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# Chapter Thirteen

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## Labor

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**PRACTICE  
DEVELOPING  
YOUR CRAFT...**

**...AS YOU  
CREATE  
INSTRUCTIONS  
FOR SOMEONE  
ELSE TO MAKE  
A PROJECT.**

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**DON'T FORGET  
TO CENTER  
YOUR BODY.**



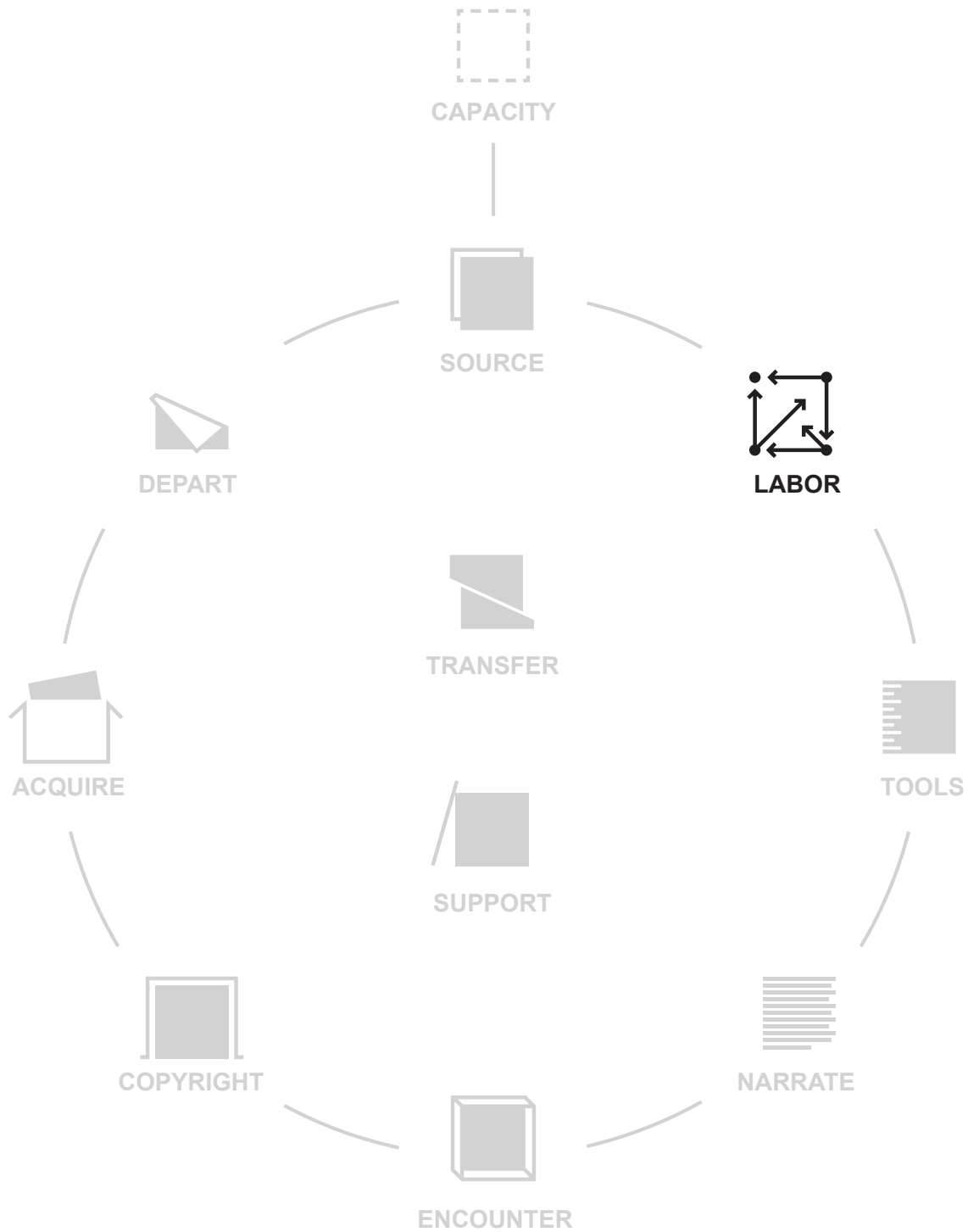
Labor: the roles you and other people take on in order to create a project.

