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Wages against Artwork: The Social Practice of Decommodification

Anything that is not work can be art.
—Marina Vishmidt, “Situation Wanted:
Something about Labour”

An international network of schools in which anyone may take classes by bartering with teachers, in which any collective may start a branch; a barter network for artists to offer and receive skills, materials, and labor; a café at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in which visitors are invited to invent the value of their currency and to use this currency to purchase tea. Each of these works is a project of the artist Caroline Woolard and her collaborators, and in each we notice a particular orientation toward the aesthetics of value. The first, TradeSchool.coop, conflates the act of trading with both the language of craft and the commodification of education. The second, OurGoods.org, makes a public claim to utility in the face of the more common assignation of value to the individual possession of talent. And the third, Exchange Café, asks its visitors to aestheticize the act of using money into the defining experience of museum-based café dwelling, itself so often the place of respite from whatever artwork-viewing opportunities the museum offers (Carolinewoolard.com). For those

who follow contemporary arts discourse, Woolard's works recognizably belong to the emergent mode of social practice.¹ Depending on one's aesthetic genealogy and preferences, social practice can be divided into distinct component elements. For its proponents, such practices frame the modes of production of the artwork itself: the practice manifests the schooling, debt, labor, and infrastructure that any work requires; the practice replaces the work. To its detractors, such works glorify the absorption of social-welfare-state administrative functions into an aesthetic order and present them in a depoliticized space to be consumed as spectacle: social work replaces artwork.² In both, the relationship between art and work repositions so that the contents of labor/work overdetermine those of the aesthetic.

I want to investigate the problem of artistic labor and aesthetic value in an entrepreneurial age through Woolard's practice. Michel Foucault's (2008: 234) original and now oft-cited assertion "man has become an entrepreneur of himself" makes a claim on the epistemological and ontological status of human labor today. Unlike the proletarianized worker of yore, the one who sells her labor power under pain of starvation or homelessness, who is organized by the "double freedom" of capital's commodification of land and labor, the entrepreneur chooses freely when to buy and sell. Andrew Dilts (2011: 136) summarizes the discursive transition from worker to entrepreneur:

[T]he theory shifts . . . from commodity production and exchange, instead centering its analysis on labor as an activity chosen from amongst substitutes . . . [that] leads to a second shift, the subsequent re-categorization of wages as income. Finally, this re-categorization allows for an analysis to focus on income streams as dependent on specific attributes of particular bodies [enabling a] radical shift in the understanding of *homo oeconomicus* from . . . "partner of exchange" to . . . "entrepreneur of himself."

From labor-power owner to human-capital investor, from wage earner to capital-gains recipient, from worker to entrepreneur, these are the ideological stakes of Foucault's description of our age, prescient in identifying discourses but ambivalent about their effectivities. Theoretically, it is not contentious to claim that Foucault moves us away from the commodity form and the abstract labor power that is its *ur*-content. That is, in some sense, the point. But an older tradition of commodity aesthetics exists that we must also move away from when we shift away from the commodity form. What are the aesthetics of the artist as entrepreneur as opposed to the "artist as producer" (Benjamin 1998) or the "artist as ethnographer" (Foster 1996)? How does the artist as entrepreneur offer a chance for a possible cri-

tique of the critical theoretical and social forms of our economic moment in a manner similar to the one in which commodity art framed the commodity form?³

The romantic depiction of the artist as an individual does have a certain entrepreneurial aura to it. I am interested in highlighting the theoretical additions and subtractions that occur when art as commodity and artist as producer are reframed: “art wage” becomes future return on investment, and artist as producer becomes artist as entrepreneur. The move requires two conceptual transpositions, both tied to the status of labor. First, we must have arrived at the end of labor in a discursive sense. The artist no longer views herself as a worker, but as an investor in herself who protects her brand, itself an aestheticized capture of possible future value given present representation (see La Berge 2015: chap. 1). Foucault (2008: 225) says as much with respect to discourse: the entrepreneurial subject has a “conception of capital-ability which, according to diverse variables, receives a certain income that is a wage, an income-wage, so that the worker himself appears as a sort of enterprise for himself.” Second, we must have arrived at the limit of a certain material labor process. Here we find the argument that the real subsumption of labor to capital has superseded its formal subsumption. Antonio Negri describes this process as a moment in which “labour under capital has reached its irreversible completion, culminating in the quashing of any temporal externalities to capital’s process of valorisation. . . . [it includes a] subjection of labour to the continual renewal and transformation of the capitalist mode of production, as underpinning *all forms* of social activity” (quoted in Polhill 2008). Negri here makes reference to the familiar trope of “no more outside,” but I am more interested throughout this essay in how the referent to what constitutes labor itself has undergone a dramatic shift—what I will refer to as “the end of labor.”⁴ Within the autonomist tradition, the end of labor signals the move toward the biopolitical.

At the end of an age of labor, then, we arrive at the age of enterprise, and the laborer is transformed into an entrepreneur—an entrepreneur foremost of the biopolitical terrain of her own subjectivity. To think through the aesthetics of the move from labor to enterprise, we need to remember that the material and the discursive comprise different levels of mediation and that moving between them reshapes our own bearing on the aesthetic. My attention to the history and integrity of discrete categories from divergent theoretical traditions is meant to highlight the genealogical possibilities of continuity and rupture. What aesthetic approaches to the status of labor as commodity can we locate at the end of labor, after labor, and how does this

problem intersect with commodity-art? I want to suggest that a logic and an aesthetic of decommodification is required in order to continue our conversation about how aesthetics and value are co-constituted in contemporary arts practices. *Decommodification* is a term that has been deployed in a political science context—used most influentially by Gösta Epsing-Andersen (1990) to discuss varying levels of welfare assistance to citizens in Western democracies. My borrowing of the term takes its basic conceit—the circumscription of commodified labor—and attempts to translate it into an aesthetic term compatible with the artistic practices of our entrepreneurial age.

