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ART, POLITICS, AND MARKETS

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Introduction

Art, politics, and markets: where are we to begin? Given the amazing degree of variation in understanding each of the areas, trying to pin down how they relate to each other and overlap could easily result in a vast array of possible approaches starting from different conceptions. Taking just two of these areas leads one into vast academic literatures. Given the near impossibility of providing a comprehensive account, this chapter will take a more thematic approach, gesturing to key areas of concern that could and should be explored further. As a starting point, we can consider three particular instances or figures illustrating the relationship between art, market, and politics in interesting ways, some more celebrated as paradigmatic figures of art history than others.

First, let us consider Marcel Duchamp. While mentioning Duchamp is almost required in many contexts, he is interesting as a figure precisely for the way he helped to redefine all three areas above, from his involvement with the Dadaists, whose influence is still drawn from heavily in thinking about the politics of art, to transforming what could be understood as art practice itself through the idea of the readymade. In many ways Duchamp can be understood as the avant-garde figure whose shock of the new serves to disrupt and redefine established methods of artistic production, relationship to politics and the functioning of markets (De Duve 1996).

Second, we could consider Yves Klein, whose all too short a career in Paris in the mid-twentieth century is impressive for how quickly it developed. Klein cultivated a well thought out artistic celebrity image, and likewise maintained links with avant-garde currents of the time. He managed to turn disruptive gestures, from the exhibition of monochromatic paintings, galleries apparently empty of all content, and the patenting of his own shade of blue, into both artistic credibility and financial success. In some of his most interesting pieces he would engage in the sale of an artwork possessing no apparent visible existence in the world, what he would call “zones of immaterial pictorial sensibility,” which he would exchange only for pure gold (Riout 2010; Brougher et al. 2010). Similarly to Duchamp, his practices can be seen to redefine the nature of artistic practice, how value is produced by art, and the politics involved.

Finally, we could turn to Gustav Metzger, who as part of the UK art scene in the 1960s developed the idea and practice of autodestructive, as well as autocreative, art. Metzger spent years elaborating a sense of politics based around the power of art institutions and the importance of ecological thinking. He proposed the years 1977–1980 as “years without art” thus helping to develop what has been called since then the idea of the “art strike.” The art strike, along with its more recent iterations, has been taken up as a form of labor struggle and politics.
designed to disrupt the gallery system, the role of the artist, and the place of the arts in the cultural economy (Home 1991).

These are three figures, moments, or conjunctions of art, politics, and markets. Needless to say there are many more. Starting from here we could frame them in an admittedly crude but hopefully useful model for showing how they relate. This can be done by evaluating particular artists or artistic movements and practices based on their relationship to the market, and whether they tend to emphasize an individual or collective orientation. Does the artist or movement exhibit a particular attitude or relationship to the market (both the art market and more broadly) – does it embrace or celebrate it? Or an attitude that is quite critical of the market, perhaps espousing an anti-capitalist stance or elaborating a different notion of value and social organization? Similarly, for the question of orientation, is it primarily around the notion of individual creation or form of social or collective creation? In this first attempt to frame the relationship between art, markets, and politics we could thus understand artistic politics as formed through how arts and markets relate to each other, in variations of embrace and celebration, to attempts to negate or work around them or to do away with them altogether.

Most typically when we think of art and artists there is a tendency to fall back on an assumption of individual artists, the celebration of the individual genius, the creator of something new out of nothing. This kind of assumption is what leads to any number of news stories about, for instance, the recent sale of some piece by a dead “master” for an astronomical sum of money (Findlay 2012). The celebration of the artist as the individual genius is embedded in a larger set of assumptions about what counts as valuable within the arts and the art world and how this value is produced (Klamer 1996). Likewise this is also connected to the positions of critics and their associated modes of valuing, both in monetary and symbolic terms, works of art. Roger Taylor (1978) has argued that the ethos of the “individual genius” who possesses pre-given creativity or talent blocks off others engaging in artistic activity from seeing themselves as workers. The politics of connecting arts and markets here is found only in enabling the recognition of certain forms of activity as valid, as being art, or in terms of how they are valued. This can be seen to operate through the way that people who work within the arts and creative sectors would not identify themselves as, or be identified as, artists. They do not see themselves as “mere” workers, yet their work is not regarded on the same plane as the work of “the artist.”

