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ON THE COVER

MARK KASUMOVIC

Pixel World #7
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Participatory outsider-purposes

It is as if the acceleration of production has increased to the point where commodities, literally, turn into translucent objects.

—Tiziana Terranova

We are increasingly pressed to produce—to generate, to construct and compose our lives for the ecstasy of perpetual output.

We are effectively outside ourselves.

The measure of success for the actualized, accomplished professional is no longer fame or luxury; it's productivity. Machinistic, athletic, and socially responsible productivity is the new decorum for the supermodern age. Decorum is an important word here, because it connotes that this obsessive level of production is aesthetic in nature—it must be visualized and formalized. Perhaps this has been historically clearest to the figure of the artist, whose “art work” is often in conflict with the aesthetic conditions that constitute “work” during their time.

We can look to iconographies like the punch clock, the uniform or the security badge to see how a visual prescription for the act of “working” has been established. But this is no longer the case, or at least not so succinctly. Web 2.0 changed all that. Whether you're a pharmacist or a filmmaker, the constant production of cultural ephemera across networked technologies (and its bleed into professional objectives) is a ubiquitous, daily behaviour.

A blogger is instagramming cat food at the grocery store as part of her holistic veterinary research.


A physiotherapist updates his LinkedIn profile after writing a yoga mat review on Amazon.

A social worker tweets parenting tips while coaching her daughter's soccer team.

Essentially, we are each other's gadgets. But who is profiting from this techno-slog? In monetary terms, it's certainly not the everyday citizen. Yet, it is the anonymous sea of surfers, scrollers and clickers that drive the media

engine forward. Key a Google search, rate a movie on Netflix; millions of people are producing content and information for the active consumption and redistribution by others. Did you think about the saleability of the last thing you “liked”?

As such, any semblance of a line between times or spaces of labour versus those reserved for leisure has disappeared. Was there ever a hard-edged one to begin with? Let's not be naive. The history of tenements in industrial age factories is proof enough to tell otherwise. But, before the profusion of mobile, networked technologies the classification of “work” had a much more geo-specific understanding. The factory didn't follow you around in your pocket. Now, with the confluence of “social media” and our own pre-existing social networks, the trope of the factory is just as applicable to Facebook as it is to a cannery. Because, after all, the contemporary factory doesn't make goods, it makes desire itself. Affect is the new logic for what some have deemed the rising “affiliation economy”. Long gone are the days of the obvious commercial exchange. Replace the bottom



dollar with some parenthetical formulations, including but not limited to the ephemeral moments of social interaction surrounding any and all transactions. One doesn't even have to look to online retailers or social media platforms to see evidence of this. Shifts can readily be seen in the marketing and communications of major cultural institutions. The museum, for instance, doesn't spew art knowledge from a smoke stack, but it does dispense "services", "connections", "experiences" and "engagement" with the regularity of condensed tomato soup.

Just who allowed us to get to such a point of obscenity? Well, simply put: We can think of commerce in this way now because we can see *it*; because we have the ability to track, access and archive these interactions. The sheer magnitude of documentation is, in fact, maddening. Even if an experience didn't really happen *that way*, or even if it didn't happen at all, we're still busy producing the image (and the imaginary) like it did. "Pics or it didn't happen" isn't just a millennial idiom for the record books—it's a paradigm for 21st century ontology. In this light, the models of the hourly wage or the eight-hour workday become laughable inadequacies to the reality of pervasive, immaterial labour.

In her song "Digital Witness", released earlier this year, songstress St. Vincent has a disarmingly simple line: If I can't show it/ You can't see me. True! We could stop at the point of literal return here and call it a day. But, in the context of supermodern life that couplet is poetic gold. Not only does it concisely reflect how documentation utterly defines our daily existence, but it also exposes the political nature of disseminating yourself. To be seen is now a prerequisite to being heard, let alone being "liked", "shared" or "reblogged". Whatever it is that you need to accomplish you first have to surrender your image and your identity as the vehicle, because there are no barriers between a political life and a personal one in the great shipwreck of the search engine. However revealing, this is not to say that this collapsing of identities is inherently a bad thing. As we learned so well last year at this time, every crisis is a mirror for potentiality. We need schizophrenic goggles for our post-Internet world. We need a fundamental realignment of *labour* and *value* to economies altogether. If something intangible as affiliation can be a social currency then it can just as easily be a tool for collective action or a weapon for political resistance. Exchanges that turn on the dollar sign still won't be able to buy you happiness. But, from there the road forks.



ART WORKER

The Embodied Contemporary Condition of Work

SHANNON GARDEN-SMITH

In developed, capitalist economies, the image of a smoke-belching factory chimney is an increasingly rare real-world sight. As an after-image—implicating a lifecycle of production that culminates in formless exhaust—it evokes something of our dematerialized, production-saturated present. So, truly, it is the *image* of the Fordist factory that persists, and it may even do so from within the museum collection.

