It's the Political Economy, Stupid

Occupational Realism

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In 1998, California-based artist Ben Kinmont began his longest and most involved conceptual project to date: he opened his own bookselling business.
The piece, which is ongoing, is entitled *Sometimes a Nicer Sculpture is Being Able to Provide a Living for Your Family*, and Kinmont’s use of the word “sculpture” harks back to Joseph Beuys’s notion of “social sculpture” as “how we shape our thoughts into words...[and] how we mold and shape the world we live in.” Kinmont specializes in antiquarian books with a focus on gastronomy, and in this capacity attends auctions, participates in book fairs, works with libraries in need of development, logs his inventory, negotiates prices, and ships books to private and public collections around the world. *Sometimes a Nicer Sculpture* is meant to function both as an income-generating bookselling trade and a performance that is legible as such in the art world.

For Kinmont, it is important that his business function as a business; it is not enough for him to gesture symbolically towards the world of commerce by, say, printing up ironic letterheads or opening a fake storefront. As a result, he partakes in what I have termed “occupational realism,” in which the realm of waged labor (undertaken to sustain oneself economically) and the realm of art (pursued, presumably, for reasons that might include financial gain, but that also exceed financialization and have aesthetic, personal, and/or political motivations) collapse, becoming indistinct or intentionally inverted. These are performances in which artists enact the normal, obligatory tasks of work under the highly elastic rubric of “art.” Here, the job becomes the art and the art becomes the job.

“Performance as occupation” participates in the rising tide of discourse regarding the interconnection of contingent labor, artistic value, and precarity. Precarity is one name given to the effect of neoliberal economic conditions emergent in the wake of global financial upheaval, recession, and the reorganization of employment to accommodate the spread of service, information, and knowledge work. It designates a pervasively unpredictable terrain of employment within these conditions — work that is without health care benefits or other safety nets, underpaid, part-time, unprotected, short-term, unsustainable, risky. Debates about precarity — and an insistence that artists belong to the newly emerging “precariat” — have been increasingly taken up within contemporary art, as evidenced by exhibitions such as *The Workers: Precarity/Invisibility/Mobility*, which opened in 2011 at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, as well as anthologies like *Critique of Creativity: Precarity, Subjectivity, and Resistance in the “Creative Industries”* and *Are You Working Too Much?: Post-Fordism, Precarity, and the Labor of Art*. A group of cultural and educational laborers in London organized themselves into the Precarious Workers Brigade, and they have mobilized to protest arts funding cuts in the UK, the economic and power dynamics of unpaid internships, and other issues; their posters ask questions such as “Do you freelance but don’t feel free?”

The ascendance of the term “precarity” connects to research in the last
few years by sociologists such as Pascal Gielen, with his consideration of the congruence between artistic practices and post-Fordist economies. But this alleged congruence has wider consequences, as it underscores the need to understand artistic occupations temporally. As Pierre-Michel Menger’s 2006 report on artistic employment notes, “the gap is widening” between brief vocations and lifelong careers:

How do short-term assignments translate into worker flows and careers? From a labor supply standpoint, one artist equals one long-term occupational prospect, especially when employment relationships are long-term and careers are well patterned. But the gap is widening between the vocational commitment and the way it transforms into a career: self-employment, freelancing and contingent work bring in discontinuity, repeated alternation between work, compensated and non-compensated unemployment, searching and networking activities, and cycling between multiple jobs inside or outside the arts.

As Menger’s text implies, the temporal mentality of artistic labor (contingent, intermittent, brief) has long resembled what is now called precarity. What happens, however, when artists—who, being popularly imagined as models of precarity avant la letter as they do not earn steady wages in any conventional sense and have neither a secure employer nor a consistent, stable workplace—redefine art as work out of necessity, motored by a new urgency to “provide a living for your family,” to cite Kinmont?

