Art and the utopia of (non-)reproduction

When thinking about art and labour, perhaps it all comes down to the paper claims. What makes everything so complex is the fact that in real life the value of nothing is determined by labour. Or rather, the ‘socially necessary labour time’ for the construction of commodities does not determine their value directly – to put it in the terms of Marx’s *Capital*. It is the value of *RE*producing a commodity that is socially determined by labour. This opens value to the vicissitudes of technological change and revolutions in productivity. Today’s cutting edge computer is tomorrow’s vastly over-valued hunk of junk, faster processors undermine the supposed value of the previous generation. Not only the price but the value of everything is radically volatile in capitalism, and value is always virtual.

Beyond this, Marx’s *Capital* also gives a sense of the role of theft or looting in capitalism. Individual capitalists cut their overheads and boost their revenue through processes of non-reproduction: paying under the value of materials, including labour-power, the cost of reproducing the worker as such. Far from being fixed social-labour-time-determined units in the production process, all these are volatilized by the diffuse processes of production beyond the factory or the art gallery. The unsung production of the producers is crucial – housewives and other non-waged workers donate their labour for free to capital. Globalisation runs on this fact – a US capitalist can purchase a whole village of beautifully socialized, cooperative and compliant Guatemalan workers owing to the rape and pillage of Latin America, the terms of the NAFTA trade agreement, the destruction of the Mexican currency, the relative status of white and brown, women and men. It’s all crucial – none of it happens in the factory or the retail outlet.

Marx’s chapter on ‘Primitive Accumulation’, which comes at the end of Vol. 1 but the beginning of capitalism, gives a sense of what is in fact an ongoing process insofar as capitalists are continually ripping off bits of the environment, infrastructure and population and plugging them into processes of production, and using finance, law, war and racism to do it. All this is necessary to offset capital’s inherent tendency to devaluation through the elimination of the very source of value – labour – by automation and rising productivity. The deflationary tendency which produces today’s secular global crisis of capital is only managed by turning up the level of non-reproduction: the looting of people and planet. Non-reproduction, the exchange of non-equivalent values in payment for variable and constant capital, people and things, is a kind of supplement to the ‘normal’ process of capitalist exchange, yet one which, in a Derridean way, capital cannot do without. It is an intrinsic excess, one might say, or rather a double deficit and excess.

Contemporary primitive accumulation or non-reproduction would, however, be impossible without a massive increase in production of the ‘license to loot’ that is fictitious capital – the paper claims on (past or future) value which capitalists call stocks, bonds, and financial instruments. In reality the increasing (tendential) devaluation of value arising from increasing productivity appears *only* as a surfeit of fictitious capital, and a massive destruction of the value of labour-power (the level at which the world’s workers, its infrastructure, productive resources, and environment, are reproduced). This speculative capital – promissory and performative, at once neutral and domineering – expands exponentially as capital’s productivity increases, imposing a massive increase in *un*necessary labour just as automation should be freeing humanity from work at last.

It is as a special class of commodity with its own ‘paper claims’, with its own particular relations to exploitation and to the looting of people and things, that we might begin to consider art today. Art as the most speculative, extractive, and indeed looted and instrumentalised commodity. With the advent of the readymade, not only was art reconceptualised and retooled as a form of immaterial production, capable of enlisting pre-existing commodities directly into the fabrication of increasingly conceptual works. At a stroke the artwork was opened on to a universe of *looting*, of *free inputs* – not only the banal annexation by nomination which was revived by later conceptual practice (Kosuth most obviously), but also in the more sophisticated, productivist ‘craft of reproducibility’ analysed and endorsed by the theorist John Roberts.

Such an approach, however, wedded as it is to the notion that art tails and attempts to keep up with the productive forces of capital, introducing the cutting edge modes of production into an area of quasi-artisanal labour normally considered outside the sway of capitalist development, whether critically or nostalgically or both, tends to miss the key condition of art. In fact art is not so determined, just as its value can swoop or swoon with the vicissitudes of the financial markets, so the artist – however construed, however decentered or outsourced their mode of production – is not constrained by the time and motion imperatives of the production line, because the production line itself does not obey this (supposed) rationality. In an age when cutting edge factories recycle obsolete automotive chassis in restyled bodies in the USA, and highly technologized vehicles are hauled manually down the production line by rope in China, it should be clear that capital’s supposed core rationality only operates in a state of suspension.

