel's relationship to debt by having her visualize her debt as a thing or space. The debt visualization is a hypnotherapeutic process I developed while getting my master's degree, when my classmates and I were making so much more debt than art. Laurel and I went to the gallery together and had a conversation about the scale of Laurel's financial debt. Like anyone, it was much easier for her to share her theoretical ideas about indebtedness than to describe her own experience of it. After listing her financial debts, we began the visualization. I asked her to close her eyes and imagine herself entering the gallery space, searching for a physical representation of her student debt.

To start the debt visualization, I have people close their eyes and imagine walking—just feeling their feet on the ground in an imagined place, observing what it feels like to walk around while the body remains still. I lead them on a search in the unknown, for a thing or a space that they can experience and interact with as if it were their debt.

More than other debtors I had worked with, Laurel was very motivated to explore abstraction—she started by saying, “I should dress like a homeless person because I have negative zeros behind me.” Laurel imagined walking through the door of the EFA Project Space gallery. She described everything she saw, and in moments of quiet, I asked her questions about how she felt.

Laurel described the gallery as a brightly lit room. You can see this in the first image (see page 53), the black-and-white drawing. On the left-hand side of the drawing it said conscious. Things were kind of as-normal over there. And when she crossed over the borderline into the unconscious (as labeled on the drawing), the deeper part

of the gallery, things got dark and cold and the walls flickered—disappearing and reappearing again. She said, “I have the sense I’m peeking into the abyss when looking into the other [side of the] room. I’m at the border.” From her description, there was this sense of infinity in this dark, cold part of the gallery. At one point she threw a chair into the unconscious space, and it stayed in perpetual flight, hovering as it throttled forward into, but not through, the wall. So my analysis was this: As Laurel walked into this unconscious space, she entered a reality that didn’t follow the rules that existed in the initial, conscious space. It was as if getting close to her debt actually removed all that she trusted when she thought of what is “real.”

Entering the dark, cold area provided a place with no gravity, no matter. It’s a useful metaphor. What can we trust when we see that the guidelines we have been living by are not in our best interest? The walls wavered and disappeared and came back. When we finished the visualization we discussed putting handles on the walls of the gallery so Laurel could always feel that they were there. In the end we decided not to, because it seemed like it was more important to let the walls fall.

“I want to mold outside space into a room. I’m starting to feel the wall as a white, real pure form of clay. I can feel how it could be made into a different form, pure without laws of construction, gravity. A space more connected to desire instead of logic. It’s the outdoor space that’s inseparable from this space. It’s become this space. The floor is stable but the walls have become a hut. More rounded features, imprecise. Growing more organic somehow.”

When I think of the pure white clay walls described by Laurel, I see infinite malleability, the pure potential of a clay that is always soft, never dry, never hard, never finished.

This infinite potential that promises never to dry up is familiar to me—it sounds like the potential offered by credit! Maybe Laurel is speaking of a credit that never dries up or becomes hard. What would that be? Perhaps it is untethered to money and responds to desire without threatening indebtedness, guilt, payback—a network of interdependence.

But the fact is that clay gets hard when it dries out. Credit, in a cold, dry financial landscape, becomes heavy and brittle when it transforms into debt. And the fact that a borrower can carry that heavy debt makes them more attractive to predatory creditors, but future loans will always be at a higher interest rate with the threat of a heavy object breaking over the head. The fear that is caused by this threat of something breaking in the future weighs on the unconscious so much, creating mental noise and a fear for survival—such imaginal limitations.

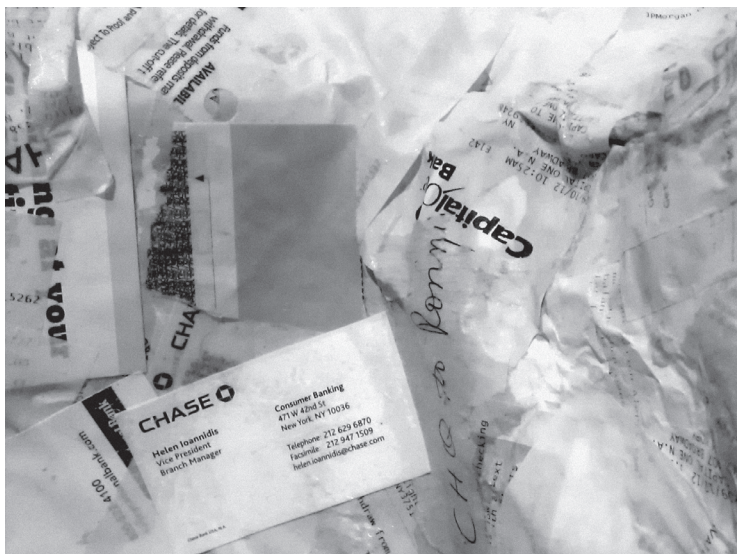
After the debt visualization was complete, we decided to arrange the exhibition around what Laurel saw. We installed a thick white curtain that divided the left side, the conscious space, from the right side, the unconscious space. On the left, conscious side, it was brightly lit. There were large infographics and a library of books about debt and economics. There was a bulletin board with information about projects that people were doing to strike debt or barter. The focus of the room was a set of tables where people could read or talk. On the right side of the map, in the unconscious space, it was dark, cold and windy, and a little disorderly. There was a sense of control and clarity on one side and darkness and chaos on the other.

Laurel requested that I plan a ritual for the show's opening reception. She was forthright about her desire for transformation in the course of this show. If you look back at the map, you'll see this blob drawn in the middle of the

conscious side. It says: ENORMOUS BURDEN MULTIPLE KINDS, and then it says SECURITY around it (see page 53). This unnamed burden was an object for the transformative ritual that was to open the show.

To make this model of a physical “enormous burden,” I collected hundreds of garbage bags of receipts stolen from ATM vestibules all over New York. With interns and friends and whoever would help me, we cleaned out the wastebaskets of every ATM we could find, mostly in Midtown, because that’s where the EFA gallery is. As we collected receipts we could see that the balances on most accounts were low. So many people had \$100 balances, and this is in Midtown Manhattan! Occasionally somebody had \$40,000, but that was rare. The receipts were filthy, covered in spilled coffee and other substances. With many friends over the course of a week, we made a big armature in the shape of a boulder, about ten feet tall. We worked all day and all night covering it with papier-mâché receipts. I would sometimes take walks around Midtown in the middle of the night to get more receipts, and I would come back with strangers who would stay and work with me. As we made this “enormous burden,” we tried not to talk about it or look at it except when absolutely necessary. It had no name, but it was at the center of all our effort.