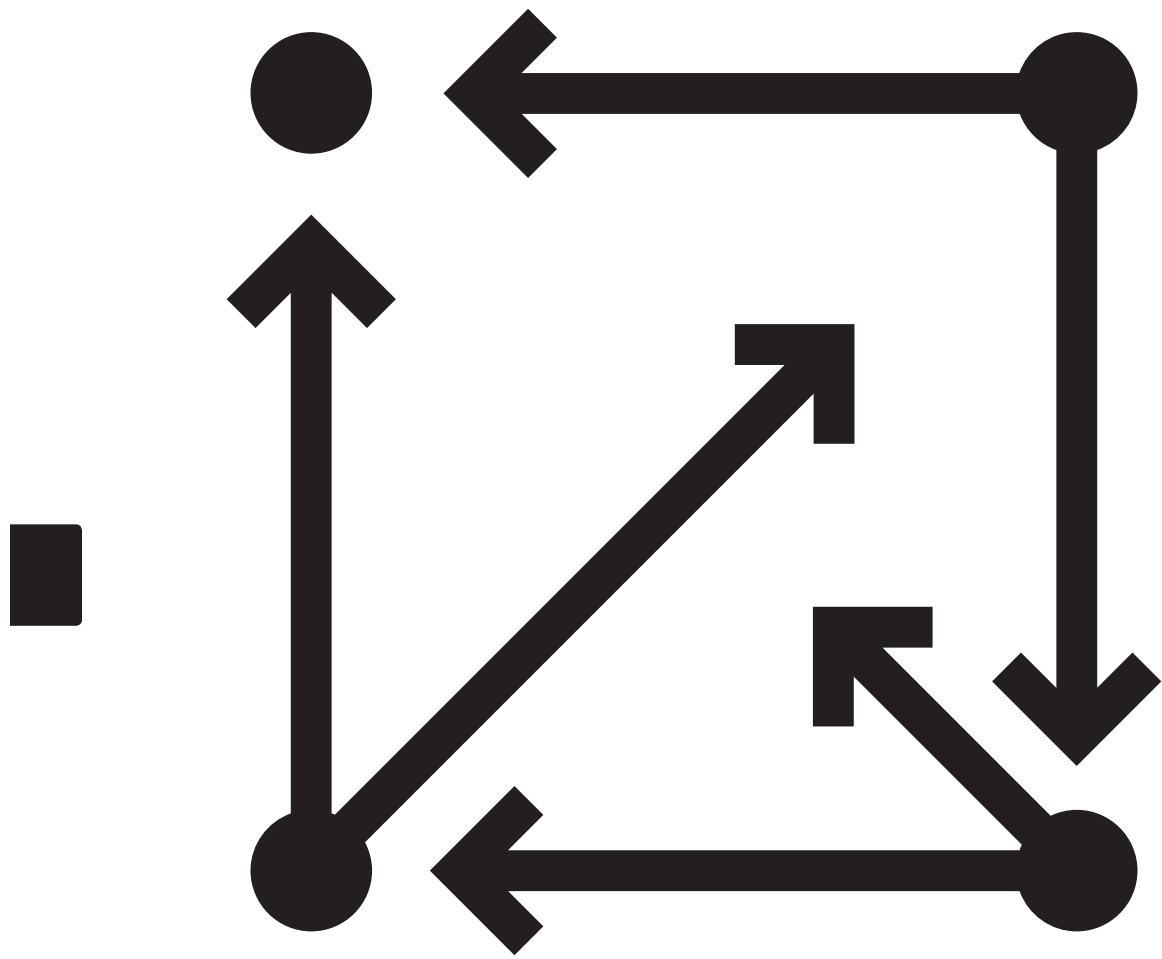
Labor could be organized in the following ways: as a D.I.Y. solitary act, with friends, with family, with peers, in a collective, in a cooperative (worker-owned business), with assistants, with interns, or with employees in a small business.