The art market is happy to celebrate the work of the individual artist who is quite critical of capitalism, the state, and the operations of power. In many cases it may actually appreciate the commercial value of certain political approaches, concepts, or understandings precisely because of how they can generate further interest (and sales) in the artist in question. This seems to especially be the case in recent times where the value and social visibility of interventionist art, political art, has increased greatly. As Hans Abbing (2004) has commented, there is perhaps nothing as commercial as the anti-commercial artists. In these cases “politics” becomes the content of a work that can be celebrated, rather than something that is enacted in its form, or the relations involved in the process of artistic production itself, or the kinds of labor that are involved. This is why, for instance, the art world has been more than content to conduct and facilitate endless discussions around precariousness, the politics of the arts – all the while reproducing the very conditions of precarious work and life in terms of funding, labor practices, and arrangements, while engaging in these discussions. Addressing precariousness happens at the level of content, rather than by changing the conditions of the art world where the discussion occurs.

Nearly diametrically opposed to this are collectively oriented artistic practices openly opposed to market relations. This is where most avant-garde movements, from Constructivism to Surrealism, or those who participated in art strikes, would be placed. There is a tendency for artistic work that falls into this category to be respected less, on the grounds that it is not good art, that
it is propaganda, and thus does not need to be taken very seriously. Or, much of it is simply dismissed as “not art at all.” As Lucy Lippard commented, the art world prefers “museum quality resistance” rather than forms that become too engaged: “art that is too specific, that names, about politics, or place, or anything else, is not marketable until it is abstracted, generalized, defused” (1973: xxii). Collectively oriented practices that are not market-oriented tend to be shaped around enunciating different kinds of value other than market ones, for instance in the Constructivist practice of attempting to build a socialist society through art, or the Surrealist exploration of the collective unconscious. Here we could include artistic practices that are designed to reproduce other forms of social relationships, such as through the idea of artistic citizenship (Schmidt and Martin 2006), or propping up religious authority (Freeland 2001). Here we could also include collectivist activist practices that remain on the fringes of the art world, possibly exploiting the ambiguity of being inside/outside the art world, but which are then read and/or classified as art.

In recent years, a number of groups in Europe and in the USA are organizing around the questions of art, labor, and value. In the UK, the Precarious Workers Brigade (PWB) emerged from the Carrotworkers’ Collective that previously worked specifically around the increasing reliance on exploitation of interns and unpaid workers within the art world. Today, PWB have expanded to deal with wider issues of precarious conditions of working and living within in the arts and cultural, as well as education, sectors and beyond. Working between London, Berlin, New York, and Bucharest, Artleaks is a collective platform of artists and curators, focusing on exposing (and naming and shaming) labor exploitation, slander, intimidation, and blackmail occurring within the art world. US-based WAGE, Working Artists in the Greater Economy, have recently finalized a survey about the economic experiences of visual and performing artists who worked with non-profit arts organizations and museums, finding that “58% of artists who exhibited at a New York nonprofit organization between 2005 and 2010 received no form of payment, compensation or reimbursement – including the coverage of any expenses.” In Denmark, UKK (Unge Kunstnere og Kunstformidlere, or “Young artists and art workers”) have presented a broad survey of working conditions of their members; in Berlin a more informal group, Haben und Brauchen, formed to further discussions around working conditions of artists and cultural producers, as well as the conditions of production and valuation of art and culture, in a city that prides itself on both a thriving art scene and a large number of cultural producers, Berlin.2

Lastly, we could look at practices that are collectively oriented and pro-market. These are comparatively much more rare, but could include figures such as Theaster Gates (2012) who are explicit in their embrace of the market, but do so in order to create other kinds of social relationships. Gates has been quite explicit about his approach of turning art into capital through sales, and then using that capital to acquire property for community development efforts and projects, which then form the social basis for the creation of new art projects. Conceptually this proceeds in a virtuous circle of expansion. Here we could also include the history of artists’ cooperatives, or the formation of cooperatives within Fluxus (readies 2012). Oftentimes here the acceptance of market relations is one of a pragmatic nature, rather than an ideological decision. (Although the same could be argued similarly for forms of art practice rejecting market relations: at times that could be a pragmatic decision.)