When the ATM receipts dried, they hardened with a special bluish sheen. Later, I read in a *New York Times* article that this was because of the PCBs that coat that type of receipt. Despite how this physical piece of debt took on the color and the sheen of a glacier, it always looked like it was on the verge of falling apart. It appeared too big to hold itself up. It was too big to fail! We began to call this pathetic boulder of “enormous burden” the “unspeakable thing.” Prior



to the opening of the exhibition, we placed the unspeakable thing in the dark cold area, in the unconscious.

In preparation for September 17, the first anniversary of Occupy Wall Street, members of Strike Debt organized a series of actions to take place in the financial district. As I was building the unspeakable thing, we were also painting banners in the space; my favorite one said SILENCE=DEATH. On September 17, I watched from outside as Laurel was arrested for her participation in an action at JP Morgan Chase. There was confetti thrown, and I saw Andrew Ross being handcuffed and walked out of the bank with party favors on the ground around him. It was unclear if Laurel would be released before the exhibition opened, so we began to install without her.

When I first began to construct the unspeakable thing, I didn't understand what it was for or why I made it. I knew I wanted to make some debt, and I knew we needed a transformative ritual—now more than ever. Two days before the opening, while Laurel was in jail, I called a witch named George for advice. I had met George in a storefront in Queens during Obama's first presidential election. He and his coven hosted an election ritual to save us from John McCain. I invited George to help me design a ritual around debt. At this point I was extremely desperate to figure out what to do for Laurel, and for everyone.

“Do you know what kind of ritual you want to have?” No.

“Do you want to create something or destroy something?” Destroy.

“What do you want to help people destroy?” Fear.

“Fear of what?” Debt.

“Oh, well that's easy. Whenever you want to remove fear, you have to place it into an object, and then take that object and incinerate it or bury it. If you incinerate it, the





EXPORT YOUR DEBT

- I. CLOSE YOUR EYES.
- II. IMAGINE YOUR DEBT AS A THING OR SPACE.
- III. VISUALIZE YOURSELF APPROACHING IT.
- IV. OBSERVE THE FEELINGS YOU HAVE AS YOU NEAR IT.
- V. TRY TO CULTIVATE FEAR AND ANXIETY.
- VI. RUB YOUR HANDS TOGETHER VIGOROUSLY WHILE IMAGINING THE FEELING ENTERING YOUR HANDS.
- VII. GO TO THE HUGE UNSPEAKABLE THING,
AND
AGAINST ANY RECOMMENDATIONS PROVIDED BY SECURITY,
- VIII. TOUCH THE INVISIBLE THING. HOLD YOUR HANDS ON IT, TRYING TO EMPTY OUT YOUR FEELINGS INTO IT.

transformation happens really quickly. If you bury it it takes a little longer, but it's a more thorough change."

And so we had a ritual: Put the fear of debt into the unspeakable thing through people's hands, and incinerate it.

Financial debt wants security. If you have a lot of debt, you want to hide under your security blanket, safe from predatory financial institutions, safe from others who might judge you. If you are a bank and you give a lot of credit and own a lot of debt, you also want security, to protect your assets from the debtors, who want to kill you and take advantage of you. Thus, I hired a security guard to maintain the principles of the unspeakable thing: no acknowledgment of the debt (sight, touch, or discussion) was permitted. I hired a friend, artist, healer and dancer, Shizu Homma, to play the role of security guard during the opening. She is the woman in the image of a dark room, with the unspeakable thing in the foreground. During the opening, she was at her post guarding the sculpture all night. If people came into the dark cold unconscious side of the room (which you had to pass on your way to the bathroom), she would yell: "Don't look at this or touch this!" If visitors acted in violation of the rules, Shizu would issue them a quick citation that said get back here at 7:30. Through the protection of the debt, its presence grows and takes up more space. As visitors must go out of their way to avoid the debt, they are also forced to pretend they are not experiencing it.

Now look at the image of a mirror, where you can see there's a sign taped to it. That mirror was in the bathroom of the gallery, and you had to walk by the debt to get to the bathroom. The bathroom was low lit with blue light and filled with smoke from burnt sage. The sign read: DESPITE WHATEVER AUTHORITY KEEPS YOU FROM IT, TOUCH



THE THING. As people returned to the dark cold room after exiting the bathroom, Shizu yelled at them again, but now they touched the sculpture anyway. Shizu issued them citations that ordered them to return to the debt at 7:30. Eventually most people received a citation.

At 7:30 all the visitors migrated from the bright room into that dark cold room, surrounding the thing but not looking at it. The performance of “pretending not to see” was really funny. After a few minutes of standing in a circle filled with discomfort and quiet, Shizu abruptly ordered the circle of people: “Look at it, and walk towards it.” She waited for the group to obey, then breathed deeply and touched the thing, and everyone followed. Her voice completely changed when she said, “Now while touching it, imagine all of the indebtedness in your body going into this object. Your fear of debt is leaving you as it empties into it.”

This was a powerful moment! We stayed together touching debt, a group of about fifty people, for three or four minutes in silence. Shizu broke the silence with movement, signaling for us to push the debt into the light, through the curtain. As we shoved it into the other room it began to fall apart. When it made it to the center of the conscious side of the room, it was carefully, silently reconstructed. Shizu asked everyone to lie down on the floor, where she led them to imagine their collective debt, which was in this rock, pouring into the ground, where it was neutralized by the earth. At the conclusion of the visualization, she explained how the rocks were going to be incinerated in Laurel’s backyard in a month, after the exhibition concluded. To close, Laurel sprinkled rose water on the debt sculpture, as prescribed by George.

...

It occurs to me that the fetish object, as Max discussed, connects to this physical form of debt we made. In debt we automatically invest our fear, faith, and value, giving it power over us. It makes us desire security as it instills competitive survivalism and a sense of scarcity. I've always likened debt to an idea form, or something that is made into a physical experience by our pure collective belief in it. The more people who fear and respect it, the larger and more ominous it gets. Max (and Marx) related the fetish object to money, and I would like to replace money with debt: "We imagine that [debt] has this power in and of itself, but in fact it's just our collective creative power reflected back to us in a dark mirror." But since it's an abstraction without physicality, you can't see debt, so you just keep staring at the mirror. By using art to make the debt physical, it becomes something to look at in the mirror instead of only looking at yourself.