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What if the organization of labor were integral to your project?

\* We suggest that the following section be shared with the group as best suits your context, either read aloud—in whole or in part—or assigned to be discussed in your space of learning. Before you begin to read, we invite you to ground yourself in the space: notice the air on your skin and your feet on the ground. What are your feelings and sensations at this moment? What are you bringing to this text? Take a moment to become aware of this. We invite you to notice what comes up for you, as you are reading this chapter. We will ask you to reflect upon this at the end of this chapter.





## Introduction

The phase of the lifecycle that we refer to as “labor” considers how work is organized for a project. For example, if you are working within a discipline like printmaking or print media, you may have the skills to create an edition of prints alone without another person’s help. You might ask your friends to help you pull an edition of large scale prints. If you are working in a collective, then the labor to create and distribute a set of posters might be shared among members of the collective. Or you might propose projects that must be fabricated elsewhere, which require the labors of others in order to realize your vision. Your labor practices determine the speed and scale of your production.

## Story

You might wonder what allows you to claim authorship for a project—*Is it having an idea? Doing the physical labor required to make the project? Speaking about it in public and in the media? Maybe it is all of these things? What is it?* Artists João Enxuto and Erica Love talked to us about the moment when they began to work together.

Love: We started working together, we say in 2009 but it happened much more organically before that, where we would just help each other with one another’s projects and get so involved that the ownership of the project would become unclear. Like who actually was behind it. So it just kind of happened naturally. Especially when we were doing video work which takes a whole crew, it would be a whole crew of two of us [doing everything, all the roles]. That is kind of how it began.

Enxuto: And to avoid the whole ownership issue, we just started working together and also we kind of synthesized individual interests into a new project.<sup>1</sup>

Enxuto and Love embody the capacity that we call “coordination / collective action: I am reliably able to take powerful, life-affirming actions rooted in shared values and vision in teams, partnerships, and alliances. I remain responsive to evolving conditions.”<sup>2</sup> As Enxuto and Love say, they find shared values in working as a team as they are able to “synthesize individual interests into a new project.” When Enxuto says “to avoid the whole ownership issue,” he is referring to the historical and contemporary debates surrounding the relationship between art and labor. *See Is Art a Commodity? for more.*<sup>3</sup> In this chapter, we will explore the ways that

artists organize labor in their projects, and how this impacts the quality of labor itself. We will discuss the pains and pleasures of labor, and how these are reproduced in worker cooperatives and in spaces of learning.

## Discussion

What do people learn about themselves, other people, and the world while laboring on a project? In many day jobs, interns and employees feel that they cannot share their opinion about workplace safety, communication styles, or compensation, because they fear that they will be fired or ostracized. Many day jobs teach people that they should learn to respect hierarchy and not question the authority of the person with more power above them. The Marxist scholar David Harvey, in his book *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism*, asks:

How might it be possible to build a sense of moral community or of social solidarity, of collective and meaningful ways of belonging and living, that are untainted by the brutality, ignorance, and stupidity that envelops laborers at work? How, above all, are workers supposed to develop any sense of their mastery over their own fates and fortunes when they depend so deeply on a multitude of distant, unknown, and in many respects, unknowable people who put breakfast on their table every day?<sup>3</sup>

People spend more than half of their waking lives at work, and yet few people learn to connect work to shared power, self-actualization, or community. You likely have few experiences of democracy at work, online, or in school. How can you live in a directly democratic society if you never get to experience vital practices of democracy like learning to make proposals, asking clarifying questions, exploring options as a group, refining proposals, and voting or coming to consensus on the issues that impact you every day?