Decommodification, I argue, has always been the silent partner of not only commodity aesthetics but also capital itself. In an age of the real subsumption of labor to capital, one cannot locate a new, uncommodified ground of that long hoped for “outside.” Rather, one must take objects, processes, anxieties out of circulation, making them available once again for the generation of a different value, and provide a model for doing so. Unlike Immanuel Kant’s non-teleological insistence of the aesthetic as such, the category of the decommodified that I introduce here has a purpose. But the “purpose” of this decommodified aesthetic is to “repurpose” by depurposing in the realm of labor, and this effect will ultimately reveal contemporary dimensions of time, space, and scale. Indeed, decommodification is the ideal economic pair to what Shannon Jackson (2011) has called social practice’s emphasis on “de-autonomizing” the work of art and what Ted Purves (2005) has simply called an aesthetics of “generosity” in his well-titled book *What We Want Is Free*.

Commodity Forms (A Brief History)

We all know what a commodity is: it is a trivial thing, a thing outside us, a queer thing, and a thing whose looks are deceiving. Marx uses the language of vision, first glances, and awkward impressions to introduce this form. He explains that, “a commodity is, in the first place, an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another. The nature of such wants, whether, for instance, they spring from the stomach or from fancy, makes no difference” ([1867] 2010: chap. 1. sec 1). And famously, for Marx ([1867] 2010: chap. 1. sec 4), “a commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing.” Likewise, we all know how the commodity’s armature will unravel and unwind. Its simplicity and easy apprehension will soon transform into “metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” ([1867]

2010: chap. 1. sec 4), whose hermeneutics and historical disposition will become the *sine qua non* of the capitalist mode of production. While anything may take the form of a commodity, only one action may generate the value found within it: the expenditure of human labor. There exist, then, both myriad commodities as well as a singular commodity. Ultimately, commodities are bearers of value, and value is a social relationship, quintessentially and necessarily derivative of human sociality.

Dan Schiller (2010: 8) defines a commodity as an object that is made by waged labor and sold on the market, and his is about as concise a definition as we are likely to find. Who is waged and what constitutes a market will change historically: a cotton-spinning jenny is a machine for spinning cotton but only becomes capital in certain historical relations and conditions. Nonetheless, the formal requirements of wage and market are structural, and because these requirements are structural, they appear as mediated, a form of representation that Louis Althusser labeled “structural causality” (Jameson 1981: 36–39).⁵ Indeed, the relationship between commodification and historical development is itself a mediation between materiality and discursivity. Its mediated, structural nature makes it difficult to apply quantitative analysis to the process of commodification, and it renders suspect the application of ratios such as more or less commodified, more or less developed, and so on. Just as a single commodity renders invisible the history of its own production, so commodity history makes ascertaining its moments of break and innovation difficult.

Yet at the same time, one of the seductions of commodity history is that of the event, the “this” of the commodity that refigures space and time. We would do well to remember Moishe Postone’s (1993) understanding of the coexistence of stasis and progress within the frame of capitalism.⁶ The advantage of Postone’s conception of historical time as both an omnipresent and unidirectional narrative is his insistence that there are no qualitative breaks within the temporal horizons of capitalism. He explains that “the movement of capital is without limit, without end. . . . As self-valorizing value, it appears as pure process. In dealing with the category of capital, then, one is dealing with a central category of a society that becomes characterized by a constant directional movement with no determinate external telos, a society driven by production for the sake of production, by process that exists for the sake of process” (1993: 269). That is, capital claims an eternal present that exists only to produce more of that present in the future, and which cycles back and forth between abstract and concrete, a familiar pair that will be realized through labor, space, and time.

My particular concern is not to examine historical method but, rather, to track a changing discourse and material reality of commodified human labor. Because I am trying to retrace a certain terminus of the referent to and actuality of labor, the scale of possibility for its transformation is crucial. Both the claim of the real subsumption of labor to capital and the discourse of entrepreneurship denote a change in labor's ontology and referential scope. What, precisely, is the status of labor after real subsumption? Jason Read (2009: 33) offers one assessment: "This [real] subsumption involves not only the formation of what Marx referred to as a specifically capitalist mode of production, but also the incorporation of all subjective potential, the capacity to communicate, to feel, to create, to think, into productive powers for capital. Capital no longer simply exploits labor, understood as the physical capacity to transform objects, but puts to work the capacities to create and communicate that traverse social relations."

Real subsumption thus removes any internal or external barrier to capital accumulation. There is no more spatial or temporal outside to assimilate. Yet conversely, Read insists, this subsumption produces a reconstitution of interiority reconceived as space. He continues, "capital is nothing but outside, production takes place outside of the factory and the firm, in various social relationships. Because of this fundamental displacement subjectivity becomes paramount, subjectivity itself becomes productive and it is this same subjectivity that must be controlled" (2009: 33). That is, according to Read, real subsumption produces the ability for something like the biopolitical to become a historical reality.

But is that really such a radical historical change? Does the emergence of the biopolitical require the real subsumption of labor to capital as its precondition? From the biopolitical excesses and enclosures described in the late Middle Ages in Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch* (2004) to the biopolitical terrain of the American plantation system evinced in Walter Johnson's *River of Dark Dreams* (2013), the extractive production of subjectivity is hardly a new feature of capitalist accumulation. Indeed, real subsumption may be conceived of as both generic to capitalism *and* historically impossible within capitalism; it might well be possible to treat any historical moment as that of real subsumption or as productive of the biopolitical control of life processes. Amy Dru Stanely (1998), for example, offers an account of the "commodification" of domestic space in 1870s New York, as women brought laundry and sewing into their home for pay. Throughout the nineteenth century in the northern United States, ceaseless commodified labor dominated home and work alike, involving both adults and children. The modish term

playbor, meant to designate the assimilation of pleasure or leisure with commodified labor, has its historical parallels as well.⁷ Think of the late nineteenth-century distribution of the Sears catalogue and the stories of shared public reading and viewing of its merchandise.⁸ Certainly, this activity, too, was *playbor* of the now Facebook-derived variety.