Reading this text from Max makes me reflect back on this project differently. It now feels as if we experienced the making of a fetish object as a transparent public process. What if we were always able to intentionally imbue objects with value in such a clear way? And what if we could remove the harmful power that we've installed in money? How would we remove our belief from it?

A change in where we put our value would require a change in our belief of what is possible, which is something that the Rolling Jubilee did. When the Rolling Jubilee began, a friend wrote on my Facebook wall, "I didn't know people could act like this." It's not that Rolling Jubilee was about altruism, but it was about revealing a different story about debt that removed its mysterious sanctimonious power over us. In a series of debt buys, the omnipresent monolithic power of debt was disproved. Instead of looking at debt

and seeing a mirror, we just saw a flawed system with holes that we could reach into. I always think of the Rolling Jubilee as being the first soft spot in a hard system, when we're so used to systems being so slick, impenetrable, and seamless.

**Thomas Gokey
and Zachary Gough
in Conversation**

If there's one thing that art can do, it is to change the way we think about the world around us. It can show us that our beliefs—economic or otherwise—are mutable and in flux. When Cassie told me that she knew Thomas Gokey, one of the artists deeply involved in the Rolling Jubilee, I asked her to put us in touch.

The Rolling Jubilee is a project by Strike Debt New York, an offshoot of Occupy Wall Street. The premise of the project is fairly simple: it works by exploiting a loophole in the debt system. Typically, if someone defaults on their debt—perhaps they can't make their student loan repayments or they incurred medical expenses due to unplanned illness or accident—their debt is bundled with other defaulted debts. Creditors then sell those debt bundles on a secondary debt market for a fraction of their value. For example, a \$50,000 debt is traded for \$2,000, \$20,000 is bought for just \$800 or thereabouts. Brilliantly, through relationships with secondary debt collectors, the Rolling Jubilee is able to buy large sums of debt on these secondary markets for a fraction of the cost. Rather than collecting on the debts' full value, the Rolling Jubilee cancels the debts completely. As of this writing, Strike Debt New York has fundraised over \$700,000 and with it, canceled almost \$32 million. It's a kind of reverse neoliberal alchemy—turning gold into straw.

The Rolling Jubilee reveals to us that the value of our debts is relative. They expect us to pay our debts in full, and yet they sell them to each other for pennies on the dollar. For me, this project deeply changes the beliefs I have about money, debt, and value. I venture to say that this project is having a large effect on public consciousness and how we understand debt. The problem with it, however, is that it doesn't change the way the system works, only

the way we think about it. It is an exposing and an exploiting of a loophole within the debt system.

But for me, where this project falls short as a tactic for change, it thrives as an artwork. One of the potentially defining features of a socially engaged artwork is that it uses real-life collaborative actions as artistic gestures. The critical theorist Stephen Wright calls this a *double ontology*, an event that serves as a representation of something and simultaneously as the thing represented itself. He uses an example from a Lewis Carroll novel, *Sylvie and Bruno*, in which two characters discuss a map so large that the land itself is used as a map.¹ The Rolling Jubilee does just this. It is not just an idea—in fact the idea of the Rolling Jubilee had been floating around activist circles for a long time—but it is the real-life manifestation of that idea. This manifestation of the idea brings so much power to it. We see it as real and possible right before our eyes.

Meeting and speaking with Thomas felt like meeting the man behind the curtain in the Emerald City. He is part of a dedicated team, largely unrecognized and hidden behind the collective authorship of Strike Debt, who brought the Rolling Jubilee to life. I was particularly interested to speak to him because of his approach to this work as an artist. In our conversation we talked a lot about what skills an artist offers social-change movements, a bit about artists working in libraries; we also talked about authorship, scale, and the imagination. We spoke online on January 31, 2015.

—ZG

ZACHARY GOUGH: I want to cover some large topics; each of those might have some subcategories. Specifically the



imagination, authorship, scale, and art in libraries, or more broadly the commons. I also definitely want to talk about Rolling Jubilee. To start out, I know you have some trepidation about identifying your work as art. With the *LibraryFarm*, for example, a project that you worked on with your wife, Meg Backus, you've said it feels icky or morally wrong to you somehow to call it art; but I wonder how should I introduce you, as a creative activist? Is "artist" also a term that you don't like? I wonder what you think of the term "constructivist," as in Gandhi's "constructive program"?

THOMAS GOKEY: Well, it's interesting because I don't mind being called an artist. I still insist on being called an artist. But that might just be a hangover from how I've thought about myself for a long time. So maybe I should be thinking more critically about that title and whether I should be using it anymore. But just in my own head, I am still very much an artist. Just the other day someone sent me a message and said "What's your day job?" and I said "No, I'm an artist! I don't want to be identified by my day job." I guess the way I'm struggling to articulate this is that I'm an artist who doesn't know what we're doing anymore. But maybe the only reason I'm calling myself an artist is that I went to art school. A lot of us who are working on Strike Debt or the Rolling Jubilee or the Debt Collective came from cultural work of one variety or another, but not all of us did, and we're all basically doing the same work. My friend who's working on the Rolling Jubilee who's an accountant is, I think, approaching the work from a different perspective than I am. The work is basically the same, but the frame we're coming to it with is different. I still see like an artist and the work feels the way creative work has always felt. Working on the debt collective, trying

to think of creative ways to get around laws that are designed to protect creditors from debtors. So to think, well wait a second, maybe we can get around a law this way or maybe we can use this law to do what we want to do. It feels the same way as when you're in the studio and you're struggling with materials. Wood can do certain things and it can't do other things. But maybe we can flex the material of wood in an interesting way to make it do something it hasn't done before. For better or worse, I'm an artist. Whether or not the work that we're doing should be called artistic work is something I'm still trying to figure out. For me the questions aren't really artistic questions. I think it's very uninteresting to say what counts as a work of art anymore from the question of aesthetics. I mean, certainly what we're doing could be art. The question is more of an ethical or political one: Should this be art? Aren't there some things that are worth protecting from the art world?