In her book, *The Wretched of the Screen*, Hito Steyerl traces the lineage of the defunct factory, writing that, “Former factories... are today, more often than not, museums.”[1] That the factory as artifact should take up residence in the museum spatially compounds the superimposition of each on the other. Steyerl provides the example of the former Lumière factory, which originally produced photographic film and has now been reclaimed as the Institut Lumière, a historic monument and cultural site.[2] There is also the instance of the mine in Carmaux, France, which has been converted into an entertainment multiplex named Cape Discovery, replete with a “‘Mining Museum’ in which methane blasts are simulated for vacationers.”[3] In Toronto, a former powerhouse situated on the lakeside has been “renovated to be a flexible presentation space for the ever-changing nature of contemporary art” as The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery.[4]

Originally devoted to labour and industrial production, a seeming inversion of the purpose of these spaces occurs in their reincarnation as places of leisure and culture. As Steyerl argues, not only is the emptied out factory floor now occupied by the museum, the museum functions as the new model of

factory, so that, “Workers who left the factory have ended up inside another one: the museum.”[5] Steyerl invokes the notions of factory and museum as metonymical equivalents of work and culture respectively, so that a museum or “art space is a factory, which is simultaneously a supermarket—a casino and a place of worship.”[6] As superficial opposites, the shift from factory into museum/art space/gallery presents a narrative of historical progression from one dominant mode of production to another. In this sense, the gallery and its attendant network of workers become illustrative of the current dynamics of work.

We could categorize the replacement of factory with museum as an aspect of informatisation—a term developed by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri to describe the paradigmatic shift in capitalist economies from the production of goods to the production of services.[7] This ascendancy of the dematerialized service is predicated upon the essential qualitative reorientation of work. One such critical change is that labour is no longer beholden to the unique, physical workplace, but, as “immaterial labour,” it occurs unbounded from spatial and temporal specificity. David Staples reflects on the distension of the space of work, noting that, “In purely spatial terms, the antagonism focused on the factory floor in Fordism has extended to all sites of capitalist sociality: the home, the office, transportation, the Internet, health care, education, child care, popular culture, body culture, morality, political organization, and so on.”[8] While the museum certainly remains a physical site where people assemble, mostly they occupy the space as spectators. As a place of employment, the work conducted

within the museum-as-factory privileges information, communication, knowledge and affect—qualities that define the service job.[9]

Since the museum embodies contemporary work dynamics, it comes as no surprise that the necessity of affective labour represents a universal trend in employment. Affective labour, denoting work that deals in the intangibles of emotion and intellect, attains an indivisibility of worker from work; it is concomitant with the replacement of work by *occupation*, wherein one's occupation is the consummation of self-fulfillment. Any Craigslist job advertisement will articulate the banality and omnipresence of affect in the workplace. The postings are interchangeable in their solicitation of “highly self-motivated, driven, energetic, personable, resourceful” “upbeat, energetic, hard-working people” “who are passionate about fantastic customer service!” Imploring those with “a winning attitude,” and “a movie-quality sparkle every time [they] smile” to “please bring a resume and huge smile and be ready to impress!”

The expectation that all manner of jobs engage the affective capacity has incredible social consequence in terms of ushering in the “social factory,” wherein all facets of existence are beholden to production. Steyerl discusses the illimitability of the social factory and how this very quality converges with cultural production, writing:

It pervades bedrooms and dreams alike, as well as perception, affection, and attention. It transforms everything it touches into culture, if not art. It is an a-factory, which produces affect as effect. It integrates intimacy, eccentricity, and other formally unofficial forms of creation. Private and public spheres get entangled in a blurred zone of hyperproduction.[10]

So, work within the museum extends to the without.

Somewhat evidently, advances in technology have made this boundless spatial and temporal regime of production possible. While technological advancements have instituted a quality of porousness with respect to the when and where of work, they have simultaneously diminished the real need for traditional labour: “Gains in productivity, outsourcing, mechanization, automated and digital production have so progressed that they have almost reduced to zero the quantity of living labor necessary in the manufacture of any product.”[11] The continued, even heightened significance of production exists because of the embedded value of work socio-politically and in personal identities.