When you work alone, you have to determine how to care for yourself as you labor. Do you repeat patterns from your day job in your studio or workplace, punishing yourself and others for being sick or needing time off, or do you celebrate, reflect, and care for yourself and others at work? What capacities do you embody as you labor? See *Chapter 9: Support for more.*<sup>7</sup> People who join together to work in a horizontal or consensus-based manner (in a collective, family, or worker-owned business), often do so because they want to spend their lives producing things with dignity while also learning how to share power equitably. They believe that differences of opinion are a good thing, and that stronger projects emerge from intentional deliberation among people with a wide range



of experiences. *See Chapter 3: Who Do You Honor? for more.*<sup>3</sup> They want to learn how to make decisions together about labor, safety, and surplus. Collectives, groups of artists who labor together under a common name with shared authorship, often acknowledge that the lived experiences of working together leads to a deeper understanding of how labor and creativity are bound together. Love put it this way, “we would just help each other with one another’s projects and get so involved that the ownership of the project would become unclear.” For Love and Enxuto, collaboration became inevitable.

You might be interested in the intentions that many groups, collectives, and worker-owned businesses (which are called worker cooperatives) set together. For example, here are the *10 Principles of Cooperation*, developed by a network of worker cooperatives called MONDRAGON in Spain:

- **OPEN ADMISSION:** Anyone who can do the work and supports these principles can become a member. There will be no discrimination.
- **DEMOCRATIC ORGANIZATION:** Our groups are democratically organized, governed by the principle of one worker, one vote.
- **PARTICIPATION IN MANAGEMENT:** Members have a meaningful role in decision-making based on full access to information about the group. Systems for participation, including training, internal promotion, and transparent sharing of information, must be created. Members take full responsibility for the health of the group.
- **WAGE SOLIDARITY:** Wage solidarity means there is less disparity among workers and the communities in which they live, reinforcing the equality and quality of ownership.
- **INTERCOOPERATION:** An interdependent network of groups and co-ops promotes solidarity and efficiency by facilitating the sharing of common resources (finances, research and development, training, etc...) and enables groups and co-ops to succeed by supporting each other. Our groups and co-ops will engage and share resources with other businesses in the solidarity and cooperative movement nationally and internationally.
- **SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION:** The co-op movement is more than just creating cooperative businesses. It is about partnering with others to bring about a freer, fairer, and more caring society.
- **UNIVERSALITY (SOLIDARITY):** Group members stand in solidarity with those who work for economic democracy, justice, and peace. Solidarity means recognizing that whatever happens to one directly, happens to all indirectly.<sup>4</sup>

Even if you are not interested in forming a cooperative, you might want to bring some of these principles into your work individually, in a collective, in a non-profit organization, or in a small business. Businesses and non-profits alike can ensure that working conditions are safe; they can make space for honest reflection and give employees opportunities to learn and grow as people. They can even be democratically run, allowing employees to make decisions about the organization, even if they are not legally incorporated as a cooperative. They can employ people at a living wage. While benevolent employers do exist without a cooperative structure, your boss can also remove these rights at anytime. How might you incorporate these principles into your labor practices?

### *Labor in School*

Think about the lack of discussion about labor structures and labor practices in art school. If you are an art student, you likely hear narrations about “successful” artists with large studios and multiple interns. This emphasizes inequitable labor practices with unpaid internships and hierarchical relationships that might not honor the dignity of all workers. For example, if you get school “credits” for an unpaid internship, and you are paying for school “credits,” you are *paying* to go to work. This is analogous to your teacher paying to teach you. *See Chapter 14: Narrate ≡ for more.*<sup>7</sup> We believe that it is important to learn how to work with others on your projects, whether they are collaborators, curators, assistants, family members, elders, or people in any field of inquiry.