ZG: Yeah. The first thing that comes to mind is about the public library system. I'm interested in positioning my own work within the library system, and—not to jump too far from the Rolling Jubilee—do you see the library as a potentially dangerous place to work as an artist?

TG: Well, I'd like to think more about what you're thinking in terms of what the dangers of libraries are.

ZG: Mmm. Well, I mean not just the fear of being a burden on those institutions—they're already short-staffed, underfunded, and things like that—but also co-opting programs that are already existing for your own personal gain, enclosing them. Which relates to this topic of authorship that I really

want to talk about too. I guess that's what I'm thinking about when I ask the question. Is the public library one of those things worth protecting from the art world?

TG: Well, sounds like your concerns about libraries are very different from my concerns about libraries. And this is where it seems that maybe you should be having a conversation with my wife, Meg Backus, who's a professional librarian. Having done this work for five or six years thinking about libraries and getting a bit of distance and perspective about how we were approaching it earlier, I think the danger that we fell into was probably being a bit too idealistic about libraries. We were interested in the commons, and thinking where could the commons still function in an idealistic sense. Everybody loves libraries. That's starting to change a little bit, but even across the political spectrum, people have a lot of warm feelings for libraries. If libraries didn't exist, and we were proposing to create something like this, I think it'd be impossible to make it. It would be considered a horrible communist experiment in the current political climate. But because it already has existed, people kind of love it. So we were approaching the libraries as a place where the commons is still possible. I'm an outsider still, I've been working on projects within the library, but my wife goes to work every day there. And so it's become a little bit hard to keep lying to ourselves about how idealistic these institutions are. We have been telling ourselves that libraries are places where democracy is being practiced but also where it's being produced, where in the functioning of libraries there's more democracy tomorrow than there was today because of the work that libraries are doing. The reality is that public libraries aren't very democratic, they're still based in these hierarchical

municipal systems and it's hard to be reminded of that over and over again. The actual people don't get to decide how the library functions, they don't get to make the decisions. These decisions are still largely made by mayors and city councils, and there's nothing at all democratic about mayors and city councils. The library board of directors is largely unrepresentative of the population the library is supposed to be serving. And having worked with horizontal structures in Occupy where you get to see actual democracy with all of its messiness, it's just completely different from how a city is run. So I am interested in people like Amy Roberts and her work with Occupy and archives.² I'm very interested in her work. You know, I think in order to make the library that we want it's going to have to exist outside of libraries. We're not so much worried that we're going to fall into the trap of co-opting libraries, so much as it is that the ideals that we're approaching libraries with aren't actually realized in libraries, and the work that we're trying to do isn't possible.

ZG: Another one of my assumptions is that librarians hold those sorts of values, but is that an invalid assumption do you think?

TG: I think that librarians are some of the best people I've ever met. I can think of many, many librarians who hold those sorts of ideas. I've been dealing with a lot of debt collectors and a lot of debt buyers, and when you can approach them as human beings, the way that they would like to live their lives is very different from how they are actually living their lives. Most of us have ideals that are out of step with our practices, even if you find an army of librarians who are champions of democracy, the library as a structure fights against that.

And it's not so much the library as it is the city. This fake democracy that we have in municipalities fights against the genuine democratic values that many libraries and library patrons have. There are so many things that we could be doing that we're not able to do because libraries aren't democratic.

ZG: Jumping back to the Rolling Jubilee, I'm thinking about its effect on my imagination and the way that I understand debt as a phenomenon in our society. I know I'm not the only one who thinks about debt differently after the Rolling Jubilee. Specifically, that it shows how the value of debt is relative. This puncture in the system is so powerful to me because we're led to believe that the system is so empirically sound. Cassie Thornton described the Rolling Jubilee as "the first soft spot in a hard system." I know you have used religious language to talk about art after Occupy Wall Street. I'm wondering how you see the Rolling Jubilee's effect on our collective imagination and its ability to affect the way we perceive a world we might live in and our beliefs about what is possible?

TG: Well, yeah! This is something where again, I want to hear more from you on this, because I've been inside of it so much on a daily basis. I've been operating inside the Rolling Jubilee for 40 hours a week for the last three years. I've lost perspective. I think the main frustrating thing about it was that people got too focused on the Rolling Jubilee as an end in itself, and failed to see the way it fit within a larger debt-resistance movement. And that's been a real struggle for us to dream beyond the Rolling Jubilee.

To me, the big rupture wasn't the Rolling Jubilee itself. Prior to Occupy, I had this massive amount of personal debt, and I thought "I'm never going to get out from under

this, I mean I could live to be 120 and I'm not going to get rid of this, so I just need to come up with a creative way to get rid of it." So I was trying to make a work of art where somehow in the act of selling the actual work of art I could pay for my debt. But the real puncture for me was when Occupy happened. We were physically taking up space that is kind of near Wall Street. In some ways that's a direct action because our bodies were physically there and we were freaking out police and we were freaking out the right people. Wall Street was scared for some reason. And if they had let us stay there and actually build the society we want to see in the park, we were actually not interfering with what they were doing. If I was the 1% or the mayor of New York or the police chief I would have treated Occupy as this harmless thing that should be ignored. And if they had ignored it, it would have fizzled as these things tend to do. Instead, because they freaked out and the police overreacted, it grew and spread. When people saw nonviolent people being pepper sprayed for simply taking up space in a park, that made it grow exponentially. In the park we were thinking, "OK, what actually would interfere with the operation of what Wall Street is doing?" And very quickly the big light switch moment for me was that instead of finding creative ways to pay my debt, we needed to stop paying our debts altogether. If we could create a giant debt strike, we could win. We could take all of the control away from Wall Street and all of the control away from Congress if we just collaboratively refused to pay our debts.

So then the Rolling Jubilee became a means to an end to building a debtors' union of some kind. But I don't think that people got that. We never thought of the Rolling Jubilee as charity work, we thought of it as illumination. Trying

to illuminate how debt functions, to pierce through the fake morality of debt. We hoped that people would start thinking that we don't owe the debt that the 1% says we owe them. They sell it to each other for four cents on the dollar. Who do we actually owe, and what do we actually owe? Those were to me the big dangerous questions. What do we owe and to whom? Because maybe the answer is that maybe we don't owe the 1% anything. But maybe we do owe each other health care; maybe we do owe each other an education; maybe we do owe each other work, meaningful work, not just minimum-wage work doing damaging things, but actual meaningful work; maybe we owe each other livelihoods; and maybe we should start paying those debts instead of the ones that the 1% claims we owe them. Instead, I think too many people saw the Rolling Jubilee as charity, where too many people got excited about the gimmick aspect of it.