Deepening/expanding the model

In laying out this model of framing the relationship between politics, art, and the market there is an immediate problem. It is the very problem we began with, namely that a model like this is far too simple. These positions are hard to nail down with this degree of clarity, and change over time. For instance we could look at the ways that collectively oriented anti-market practices

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generate interest and social value, which are then rendered by particular artists into personal fame and economic success. This could be called the “Boltanski and Chiapello” (2005) effect for the way they describe how artistic critiques of the market have been absorbed into forming a “new spirit of capitalism” for the present.

More importantly, it is clearly the case that the art world, the market, and politics are not one, monolithic thing. Thus the way that art, politics, and markets are related varies immensely by the particular subsection and part of any of them we are discussing. The way in which value is produced there, and the kinds of value that are produced in an overall sense can only be found within the details. In other words, the politics possible within a commercial gallery space would vary quite significantly from those of street art, or the art school, even if these spaces at times cross over each other. Here we could consider the descriptions provided by Sarah Thornton in Seven Days in the Art World (2008). While it is true that Thornton tends to only focus on the shiny and glitzy aspects of the art world, her description and categorization of the worlds of experience found there is quite useful. Thornton divides the art world into the space of the auction, the art school crit session, the art fair, prizes and prize giving, art magazine production, the studio space, and the biennale. By breaking the art world down into multiple spaces it becomes clear that it is not a monolith, and that each particular area is engaged in a different form of value production and is animated by varying forms of social relationships.

As Thornton herself suggests, the art world is not a system or a smooth functioning machine, but is better understood as a “conflicted cluster of subcultures – each of which embrace different definitions of art” (2008: xix). Each sector could thus be understood to contain a different relationship between art, politics, and markets in that it creates different forms of value by its activity. So when Thornton notes that a Turner Prize nomination increases the selling price for works by an artist by a third, and that winning doubles them (2008: 140) this is a clear indication of how value is produced in that act of prize giving, and thus the politics of articulating a relationship between art and the market. This quickly multiplies the relationship and spaces for co-articulating the relationship between politics, art, and the market. We can thus understand how even for one artist, practice, or movement the politics and value associated with them is not solely found within their own actions, but in how they interact with a distributed set of interactions and roles across a whole range of spaces and institutions. Indeed, even if the focus was limited to a particular city and a particular time, for instance in the way Fletcher and Helmreich (2012) have done with London art markets in the nineteenth century, the social shaping of the art market and the politics of that are quite complex and varied.

**Art and value**

Perhaps rather than getting trapped within the details of the relation between politics, arts, and the market it would be more useful to trace that relation back to a question that connects them all, namely, how is it that art produces value for and in the market? From an understanding of this value production we can then develop an approach to politics. There is always something difficult about directly discussing value formation, and perhaps even more so when discussing how artistic labor produces value. Questions of value production often stand in as a proxy for providing the basis for politics, lending legitimacy to certain kinds of interventions or modes of organizing in Marxist politics, or providing the prime logic for decision making within capitalism. In this sense one can say that in the same way that labor power is more than itself, the question of value production is always more than itself, precisely because of how it connects to other concerns and realities. And this in some ways serves to explain the difficulty in approaching it, for as Diedrich Diederichsen suggests, paraphrasing Marx, “Value, therefore, does not have its description branded on its forehead;
it rather transforms every product of labour into a social hieroglyphic … this hieroglyphic speaks of something, but it is impossible to tell by looking at it what it is speaking of” (2008: 22).