Raymond Williams, in his entry on “art” in *Keywords*, traces the history of the meaning of the word “artist” in the English language over seven centuries and its effects on the perceived subjectivity of the artist. When we say subjectivity, we mean your sense of self in relationship to institutions and historical forces. Williams writes that:

The now general distinction between artist and artisan—the latter being specialized to “skilled manual worker” without “intellectual” or “imaginative” or “creative” purposes—was strengthened and popularized [in the 19th century].... The artist is then distinct within this fundamental perspective not only from *scientist* and *technologist*—each of whom in earlier periods would have been called artist—but from *artisan* and *craftsman* and *skilled worker*, who are now *operatives* in terms of a specific definition and organization of work. As these practical distinctions are pressed, within a given mode of production, art and artist acquire ever more general (and more vague) associations, offering to express a general *human* (i.e. non-utilitarian) interest, even while, ironically, most works of art

are effectively treated as commodities and most artists, even when they justly claim quite other intentions, are effectively treated as a category of independent *craftsmen* or *skilled workers* producing a certain kind of marginal commodity.<sup>5</sup>

What it means to be an “artist” is determined by your communities, the media, institutions, and historical forces. We hope that you can situate yourself, as an artist, within a continuously changing narrative that is produced by those conditions. Once you understand that your subjectivity is open to contestation, you can become aware of the forces that act upon you. *See Chapter 6: Historical Consciousness for more.*<sup>7</sup> For example, even today, despite a growing emphasis on interdisciplinary art practice, many artists identify themselves with the medium that they use, saying “I am a painter” or “I am a photographer.” In his essay “From Medium to Social Practice,” Williams writes that “the properties of the medium were abstracted as if they defined the practice rather than being its means. This interpretation then suppressed the full sense of practice, which has always been defined as a work on a material for a specific purpose within certain necessary social conditions.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, the noun *paint*, the material means to an end, becomes *to paint*, an action performed by an artist who is a *painter*. The lineage that Williams traces, whereby the object and its properties comes to occlude the object-maker and her sociality, particularly that of her labor, continues to resonate today in art schools. Imagine if art schools, which are mostly organized by medium-specific disciplines such as sculpture, painting, video, and other media, started to organize departments by labor practices: you would “major” in “solitary labor,” “collective labor,” or “employee/employer” labor. *See Chapter 19: Imagining the Future for more.*<sup>7</sup>

If labor practices are discussed in art school, the emphasis is on you as an owner of a capitalist firm who brings in laborers—employees or interns—whose labor you own. Writer Ben Davis claims that “the position of the professional artist is characteristically middle class in relation to labor: the dream of being an artist is the dream of making a living off the products of one’s own mental or physical labor while being fully able to control and identify with that labor.”<sup>7</sup> For example, when you work on another person’s project, and they direct your labor, the implicit understanding is that your contributions to the project are now owned by them. It is rare to encounter public attribution for the myriad labors that support the production of a project. Contributors who have worked on projects and exhibitions as waged workers or as volunteers are made invisible because of the primacy of single authorship. If an artist attains notable cultural capital they often increase the speed and scale of their production. For example, some well-known artists often reach beyond

the scale of their own labor in order to meet the demands of galleries, non-profits, or commissions. This can lead to impersonal and potentially exploitative labor relations if, in order to complete their projects, artists have to depend upon contract workers, apprentices, or interns.<sup>8</sup> See *Chapter 14: Narrate* ☰ for more.<sup>7</sup>

What labor practices are modeled in art pedagogy? When you get used to assignments, and are given more assignments than you can handle, the relationship that is reproduced between you and your teacher is similar to that of employee and boss. You learn how to produce art according to the dictates of someone else's whims or the art school's accrediting bodies. You may never be asked, "What would it mean to make projects at a pace that is healthy for you, your family, and your community?" You might not get asked "what do you care about?" until the final year of your undergraduate education. Being highly "productive" as a student and a teacher is institutionalized and reinforced in assignments, deadlines, grading policies, measurements, tracking, syllabi, curricula, and school policies for accreditation.