Such examples demonstrate the awkwardness in speaking of “increasing commodification” as teleological movement toward an absolute and why it is more precise to speak of the creation of markets in which commodities can circulate and have their value protected with some regularity. Any historical moment will reveal increased and decreased levels of commodification. Furthermore, when sleeping, corresponding, fantasizing, and lovemaking, for instance, are all value-producing operations, labor itself loses its conceptual capture as something distinct and differentiated from capital. As such, the status of labor after real subsumption bears a certain structural resemblance to the entrepreneurial moment delineated by Foucault. Activity, being, and tasks all become subsumed into a purely imminent horizon in which each functions as capital. Ultimately, Foucault (2008: 223) arrives at a “breakdown of labor into capital and income” as the defining quality of an entrepreneurial age. In the scheme of real subsumption, we cannot help but be workers; in the scheme of the entrepreneur, we cannot help but be capitalists. The first claims that all human action functions as commodified labor and the second claims that all human action may be treated as capital. In this theoretical archive, labor’s scope has changed, both materially and discursively, to the extent that either everything is a commodity or nothing is. Yet, the two paths to this place of radical divergence are oddly complimentary, as each one requires a radical expansion of one side of the capital/labor dialectic.

At this point, I want to think about the aesthetic consequences of this terminus. What is the status of art after the conceptual weakening of labor, whose ultimate form is realized when labor is waged and sold on the market as a commodity? Art’s dominant modern paradigms of lack of purposefulness and aesthetic autonomy are conceptually dependent on labor as a commodity. As Stewart Martin (2007: 18) explains, “just as the autonomous artwork is defined by its independence from any use or purpose outside itself, so is the commodity defined by the independence of its exchange-value from its use-value. The appreciation of the purity of modern art, stripped of any use-value, is matched by the autonomy of the commodity in developed capitalism. . . .” The homology between art and the commodity telescopes the freedom available to both while simultaneously alerting us to an alternate state of affairs, namely, that art must not only exist homologously to the commodity,

it must also take the commodity form. Martin (18) suggests that: “within a society in which commodification is dominant, everything that is external to this commodification becomes marginal, liable to be socially irrelevant or merely yet-to-be-commodified. This predicament recommends an alternative, immanent critique: the generation of art’s autonomy from *out of* [its] commodification.” Art cannot be a commodity because if it were it would forfeit its critical power. But art *cannot not* be a commodity because being external to commodification also forfeits its critical power.

The paradox contained herein stabilizes a long and varied history of aesthetic returns. Echoing a Kantian conception of the aesthetic as derived from purposelessness and using the language of work as opposed to labor, Vishmidt (2008: 23) explains: “Anything that is not work may be art, anything that is not art, may be work,” and “if both art and work can be anything, and anything that is not work can be art, then art could be seen as the phantasmatic enactment of this potentiality as potentiality—the potentiality not to work.” But in a moment of real subsumption, all activity is value producing—that is, all activity may be conceived as work. And if everything is work, then there is no art after real subsumption. This is the precise problem Nicholas Brown (2012) considers in “The Work of Art in the Age of Real Subsumption,” and he arrives at the theoretical correlate that criticism, too, is endangered by the process of real subsumption. Brown (2012) explains that “while one can ask sociological questions about art commodities—Why do people like violent movies?—interpretive questions—Why is there a love scene in the middle of *Three Days of the Condor*?—do not have interesting answers.”

Steven Shaviro (2013) takes yet another route to arrive at a similarly foreclosed aesthetic moment, which registers the biopolitical explicitly. If nothing is work because everything is now capital, then there is also no art. Shaviro (2013) explains: “It’s not just that sensations and feelings are trivialized when they are packaged for sale. . . . It’s also that the two most crucial qualities of the aesthetic according to Kant—that it is disinterested, and that it is non-cognitive—are made to vanish, or explained away. Aesthetic sensations and feelings are no longer disinterested, because they have been recast as markers of personal identity. . . .” Both critics, and we can add Vishmidt and Boris Groys here, too, turn to Foucault to assign, finally, the fate of the artist. For Brown (2012), for instance, the outcome is clear: “the artist . . . will be forced to conceive of herself, in true liberal fashion, as an entrepreneur of herself.”

True, we have already had a moment when “everything is/was commodified.” And this moment, too, produced a distinctive aesthetic. We used to know this condition by the name postmodernism. But if that previous

moment of totalizing commodification now seems quaint, it is because the entrepreneurial imperative includes a nonideological internalization of the process. The entrepreneurial subject embraces the activity of self-capitalization rather than passively acquiescing to or struggling against it. As Groys (2014) states in his recent piece on art activism, “Foucault indicates that in terms of human capital, the consumer becomes a producer. The consumer produces his or her own satisfaction.” While each of these theorists—Brown, Vishmidt, Groys, and Shaviro—arrives at an entrepreneurial juncture when theorizing contemporary aesthetics, the formal possibilities and constraints of artist as entrepreneur have less presence in their work. Such artists would be those who do not seek a spatialized “outside”—as in “there is no outside to capital”—and who do not issue a utopian demand for an impossible future, such as a call for the end of capitalism/the end of the world or, conversely, a demand for an impossible past realized in the present, such as “Keynesianism now!”

