



Is Art a Commodity?

Leigh Claire La Berge

We invited cultural theorist Leigh Claire La Berge to write about the tensions held within the category of art itself. La Berge has shaped our understanding of the intersection of culture and political economy in informal and formal conversation, over the past five years. She will define key terms that reappear throughout the book, including: commodity, labor, capitalism, and aesthetics.

“My kind of original moment of thinking about [art and labor] actually probably started in an Old Navy Store where I was shopping one day and I was thinking ‘oh wouldn’t it be great if all these clothes were made by hand,’ and then I had this sort of double take. All these clothes are made by hand, it is just that it is by hands that I don’t see. And I thought ‘oh, OK.’ And then I started thinking about all the hands all over my clothes, and that was sort of amusing and a little disconcerting and also fantastic and that is what brought me to doing that work.” —Zoë Sheehan Saldaña¹

Is art a commodity or isn’t it? The repetition of this question frames much of art’s philosophical repertoire as it relates to the economy. And, as with most real questions, the possibility of generating knowledge from it resides not in answering it, but in understanding how its very inability to be answered forms the base of knowledge that the authors of this book seek. Indeed, before you may explore that question, you have to explore several others, and, in doing so, you will arrive at definitions foundational to this book. What *is* a commodity? What *is* labor? How do each of these terms, so fundamental to the tradition of political economy, relate to artistic and cultural production, and why?

To begin, then, what is a commodity? Reach around you, pick up the first object you see. What is it? A pen? A mug? A chair? Your computer or backpack? You have likely selected a commodity. A commodity is an ordinary thing, a thing outside us, and a thing whose looks are deceiving. Marx uses the language of vision, first glances, and awkward impressions to introduce what he calls the commodity 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.” And famously, for Marx, “a commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. [Yet] its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing.”² Soon enough the commodity’s armature will unravel and unwind. Its simplicity and easy apprehension will transform into what Marx calls “metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” whose interpretation and historical disposition will become the essential condition of capitalism. Central to its subtleties is the fact that while anything may take the form of a commodity, only one action may generate the value found within it: the expenditure of human labor power. If you return to the object you picked up, you may remember the moment it entered into your life, the sale. Marx insists, however, that the sale of a commodity is not its beginning, rather, a sale is just one long moment of commodity being. I will write more about this in a moment.

Reach around you, pick up the first object you see. What is it?

In describing capitalism, Marx suggests that it appears as an immense collection of commodities. Yet for an object to exist as a commodity, certain features must be adhered to: first, a commodity is made by wage labor; second, it is sold on the market. Wage labor refers to the selling of one's time to someone else; a market refers to a time-space outside one's self, a semi-public site where someone else may buy our wares, or, indeed, buy us, since, foremost, the rubric of "made by wage labor and sold on a market" describes the worker herself. Workers are made by their own labor power, a proposition fully expressed by early social contract theorists who claimed that each person (with the usual race and gender prohibitions) has property in their own body because they work.³ And the worker made by herself constitutes the basic commodity of labor power that she possesses and will sell on the market. This fact makes labor our most unique commodity, because unlike a car or a sofa, labor daily regenerates itself through the life process of the worker, and usually through women and raced and colonized subjects' care work. The laborer has to leave work, eat, sleep, dress herself, and remain healthy—all of this unpaid—and she does so to be able to show up to work again the next day. She must reproduce herself as a worker. This is part of the long moment of commodity being. *See Chapter 9: Support / for more.*⁷

According to Marx, capitalism's uniqueness is found in the fact that everyone has to sell her labor to someone else as a commodity. This ceaseless, global exchange of labor power generates the social world of modernity in which we are all connected locally, nationally, and globally through our commerce. This is a world in which all things, services, and actions may be and will be commodified, or purchased by someone who has paid for the right to our labor for a certain amount of time. In this book, when the authors speak of the commodity, they mean to emphasize human labor. Yet even as it comes to define our lives, the selling of labor power produces a fundamental misrecognition; namely, the value of commodities seems to be located in the things, not in the labor of the people who made them. Marx notes that such a scenario produces a world governed by "material relations between persons and social relations between things."⁴


Such a worldview may seem totalizing, and it is. Yet in the history of critical theory, one possible and tenuous exception to this regime has been continually noted and returned to: the capacious sphere of the production of and reaction to natural and artful stimuli known as "the aesthetic."⁵ Simultaneous to the emergent eighteenth-century capitalist reality that all goods and services, including some people and most property, could be sold, the category of the aesthetic emerged to circumvent commodity relations. "In a notable historical irony," the critical theorist Terry Eagleton writes, "the birth of aesthetics as an intellectual discourse coincides with

the period in which cultural productions [begin] to suffer the miseries and indignities of commodification.”⁶ We treat a pen differently than we treat a work of art, yet these are both commodities, both are made by wage labor and sold on the market.

