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Sophie Cras

The Artist as Economist: Art and Capitalism in the 1960s

Trans Malcolm DeBevoise New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019. 244 pp.; 50 color ill.; 35 b/w ill.; 85 ill. Cloth \$65.00 (9780300232707)

Marina Vishmidt

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The 1960s are often art historicized as a period when artists began to shift their practices away from materiality and toward forms of abstract thought. According to the economist-turned-art-historian Sophie Cras, it also turns out to have been a decade when financial abstraction came to the forefront, and not just for artists who suddenly found themselves flung from the garret into a boom market, but for the public as a whole, heralding a cultural obsession with inflation, speculation, and arbitrage. Across the Cold War West, and specifically in the France and United States explored by Cras, this was a time when money became politicized as never before, causing artists to grapple with urgent questions of symbolic, economic, and social value. Specifically, these questions went from being extraneous to marking an immanent condition that lent itself to multiple levels of engagement. Although none of the artists Cras discusses, with the exception of Robert Filliou, were trained as economists, many took it upon themselves to intervene in the economics field, at a time when it was both crystallizing into the rigid neoclassical shapes we know today as well as becoming popularized with the publication of graphs and other metrics in the mass media. While some artists, such as Yves Klein, used their work to propose different structures of valuation, others, such as Larry Rivers, helped to accentuate the slippery ground on which more official definitions of value crafted by states and central banks were skating. However, all faced the incorporation of their work into an increasingly publicity-hungry machine, as Alexander Alberro has elaborated in *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity* (MIT Press, 2004). This was the same "spectacle," as the Situationists would have it, that had consumed economics, captured in a 1959 article in the French press in these succinct terms: "Caught up in a general inflationary process, art cannot escape the conditions of a society governed by money" (Geneviève Bonnefoi, 17). This in turn has to a large extent determined the subsequent readings of these works as trivial or opportunistic, as with Andy Warhol's *Dollar Bill* series. It can also be seen in the diagnosis of complacency delivered by Benjamin Buchloh to much Anglophone Conceptual art with the label "aesthetics of administration" (MIT Press, 2000).

In one sense, Cras develops her analysis at a distance from those debates, noting early on that her project is an economic and social history that touches on the rambunctious politics of the era by implication rather than head on. This is a slightly jarring decision given that writers covering this period usually try to draw connections, however sketchily, to the social ferment that define the era, from civil rights to feminism to the antiwar movement. Yet it is clear that this bracketing, which Cras explains persuasively in the initial sections, gives the author space to consider the details and contradictions of each practice in depth, as well as their relation to more general tendencies in the aesthetic and financial landscape, from the "heavy franc" introduced by the Gaullist administration and lightened by Klein into his famous "zones of artistic sensibility" to the debates on the value of artistic labor that marked the spot where they precisely moved away from a skills-based to a knowledge-based paradigm along with the rest of the economy. Lesser-known and often intriguing dimensions to this picture often pop up, in the main text as well as the notes, such as the Christian-Democratic premises of Klein's money mysticism; Adrian Piper's iteration of the project to quantify artistic labor as wage labor, pursued by Edward Kienholz and others; and the post-McCarthyite inspiration of pushing the slogan "In God We Trust" onto the greenback, no less than the pushbacks from a technologically challenged US mint. Far from an anecdotal approach, however, these dimensions emerge from an ambitiously dense but focused discussion, one that, as noted, keeps a programmatic distance from the political and theoretical but provides plenty of material for others to undertake such work, whether from art historical or other perspectives.

The inquiry is divided into four chapters that build admirably on each other. Each section focuses on an aspect of the imbrication of artistic work with economic issues in a period defined by the market expansion and currency fluctuation that started in the late 1950s and ended in the early 1970s with the termination of the Bretton Woods agreement. Thus the presentation moves through "value," "currency," "speculation," and "commerce," with several emblematic figures discussed in each, such as Klein, Warhol, Robert Morris, and Lee Lozano, as well as artists whose practices have fallen from the top shelf of art historical scrutiny in latter days, such as Les Levine and Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio, or who have been acknowledged to have fallen off the radar for too long, such as mail-art impresario Ray Johnson.