In my view, it would have been better—you know we raised \$700,000 dollars, but our initial goal was to just raise \$50,000—I think it would have been better to have raised \$50,000 to do the Rolling Jubilee as this consciousness-raising project and spent the other \$650,000 on building the infrastructure to form a debtors' union. But we felt a responsibility to the people who were donating money to use it for this specific thing that they all believed they were donating to. We were bound to that and now we're struggling to shift gears to a debtors' union. We really need a half million dollars to build the infrastructure to make the debtors' union function and we're trying to figure out how to get that money exactly. When we started raising money for the Rolling Jubilee we knew for sure, for sure, for sure that it was going to work. We had already done tests, we had done nine months of research. With the debtors' union, we're inventing the

airplane in mid-air. We're not sure that it's going to work, so it makes us a little hesitant to go to the public, ask for half a million dollars and promise a revolution. I'm not sure how many people's imaginations were shifted by the Rolling Jubilee. It's good to hear that you imagine differently and I'd like to hear more from you about how you thought of debt before the Rolling Jubilee and how you're thinking of it now.

ZG: My perspective is more similar to yours than the general public's, I think. I come from an arts education and that kind of thing. Before the Rolling Jubilee I saw debt as a negative bank balance, and now I see it as a relationship between parties in different social classes. I see that the value of a dollar is relative. One of the things that I like about the Rolling Jubilee is that it really does capture people's imagination, in a way that somehow the debtors' union hasn't done for me yet. I don't say that as a critique. I've often talked about the Rolling Jubilee as my favorite artwork ever—but specifically as an artwork. I think that part of the reason people latch onto it is that it's a symbolic action, but a symbolic action that has very real ramifications. One of the things I want to talk to you about is the scale of that symbolic action. On the scale of global capitalism, one of my teachers described it as homeopathic, totally tiny. But for the scale of the individual, it's massive. Debts so large that, as you were saying about yours, you'd never pay it off in your entire lifetime. So, shifting the scale is one of the components of it. And also that it is both symbolic and a tangible interaction, and I know that in this conversation you've been downplaying the role of the realness of its charitable components, but those charitable components in their

tangibility are effective means of capturing the imagination. And the debtors' union, like other economic systems such as financial debt, or currency, requires faith. So I guess how I'm thinking about what art has to offer is our ability to transmit our faith into different systems. And I think that's something that, working through the connections between art and social change, I'm interested in figuring out—what art's role is. To turn this into a question, do you see the creative component or the symbolic component in the debtors' union in the way that I see it in the Rolling Jubilee?

TG: Well, a couple of thoughts. For us, the Rolling Jubilee is not at all charity. We see it as an act of concrete mutual aid. Our donations were all small amounts. On average donations were about \$40, but there were lots and lots of people who gave just one dollar. We would get messages from people on Facebook that said "I am massively in debt, I work minimum wage, but I want to give you something so I'm going to give you one dollar." These are people who are massively in debt who know that they are not going to be helped themselves by the Rolling Jubilee because you're absolutely right, in terms of scale this is just a drop in the bucket, but the idea that that one dollar that they're donating could get rid of at least \$20 of somebody else's debt was something that they felt strongly enough about that they gave, even though they couldn't afford to give anything. As someone who was raised in a very Christian environment, I'm reminded of one of the stories from the gospels, of the poor widow who donates two mites at the temple. Jesus says, Well that person actually gave more than all the wealthy people who make a big show out of their giving, because she gave out of her lack, whereas they gave out of their riches. I think of Jacques

Lacan, who says love gives what it lacks. “I don’t have any money to give, I am in debt, but I will give out of my debt.”

And I’m not interested in symbolic actions. I’m really not interested in it at all. The protests against the war in Iraq were just symbolic. They were partly cathartic, they helped my psychology a lot to participate in them, to know that I wasn’t crazy, that I wasn’t the only one who thought that this war was ridiculous, but it didn’t actually hinder the war effort in the slightest. I’m not interested in symbolic action; I want direct action. And that’s why it is important to change the way people think about debt, but that’s only important if we start creating direct confrontation with debt. And that’s where I think the debtors’ union succeeds as a tactic where the Rolling Jubilee never will be able to succeed. The Rolling Jubilee is both symbolic and real, but the real portion is a drop in the bucket. A writer for the *Guardian* called the Rolling Jubilee “the sparkling lit fuse of debt resistance.” If you follow that fuse it leads to a powder keg of a debt strike. A debt strike is just a different tactic; that’s how I see the Rolling Jubilee—it’s a tactic and that’s useful as far as it goes, but its main success or failure should be measured in how well it creates an on-ramp for other tactics like debt strikes.

I guess the real crossover between artistic practice and the kind of work we’re doing now is exactly this relationship between the symbolic, imaginary, or representational things and actual real things. One of the things that, as an educator, when I used to teach studio art classes, I helped my students work through, and I think is part of growing as an artist—a lot of my students will come to me with an issue that they feel very deeply about and are making art about, and they start by simply operating on a representational level. We’ll discuss what projects they want to make, and they’ll say “I’m really

concerned about food and food justice, and so I'm going to make a painting that when people see this painting I want them to know that the food court on campus is wasting a lot of food." I ask them, "Instead of making a painting that's representing that problem, wouldn't it be more interesting to just intervene directly in the problem? Wouldn't it be more interesting to make a compost system to handle all this food waste? Or to create an actual garden or to go on a hunger strike? Can we move away from the representational realm, and move closer and closer to the heart of the matter?"