This, then, is the most central tension of this book and of many artists’ lives. To have access to the time and space to make art, that which *seems* to dwell outside commodified social relations, one needs, above all, money. To get that, one needs to sell their labor; one needs to exist in and on a market. After a successful sale of one’s labor, in the form of a wage for a day job, one might have time *not* to labor, indeed, one might have time to make art. For example, after selling one’s labor as a service worker, one might have time to take a day off to make art. Aesthetics, as a philosophical category in which art participates, is both constituted by and oppositional to the world of waged labor. Some artists may be paid at some points for their artwork or for their labor to make art, but these discrete moments of money changing hands do not mitigate the categorical tension. Artists live in this tension and represent it in their work; they speak and write about.

Think of all the artists who have attempted to scandalize the art world by insisting that the art sale is a sale like any other: Marcel Duchamp, who created a fraudulent check for his dentist, *Tzanic Check* (1919); David Hammons who sold snowballs in *Bliz-aard Ball Sale* (1983); Mel Chin who asks participants to create hand-drawn interpretations of \$100 bills in Operation Paydirect (2006–ongoing); David Avalos, Louis Hock, and Elizabeth Sisco, who gave their \$5,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts away at Site Santa Fe by handing out \$10 bills to immigrant workers gathered at a day-laborer site in *Untitled* (1989); Andrea Fraser who became a sex worker for her project, *Untitled* (2003); and Cesare Pietroiusti who covered a wall with 3000 one- and five-dollar bills previously treated with sulphuric acid and stamped on their back side in *Untitled* (2008). There are many others.

Likewise, think of all the artists who have refused the path of commodification. *Wait, can you think of them?* Artists who give all of their work away for free must sell their labor elsewhere. Artists who teach sell their labor as educators. Academic projects, like this book, are part of the labor requirements for promotion and tenure in the academy. That situation has its own irony. To be known, to circulate, to have people see, remember, and comment on one’s art is likely to have one’s art (or one’s self) commodified. And then there are those artists whose career is seemingly devoted to playfully occupying the space in between. Tino Seghal has supposedly non-commodity-based performances, yet these have been eagerly consumed by museums and collectors. There’s no object to buy; no object to possess; and he won’t sign a contract for a sale and relies upon



elaborate verbal agreements between lawyers to sell his work. And yet: his art sells. When asked about Seghal's work, Jannis Kounellis, an *arte povera* painter of an older generation, offered: "There's always been someone to buy something. That's nothing new. The challenge is to remain dialectical."⁷

While contemporary art classrooms are comfortable rejecting a relationship to commodities or capitalism, and indeed, while many artists have an anti-commodity bent in describing their own practices, such description largely happens on a rhetorical level. The authors of this book seek to move from the rhetorical to the material and to make other forms of relations available, between student and artwork, student and student, student and teacher, and so on, by providing a book of examples and activities designed to bring out interdependent ways of being in the studio art classroom. In doing so the authors encounter a series of generative contradictions, including the fact that most art education takes place within the university, and universities themselves have become yet another site for the inequitable production and distribution of wealth. But again, the goal of locating a real question or contradiction is not to resolve it, but to understand how and why it exists.

The challenge of this book is to render art education dialectical, or aware of the fundamental, unresolvable contradictions that undergird twenty-first-century art-education's being. Many of these tensions—that one has to pay for education, that most art will never sell, that art education has been a burgeoning field since the 1950s and yet there are few jobs today—are themselves derivations of the philosophical questions about art that have long occupied critical theorists. For Theodor Adorno, art famously has a "double character as both autonomous and social fact."⁸ Adorno's key claim is that although art's autonomy and commodity status are in tension, each requires the other and each may express the other. By being seemingly independent of the world of commodities—autonomous—art may represent that world, it may stand as "social fact." Jacques Rancière narrates the same tension through the language of art history: "The mixing of art and commodity is not a discovery of the [1960s] ... as soon as art was constituted as a specific sphere of existence, at the beginning of the 19th century, its producers began to call into question the triviality of reproduction, commerce, and commodity [and] as soon as they did so, commodities themselves began to travel in opposite directions—to enter the realm of art."⁹ Musical theorist Jacques Attali is perhaps the most succinct: "The artist was born at the same time his work went on sale."¹⁰

Is art a commodity, then? And if it is a commodity, is it of the same kind as a car or a t-shirt? If it is not a commodity, why isn't it? This kind of internally generative tension not only delimits many discussions of art, in Boris Groys's account it has become definitional of what contemporary


art *is*. The question has been incorporated into the artwork itself through this rhetorical claim: Is art a commodity? Yes. Should it be? No. Therefore, the artwork will become a commodity that is self-critical of its own commodity being; it is a commodity that wishes it were otherwise. Groys uses this opposition to construct the term “paradox-object”: “to be a paradox-object is the normative requirement implicitly applied to any contemporary artwork,” he states.¹¹

While tensions between art and commodified labor are both philosophically and historically rooted, they take specific forms at discrete historical moments: sometimes the distance is greater; sometimes an intimacy is produced. From the Dadaists to the Situationists, from the Constructivists to Fluxus, the avant-garde has long refused the distinction between the categories of art and work, arguing that the very categorical separation itself is yet another form of social unfreedom and proprietary regulation. The Constructivist instruction for artists to “abandon their inquiry into art as a mode of production and enter the realm of production itself” is perhaps the most direct confrontation with this separation, but there are others.¹² Think of the Situationist staging of actions on the way to work, the Duchampian nomination of mass-produced commodities to “readymade” art objects, Fluxus sales or Andy Warhol’s adoption of a terminology of production in his studio: it was The Factory. To this I would add dancer Yvonne Rainer’s “task-based” performances and painter Gerhard Richter’s “capitalist realism”—each reminds us of how art incorporates work into art so that art may critique work.