When I first conceived this chapter, I wanted to provisionally define occupational realism as it functions both as a genre or style of performance as well as an attitude towards work that sheds light on the specific class conditions of artistic production and identity. Within economics, to think occupationally means to think variously about professional status or employment; feminism further understands non-remunerative labors such as housework or child care, traditionally performed by women, as occupations. As I have been writing, and as the Occupy movement has grown around the world, I have been further impelled to rethink how “occupation” in terms of a spatial political strategy might connect to “occupational” practices that specifically interrogate labor and value. If occupational realism stems at least partially from jobs or work undertaken by artists because they “have to” (though the issue of compulsion, need, and choice is unevenly applicable), this form of practice also raises questions about the potential strategic or operational value of precarity: its capacity to redefine social relations, aesthetic and affective production, and class structures.

In addition, the language used to describe the current conditions of precarity draws heavily upon the rhetoric of performance, as performance skates the line between live art and art that is lived. According to theorist Paolo Virno,
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post-Fordist capitalism, with its emphasis on flexibility, has led to an expansion of "living labor," such that not only all of our working hours, but our very desires and thoughts have been absorbed into new regimes of work. But Virno sees a space of political possibility within what he calls "virtuosity," which "happens to the artist or performer who, after performing, does not leave a work of art behind." Within his formulation, artistic performance (which in some Marxist understandings is posited as the paradigmatic outside, alternative, or other to deadening alienated wage labor) as a form of activity that generates surplus value without an end product, has become not a specialized case unique to performers, dancers, musicians, and the like, but has turned into the general condition of "servile" waged work. Virno writes: "The affinity between a pianist and a waiter, which Marx had foreseen, finds an unexpected confirmation in the epoch in which all wage labor has something in common with the 'performing artist.'"

Virno sees virtuosity as a way to move beyond narrow considerations of political action, artistic production, and work as existing in separate spheres. For Virno, the virtuoso's activity "finds its own fulfillment" and must include an audience or "witnesses"; he stipulates that it contain some sort of public or social component. Virno relies heavily upon the language of theatre; he discusses the performance, the script, the score, and the audience as he charts an opening out from work to the realms of cultural or creative activity, and finally into the sphere of the political. But what about artists who move in the other direction and mine the procedures of labor in the service of their performances? How does occupational realism thematize and make legible the conditions that Virno describes, as well as indicate what Virno overlooks?

Historically speaking, a claim such as Kinmont's that his business is his art is hardly exceptional. In one sense, such an assertion is a conceptual art strategy that began in the early twentieth century with Marcel Duchamp, in which something (either an object or an idea or a gesture) is appropriated, put into quotes, framed, nominated, or bracketed "as art." In the wake of this logic, art's very contours loosened and blurred to accommodate two of its ostensible opposites: "life" and "work." There is, however, a key distinction between post-Duchampian strategies of nomination and artists who begin to understand that if their activities already resemble art, they might as well name them as such. Here, they do not "decide" to feel or think of their life or work as art, but just the opposite: they start feeling and thinking it before they know it, because of the effects that Virno describes.

Which may be why occupational realists insist on doing the work themselves, standing bodily in the space of labor. Hence they are also distinct from the "delegated performance" of artists like Oscar Bony whose piece *Familia Obretra* (Working Class Family) (1968), involved paying a blue-collar worker, machinist Luis Ricardo Rodriguez, along with his wife and their ten-year-old...
son, twice Rodríguez’s normal hourly wage to sit on a pedestal during an art
exhibition at the Instituto Di Tella in Buenos Aires. Occupational realism is
also different from the work of Santiago Sierra, whose performances involve
hiring workers to carry out menial tasks, sometimes within the space of the
art institution.