For me, the heart of the matter in debt is that when I pay my debt, I'm actually betraying all of the people I care about. When I pay my debt to Sallie Mae, I'm actively harming other people. I might be forced to do it, because if I refuse the state is going to squish me. But I feel a certain responsibility to try to find a way of avoiding that harm. And this is something that I am working through personally with my own personal debt because, and maybe this is something you'd be interested in talking more about, I have been working for free for the last three years or so. I was an adjunct getting paid poverty wages to educate people in art, and I care deeply about education, I care deeply about art, but I wasn't getting paid enough to actually survive. For the Rolling Jubilee, none of us have been paid a penny, and we've been working very, very hard. Now I've just recently moved, and this is my first week working a new job. And it's a very strange experience for me, because I'm getting paid a living wage, not just a living wage, but an actual liberating wage, and I don't know how to deal with it. It's a new experience, and it feels very weird, but it also changes what would be possible with my student debt. If I wanted to, I could start making payments on my student debt. But I'm trying to figure out if that's the right thing

to do or is that the wrong thing to do? Is there a better way to approach my debt than to just start paying it off? What would that look like, what are the risks involved? I haven't figured out what I should do yet, but it's a weird thing to try to navigate and I don't know the answers.

ZG: One thing that I struggle with all the time is thinking about to what degree is it OK to participate in a totally exploitative, unjust, and immoral system such as capitalism? It's just an open question for me, I don't know when it's OK to pay rent, when it's OK to buy food at the grocery store, because I'm supporting the system in some way. Pure abstinence from it is maybe possible for a small portion of us living here in the US, but for the most part we're forced into participation in some way. I guess I have understanding for the situation that you're in, trying to figure out how to tackle the problem of being able to pay your debt. But it seems like finding an interesting way to solve that problem is a good ambition.

TG: And even if I was able to find a creative way to refuse paying my debts, that doesn't really mean that I am in any way less involved in capitalism. There is no outside of capitalism. We exist inside of it, even if most of the things that we do in our daily lives aren't capitalism. I'm also feeling somewhat optimistic that capitalism isn't going to last much longer and I'm both excited and terrified by what might be coming next. You raise a really good point about paying rent, because I pay my rent and I really don't sweat it. I guess this might be that you can't focus on everything all at once, and my debt has occupied this larger part of my consciousness. Maybe for other people trying to resist paying rent

is the thing that they feel really guilty about or conflicted about. There's so much work to do. We really could create systems where we didn't have to pay rent. That would be so much fun to do. And I feel that and maybe because I now have an actual job that's paying me actual money, I could take a large portion of what I'm making and start making a community land trust so that we can create systems where we're not paying rent. I'm not sure how to deal with work and labor and money, because with my new job the main feeling is that I've traded all of my time to be liberated financially, whereas previously I was totally liberated in my time but not at all liberated in terms of finance.

ZG: I want to go back to this idea of getting people to follow the sparkling lit fuse of debt resistance. It's a question for you, so I'm excited to hear about what sorts of thoughts you're having about convincing people to follow you on the path and whether your training as an artist is relevant to that aim and whether other skills are going to be necessary.

TG: We're still at the very beginning of working on the debtors' union in a serious way. So I still feel pretty optimistic that we're going to find ways to succeed. You know, nothing succeeds like success. If we can get a couple small-scale victories under our belt that act as a sort of proof of concept for a debtors' union or a debt strike, I think that that will be the best way to get everybody's eyes to light up and see the really enormous potential here. We're starting to do that. So in the next month we're getting ready to announce our first small-scale targeted debt strike. I definitely think that being trained as an artist is very helpful. I love, love, love the process

that we've had just in this past week, thinking really creatively about laws and how money actually works. Now we're coming up with really creative uses for escrow accounts that would help support a debt strike. The main frustration for me is that I feel like I wish I was a lawyer. We definitely need lawyers that are able to think creatively. And one of the problems is that in order to be a lawyer you need to take out \$200,000 in loans, and afterwards you need to get a job to pay off those loans, and so you need a corporate job. You can't be doing any creative work with a group of activists and artists doing creative things with the law. Debt has this enormous disciplinary power that helps prevent the kind of work that we're trying to do. But also, you can be an excellent lawyer without necessarily being a very creative lawyer, so we need that right mixture of talent and knowledge working collaboratively in order to make what we're trying to make. Right now we're having trouble getting enough lawyers who have enough time to dedicate to what we're trying to do. It's annoying because I'd love to just do it myself. I'm willing to dedicate enough time to do it myself, but I'm not a lawyer, I can't do it. And this was actually true with all of the artwork I was making before. I was making art about brain chemistry, and I needed to convince some neuroscientists to help me do what I was trying to do. If I have any talent as an artist it's talking to specialized people and getting them excited about doing what we're trying to do. They always end up saying yes.

ZG: That's a great skill to have.

TG: And creativity is by no means a monopoly for artists. There are all kinds of engineers who are immensely creative. I'm pretty sure there are lawyers who are amazingly creative

and just don't get the opportunity or excuse to be creative with the law.

ZG: I also want to talk a bit about authorship. I've been thinking about creativity as a collective process, a common resource, something that really doesn't happen in the individual brain or mind, but rather through bouncing ideas around. Coming up with something purely original is really hard or maybe impossible. I was thinking about artistic authorship as ownership, an enclosing of the common creativity. And because I think of the Rolling Jubilee as an artwork, even if that might seem like a betrayal for you to think about it that way, I guess I'm curious to know about the authorship of the Rolling Jubilee and how you present it in your mind and to others.

TG: Sure. Well, let's just start thinking about the Rolling Jubilee as an artwork as a thought experiment. I totally agree with you that thinking is a social act. I'm totally fascinated by the sociology of knowledge. There's all of these studies that have shown that a very large percentage of Nobel Prize winners in science have ended up in laboratories that were overseen by previous Nobel Prize winners in science. So it seems like your ability to be a creative scientist is in part dependent upon being in conversations with other creative scientists. I certainly find that I would love to believe that I could just be equally creative no matter what scenario you throw me into, but the reality is that I do my best work when I'm in a thriving context. When I was at the Art Institute of Chicago, everyone there was doing their best work, so it was really easy to do your best work. I was more creative because I was constantly talking to people who were doing the most mind-blowing, amazing things. They made me better just