Today, of course, there is a new mode of art production that, again, stages this question: social practice art or socially engaged art. As I have argued in my recent book, *Wages Against Artwork: Decommodified Labor and the Claims of Socially Engaged Art*, this mode of art production should be understood as centrally concerned with the question of labor.¹³ And certainly the need to address how artists’ labor has been transformed is not only a part of art practice but also a part of art’s expanded field of activism. Think of the Art Workers Coalition, active in the 1960s and 1970s, which insisted that an artwork is made by the *artworker*; or of the activist group to come out of Occupy Wall Street, “Arts & Labor”; or of the contemporary arts organization W.A.G.E. (Working Artists for a Greater Economy), which attempts to integrate artists into the solidarity economy movement.¹⁴ Economic history, critical theory, art history and criticism, and indeed art practitioners themselves all suggest that a change in the valuation of labor—how much one gets paid for their labor and for their artwork—provides a much-needed site for developing the contemporary understanding of the category of art itself.

The authors of this book have written it because they believe this particular material and philosophical moment of art practice demands a

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new pedagogy of artistic production, circulation, and distribution, one that accounts for our capitalist present. While most artists who work on political economy are either seduced into making artwork that says, “Ah-ha! That’s capitalism at work,” or feel compelled to offer a moral dirge of “how awful our neoliberal moment is,” in this book, the authors want to sit with precisely the same contradictions that we’ve now come to understand: namely, art’s role in mitigating the difference between our lived reality and our shared desires for political and economic equality. In sitting with these contradictions, more so than in condemning them or celebrating them, the authors may excavate an artistic pedagogy that reflects its own conditions of production. On this small scale of activity and practice, the authors believe some amount of transformation may occur.

How do the authors think about art and economic justice? Throughout this book, they take as inspiration Marx’s injunction to venture into the “hidden abode of production.” But whereas for Marx, opening that door leads to an understanding of capitalism in its totality, the authors hope to transform his directive for investigation into a method of art education. What forces are behind the production of the art student, the art teacher? What forces organize the art classroom and with it the objects produced in it, namely student art works? How do they come into being, remain, and depart? The authors 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, individual, a commodity, a work of art. For the authors, in this book, the object that they try to resituate is the art object, specifically the art object produced in the twenty-first-century studio art classroom or in other spaces of learning.

1. Zoë Sheehan Saldaña, "LABOR," interview by Susan Jahoda and Caroline Woolard, BFAMFAPhD, at the School of Visual Arts, New York, NY, June 2016, video, 1:04, <https://vimeo.com/193419284>.
2. Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume 1: A Critique of Political Economy*, reprint edition (London, UK: Penguin Classics, 1992), 176.
3. As John Locke states: "Though the Earth, and all inferior Creatures be common to all Men, yet every Man has a 'Property' in his own 'Person.' This no Body has any Right to but himself. The Labour of his Body, and the 'Work' of his Hands, we may say, are properly his." See John Locke, *The Second Treatise on Government* (London, UK: Thomas Tegg, 1821), 209.
4. Marx, *Capital: Volume 1: A Critique of Political Economy*, 176.
5. Fredric Jameson singles out "nature"—not only art—as one of the last footholds to have been absorbed into capitalism. See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 34.
6. Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (London, UK: Verso, 1990), 64.
7. Jannis Kounellis, interview by Anna Dickie, "Jannis Kounellis in Conversation," *Ocula*, January 21, 2014, accessed January 2015, <http://ocula.com/magazine/conversations/jannis-kounellis/>.
8. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, eds. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedermann, trans. Robert Hullot-Lentor (London, UK: Athlone, 1997), 5.
9. Jacques Rancière, "Contemporary Art and the Politics of Aesthetics," in *Communities of Sense*, ed. Yates McKee and Jaleh Mansoor (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 43.
10. Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1985), 47.
11. Boris Groys, *Art Power* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 4.
12. Maria Gough, *The Artist as Producer* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 8.
13. Leigh Claire La Berge, *Wages Against Artwork: Decommodified Labor and the Claims of Socially Engaged Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).
14. In some respects this demand is not new. See Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front* (New York, NY: Verso, 2003). But while the cultural workers Denning tracks wanted to (and did) get hired and paid, this new group of organizations is less interested in getting paid than in critiquing the structures of their non-payment. For Arts & Labor's statement of purpose, see <http://artsandlabor.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/AL-Statement.pdf>.