The rhetoric of contemporary work privileges the narrative of society's progression from the production of goods, which connote materiality, specificity and corporeality to the production of information or services, which do not occupy space or have a tactile resolution. Despite the prevailing metaphor of dematerialization, this shift from production to hyperproduction has not rendered bodies obsolete. In fact, the overwhelming turn to affective labour is conspicuously linked to engagement of the body. It is no coincidence that an appeal to the “smile” is a recurring feature of the Craigslist transcript. What follows is a change in focus from the external body of material good to the internalization of production in the body of the worker themselves. In this way:

Producing oneself is becoming the dominant occupation of a society where production no longer has an object: like a carpenter who's been evicted from his shop and in desperation sets about hammering and sawing himself. All these young people smiling for their job interviews, who have their teeth whitened to give them an edge.[12]

Where once bodies performed work within a delimited time and space, affective labour has made the body a continual site to be performed upon and to, in turn, perform. The body, the individual is the product

and producer. The self is the actualization of value.

Affective labour is not the new fruit of a new dynamics of labour, but a new term that shares its lineage in the types of work historically performed outside the dominant mode of capitalist value-production. Domestic work—one such example—is not spatially differentiated from non-work time in the way that industrial wage-labour demands. Today, the home (or coffee shop, or commute) has usurped the factory as the space of value production. Steyerl synthesizes this transformation with a before-and-after vignette: “Before: people working in factories. Now: people working at home in front of computer monitors.”[13] This historical narrative purposefully omits the “working at home” of domestic labour both of before and now because this work is seen as outside of capitalist value production. While the domestic site has now been cultivated for the performance of value production, the emotional obligation of traditional reproductive work formerly performed here has been incorporated into every place of work. The “love” involved in reproductive work is carried onto the museum floor, so that to volunteer at The Power Plant, for example, a person needs to demonstrate they are “committed” and “enthusiastic for contemporary art.”[14] Alternatively, modes of thought seeking to align reproductive labour with the tenets of the industrial paradigm might appeal to the different productive aims of this kind of work: namely, “[t]he production of people.” [15] This conception of a specifically feminized work prefigures the contemporary emphasis on the production of self.

Returning to factory smokestack, we find the bricks and mortar still firmly in place. No smoke is being dispelled, and the chimney is now emblazoned with “Contemporary Gallery.” The former factory lends an exquisite aura of history to all those events and exhibitions it now hosts as museum. Still, the workers have not dematerialized, as orthodox accounts of a new paradigm of work claim. They remain toiling within the lately whitewashed walls greeting the visitors with enthusiastic, attentive, team-playing smiles.

Notes

1. Hito Steyerl, *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012) 62.
2. Steyerl, *The Wretched of the Screen*, 66.
3. The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009) 30.
4. [**“The Power Plant Venue Rentals,” accessed August 27, 2014.**](#)
5. Steyerl, *The Wretched of the Screen*, 66.
6. Steyerl, *The Wretched of the Screen*, 63.
7. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, “Postmodernisation, or The Informatisation of Production,” *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).
8. David Staples, “Women’s Work and the Ambivalent Gift of Entropy,” in *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*, ed. Patricia Ticineto Clough and Jean Halley (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 124.
9. Michael Hardt “Affective Labor” *Boundary 2*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Summer, 1999): 91.
10. Steyerl, *The Wretched of the Screen*, 63.
11. The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection*, 30.
12. Steyerl, *The Wretched of the Screen*, 63.
13. Ibid.
14. [**“The Power Plant Opportunities,” accessed August 27, 2014.**](#)
15. [**Kati Weeks, “Life Within and Against Work: Affective Labor, Feminist Critique, and Post-Fordist Politics,” ephemera 1 \(2007\): 237.**](#)

SHANNON GARDEN-SMITH

is a Toronto based artist and member of XXXX Collective. Her largely installation-oriented practice deals in the fraught interdependence of interiority/exteriority.

Artists often paint themselves as innocent victims—or innocent beneficiaries—of economic forces beyond their control. Of course, most economic forces are beyond our individual control. But ‘the market’ does not commodify artworks: artists do.

Andrea Fraser (interview, 2012)

The waves of social unrest that have taken place around the world in recent years are evidence of a widespread, compelling urge to question the legitimacy of political processes, social structures and systems of capital. The images of protest that circulate and infiltrate are dominated by bodies, public spaces, violence, occupation and policing. What does it mean when the identity of the protester solidifies around these corresponding elements? What does it mean for acts of protest to fall outside? What follows is not a comprehensive excavation of the act or actors of protest but a collection of visual signposts that point away from centre stage.

THE IMAGE OF PROTEST

STEPHANIE FEENEY
& RUTH ANNETT

The Body and the Street

In the last months there have been, time and again, mass demonstrations on the street, in the square, and though these are very often motivated by different political purposes, something similar happens: bodies congregate, they move and speak together, and they lay claim to a certain space as public space. [1]

Recently the term “protest” has become inextricable from the corporeal and the street. When Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian fruit vendor, set fire to his body on the street in an act of protest against the dictatorial Tunisian regime, he could not have known that this act would resonate so widely and deeply. A singular, public, gesture of protest, enacted through the body itself, was the seed for a global

commons, a wave of social movements that rippled through Tunisia and other Arab states, Europe and America. Recent images of political revolutionary movements in Arab states such as those Tahrir Square in Cairo, social justice movements in Europe typified by events in Syntagma Square in Athens and anti-capitalist movements such as the Occupy occupation of Central Park in New York all coalesce around masses of human bodies moving together in a public space, a chaotic super-being congregating, occupying, reclaiming and above all being visible in the public sphere. Resistance has become embodied and the street is its playground.