Rather, we find the aesthetic rejoinder to the age of entrepreneurship among artists who are working purposefully within the scene of decommodification. Here we can locate artists and artworks that enjoin a tradition of purposelessness to our selectively decommodified present. Within aesthetic criticism, *decommodification* is a term that we seldom hear and that Marx did not use.⁹ It is inherited from the market and state theory of Karl Polanyi and receives its most sustained treatment in Epsing-Andersen’s analysis of the levels of intensity of commodified labor, where it is used to index the freedom individuals have to reproduce themselves socially outside of that regime (Carruthers 2014). Epsing-Andersen (1990: 37) defines decommodification as “the degree to which individuals, or families, can uphold a socially acceptable standard of living independently of market participation.” Peter Frase (2011) picks up on this notion of independence as a possible political demand and argues that we “can think of the de-commodifying welfare state as giving people a *choice* about whether or not to commodify their labor, rather than forcing them to sell their labor as would be the case in the absence of any welfare-state institutions. The choice that is involved here is not merely about income. It ultimately comes down to how we want to organize our time, and how we want to structure our relations with other people.” Frase begins to broaden decommodification and extend it into the realm of temporality, while Bruce Carruthers argues that the term is crucial to understanding the structure of contemporary financial assets. Carruthers suggests that the US government “decommodified” a range of financial assets in response to the 2007–8 credit crisis as a protective

measure of price stability for banks and other financial institutions. For each of these theorists, decommodification limits the market exposure of labor or money so that each may ultimately function as stable commodities *par excellence*.

We may also locate traces of decommodification's theoretical genealogy in recent discussions of "commoning," or the collective production of a space outside of the demands of capitalist valorization. Federici has differentiated production of the commons from acts such as bartering, cooping, mutual aid, and so forth. She claims that "anti-capitalist commons are best conceived as autonomous spaces from which to reclaim control over our life and the conditions of our reproduction" (Caffentzis and Federici 2013). The rhizomatic Internet and a bucolic Swiss pasture are, for Federici, nice but not the point. We must, however, differentiate a theory of decommodification from a practice such as commoning. Decommodification is more individualistic and more local to the process of mirroring and reflecting specific commodity forms. For example, mortgage-backed securities and other financial assets crisis were not "commoned" after the credit crisis; they were decommodified. During the Occupy Wall Street movement, Zuccotti Park was not decommodified; it was commoned. To prove efficacious, my argument of a decommodified aesthetic must establish a decommodification on par with commodification's expansive theoretical scope: a decommodification of time, of space, of embodiment, and so on. This is not a reactionary project. Rather, just as capitalism has always has its deterritorializations and reterritorializations, decommodification has always been a partner to commodification.

Decommodified Forms

If decommodification is the removal of land, labor, or money from market-based circulation, then many artists are already working within its historical ambit. Most artists do not make their primary earnings from their art, which renders their art-labor unwaged, and most of the commodities they produce are not sold as such because they are not sold at all. These circumstances remind us that just as commodification delivers a "double freedom" (you are free to sell your labor/you *have* to sell your labor), so does decommodification (you are free not to sell your labor/you *cannot* sell it). My claims about artists' employment derive from Woolard's recent ongoing collective project BFAMFAPhD (bfamfaphd.com/), which translates the Benjaminian problem of the status of a work of art into a new idiom. The project asks "what is a work of art in the age of \$120,000 art degrees?"

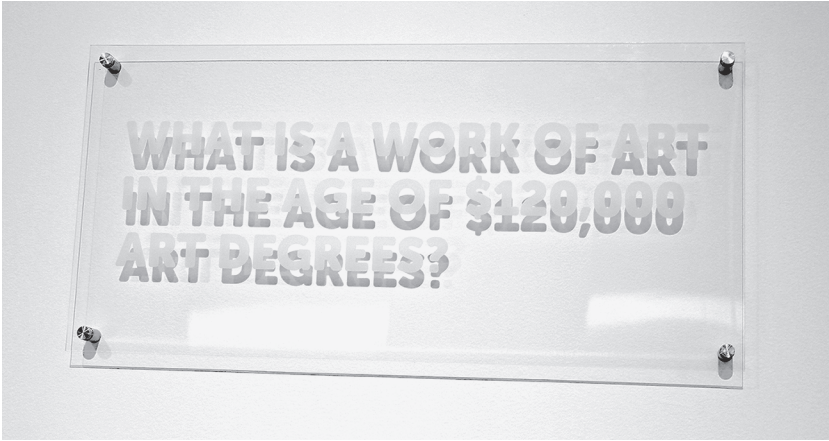


Figure 1. Caroline Woolard, BFAMFAPhD, *Statements* (2013), plexiglass, plaque hardware, 11" x 23" x 1". Credit: BFAMFAPhD, licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Share-Alike 4.0 International License

This question is answered through a series of data visualizations including statistical information about how and for whom artists labor. A corporate-like plexiglass plaque is affixed to the museum wall (figure 1), and viewers are invited to take a handout that contains these and many more statistics. Two motorcycle jackets fabricated by BFAMFAPhD member Lika Volkova from a mix of leather and artists' disclaimed canvasses hang next to the mounted texts. While the plaque might remind viewers of the corporate-financed world of higher education and museum spaces, the painted canvas jackets serve as a suggestion that in this work, aesthetic purposelessness will be repurposed—for instance, a painting will become a jacket.