Despite the emphasis on individual accumulation and enormous material outputs, many artists and students *are* focusing on political economy by making labor visible in their projects and practicing forms of labor that align with their values.<sup>9</sup> As we described in *Chapter 5: Capacities*, Zara Serabian-Arthur and her friends formed a cooperatively owned film production company in New York City called Meerkat Media because they wanted to find a way to work with one another on a daily basis, rather than working elsewhere for their day jobs. A cooperative is an organizational form in which resources are distributed equitably and members vote democratically on the issues that impact their work.<sup>10</sup> Meerkat created a worker-owned business that enabled them to pursue their vision of artmaking outside of the traditional model of the individual filmmaker working alone. By taking on lucrative, commercial filmmaking jobs, members of Meerkat are able to make media for grassroots groups, purchase filmmaking equipment, and also put aside money for their own independent projects in a pool that members access on a rotating basis. See *Chapter 5: Capacities* ☐ for more.<sup>7</sup>

If you are interested in forming a worker cooperative, or in learning how to collaborate more effectively, you might be interested in cooperative development organizations like The Center for Family Life and Greenworker Cooperatives (New York City), Enspiral (international), The United States Federation of Worker Cooperatives (national), RoundSky Solutions (online), the Democracy Collaborative (Washington, DC), Cooperation Jackson (Mississippi), the Cincinnati Union Co-op Initiative (Cincinnati), and the Sustainable Economies Law Center (San Francisco), and the Valley Alliance of Worker Cooperatives (Western Massachusetts).

## Quotations

“To build community requires vigilant awareness of the work we must continually do to undermine all the socialization that leads us to behave in ways that perpetuate domination.” —bell hooks, 2003<sup>11</sup>

“The refusal to labour is the chief weapon of workers fighting the system; artists can use the same weapon. To bring down the art system it is necessary to call for years without art, a period of three years when artists will not produce work, sell work, permit work to go on exhibition, and refuse collaboration with any part of the publicity machinery of the art world. This total withdrawal of labor is the most extreme collective challenge that artists can make.”  
—Gustav Metzger, 1974<sup>12</sup>

“An artist who does not work with their hands is no artist.”  
—Shahpour Pouyan, 2018<sup>13</sup>

“Whether an artist works directly with materials, or on the telephone or the computer and never touches materials, colors my view. What does touching the materials add? The hand connected to the eyes and the brain. Hands, eyes, brain: it’s the magic triangulation. It comes from passion, heart, and intellect inseparably cemented to your times and to your emotional experiences. If I gave my designs to someone else, it would be their interpretation of my idea.”  
—Sheila Hicks, 2015<sup>14</sup>

“As artists trying to imagine a different kind of world, it makes sense that we’d apply that thinking and commitment to our work and process.... I also think that artists are especially prone to be open to experimentation, to taking risks and trying something new. Many artists I meet are excited about the idea, but I haven’t met many people adopting a [worker cooperative] model—I think in part because we’re not exposed to many examples of creative cooperatives that we can learn from.” —Zara Serabian-Arthur, 2016<sup>15</sup>

“I joined a collective of 100 Black women artists. I was strengthened by the force we made together, immediately. No matter what I had to do in other aspects of my life, I wanted to be there every week because I needed that shared space and possibility. We laughed. We broke bread after meetings. We sat at a table together and conjured a ritual healing, one that made space for the bitter and the sweet, sweeping floors with Lucky Leaves, the Second Line, our fists raised

while BLM’s policy platform was read, where we danced ’til we sweat. Black Women Artists for Black Lives Matter—many red bandanas whirl from our hands while DJ Tara spins. We chant a litany, wearing red for our fierce rage and life blood, for collective strategy, rhythm, and insistent Black joy.” —Nina Angela Mercer, 2016<sup>16</sup>