The Primacy of the Protester

The primacy of visceral embodied protest is continually reinforced by new media. Organisations and individuals possess the technology and network connectivity through Twitter, Facebook and other new media forums to distribute real time information and images across the globe. Competition for the audience's attention is fierce; only the most visceral, violent and taboo images of protest catch the attention of a viewer who is suffering from attentive stress due to unprecedented levels of informatics stimuli[2] and thus a normativisation occurs, a normativisation of emotive, chaotic, public protest that risks life in its bodily form.


Image courtesy of Panayiotis Tzamaros

As acts of protest, triggered by the events in Tunisia spread, intensified and persisted day after day, one particular identity, that of the protesting body or “the protester,” was (re)constructed and foregrounded. All kinds of people, many up until that point having never been involved in direct protest, started to “do protest”: demonstrating daily on the street, occupying city squares at night, defying, self-organising, speaking out, documenting and disseminating. These people performed protest and protest's performativity worked to affirm the identity of “the protester,” in some cases to the extent of cannibalising it, mainstreaming it and subverting any previous pejorative or negative associations to almost parodic effect as evidenced by *Time's* “Person of the Year 2011” award going to a generic category of The Protester.

The protesting body, willing to struggle for change, is precisely the kind of “actively involved human being” that that inspires awe and admiration.[3] Protesters on the street whose bodies are at risk of violence, hunger, incarceration, disfigurement or death recall the cliché of the revolutionary hero who takes matters in his own mortal hands and is brave and fearless against prevailing regimes, regardless of how unthinkable the consequences. Anything less than this arouses suspicion and disdain.

Queering Protest

When Greece accepted a bailout loan from the European Union (EU) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) that was contingent on stringent debt repayment conditions and austere public budgets, large numbers of people living in Greece took to the streets to perform protest: mass occupations of public squares, nationwide general strikes, street demonstrations, which often ended in bloody and violent battles between protesters and police. International media coverage of one public demonstration in Athens reported the protesters chanting “We are not Ireland. We will resist” and holding aloft banners carrying similar messages (“This is Greece not Ireland, we the workers will resist,” 2010). Ireland followed Greece, becoming the second EU country to receive a



bailout loan from the EU/IMF, contingent on equally stringent loan conditions and austere public budgets, but the popular reaction in Ireland to the bailout was markedly different to that in Greece. The recent and intense manifestations of protest have become so inextricably tied to violence, bodies and the street that the protester considers anything less as contemptible. The provocation by the protesters revealed that difference is interpreted mistrustfully, they openly challenged what they saw as unnatural and deviant behaviour, “queering” the non-protesting Other for behaviour that is at odds with a normative, dominant, protesting Self.

A single, dominant narrative of protest risks predictability, which makes it vulnerable to physical and psychological containment and “kettling.” A dominant narrative of protest closes down the space for protest so that acts of resistance falling outside it go unrecognised. Consider a lone, bankrupt, property developer in a cement truck, painted with the words “ANGLO TOXIC BANK” blocking the gates of government buildings to bring attention to the local consequences of a global banking crisis (Figure 4). It’s not protest in the way that a Greek protester may immediately recognise but it is an act that disrupts, voices dissent, counter visualises and demands visibility. It is imperative that our understanding of protest remains open, that exceptional, if unconventional, acts of protest are recognised as such: an individual acting alone; techniques of visualisation in place of violence; innovative use of scale; presence of durable objects in place of fragile bodies; odd juxtapositions that make visible hitherto hidden connections; anonymity and absence in place of visibility.

Image courtesy of David Johnson.

Spaces of Protest

The visual and psychic architecture of institutional power in the city “induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility,” as Foucault wrote of the Panopticon.[4] Cities are complex and dynamic spaces, fraught with inequalities and injustices, but because of the density and the diversity of the components, they are also the “key sites where new norms and identities are made.”[5] Contemporary, urban, social movements that seek to reclaim public space and the streets can be read as an assertion of Henri Lefebvre’s right to the city, an idea that includes two radical rights for urban inhabitants: the right to participation directly in any decision that contributes to the production of urban space; the right to appropriation that allows physical access, use and occupation of urban space in everyday life.[6]

When the right to the city is not afforded to the citizen it can take steps to claim it nonetheless. The impermanence of walls, symbolism of bridges, fragility of windows, the structures of infrastructure that symbolize the city and governmentality are flipped over and used as spaces for unsanctioned social commentary. Democracy is spatialised and the physical aspects of homes, commercial property and public institutions bear the values, disenfranchisements and impertinent remarks of their citizens and dwellers. Furthermore the street and its infrastructures become a forum for dialogue, a shared space in

which opposing ideologies are expressed, an uncensored space for opposition, malcontent, redemption and audacity.