This particular work, these questions, even the mode of data collection may at first appear sociological. In the printed statistics, artists themselves are divided into the usual demographic categories of income, race, age, and gender as well as a category we seldom see in such data: medium specificity, or the material mode in which artists work, including sculpture, photography, video, paint, and so on. In its sociological reach, this installation, presented at the Museum of Art and Design's inaugural "Maker Biennial" (July–October 2014), resonates with Claire Bishop's description of the necessary mode of interpretation of much social practice work. "From a disciplinary perspective," Bishop (2012: 7) writes, "any art engaging with society and the people in it demands a methodological reading that is, at least in part,

sociological. . . . an analysis of this art must necessarily engage with concepts that have traditionally had more currency within the social sciences than in the humanities: community, society, empowerment, agency.” Bishop, of course, will be critical of much of this work. Jackson, her interlocutor, offers a more sympathetic, and to my mind expansive, reading of these works. Adding to the long history of theories of aesthetic autonomy, Jackson (2011: 25) proposes that we think of social practice work as a “de-autonomizing art movement.”¹⁰ Such works should be understood, she suggests, not as sociological but rather as what she understands as a “deautonomizing of the artistic event.” Jackson (2011: 28) then notes, however, that “deautonomizing” is not the equivalent of “de-aestheticizing,” explaining, rather, that “the deautonomizing of the artistic event is itself an artful structure, more or less self-consciously creating an intermedial form that would subtly challenge the lines where the art object ends and the world begins. It is to make art from not despite contingency.” Woolard’s work telescopes this problem of the required structures necessary for our current mode of arts production with acuity.

I introduced Woolard’s work through artistic education and professionalization because these function as the infrastructural gateway to becoming “an artist.” One becomes trained and certified, and one goes into debt; seven of the ten most expensive universities in the United States are art schools (Simon and Barry 2013). Woolard herself graduated from formerly tuition-free (and free when she attended) Cooper Union; the contrast between her education and that of her indebted younger colleagues animates “What Is a Work of Art in the Age of \$120,000 Art Degrees?” As education becomes a more expensive commodity, it generates a workforce whose members are unable to realize themselves in the appropriately commodified form, namely, waged art work. The result of this overaccumulation may be found in moments of both chosen and inflicted decommodification.¹¹

The next two works I focus on do not merely critique but, rather, offer the *experience* of decommodification as their primary aesthetic form. OurGoods.org, a barter network for artists, and TradeSchool.coop, an international network of self-organized schools, instantiate decommodification by creating ongoing democratic institutions in which artists, or anyone who wishes to enjoin their labor as art, may participate. These works might be grouped within what Maria Lind (quoted in Jackson 2011: 54) has called “constructive institutional critique,” to describe works that “manifest their interest in critique by creating alternative institutions.” Jackson (2005) herself understands works such as these under the rubric of “infrastructural aesthetics” because they highlight the designs of the basic and unequal

structures that undergird any aesthetic production. Hal Foster, however, suggests the opposite. In a review of Nicholas Bourriaud's works, Foster (2003) warns that art is not the place to think through material and political inequality. Regardless of our particular position in this debate, such a range of criticism does provoke the question of *how* this work should fit into a genealogy of art historical discourse and, in particular, how art advocacy should be incorporated into art history. Is social work within art social work or artwork? This question might be our contemporary version of the classic provocation of the avant-garde in which the spheres of life and art are rendered momentarily indistinguishable (see Bürger 1984). As Bishop (quoted in Finkelpearl 2013) writes of a different project, also a school, run by the artist Tania Bruguera in Havana: "Why do you need to call it a work of art? Can't it just be something you do in Havana? For this to be a work of art, you have to finish it. It can't be ongoing. And most of all, you have to think about the form in which it is relayed to a public who are not its participants. It has to be communicable in some way, rather than existing as pure presence." Indeed, Woolard herself is undecided about the art/life claims of the two projects I discuss here.

In the following section, I present Woolard's work in a larger context of contemporary social practice and, through my reading of her work, introduce *decommodification* as a missing term in discussions of social practice art, which is already a conversation about the transfiguration of terms such as *autonomy* and *purposefulness* as well as the potential for transformation of the work of art itself in an entrepreneurial age. Bruguera (quoted in Kennedy 2013) explains one of the aims of social practice through an ironic claim to another aesthetic moment: "it's time to restore Marcel Duchamp's urinal to the restroom." In fact, Bruguera did this in the men's bathroom of the Queens Museum by placing an exact replica of Duchamp's *Fountain*, complete with the "R. Mutt" signature, only now available for use. The conditions under which the urinal left the restroom are not the same conditions under which it returned—thus the humor in her claim, which nonetheless makes an argument about the relationship between aesthetics and purpose. Kant's famous definition of the aesthetic as "purposefulness without purpose" or "final without end" results from a historical scene of generally commodified labor. One of the defining characteristics of labor is that it always has an aim. The act of labor, then, disallows participation in an aesthetic realm because labor introduces a purpose. The works I discuss here attempt to reframe the relationship between aesthetics and purpose through labor with the crucial intervention that only the labor is decommodified. Woolard

and the artists who use OurGoods.org and TradeSchool.coop did not want their labor to be decommodified, but they are now choosing to aestheticize that decommodification in a manner that restores a different purpose to the first part of Kant's claim: "purposefulness without purpose."

Let us call this "aesthetic purposefulness *with* purpose" and say it is that which, paradoxically, follows from the decommodification of artistic labor under the dictates of entrepreneurship and real subsumption at the moment of their convergence. "We didn't want to call it a work of art," Woolard (pers. comm.) explains of the barter network, OurGoods.org, "because then people wouldn't use it. They would feel as if we were using them for our own performance experiment." This comment suggests that even the claim to an artistic ontology disallows a use value. There is a certain irony here. After all, purposeless art always serves the purpose of the artist. Conversely, what I want to show is that these works are *works* and that social practice's avant-garde may be located through Woolard's oeuvre as the refusal to not work. How this "not not working" will unfold and what form it will take enframes the parameters of a new aesthetic. Woolard's work provides a decommodified aesthetics that is itself a decommodification of our most important commodities: labor, education, money, and, now, land.¹² The welfare state decommodifies certain labors (Epsing-Andersen) so that its citizens may socially reproduce themselves free of market constraints. In the neoliberal state, however, this relationship is inverted, and enterprising citizens, in a Foucauldian gesture, structure their own decommodification to achieve a certain freedom. We are not yet prepared to qualify this freedom as misplaced or genuine; rather, in keeping with Foucault's approach, we can only say in this moment it is understood as a freedom to those practicing it.