The question that concerns us here is the forms of social valuation produced by artistic practices and intervention. Or, taking up the argument of Peter Burger (1984), it would be to ask, if the role of the avant-garde has been to attempt to bring art back into daily life, what modes of interaction and value did this movement produce? In Burger’s narration of the historical avant-garde this becomes a story of a rejection of traditional art institutions and formats that results in transforming the logic of the art institution and art practice more generally, as it comes to value other forms of artistic practice and production than it had before. Antagonism is converted into new forms of artistic productivity.

This is not, however, to fall back on an argument that artistic practices are merely reflections of underlying economic structures that determine them, as would likely be the case in an older style of Marxist analysis that relies on a base–superstructure model. As Jacques Attali argued in his important book *Noise* (1985), modes of artistic production can precede and can actually forecast broader changes in economic interactions. Pascal Gielen (2009) has expanded this argument with his work on the artistic multitude, arguing that the art world served as social laboratory for the development of the post-Fordist work ethic. The purpose of examining changing modes of value and production in the art world is then not necessarily to remain in one’s concerns in the art world. In fact there is too great a tendency for discussions of art and labor to remain within the circuit of concerns of the art world exclusively, rather than considering how these interactions have become more generalized and expanded beyond the art world.

But perhaps we are yet again getting a bit ahead of ourselves, as is easy to do in such consideration. Taking a step back, we can return to what seems like should be a quite basic question: when we speak of value being created in an artistic process, value being created by artistic labor, how exactly is that value created? There is something particularly slippery in talking about value production in artistic labor, and that the slipperiness of this discussion can easily lead one back into an almost neoliberal conception of value production, one that could be held even despite the stated intentions of the person who is making claims about artistic labor.

What are the main models of value production and labor? For the sake of simplicity, let’s say that there are two main approaches, to which can be added a third form. The first approach would be to argue that value is created through the process of exchange itself. That is to say that value is the product of a social exchange, the outward expression of valuation of whatever goods and services are discussed. Value in this sense is created within the process of exchange itself rather than being a formal characteristic that existed before the exchange process. The best expression of this perhaps can be found in the work of Georg Simmel (2004) and more generally in neoclassical conceptions of value production and utility developed within neoclassical economic thinking but generalized since then.

Contrasted to this one could pose a more traditionally Marxist conception of value, which is that value is the substance produced by labor power which is then valorized through circulation and accrued eventually into the further development of capital accumulation. Although this is admittedly a very crude rendering of complex debates around value production, the essential aspect for consideration here is that value is an attribute related to labor itself, and thus value production occurs prior to the exchanges happening within the marketplace. This is Marx’s point about trying to understand commodity production not through an analysis of the market and its appearances, but rather in relation to the labor and value practices that happen within “the hidden abode of production.”

Here we should also pause to gesture to models of value production that have extended and developed these ideas in quite fruitful directions, and in particular David Graeber’s (2001)
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anthropological model of value production as framework for evaluating the importance of actions and modes of being that are already in motion. Graeber’s work in this direction is formed by the bringing together of Marxist political economy with the ideas and work of Marcel Mauss, and provides a way of thinking of value in a broader sense. This has been taken up by Massimo De Angelis (2007) who expands this into a framework of value practices and value struggles around ways of living. And it could be further expanded along the line that Bruno Gulli (2005, 2010) has sketched out through exploring how labor functions as a core concept for social and political ontologies. Gulli proceeds from his poetic conception of labor to a politics that recuperates what political economy often forgets: culture, care, and ethics of singular becomings not determined by economic value.

The main reason why we bring up models of value production is not that we want to get into a long exploration of them, but to point out that they seem to have difficulty when applied to the way that artistic labor produces value. Or, we could rather say, that Marxist approaches of value production come into the greatest difficulty. This can be seen when you take the clichéd scenario of any recent news article that discusses how a particular piece by this or that master artist has sold for some new and unprecedented amount. Now if value is produced by the labor necessary for the creation of the piece, whether that piece is a piece of steel or painting, it does not make sense to say a piece would contain more value one day, rather than on the day before, particularly when the artist has been dead for decades if not centuries. In this case it would be easy enough to take such instances as a kind of false bubble effect of capitalist market relations that bears no semblance to the substance of value contained in the work. And there might be some truth to that, but there is more than just that.