Graffiti scrawled on a public, Dublin city centre hoarding, in red capital letters, initially read “Ireland for the Irish,” a stark visualization of the growing racist sentiment in a society squeezed by austerity budgets and rising unemployment. The public

space of the hoarding acted, temporarily, as a canvas for unwelcome social commentary and before the photographer returned with her camera to capture the comment the message had already been transformed into an effective counter-visualisation[7] by a second spray can protester, who appropriated the original graffiti and amended it to read “Ireland for all. Feck Rascism.” The corrective vernacular opened up a space for dialogue, not seeking to cleanse the space of the initial sentiment but publically challenging it. The image resonated, generating hundreds of retweets on Twitter and appearing multiple times in blogs and national press, creating a commons of anti-racist sentiment that sidelined the initial act.

Non-Urban and Urban

Saskia Sassen asserts that the rural sphere lacks a historiographic potential for the oppressed. This does not indicate a lack of intent or action but rather a lack of visibility that can work to drive rural agitation to the centre in order to be acknowledged. In rural spaces idyllic landscapes can often mask injustices; conflict occurs between the social and the natural landscape or, more specifically, between the use of rural landscapes for leisure by urban dwellers and dependency for livelihood by rural communities.

In 2011 an artists' **Think Tank** effected an urban poster campaign with the aim of unthinking given narratives about place, culture and identity. One of the posters in the campaign, titled "Strength in Community," included the image of a small, rural dwelling in an isolated area with the words "strength in community" painted on its roof. The words were painted in protest against government-backed plans to build a gas refinery and high-pressure pipeline through the rural landscape.

An urban poster campaign, visualizing rural concerns introduces multiple layers of complexity within the protest: the act, the space, the image,

the distribution. The text on the roof is rallying and defiant, claiming a community that is paradoxically absent in a derelict landscape. In the absence of symbolic infrastructures and institutions, rural dwellings and words become a placeholder, a remainder of protest in a space too large to be occupied or reclaimed. It disrupts traditional notions of idyllic landscapes, a dramatic counterpoint to received notions of rural life, forcing the onlooker to question their understanding of rural landscapes and the existence of the communities within them. As an image the protest is mobilised, mediated and renegotiated with new audiences beyond its immediate geography. As a poster, embedded in the streetscape of the capital and using the visual and material language of electioneering, the urban is transformed into a surrogate space for rural protest. In this context the image changes the protesters' call for solidarity into a plea for resonance across geographical and social distance.

The Spectre of Protest

As much as we must insist on there being material conditions for public assembly and public speech, we have also to ask how it is that assembly and speech reconfigure the materiality of public space, and produce, or reproduce, the public character of that material environment. [8]

When masses gather in a public space to demonstrate, when an individual acts alone to protest or when a public wall/hoarding/bridge is used as a canvas to express dissent, the history and character of the site of protest reconfigures the act of protest and is itself re-configured. The contested space and the dissenting act layer complexity on one another.

In March 2013 the 39th Group of Eight (G8) summit took place in Enniskillen, Northern Ireland. The geography of the province was transformed by the machinations of order enforcement that accompany these global summits and was met with a troubling silence. The most visibly subversive act of protest was a giant-sized message inscribed on the hillside overlooking Belfast—"G8/NWO WAR CRIMINALS," which appeared overnight and transformed the natural landscape into a giant tickertape of dissent. The provocation floated silently above the rooftops, visible to all who travelled the main arterial route to the Enniskillen resort.

The topography of the Belfast Hills, a physical barrier on one side of the city, presented the words, which were later re-configured to read “G8 = WAR + PROTEST,” as a theatrical backdrop that insisted on the city as a canvas for protest. In Northern Ireland, where protest is difficult to separate from the internecine conflict of its divided communities, *Project G8* appeared to open up a collective space of protest unfettered by territorial concerns. The scale and position of the protest slogan relative to the capital city worked to “collect the space itself, gather the pavement, and animate and organize the architecture,” as if the population itself was united in protest.[9]

In reality Northern Ireland, certainly Belfast, was largely receptive to the G8 summit and protest was a minor player in a production of happy flag waving locals and bountiful facades. The media reported that the designated protest camp, some distance away and closer to the summit proceedings was populated by “...nine protesters and a dog” including

“two Dutch tourists who had been unaware the summit was taking place.”[10] But despite this, *Project G8* challenged reality and created the illusion of collective protest, of a historically divided city joined in a common concern. It was an effective illusion, a fabrication of collectivity that was configured by and, momentarily at least, re-configured a city’s character.