Art is not so much the exception to some grinding logic of social necessary labour, or rampant automation and acceleration, as the most visible exponent of capital’s really existing magic of *fictitious capital* and (all–too-real) *looting*. A system that extorts labour and environment to the limit, simultaneously blows epic financial bubbles, and endlessly elaborates the implications of Duchamp’s restructuring of the artwork – both as a particular market and in the very form of artworks themselves. How to gauge whether art is working, or breaking, or working by breaking, and to rediscover a dimension of *antagonism* IN art akin to the animating animus of Marx’s *Capital*? That perhaps would be the ultimate set of instructions to present to a radical art today.

Perhaps we will find evidence that it is already in circulation, a spectre haunting the practice of post-contemporary artists. As Marx wrote in a famous letter to his friend Ruge: *We develop new principles for the world out of the world’s own principles.* How exactly artists respond to the axioms capital hands down to them, as opposed to the precise configuration of the process of production (and reproduction – or its absence) is perhaps then the issue. All production occurs within a complex division of labour, the studio is global, virtual, as well as physical, determinate. But it’s not so much how you *produce* as how you respond to the global reality of *non-*reproduction (the forms of ‘non-equivalent’ exchange issuing in the pushing down of the wages of labour below the level necessary for its reproduction mentioned above) that determines the critical acumen or complicity of art today.

Art does not need to become or side with labour – in any case, it *cannot* insofar as it remains semblance, fiction, a collections of *things*, a bourgeois social practice, a part of capitalism, and the product of individual authors (however collectivised), however many levels of relational or self-organisational restructuring it applies. Artwork is still produced through a negation of *alienated* labour, and not just in the sense of making efficiencies (*pace* Roberts), perfecting dematerialised production. Art needs to know how to become antagonism to a capitalism defined by vast destruction and looting as much as the ostensible emancipations of the social network and immaterial labour. How can art respond to this systemic real without surrendering to its dictats and repressions?

Making the process of production appear may be a necessary first step or it may be an obfuscation, the beginning of antagonism or a new form of quietism that now repeats the language and gestures of the think tank, post-fordist corporation or reformist ngo, the real estate and regen programme, the arms dealer's propaganda project or the neoconservative govt's social cleansing operation.  From Camberwell to Korea, a global system makes the moment of looting in all forms of production and (non)reproduction critical. How are artists to make the free inputs speak against the system, should we open up the artwork or rather concentrate on construction of a new kind of autonomy that refuses the easy transpositions and refunctionings demanded by a flexibilised, financialised, global system?

Authorship is ultimately perhaps that which a decentred work produces only as a final result, a kind of surplus product in its own right. But to be worthy of the name it must remain a negativity, and cannot ignore or escape the social situation out of which it arises. Consequently, art that is truly operating at the same pitch as capital shuns the innocuous, because it can’t hear itself speak over the shriek of the (social) machines.

Is art itself able to issue a denunciation or analysis or a kind of displaced critique, or are its workings necessarily more complicated, refractory? However it creeps in, however subtly or frontally, an artwork – even a relational or self-consciously socialised one, in which the fetishism of the artwork has carefully been put in question – still plays with art’s own quality as paper claim, as magic and loot. True to art’s dialectical character as (at least potentially) a ‘social antithesis of the social’ (Adorno), precisely the self-conscious adoption of constraints to the artistic production process, paradoxically expanding it beyond its normal terms and conditions while suspending some of its familiar (value) claims, could result in a more critical form of artistic ‘non-reproduction’ – or something analogous to that process as it occurs in regular capitalist commodities. Art is a very particular thing. Its more or less total absence of ‘use-value’, its absoluteness as a commodity, its luxury unproductive status – not just unproductive, but rare and hence able to command rent, a crucial component in the generation of cultural ‘monopoly rents’ so important to contemporary urbanism – all make it resemble both speculative finance and the process of looting in which it is generally enlisted. Yet precisely in its autonomy, ‘the incompatibility of art production with capitalist production’, their still resides a potential for antagonism. Artistic autonomy may not be inherently meaningful, but, as Danny Marcus puts it, the difference can be made to mean something – *weaponized*. In a world where capital increasingly makes art into one more means of (value) destruction, one more moment of a larger process of non-reproduction, critical art could be described as radicalising and turning this destructivity on itself.

Free as it is still is to resist the pressures of the market and the repressive norms of wider production, while marked by these through and through, a certain conscious non-reproduction of this kind – critical, corrosive, socially and historically attentive reiteration and deranging of the classical terms of the post-conceptual artwork, say – could challenge what is expected of an increasingly financialised and instrumentalised art commodity. Reworking the paper claims of which it is both subject and object, such art might construct a ‘windowless monad’ – a critical microcosm – with a view onto a wider world of production and non-reproduction.