by being around them. Lately, I feel like I've been living in exile; I was living in places like Chattanooga and now I live in Anchorage. I really would love to live in a place like New York where I feel like I'd be able to do so much more if I could be closer to the people I want to work with. So thinking is definitely a social act. In terms of collaborative artwork, we're not actually doing anything that new. It's an old problem in thinking about authorship when you're dealing with a bunch of people. You could do it like Hollywood does it and try to apportion each part of the job and properly credit each person for their work. Which is kind of an interesting thing for me because if we're talking about debt resistance, and it really is a question about credit, who gets the artistic credit for this work? The Hollywood approach of saying here's who did what still portions and privatizes the creative work. This person did set design and that person did costume design. But the really creative parts are when the director and the costume designer are talking to each other and feeding off of each other, and the costume designer ends up influencing the direction of the film. Does the costume designer get to share credit for directing? For me, the way that authorship gets thrown into a problem, if we want people to rethink debt and credit, we should be rethinking artistic credit as well. I like the approach that Strike Debt used when we produced *The Debt Resisters' Operations Manual*, where lots of people had a hand in it, and it's not entirely clear who all was involved. It's collectively written, almost anonymously written; it's published under the name Strike Debt. I didn't have a very involved role in it myself, but I still feel a certain amount of ownership of *The Debt Resisters' Operations Manual*. I feel really proud of it, even though I didn't do very much with it. But there were people for whom that became

their main project, they invested a lot in it, and I sort of feel that they should be acknowledged for the significant amount of work that they put into it. And then, I didn't come up with the idea of the Rolling Jubilee; I heard about it from David Graeber, who heard about it from Micah White. Laura Hanna, who's been working on the Rolling Jubilee as hard as anybody, heard about it independently from somebody in the global jubilee movement, so I don't know where the idea originally came from. I can sort of trace the provenance of it. I guess the other aspect of creative work is that when you do get a really genuinely original idea, the experience of it is that the idea still kind of came from elsewhere. This is why we talk about the inspiration of the muses or something; it feels like the idea was gifted from a divine source. The Rolling Jubilee shouldn't belong to anybody; it belongs to the debtors' union that hasn't yet come into being.

ZG: Are there drawbacks to that for you as an individual? As an artist we live in an art world where paintings or art objects are created by artists and each artwork has a title and an author, like a didactic panel in a museum. And you're operating in a totally different structure of authorship. I'm wondering, what do those sacrifices look like? You could choose not to pay your debts and there are consequences to that. You can choose to do authorship in this way and what are the consequences to that?

TG: Recently we had a conversation at Artists Space in New York about the Rolling Jubilee and artistic practice and I was trying to work through my own problems of trying to work through this kind of work as art. And some of the feedback I got from people in the audience

was “You’re looking at this all wrong. If you call this stuff art, people will fund it. If you don’t call it art, all of the different arts foundations are not going to fund it, they’re not going to fund political work. But they will fund it if you call it art, so don’t have any kind of moral issues with it, just act from a practical standpoint. You want to make a revolution, you need to fund the revolution; if you call it art it will fund the revolution, and that should decide the question.” I think that there’s a lot of wisdom in that approach, and maybe that’s the approach we’ll start taking. The main problem I’ve been having is, for example, I used to have a portfolio website, the way every artist is supposed to have; you put work online so that anybody can find it and see all the awesome work that you’re doing and hopefully there will be more opportunities in the future.

The trouble is that I don’t know how to relate the work I am doing now to the work I had previously been doing. And so I just hadn’t updated my website in three years. It became a sort of time capsule to the work I had been doing previously to Occupy. And then about four months ago I decided to take down my portfolio website entirely. Eventually I’m going to put something new up, and I don’t know what it should look like. But it would feel like a really jackass move if I put up a portfolio website and I said “Oh yeah, and the Rolling Jubilee is this work of art that I made.” To me that would be this really nasty betrayal of all of my friends that have been working on it together, some of whom are not artists and are not going to be able to cash in on the Rolling Jubilee in that way. And I do mean cashing it in in a career-oriented way. At the same time, a few months ago, my wife and I were in some pretty serious financial difficulty and I was desperately looking for a job. I couldn’t have a three-year gap on my résumé, so I had

to put something there to let people know that I'm an interesting person who's up to interesting stuff. I am legitimately proud of the work that I am doing, so it seems like there's some legitimate way I can point to the Rolling Jubilee and say "This is something I was involved in and isn't it awesome?" At the same time that I was taking my art website off the Web, I was starting to put the Rolling Jubilee on my CV and I was conflicted about that, but if I hadn't done that, I wouldn't be able to eat right now. We were worried we were going to be evicted four months ago. And now the situation is completely, bizarrely different.

When it comes to whether the Rolling Jubilee is a legitimate work of art, I want to get our accountant who's been working on the Rolling Jubilee to start answering the question, because I don't know what the answer is and I think she should be the one to start answering it. There are people like Laura Hanna and Astra Taylor who are filmmakers who are doing this really interesting work and I'm not sure how they're thinking about the way that this debt work we've all been doing relates to the filmmaking work that they do. But it seems like however they navigate that will help clarify how I should navigate this same thing. So I don't know. It's really fun for me, because all of these questions are very open-ended and it feels like they could go in lots of different directions. If you can help me navigate it at all I'd love your help.

ZG: The only thought I have, other than sympathy and gladness that you're in a better spot now, is about this relationship between acknowledgment and credit. You're very proud of *The Debt Resisters' Operations Manual* and want to acknowledge the people who worked

very hard on it. Maybe the solution is a collective CV writing process, where we write each other's CVs, or make each other's websites that serve as letters of recommendation in website form or something like that, which showcases our contributions. A process that isn't enclosing and delineating, but speaks qualitatively to what one does in a collective, creative process.

TG: Thinking through *The Debt Resistors' Operations Manual* is good, that helps me clarify our labor in relation to the Rolling Jubilee. I feel ownership for *The Debt Resistors' Operations Manual*, even though I didn't work on it very much. My feeling of ownership over it to me doesn't negate at all the really enormous amount of labor that a few of my friends put into it, and I want to acknowledge all of that labor. And to me, I guess the ideal way of relating to the Rolling Jubilee would be to feel like a lot of my friends in the debt-resistance movement who haven't been working day in and day out on Rolling Jubilee would feel the same amount of ownership on Rolling Jubilee, while still being able to acknowledge people like Ann Larson, Laura Hanna, and myself, who really have invested a lot of blood, sweat, and tears into making it function. I'm only comfortable with that acknowledgment if there are a lot of other people who feel invested ownership in it. I guess that's something I'm taking from you. If you feel the Rolling Jubilee was this important artwork that helped you change the way you imagine about debt, if you feel like the Rolling Jubilee sort of belongs to you or your situation, that allows me to feel a little more comfortable about owning my labor in relation to Rolling Jubilee. But I am mad proud of *The Debt Resistors' Operations Manual*. I'm very, very proud of it, but it's not to my credit; I didn't

do very much with it, except trying to get it into as many hands as possible.