The value of the labors of circulation is that which produces the social evaluation of worth or significance of whatever it is in question. For the work of the old master that is now valued in prices beyond all reasonable imagination it is not simply that the piece itself has magically accrued value. Rather, there is a whole industry of discussing and evaluating the importance of artists and their work, displaying and exhibiting them, commenting and discussing, cataloguing and curating, building histories, all the work that creates what Howard Becker (2008) very rightly describes as “art worlds.” The labors of circulation thus are the labors that curators, commentators, galleries, art sales – in short all the figures that make the art world work, that make images and ideas circulate – take part in. This is precisely the point that Isabelle Graw (2010) makes when she describes critics as marketers, which is to say as boosters of art value, and thus participating in a form of labor that amasses symbolic value that can be translated into economic value on the market. Thus it is not the case that a piece has mysteriously managed to increase in value through its own efforts. This is a mystical conception of value, art, and labor. Rather it is the way that the diffuse labors flowing through art worlds come to attach themselves to particular pieces, or are rendered into market prices of these works.

Artistic mode of production

What is most useful in thinking about the labor of circulation and how that produces value in art work is less the importance of that dynamic specifically in the art world itself, but more what happens when such a dynamic is spread beyond the boundaries of the specific artist economy and becomes a more general dynamic. Or as Chin-Tao Wu has argued in her book Privatising Culture, the way that art, the business world, and politics have entered a “clandestine symbiotic relationship” through which those enmeshed in the overlapping of these networks (for instance the Saatchis) find themselves in an ideal position to transform economic capital into cultural
capital as well as cultural capital into economic capital, all mediated through the circulatory auras of the art world (2002: 120).

This could be described, following the work of Sharon Zukin (1989), as the rise of an artistic mode of production, one based upon utilizing the same dynamics of circulatory labor in the remodeling of lifestyles, neighborhoods, and ways of life into a generalized mode of value production. It can be recalled that Zukin’s work looked at the transformation of Manhattan in the 1960s and 1970s as former industrial spaces were taken over first by artists who used them as combined studio and work spaces. This is the emergence of the “loft economy” and transformation of lower Manhattan from an industrial space to another form of value production. This is when a sign proclaiming “artist in residence” was hung not for the purpose of advertising some snazzy new program, but rather to inform the fire department that there were people living in these industrial spaces (which they would not have otherwise assumed).

This use of former industrial space for mixed use, the complete combining of living and working into an integrated mode of artistic production, becomes a key model for schemes of urban renewal and development based around the cultural cachet of the arts. This model ends up forming a mode of gentrification and development that is applied far beyond the context of New York, and is used to fuel property development in many other locations. In Zukin’s description of this process in New York the main victims of it were not the local residents, but the workers from the workspaces that were displaced. And so, importantly, artists end up finding themselves acting as inadvertent proxy in the gentrification process, for real estate booms and investment, with the “bohemian” lifestyles afforded by these spaces serving as model for imitation by the middle class. Artists also further develop modes of combining work and life that by the impossibility of clearly separating them end up serving as a way to intensify and deepen forms of labor and attachment to work when they are generalized beyond the arts economy specifically.

This argument has been explored by Böhm and Land (2009) specifically looking at the ways in which notions of value are shaped within cultural policy discourse, and how they have shifted over time. Böhm and Land argue that in the UK over the past 15 years there was a shift in how value in the cultural economy is conceived: from an earlier conception that the value of the arts is their potential to generate revenue to one of forms of indirect value creation, such as generating creativity, fostering employability and social inclusion, and other such conditions. Arguably in recent years there has been a shift away from this indirect model of artistic value creation back to the direct production of revenue. The ongoing economic and social crises have certainly contributed to this trend, or perhaps more accurately provided a convenient explanation for it. Regardless of changing trends in arts and cultural policy, it is this social value of the arts and cultural labor, how they take part in renewing social bonds and sociability more generally, that is precisely not recognized or rewarded. As Randy Martin argues, the connection created by the artwork is the work of art itself; art makes exchange possible but is not of it (1990: 83) – and therefore paradoxically falls out of the accounting of the labors involved in maintaining the conditions, the very forms of sociability, that make possible exchange itself.