Traces and Re-configurations

The global political economy and socio-cultural frameworks constantly changes but in recent years the changes appear more fraught and more urgent. How will social subjectivities and expectations be re-shaped from a crisis that hails a new phase of neoliberalism? What parts of the old regime will survive and how will the new parts be configured with the old? It is the right time to stop and think the activity of protest.

NOTES

- [1] Judith Butler, “Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street,” (paper presented for the Mary Flexner Lectureship at Bryn Mawr College, Bryn Mawr, November 14, 2011).
- [2] Franco Berardi, “Schizo-Economy,” trans. Mark Grossman, *SubStance*, 36.1 (2007): 76-85.
- [3] Theodor W. Adorno, “Culture and Administration,” in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J. M. Bernsetin (London: Routledge, 2001), 199.
- [4] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 201.
- [5] Saskia Sassen, “Does the City Have Speech?” *Public Culture* 25.2 (2013): 211.
- [6] Mark Purcell, “The state, regulation, and global restructuring: reasserting the political in political economy,” *Review of International Political Economy* 9.2 (2002): 284-318.
- [7] Donal O’Keeffe, “Ireland of the welcomes?” *140 characters is usually enough* 27 August 2013. Available at: <http://ahundredandfortycharactersi-susuallyenough.wordpress.com/2013/08/27/ireland-of-the-welcomes/>
- [8] Butler, “Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street.”
- [9] Butler, “Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street.”
- [10] BBC News Northern Ireland, 2013.

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She co-founded [*The Future State*](#) expanding on the success of [*The Future State of Ireland*](#), an interdisciplinary event that examined cultural responses to the economic crash in Ireland after a period of economic boom widely known as The Celtic Tiger years.

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BARRIERS + BURNOUT

ARTS LABOUR AND COLLECTIVE ACTION

[DiRisio's writing has been published by *Fuse Magazine*, and he assisted them with the development of their digital archive.]

This past winter, *Fuse Magazine* released a special issue bulletin announcing that 2014 would be their final year of operation. Thirty-eight years after the release of their first issue, then a one-page fold-out entitled *Centrefold*, *Fuse* would be shutting their doors, closing their laptops and calling it a day. A sad day, as I see it.

Fuse had a long history of making visible the class, power, race and gender dimensions of contemporary society, while avoiding the kind of spectacularism associated with larger alternative publications like *Ad Busters*. This making visible was often done through emphasizing radical visual arts practices that other publications would not even touch; or, if other publications did cover these practices, it would often be an attempt to exploit their cultural capital while stripping them of their political content. While there were many discussions within the pages of *Fuse* about the political and economic issues addressed by artworks and projects, the less-discussed political and economic dimensions of the *production* of these works was, fortunately, also emphasized. There is a certain irony in a publication succumbing to the very struggles they addressed.

The closure of *Fuse* is emblematic of a broader struggle—one that art workers seem to be losing ground in. Gina Badger, *Fuse*'s final editor, cited chronic underfunding, with the associated burnout and self-censorship, as the primary reasons for the magazine's

closure. These issues point to crucial concerns within the arts in a time of austerity, and it would benefit us greatly to consider them, and their history, more closely. With arts funding stagnant, which amounts to a decline if we consider inflation, ignoring them would not only be detrimental to artists, but to everyone who has an interest in being part of a living culture.


The Independent Artists' Union: A Short Story

If cultural production and access to that production is a social right for all people, then government, as a democratic institution, should ensure that culture is adequately funded to fulfill that right. [1]

The Independent Artists' Union (IAU) was established in Canada in 1984 to address the socioeconomic well-being of those working in the arts. The above quote was a central tenet upon which they based their argument for a living wage for artists. Though the group only operated until 1990, without realizing the negotiations with the Canadian government that they sought, [2] the arguments they made and the radical alternatives they envisioned could serve to broaden our understanding of both where the struggle has been and where it may one day lead.

The above quote seems obvious enough: if we agree that everyone deserves to be involved with the arts, either as participant or producer, then government funding should allow for both art in our lives and food on our tables. The IAU argued that, "Contrary to the

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‘starving artist’ mythology, artists do not extract their creative energy from poverty-line living conditions.”[3] Beyond failing to inspire, poverty tends to make it difficult for any art to be produced in the first place. This influences who is able to participate in this system, allowing for easier access by those with power and privilege. The IAU was adamant that the arts should be far more inclusive.