A FOLLOW-UP QUESTION OVER EMAIL

ZG: Thomas, one thing that I've been thinking since our chat, and which didn't come out in my questions about symbolic/real is this: Do you think that Rolling Jubilee's success to capture the radical imagination is in part related to its symbolic-ness (I know you are not interested in symbolic action, but I'm wondering if symbolism has a role in the movement)? The way Rolling Jubilee represents, like a painting or sculpture does, an alternate route for our debt society? Once a debtors' strike happens, it will serve symbolically to represent future debt strikes. Occupy was a group of people manifesting the world they wanted to see, but it fuels our collective imaginations, represents the idea of that world growing and replacing the one we currently live in. And so, maybe the question that is emerging from my thoughts is "Does an action that is symbolic and real have more weight than one that is only real? Can a symbolic action capture our imagination in a way a purely real action can't?" I can give an example to explain my thinking a little more. The myth of the middle class is something that sustains the status quo in America. We go into debt to get an education, buy a house to maintain our "middle-class status." This myth exists in our collective social imagination; if it was replaced with another story, one of justice, equality, direct democracy, etc., our everyday actions would be channeled into creating other realities. Obviously REAL change is the desired outcome, but maybe through changing our beliefs within the collective

social imagination we might be able to get there...
Just a thought.

TG: Zach, I guess part of the problem is that we are using terms like *symbolic* that are often used in highly technical ways, so it's not entirely clear if what I mean by rejecting symbolic actions is the same thing you mean when you see power in symbolism. I think changing ideology is very powerful. For the generation since 1968 it seems like radical thinking and theorizing has been the main kind of radical work that we could do. Of course changing the way we think has huge implications, but it seems like radicals have retreated into thought. Too much theory and not enough praxis. It's time to not just reread our Marx but to take seriously the call to change the world, not merely interpret it. If the Rolling Jubilee can help change how people think about debt on a fundamental level, then I'm very glad. But the proof is in the pudding. Now that we think differently, how is that new way of thinking going to show up in our concrete lives?

1. Stephen Wright, "'Use the country itself, as its own map': operating on the 1:1 scale." n.e.w.s., 2012. <http://northeastwestsouth.net/use-country-itself-its-own-map-operating-1-1-scale>.

2. Here's a good article about Amy's work: <http://thebrooklynink.com/2011/12/26/39230-the-anarchivists-who-owns-the-occupy-wall-street-narrative>.

And here is a brief description of her project: <https://peopleslibrary.wordpress.com/the-working-group/occupy-wall-street-archival-project>.

Thomas Gokey is a visual artist currently based in Anchorage, Alaska. Recent projects include the LibraryFarm, a collective farm on public land at the Northern Onondaga Public Library, and GutenbAAAAARG, a pirate printing press. Gokey has an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and turned his student debt into a work of art that is available for sale for the exact amount of the debt. He is currently a PhD candidate at the European Graduate School. Gokey is an organizer with Strike Debt, an offshoot of Occupy Wall Street, which seeks to create a global debtors movement.

Zachary Gough is a person, artist, and student/teacher who works collaboratively and responsively with other artists, community groups, and organizations to promote alternative economic systems and toward deconstructing the capitalist viral value paradigm and its manifestations. He often uses participatory and immaterial media, such as radio and performance, to address materialist concerns, such as labor, power, debt, education, and liberation. Zach is a candidate in the Art and Social Practice MFA Program at Portland State University in Oregon.

Max Haiven is a writer, teacher, and organizer, and an assistant professor in the Division of Art History and Critical Studies at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. He holds a PhD in English and cultural studies from McMaster University and an MA in globalization studies from the same. He spent two years as a postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Art and Public Policy at New York University. Based now in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Haiven has been involved in student, peace, trade union, antiracist, and indigenous solidarity struggles. Primarily, Haiven's scholarly research has focused on the financialization of society and culture over the past forty years. He has published in journals including *Social Text*, *Cultural Studies*, *Cultural Politics*, *Mediations*, *The Radical History Review* and *Cultural Logic*. His first scholarly monograph, *Cultures of Financialization: Fictitious Capital in Popular Culture and Everyday Life*, was published by Palgrave Macmillan in October of 2014. He is currently co-director (along with Alex Khasnabish) of the Radical Imagination Project, an ethnographic solidarity research initiative dedicated to understanding and enlivening radicalism and activism in Halifax. Their writing about the project has appeared in journals including *Affinities*, *Cultural Studies* <=> *Critical Methodologies*, and *Interface*, and their book *The Radical Imagination: Social Movement Research in the Age of Austerity* was published by Zed Books in July of 2014. Haiven's sole-authored academic work on the radical imagination has appeared in journals including *Cultural Critique* and *The Review of Education, Pedagogy and Cultural Studies*. He also frequently writes for nonacademic venues, including *Truth-Out*, *Dissident Voice*, *Art Threat*, *ROAR Magazine*, *Canadian Dimension*, and *Znet*. His book *Crises of Imagination, Crises of Power: Capitalism, Creativity and the Commons* was published by Zed Books in March 2014.

Cassie Thornton is an artist who is sometimes referred to as the Feminist Economics Department (the FED) and who works in collusion with Strike Debt in Oakland, California. Her work investigates and reveals the impact of governmental and economic systems on public affect, behavior, and unconscious, with a focus on debt and security. Cassie's recent works offer regular people an alternative route to find "financial success" by making opportunities for them to develop and honor complex personal narratives that replace credit scores, for dreams to weigh heavier than data, and for value to stand up and divorce that nasty cheating money. These opportunities are meant for the privileged and the poor, and involve imagining debt as a physical obstacle or opening an alternative credit-rating bureau, as well as workshops and essays that demonstrate how living is not a financial instrument.

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Notes

39 Cesare Pietroiusti eating money;
J. S. G. Boggs. 53–64 Courtesy of the artist.
71 Image credit: Angetran.

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—ZG