An ‘exceptional arts economy’?

Finally, let us end with a brief consideration of whether the economy of the arts is exceptional. This is the question asked by the economist Hans Abbing in his book Why Are Artists Poor? (2004). His answer involves an analysis of the mixed structures of motivation, value, and outcomes that characterize the art world – how it is suspended, and torn between an economy based on gifts and social values, and market-oriented values. But the formulation of the arts as exceptional is problematic, because even if this once was the case, the expansion of the arts and
cultural economy, and its structures of motivation and relationship to work, has spread far beyond the borders of the art world. The passionate and self-motivated labor of the artisan, which has long been part of explaining why artists are willing to accept less desirable working conditions and income because of the (supposedly) higher degree of meaning found in their work, has been taken up by management theory and practices within the knowledge economy and post-Fordist working practices. This does not mean that it is no longer interesting or worthwhile to analyze the politics of art markets and cultures, but rather that these dynamics have become much more important precisely because they have been generalized further beyond the art world itself.

Further, to draw from the idea of Pierre Bourdieu and Howard Becker, we could say that the art worlds have moved from existing mainly as a form of social reproduction (taste as class structure) to a position much more directly enmeshed in production. The relationship between art, markets, and politics is thus one of a composition of forces: forms of labor, political action, and social life that are intermingled together. Politics is not separate from the relations of the art world, it cannot be relegated to the content of artistic production. For arts marketing politics is found in the articulation of the relationship between art and the market, and the forms of organization and sociality that emerge and that are sustained by that very conjunction.

Further reading

Abbing, Hans (2004) *Why Are Artists Poor?: The Exceptional Economy of the Arts*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press. (Interesting consideration of the relationship between arts and markets by an author who is both a practicing artist and trained economist.)

Bryan-Wilson, J. (2009) *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era*. Berkeley: University of California Press. (This is an excellent historical study of the relationship between art, politics, and labor in the USA in the 1960s. It focuses primarily on groups such as the Art Workers’ Coalition and associated figures such as Carl Andre, Robert Morris, and Lucy Lippard.)

Gielen, Pascal (2009) *The Murmuring of the Artistic Multitude: Global Art, Memory and Post-Fordism*. Amsterdam: Valiz. (A more sociological account of the relationship between art and labor, one which lays out an argument for the arts sector as developing changes in labor and organization before the rest of the economy more generally.)

Precarious Workers Brigade, various texts and resources: [http://precariousworkersbrigade.tumblr.com/](http://precariousworkersbrigade.tumblr.com/)

Wu, Chin-Tao (2002) *Privatising Culture: Corporate Art Intervention since the 1980s*. London: Verso. (Insightful analysis of the circuits and overlaps between the art world and the corporate world, particularly in terms of how cultural capital and economics support each other (and manage to avoid paying taxes in the process).)

Notes

1 It might very well be objected at this point that this paints all art markets as the same, lumping together many different forms of projects, practices, and approaches. Does not it make any difference between whether the approach is profit or nonprofit, or is there some neoliberal logic that permeates all art practice, a logic of individualization? And is there not a risk of taking understandings of certain spheres and areas of artistic activity more than likely privileging the fine arts over other forms (such as film, music, performance)? Or confusing an analysis of the conditions of a particular place with a more general argument? Indeed these are quite real dangers. For this chapter we will start with quite broad strokes, which will then be broken down to look at the infinitely more complicated conditions found within the immense variations of various artistic fields and endeavors.

3 Although Thornton’s (2008) accounts tend to omit those in lower rank positions, she does include accounts of work of studio and gallery assistants. Yet still, the chapters that mention the low-paid art workers are centered on the glamor and the glitz of the situations they describe, and fail to include any interviews or insights into the actual daily work processes, politics, and organization of work.

References