Woolard founded OurGoods.org with a collective in 2009. Like any online network, it has a rhizomatic structure, with over seven thousand members. These members create a profile detailing what skills and materials they have and what skills and materials they need. They communicate how barter will be incorporated into their project or practice. "I need translation services for an art poster," one profile might say, for example, or "space for an event." The benefit of a single barter is that one agrees to trade what one has. The disadvantage is that the socially accepted measure of equivalence, time for money, still obtains here as members decide how (or whether) to trade a higher income-generating skill, say web development, for a lower one, say child care. The site does not track the actual barter exchanges. Rather, members engage in these exchanges in real time and space. This is one limit to its own representation, perhaps reminiscent of the challenges of

performance-art documentation. The collective has itself compared barter acts to oral traditions in which the same plot/story/barter produces different effects when told/enacted by different tellers/listeners or different partners in exchange. In the same manner that a performance never happens the same way twice, barter has an improvisational quality. Unlike performance, however, there are no spectacles here: one does not get to watch others barter. To watch, you have to do a sort of inverse of a Fluxus-style performance in which spectators become participants: here one begins as a participant but can become a spectator through self-conscious reflection.

OurGoods.org follows the movement that Jackson (2011: 92) describes as a transposition from a “discrete notion of the work of art to a process-based notion of the work it takes to make art.”¹³ Why do artists barter? Because they have potential artistic labor but no market in which to sell it; or, they need others’ potential artistic labor but have no money with which to purchase it. Their labor and potential to earn a wage have been decommmodified, and now they will find each other in a scene of decommmodification in which the dimensions of “made by waged labor and sold on the market” will never be brought to bear. To apply Vishmidt’s (2008: 23) claim that “art is the potentiality not to work” to the intermedial transactions of OurGoods.org, art is the potentiality to work *differently*. OurGoods.org offers the chance of self-employment, not through a conception of self-capitalization, but through a different form of being “a partner in exchange” in which another is required for mutually enhancing but not profit-generating reciprocity. That, too, is our first hint of the link between collectivization and decommmodification as opposed to collectivized, commodified labor, which has “technology” as one of its forms of appearance, among others.

And so barter is a kind of metaphor in the literal sense of being a vehicle for conducting meaning. The word *metaphor* literally means “to carry over,” and we assume meaning will be carried from one object to another in speech and writing. Barter structures a specific type of metaphor, perhaps akin to what Richard Halpern (1997: 12) calls a practical allegory, in that it is instantiated through activity. The barterers performed through OurGoods.org metaphorize what a new economy would look like while simultaneously constituting that other economy. If I barter two hours of my editing skills for one hour of soundtrack-laying ability, our exchange represents a mode of economic transformation. It also *is* that mode. The representation and its efficaciousness are one. As such, the barterers performed through OurGoods.org avoid the problem Peggy Phelan (2004) alerts us to in her trenchant critique, namely, that of maintaining metaphor in performance-based work,

especially when it involves the body of the artist. Phelan reads Andrea Fraser's video-piece *Untitled* (2003), in which she videotaped herself having sex with a collector, as a comment on the relationship between the artist and the art market. "If I'm going to have to sell it, I might as well sell it," Fraser explained, referring to herself (Trebay 2004). This piece, Phelan (2004: 571) concludes, disintegrates through an "utter loss of metaphor." The metaphorical space should have been locatable between the two clauses of Fraser's statement: if/then. But there is no "then" (literally), only an "if" followed by an action. Because the piece could not have been otherwise, the space of its symbolic potential is reduced. The barter carried out in OurGoods.org, by contrast, maintain an orientation of active possibility both to engage and represent economic otherness.

Even so, the actual trades do not need to be represented to others; this niche economy is scaled at one to one. That limitation is also a possibility: OurGoods.org will never be described as one of the "shovel-ready art projects" of Theaster Gates, another artist who makes decentered purposeful works, for example, his Dorchester Projects.¹⁴ Nor will it be grouped alongside Stephanie Diamond's "Listings Project" (listingsproject.com), a subscription-based weekly e-mail of real estate and opportunities listings available in greater New York City that Diamond, an artist, describes as both "an artwork" and a business. Artists need apartments. They locate them through Diamond's list, on which those who possess real estate pay to post. "I create Listings Project every week by reading, curating, and personally emailing each lister," Diamond (n.d.) explains on her website, striking a tone somewhere between artist's statement and real-estate broker speak. Because OurGoods.org is collective and because the aesthetic effect—in this case an actual trade—is retained by the participant as opposed to the collective or artist itself, OurGoods.org escapes the criticism "this is development"—think of Renzo Martens's efforts in the Congo¹⁵—or "this is a real estate brokerage," a charge that could be directed at Diamond's Listings Project.