The IAU promoted a guaranteed annual income for artists, which would provide a living wage to practicing artists who contribute to cultural production within their community. They were careful not to focus too narrowly on the so-called “fine arts,” referring instead to cultural production more generally. The “fine” in “fine arts” implies an evaluation of quality, often assumed to be objective.

“Quality,” wrote the IAU, “is a relative term—relative, that is, to the community to which it is being applied.”[4] They cited the challenge forwarded by women artists who sought to subvert their systemic exclusion from active participation in arts institutions specifically, as well as political and social organizations more broadly. This challenge made visible the deeply ingrained patriarchy present within both the judgement of the fine

arts and in the broader culture that the arts exists within. The IAU underscored a chauvinism embedded within the concept of quality. Arts funding, they argued, should avoid attempts at objective evaluation, focusing instead on the contributions of an individual to the culture of their community. They pushed for a democratization of the arts that would consider the economic well-being of the majority of artists, not an elite minority.


This focus not on art-stars, on the few who fare well within competitive granting systems, but on the majority operates in contrast to the functioning of state-based granting systems. This type of granting system, which awards grants periodically, contributes to a precarity that we are seeing increasingly discussed in labour beyond the arts. The IAU was ahead of the wave here. They criticized this granting system for lacking any social security benefits, as it did not account for workers’ compensation, unemployment insurance, health benefits, etc. Major grants are intended to provide living support, and should therefore account for the social security that unions seek to provide for their members.

There is an underlying problem within this granting system, one that is at issue within the larger discussion of the labour of artists. “Artists,” wrote the

IAU, “have not been perceived in their true role: that of working people.”[5] The struggle for benefits has existed as a long uphill climb, and the IAU, as a union, sought to situate their advocacy for a living wage for artists within this broader labour movement. This recontextualization makes it seem rather obvious that artists should have regular contributions to their pension by the state that supports them, or that they should be able to visit a dentist without clenching their teeth for fear that they will need work done. Historically, such benefits rarely originated from governmental benevolence, but are instead the product of a century’s advocacy and collective action by unions and workers’ organizations.

While the IAU was certainly critical of the many shortcomings of the then-present granting system, they nevertheless acknowledged the support that it did offer. In fact, this support was the basis of their claim that they should represent artists in bargaining with the government for benefits, as any union would. They stated that the government was essentially already the employer of Canadian artists, and as such should be required to negotiate the terms of this employment, as labour law dictates.

Whether or not we agree with their concept of a guaranteed annual income for artists, the IAU’s formal and ideological criticism of the grant-based system is instructive. It should also be noted that members of the IAU were active in other ways within Canada in reimagining this system with real, albeit limited, progress made on some fronts. Karl Beveridge, one of the founding member of the union, was active in the development of the Ontario Arts Council’s “Artist in the Workplace / Artist in the Community Grant.” Working with the Labour Council of Metro Toronto in 1989, Beveridge negotiated with the Ontario Arts Council to develop a program in which, as he



wrote, “artists can work in residence with trade union locals throughout the province.” [6] This program further aligns artists with workers, allowing them to both engage with relevant labour issues, and consider their own labour more deeply. It is clear that members of the IAU have continued in the struggle, even if the union as a whole yielded to formidable barriers and burnout.

Waging Culture, or Where We Are and Are Not

The Art Gallery of York University is currently releasing results from their 2012 Waging Culture survey, which looked at the present state of arts labour in Canada. While some of their findings were sadly quite reminiscent of statistics quoted by the Independent Artists’ Union almost three decades ago, others do show some signs of progress. In 1986 members of the IAU wrote that, “75% of art students are women while at the same time women constitute only 15% of those represented in galleries.” They described this as clear evidence that “discrimination is a structural reality in the Canadian cultural community.” [7] Though this discrimination is less pronounced within gallery representation today, with Waging Culture reporting that

28% of female artists are currently represented by a gallery compared to 36% of males, in other areas sharp divides remain.

Continual structural discrimination is inarguably present when we measure the dollar per hour value of the labour of both sexes. Of course, measuring arts labour as an hourly wage is problematic given that artists do not punch a clock: their labour does not begin and end with a clearly defined “work day,” but involves a multifarious and nebulous range of events, meetings, thoughts and actions. When Toronto-based artist Kelly Mark punches in and out of work each day, as she has done since 1997 for her project *In & Out*, she offers a wry critique of this wage-based conceptualization. Despite these initial reservations regarding the Waging Culture’s basis in a wage-based system, I do find that it productively positions arts labour alongside other forms of labour. Like Mark’s project, Waging Culture dryly presents problematic valuation that disrupts the romantic notion of the artist’s work as a labour of love.