Possessed of an energetic and astute writing style, Cras takes the reader through the aesthetically generative maze of money that loomed so large in the culture of the 1960s: money imaginaries, money worries, money as proxy for national and sexual virtues. In doing so, she is adding to the

recent flourishing of studies on the creative arts' engagement with finance that has so far most often been confined to literary genres. Little in the way of elaborated art historical study has been produced to date in a field that has more often chosen to attend to labor, as in the work of Julia Bryan-Wilson (University of California Press, 2009) or Danielle Child (Bloomsbury, 2019); to the art market, as in the work of Isabelle Graw (Sternberg Press, 2009); or to larger theoretical debates about art and value, which also encompass artistic labor in its encounter with finance as a cultural fact, as in my own work (Brill, 2018) or that of Dave Beech (Brill, 2015; Brill, 2020). Notably, Cras does not engage with race, gender, or any of the other belatedly scrutinized dimensions of the mid-century cross-Atlantic social and institutional lives of artistic practice. Consequently, some debates are strangely occluded, even as the project justifies its commitment to providing an ingenious prism rather than a comprehensive cultural history. The advantage of the approach of this book, however, is its survey of how financialization moved into artistic practices from the inside, its sheer torsion on the most reflexive and innovative of the era's positions, and how these in turn experimented with "economic life." This means taking an unprecedented microscope to the history of economic thought that set the parameters of artistic thinking about money in the fifteen-year period under consideration. While this perspective includes some topical if abstruse disputes on the gold standard, trenchant connections—such as between the stability of currency and performative masculinity in the section on Larry Rivers's paintings of the French franc—also are made. At the same time, there is a patient demonstration, rather than an analogy, of how the Fordist era of growth also pumped up the art market, leading artists to reflect on just what kind of commodity they were engaged in producing and on the nature of their labor. Cras thus aligns her work with Rosalind Krauss's precept that the rise of abstraction in the economy and in art cannot be directly correlated, but neither can they be understood in isolation.

A key contribution of this book is the panoply of contextual detail drawn on for the fluid argumentation around artistic strategies that characterizes each chapter and the larger thesis: that artists in this period were not only representing the burgeoning abstractions of the capitalist economy as a theme, but that this abstraction was reshaping what it meant to be an artist. This was an opening for the industrialized modes of a Kienholz or a Pinot-Gallizio, the frankly entrepreneurial mode of a Levine, and the investment portfolios of Morris or Dan Graham, as well as Warhol, whose work traversed all these modes from mass production to "business art." Cras's patient and concrete approach means that no hasty allegories are ventured between such strategies and more tectonic shifts in the political economy, and it enables her to demystify the discussion around certain practices, such as Pinot-Gallizio's "painting by the yard" as it oscillates between the worlds of the Situationist International and Parisian fashion. On the other hand, the fascination of such close and informed readings, drawing often on sources in multiple languages, is never really borne out in the intent, which Cras returns to at the end, to "imagine what poetical economy may one day be able to do for political economy"—an order that itself reflects a certain conservatism and leaves us somewhat vague as to what, exactly, all this economic turmoil can be attributed. The book is also preternaturally focused on the period identified, to the extent that neither the anticapitalist energies of the 1930s nor the further booms and busts of the Western art market in the neoliberal 1980s make an impression anywhere in the text. From one angle this specificity is helpful, even if from another it seems to leave the matrix of art and political economy it discusses adrift in time. Still, this is a project that ought to be assessed on the terms it confidently sets out. It offers a singular and substantive contribution to the study of the dematerialization of art in a moment when both the capitalist world and its enemies were at a point of inflection, much as we are now.

Marina Vishmidt

Department of Media, Communications and Cultural Studies, Goldsmiths, University of London



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