The limitation of the one-to-one scale of OurGoods.org laid the foundation for Woolard's next collective, similarly decommodifying, project, TradeSchool.coop (see Woolard 2013). Again, barter-based, decentered exchange is the medium. Here the term *trade* doubles in its reference to noun (a trade) and verb (to trade). This web-based platform may be downloaded by any individual or group, is translatable into multiple languages, and has spawned "schools" as local as New York and as remote as Quito and Glasgow. Woolard estimates that around fifteen thousand students and teachers have participated since 2012. Now at the level of schools, in addition

to that of individuals, barter remains the currency. Anyone may propose a course (for barter), and anyone may take a course (for barter). Different schools will develop different local cultures. For instance, TradeSchool.coop Glasgow has a mental health and senior-care focus, while TradeSchool.coop New York is more artisanal. TradeSchool.coop continues and extends the aesthetics of barter discussed above, while adding the new dimension of materialized collectivity. Now multiple people will meet in a group to barter with a teacher for the contents of a course or workshop. The collective aspect changes the scale and currency of the barter particularly in relationship to time. Individuals bartering with individuals will likely measure their own efforts in internalized commodified hours; this scale, however, is reorganized when it comes to a 1:5 or 1:10 classroom ratio. It is not that people do not have experience with their own decommodified labor—each of us does, on a daily basis—but they may not have an experience of the intentionality of decommodification outside of a volunteer context. Commodified labor time must be for someone else. On the other hand, decommodified time *may* be for someone else.

OurGoods.org and TradeSchool.coop have been legible as both non-profit members of the corporate (so-called) sharing economy and as artworks. It has been suggested to Woolard, for example, that she monetize OurGoods.org, sell the data it has accumulated on members' profiles, and so on. Levi's offered the collective \$20,000 to franchise TradeSchool.coop as a corporate entity. And indeed, it is interesting to compare these works' total decommodification to sites such as Lyft.com or Airbnb.com, which truck in the fantasy of being able to commodify all personal time and space while simultaneously being about "not working." It's not really "work" to drive someone in your car via Lyft (after all, you are not a taxi driver) or have them sleep in your home via Airbnb (you are not a hotel proprietor): you are just doing what you would be doing anyway, except now you are making money. Woolard's collective projects refuse this logic: you are doing what you would be doing anyway and you are still *not* making money, but now you are in a mutual or collective time/space in which your artistic labor may be recognized and evaluated according to new metrics.

In 2013, Woolard staged the Exchange Café as part of the "Artists Experiment" initiative of MoMA's Department of Education. Exchange Café may be seen as an easy continuation of the themes developed in the works discussed above. It is a café where visitors may "purchase" tea, but only after inscribing, on notes provided, a "currency" of one's own personal wants and needs. After receiving tea, visitors then sit along tables, perhaps navigating

the scenes and images of “exchange” that MoMA itself features in its archive or looking at furniture made by the artist and also based on exchange: a police barricade (ex)changes into a bed, for example. One thinks of the many times one wishes to lie on a bed while at a museum, not to mention the fact that in many museums dining, gift shopping, and café drinking are often the only true places of sociality, activity, or conviviality. Exchange Café makes a point of thoughtfully sourcing the tea, milk, and honey that visitors may “purchase”: milk comes from the Milk Not Jails dairy collective, while tea is sourced from the Feral Network, an artist-run courier network that locates artists’ upcoming flight routes and asks them to serve as unpaid couriers. In exchange for their labor, Feral couriers meet other artists at the end of their route and thus form new, global, artists networks.

According to Woolard, Exchange Café was a failure in the best sense: it demonstrated under what conditions a decommodified aesthetic may or, in this case, may not flourish. The MoMA show rehearses elements of OurGoods.org and TradeSchool.coop that I have claimed exemplify an aesthetic of decommodification: the lack of spectacle and a different sense of temporal organization that elides time to dollar equivalence. In the museum space, however, these elements are more difficult, if not impossible, to obtain, and this difficulty reveals an interesting compression of time and space. At Exchange Café, one can barter with the tea provider but not build a relationship with her. And one only gets tea in return. Because others are viewing, the act of barter tends toward spectacle. These bartered spectacles were compressed into the hours of the museum, a fact that likely excludes those who work in another medium (say, a 9–5 job). Exchange Café might be seen as a kind of formalist take on OurGoods.org and TradeSchool.coop, in which the form overrides the decommodified and purposeful content. Furthermore, in the museum space the collective aspect of Woolard’s pieces is reduced to the individual: the show was *hers*; according to Woolard, MoMA made it quite difficult to work collaboratively.

At the same time Exchange Café was installed, MoMA staged “Meta-Monumental Garage Sale” by Martha Rosler. This curatorial coincidence reveals a larger theoretical divide in the relationship between entrepreneurship and aesthetics. “Garage Sale” is a piece in which one purchases others’ discarded commodities in a museum setting. MoMA describes the piece as “a large-scale version of the classic American garage sale. . . . Museum visitors can browse and buy second-hand goods organized, displayed, and sold by the artist. The installation fills MoMA’s Marron Atrium with strange and everyday objects donated by the artist, MoMA staff, and the general public,

creating a lively space for exchange between Rosler and her customers as they haggle over prices” (MoMA 2012). The forced intimacy generated out of the contradiction between priceless works of art and worthless discarded “everyday” items functions as both the piece’s critique and its irony. Rosler attempts to highlight the commodity status of art by daring the viewer to purchase something not at the gift shop but in the sacrosanct museum space. The revelatory aesthetic moment of a piece such as Rosler’s follows this contour: art really *is* a commodity, perhaps even a discarded one. And the artist really *is* an entrepreneur, not of a Fortune 500 company or start-up, but of a DIY enterprise. There is no distance, conceptual or physical, from these facts. Indeed, the viewer becomes a participant in ensuring the realization. Bishop (Finkelpearl 2013: 218), following Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello’s claim that capitalism has internalized aesthetic critique, has argued that “participation is really a new word for the new spirit of capitalism,” a fact which resonates with Airbnb.com and contemporary art alike. This claim, however, intersects with the work of Woolard and Rosler quite differently. In Rosler’s work, the exchange is “not really” a sale but an artwork fully subsumed into Rosler’s (and MoMA’s) aesthetic circuit. In Woolard’s collective-based pieces, there is no “as if” quality of disavowal. These barterings and courses never could have been sales, so no conceptual introduction of purposelessness exists to render them aesthetic. There is no binary pedagogical reminder of art AND/OR commodity, but instead a set of materialized metaphors that work in the trenches of decommodification, and double as a practice to formalize and describe a new world.