In the Waging Culture report titled “The Sex Gap (!)” they state that, while the wage gap is closing in the Canadian labour force more generally, it has experienced a recent turn for the worse

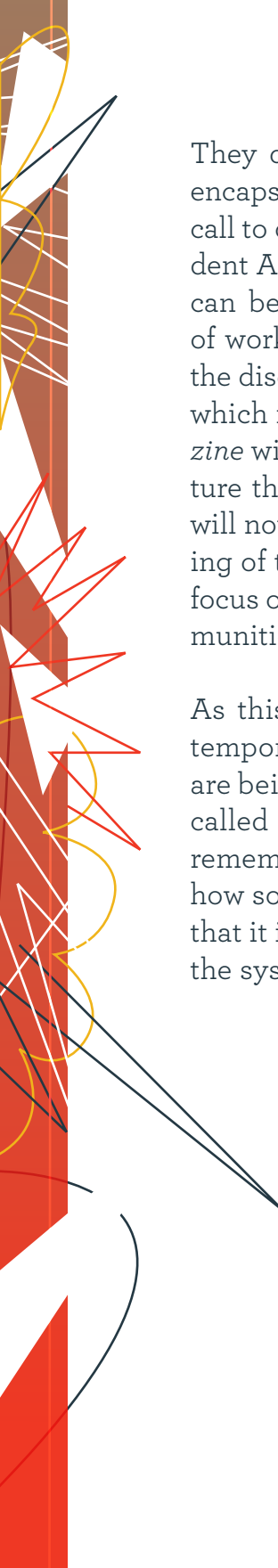
in the arts. Their 2012 data shows that, “For every \$1/hr a male artist earns, a female artist earned 40¢.” This figure, they note, is skewed slightly by a few very high-earning male artists. For the majority of artists the gap is not quite so large, but sharp inequality nevertheless represents a firmly entrenched structural discrimination, and offers evidence of a persistent chauvinism, previously recognized by the IAU, embedded within our culture.

Given that most artists’ incomes have remained stagnant or are in decline, with the median incomes currently at \$19,800 for female artists and \$25,380 for males, the situation is even more dire. It should also be noted that the precarious quality of arts labour is not represented in these numbers. It is easy to imagine these statistics as representing a steady income that hovers just above the poverty line, but for arts professionals work tends to come in waves, and even non-arts jobs are becoming increasingly short-term and contract-based. There seems to be no respite.

Organizing Against Austerity

In the feature article of <Fuse Magazine>’s recent special-issue bulletin the collaborating writers ended with a call for collective action. Though it is often easier to consider one’s own interests and immediate concerns, we must pay greater attention to our collective well-being, they argued.

Models for success emerge when cultural workers organize. Artists and cultural workers organizing and working with allies is what created arts funding in Canada. While we must work to increase the levels of arts funding to create a more sustainable sector, we must also be self-reflexive and willing to pull terminal organizations off life support in order to better use the funds we have. [8]



They do not paint a pretty picture, but this seems to encapsulate the reality that we are currently facing. The call to organize harkens back to the aims of the Independent Artists' Union, with the hope that a collective voice can better represent an inherently unorganized group of workers. This cannot be done without recognition of the discrimination and exploitation that currently exists, which makes it all the more lamentable that *Fuse Magazine* will no longer be with us. In the final line of this feature the writers express their hope that this organizing will not exist only amongst artists—a possible shortcoming of the Independent Artists' Union with their intense focus on arts labour—but will expand to include “all communities under attack by austerity.”[9]

As this austerity becomes further entrenched in contemporary society, seemingly insurmountable barriers are being erected around access to arts and culture—so-called luxuries in post-Fordist times. It is necessary to remember, however, that it is the collective that decides how society should be structured and restructured, and that it is only through coming together, often outside of the system, that this restructuring can occur.

NOTES

- [1] Independent Artists Union, “Social and Economic Status of the Artist in Canada,” in *Policy Matters*, Clive Robertson (Toronto: YYZ, 2006), 264.
- [2] J. Keri Cronin and Kirsty Robertson, *Imagining Resistance: Visual Culture and Activism in Canada* (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2011), 77-78.
- [3] IAU, “Social and Economic Status of the Artist,” 264.
- [4] IAU, “Social and Economic Status of the Artist,” 266.
- [5] IAU, “Social and Economic Status of the Artist,” 264.
- [6] Karl Beveridge, “Working Partners: The Arts and the Labour Movement,” in *Hard Lessons: The Mine Mill Union and the Canadian Labour Movement*, ed. Mercedes Steedman, Peter Suschnigg and Dieter K. Buse (Toronto & Oxford: Dundurn Press, 1995), 258.
- [7] IAU, “Social and Economic Status of the Artist,” 266.
- [8] “Art, Austerity and the Production of Fear,” *Fuse Magazine*, 37.1 (Winter 2013-14).
- [9] Ibid.

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