“I have tried [collaboration], and I hated it. In a strange way, working alone helps me value my body because my body becomes the limit and the horizon of what I can and cannot do. It’s a cross between being very stupid and stubborn and holding on to the idea of being human. —Paul Chan, 2005<sup>17</sup>

“[As twins, we] tend to work together in the sense that we discuss everything together and our brainstormings collectively guide the ideas ... It’s nice that [Ryan’s] my brother because we come to the best solutions if we are able to both be present. When it comes time to actually execute a piece, we’ll let one of us fully build each individual work to keep the hand consistent.... We discuss everything that we do ... it’s a collective mental pursuit, even though our hands are executing different aspects of each project.” —Trevor Oakes, 2011<sup>18</sup>

“Each member [of the cooperative] is afforded the trust to work, create, and organize in their communities as they see fit. The hope and goal is that we all will benefit from each other’s work. The more we each invest in the issues that are important to us, the better off we all are, and the more collective knowledge to draw from for our own goal work.” —Josh MacPhee, 2017<sup>19</sup>

“Collaboration moves at the speed of trust, and movements move at the speed of collaboration”. —Risë Wilson, 2018<sup>20</sup>

Here are more artists, groups, and projects that come to mind when we think about labor: Kadambari Baxi / Black Women for Black Lives Matter / Ian Burn / Chinatown Art Brigade / Barrie Cline / Workers Art Coalition / Maureen Connor / Carrot Workers Collective / Tehching Hsieh / Jeremy Hutchison / Justseeds Artists’ Cooperative / Marisa Moran Jahn / Risa Puno / Zoe Romano / Mierle Laderman Ukeles / W.A.G.E. / Who Builds Your Architecture. What artists, groups, and projects come to mind for you?

## Reflection

1. Artists who focus on labor as the central content of their projects might ask the following questions.
  - Why should labor be visible?
  - If I work alone, how should I hire people or manage my subcontractors?
  - If I work with collaborators, how should we delegate roles?
  - What are the benefits of working alone or with other people?
2. What would your space of learning look like if your labor practices were given as much attention as the objects that you produce?
3. \* What feelings and sensations came up for you while you were reading this chapter? For example, did you feel surprise, frustration, or excitement? How did you hold these in your body? For example, did you sense these emotions in your shoulders, neck, and back while reading this chapter? *See the Social-Emotional Intelligence Project Reflection activity in Chapter 4: Teacher/Facilitator Guides.*<sup>7</sup>
4. What would it mean to understand artmaking as a site of interdependence, both locally and globally, rather than as a site of individual use and exchange? Remember, art is a system of relationships. We understand from the long history of economically oriented critical theory that behind any object exists a system of extraction, of production, and of circulation whose very histories are hidden at the moment in which the object appears as free-standing, as individual, as a thing, often a commodity. For us, in this book, that “thing” is the art object.

1. João Enxuto and Erica Love, interview by Susan Jahoda and Caroline Woolard, BFAMFAPhD, at the School of Visual Arts, New York, NY, June, 2016.

2. Capacity adapted with the permission of Alta Starr and Staci Haines, from Generative Somatics, Somatic Transformation and Social Justice, "Courses," <http://www.generativesomatics.org/content/courses>. See Chapter 5: *Capacities for more*.

3. David Harvey, "Divisions of Labor," in *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), 126.

4. These principles were adapted from the MONDRAGON Principles of Cooperation to be legible to art students. We have replaced the term "workers" with "members" and "co-ops" with "groups" because we feel the principles are applicable beyond the scope of a worker-owned business and into multi-year artistic collectives as well as short-lived groups, MONDRAGON Principles of Cooperation, "Our Principles," October 1987, <https://www.mondragon-corporation.com/en/co-operative-experience/our-principles/>; For further examples of co-op principles, see Union Cooperative Council, "Union Co-op Council," Union Co-Ops, <http://unioncoops.org>.

5. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1976; repr., 1985), 41.

6. Raymond Williams, "From Medium to Social Practice," in *Marxism and Literature* (New York, NY: Oxford University, 1977; repr., 2004), 160.

7. Ben Davis, *9.5 Theses on Art and Class* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2013), 28.

8. See Gregory Sholette, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 2011); "4.2: There are many

links to the working class in the visual arts: gallery workers, anonymous fabricators of artistic components, non-professional museum workers, etc. Most artists are themselves employed outside the art world—the dream of having fully realized middle-class status remains aspirational for most people who identify as 'artists,'" Ben Davis, *9.5 Theses on Art and Class*, 29.

9. Political Economy in the Social Sciences looks at political policies and economic processes, their interrelations, and their influence on social institutions. See Gregory Hooks and Andrew Crookston, "Political Economy," *Sociology* (2013), <https://dx.doi.org/10.1093/obo/9780199756384-0103>.

10. The term "Worker Cooperative" means any enterprise that meets all of the following criteria:

- The enterprise is a business entity with one or more classes of membership
- All workers who are willing to accept the responsibilities of membership and who meet member eligibility criteria are eligible to become worker-owners
- A majority of allocated earnings and losses are allocated to worker-owners on the basis of patronage
- The class of worker-owners has a controlling ownership interest
- A majority of the Board of Directors or governing body is elected by the worker-owners on the basis of one-member-one-vote
- Decisions about return on capital investment are made by the worker-owner class or by the Board of Directors or governing body

United States Federation of Worker Cooperatives, "Worker Ownership," United States Federation of Worker Cooperatives, <https://usworker.coop/what-is-a-worker-cooperative/>.

11. bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of*

*Hope* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 36.

12. Gustav Metzger, "Statement in Art into Society, Society into Art: Seven German Artists," Exhibition Catalog, ed. Christos M. Joachimides, 79–86 (London, UK: Institute of Contemporary Art, Nasch House, 1974), republished in *Newsweek*, 1974, available, [https://monoskop.org/images/3/34/Metzger\\_Gustav\\_1974\\_statement\\_in\\_Art\\_into\\_Society\\_Society\\_into\\_Art.pdf](https://monoskop.org/images/3/34/Metzger_Gustav_1974_statement_in_Art_into_Society_Society_into_Art.pdf).

13. Shahpour Pouyan, personal correspondence with Caroline Woolard, March 20, 2018.

14. Sheila Hicks, "Fibre Is My Alphabet," interview by Jennifer Higgle, *Frieze*, February 20, 2015, <https://frieze.com/article/fibre-my-alphabet>.

15. Zara Serabian-Arthur, quoted in Mai Sutton, "Art Co-ops and the Power of Mobilizing Collaboration for Creativity," *Shareable*, October 11, 2016, <https://www.shareable.net/art-co-ops-and-the-power-of-mobilizing-collaboration-for-creativity/>.

16. Nina Angela Mercer, quoted in Jillian Steinhauer, "Reflections from Black Women Artists for Black Lives Matter," *Hyperallergic*, September 15, 2016, <https://hyperallergic.com/322742/reflections-from-black-women-artists-for-black-lives-matter/>.

17. Paul Chan, "Paul Chan by Nell McClistor," interview by Nell McClistor, *BOMB*, July 1, 2005, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/paul-chan/>.

18. Trevor and Ryan Oakes, quoted in Deenah Vollmer, "The Way We See It: The New Drawings of Ryan and Trevor Oakes by YACMP Participant," *On.Verge*, November 11, 2011.

19. Josh MacPhee, "Justseeds on Creative Commons," interview by Roger Peet, *Justseeds*, March 10, 2017, <https://justseeds.org/>

[justseeds-on-creative-commons/](https://justseeds-on-creative-commons/).

20. Risë Wilson, personal correspondence with Susan Jahoda and Caroline Woolard, May 2018.