Conclusion

Artists would, of course, rather have their artistic labor commodified. Like home owners in Detroit and holders of mortgage-backed securities, they ascertain that in our current moment commodification is the more secure route. Nonetheless, artists find themselves positioned *not* as commodities, since they are unwaged in their specific art labors. The question is not whether the commodity form can accommodate a decommodified aesthetic—think of the contemporary work of Tino Sehgal or of the long history of performance art transmuting into commodity art. “It seemed in 1969 that no one, not even a public greedy for novelty, would actually pay money, or much of it, for a Xerox sheet referring to an event past or never directly perceived,” reminisces Lucy R. Lippard (1997: 21). Yet, what we have come to see is that the commodity form by definition can accommodate all human thought and action and

that in many ways the art market represents the pinnacle of that process. The question for a decommodified aesthetic is how to remain recognizable as an aesthetic given a number of transpositions: purposeful without purpose, labor without commodification, permanence without documentation. The challenge a decommodified aesthetic faces is in requiring the commodity form to provide not only recognition and status but also coherency and regulation.

What if Woolard and the collectives in which she participates were to monetize OurGoods.org or sell TradeSchool.coop to Levi's or the private MOOC (massive open online course) company, Coursera? Would we have to reconsider the barter made and courses taught to be nothing more than the recruited content of free labor necessary for so much conceptual and performance artwork as well as for Facebook? Indeed, we would. Perhaps that is why Woolard has defined "scale as duration," an insistence to herself and others that this aesthetic requires continuation to be an aesthetic since it cannot depend on the usual buttresses of support. And, indeed, the history of the avant-garde shows that time ultimately turns toward a commodity status as well; we know this because commodification is not only a route to profit but to documentation and canonization. But for the moment, in the moment, these collectives are continually expanding and performing another economy, one suspended between an older theoretical tradition of labor and a newer theoretical tradition of entrepreneurship and that allows for the critique of both.

Notes

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- 1 In 2012, Portland State University's Art and Social Practice Master of Fine Arts Program launched the journal *Art and Social Practice*, which is a good place to track the emerging debates (see www.psocialpractice.org/aaspjournal/).
- 2 I use Bishop 2012 and Jackson 2011 to determine the theoretical dichotomy. See also Friday, Joselit, and Kolbowski 2012 and Finkelpearl 2013.
- 3 Marina Vishmidt 2013 considers the question of art and the figure of the entrepreneur.
- 4 Marx's writings on formal and real subsumption—"Results of the Immediate Process of Production" in the *Grundrisse* (1993)—are rooted in the rise of large-scale manufacture. But, as Jason Read (2003: 18) has argued, "we have to take Marx beyond the factory." Real subsumption can be taken out of the factory through a variety of possible tropes: spatiality, temporality, sociality, or even subjectivity. I will move through each of these options in this essay to show how the process of subsumption also functions as a metaphor for capital's perceived intensification. (Whether it has intensified is another question entirely.)

- 5 That is, the structure is not readily comprehensible at an empirical level. For the best explanation of the stakes of structural causality—better even than Althusser in *Reading Capital*—see Jameson 1981.
- 6 Postone (1993: 285) explains that this dynamic applies at a narrative level to the process of reading *Capital Vol. I*. The reading practice is synecdochic for the historical practice: “what seems to be historical unfolding is actually a progression backwards . . . based on a logical reconstruction of the dynamic character of capitalism . . . only when it is developed.”
- 7 The *New York Times* (Schott’s Vocab 2010) defines *playbor* as the “increasingly blurred distinction between online play and labor.”
- 8 For more on the Sears catalog, see www.searsarchives.com/catalogs/history.htm.
- 9 Julia Bryan Wilson (2009) has used the term *decommodification* in a discussion of the labor demands of 1960s and 1970s conceptual artists. She does not appear to attach any conceptual importance to the term, however. See, for example, her comment: “Several speeches at the open hearing, such as the one by Graham, emphasized that conceptualism might be one way out of the relentless marketing of art, and questions about autonomy, decommodification, and authorship raised by minimalism and conceptualism fed the antiestablishment ethos of the AWC (Art Workers Coalition)” (16).
- 10 While both Jackson and Bishop make reference to social practice, they do not use the term to categorize the works they discuss, preferring instead their own idioms. That all of these works, as Jackson herself notes, rely on tropes of theatricality and performativity is surely important as to the situation of interpersonal relationality. Both Jackson (2011: 46–48) and Bishop (2012: 2–3) provide their own versions of the genealogy from relational aesthetics to the present. For a popular overview of the term that features Woolard, see Kennedy 2013.
- 11 The issue of when and how to structure one’s own decommodification might also be conceived as an ethical question, but I will not pursue that thought here.
- 12 This last item refers to a nascent collective project called NYCTBD that attempts to establish a community land trust (land taken out of commodity circulation) in New York City.
- 13 Jackson’s description comes out of a discussion of Mierle Lederman Ukeles’s “maintenance artwork,” which finds easy aesthetic correlate in what it takes to maintain both an individual art practice (a wife), an art institution, and an art world.
- 14 See theastergates.com/section/117693_Dorchester_Projects.html. Gates claims he is not an artist but “a hustler” (Colapinto 2014).
- 15 See Martens’s “Institute for Human Activities” (www.humanactivities.org/institute), which aims to gentrify the Congo. For a more comprehensive introduction to Martens’s work in the Congo, see the information about his video, “Enjoy Poverty,” at (www.renzomartens.com/episode3/film).

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