By contrast, artist Bonnie Sherk flipped hamburger patties during the
graveyard shift on weekend stints under the title Short Order Cook (1974) at a
San Francisco, California, diner called Andy’s Donuts as part of her extended
exploration of feminism, gendered labor, and what she referred to as “cultural
costumes.” More recently, in 2000 Bulgarian-born Daniel Bozhkov undertook
a performance in which he worked at a Maine Walmart as a “people greeter.”
This piece, entitled Training in Assertive Hospitality, involved him helping
customers navigate the store; between shifts, he also painted a fresco in the
Layaway Department. Occupational realists like Kinmont, Sherk, or Bozhkov do
art as they work, within the normal contexts and spaces of work, and they work
as they do art; this precise overlap, simultaneity, and multiplicity is crucial.

But if most occupational realists are uninterested in putting their labor
within the context of traditional museum or gallery display, they are equally
uninterested in what could be called theatricality, if we use the basic defi-
nition of theatricality to mean “of or for the stage.” Other meanings of the-
aricality — that which is marked by pretense, extravagant exhibitionism, or
artificial emotion — further highlight what these artists are intentionally not
doing. In fact, they often do not want their customers or colleagues to witness
or acknowledge what they do as art — they want to vocationally “pass.” Kin-
mont speculates that few of his customers are aware that his bookselling is also
an art project — and if they are aware, they are prone to take him less seriously
as a dealer. That is, though Virno’s idea of the virtuoso demands an audience,
that audience is here complicated and fractured — there is a “work” audience
which need not or should not know that one of its workers has a value-added
position as an artist, and then there is the “art” audience.

When the distinctions between art and work are eroded, does the capacity
for art to critique the regimes of work likewise evaporate? Such an erasure
might seem, rather, to serve neoliberal paradigms, in which all hours of the
day are subsumed under the rubric of productivity. As Virno notes, the dis-
tinction between being at work and being off work (at home in domestic space
or elsewhere in leisure time), has shifted into the more arbitrary differences
between “remunerated life and non-remunerated life.” (As any freelancer
knows, if you are never officially on the clock, then you never feel totally off
the clock, either.) What does it mean therefore, to be at work but not occupied
— that is, not fully devoting one’s attentions to the task at hand? Is this partial
focus assumed to be the condition of most contemporary work? How might art
also speak to this space of mental elsewhereness? What position do you fill?
What space do you regularly occupy? The artists described here undermine the singular grammar demanded by these questions, as they perform roles as both artists and as wage earners. And then there is the Occupy movement.

"THIS IS MY OCCUPATION," reads a sign held aloft at an Occupy Wall Street demonstration in fall 2011 — bringing together in one terse phrase multiple definitions of employment, work, claiming territory, political strategy, and affective absorption. Indeed, if we are witnessing a wholesale economic shift whose only known contour is its very unmappability, its instability and uncertainty, in which workers of all kinds, diverse in their class status and in their various degrees of cultural capital, survive on the barest of margins, with no sense of security or futurity, then it could be that artists engaged in occupational realism prefigured the collapsing categories of work, performance, and art in precarious times.

The Occupy movement has spawned several artists’ groups interested in foregrounding their own underpaid and undervalued labor as art workers, including an Arts and Labor contingent of Occupy Wall Street and an artists’ bloc at Occupy San Francisco. Many in these groups are reclaiming the phrase “art worker” — a term that has been deployed at various moments in the history of the avant-garde, beginning with Russian constructivism, the 1930s Artists’ Union that emerged when artists were employed through the US Works Progress Administration, and the Art Workers’ Coalition (AWC), founded in 1969 in New York City. Those affiliated with the AWC called themselves “art workers,” a term I used for the title of my 2009 book Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era as a historical nod to these artists’ own self-descriptors. By no means did I take it as an untroubled term. It had uneven currency within its own moment, as my book elaborates, and was fraught with ambivalence, failure, and contradiction.

So I am curious, if not vaguely mystified, by how the category of the “art worker” is being resurrected. Does its most recent resurfacing mean that artists are interested in reclaiming the phrase with all of its blind spots and fault lines? What the Occupy movement’s canny focus on the “99%” has offered us is a way of finding alliances without recourse to categories such as “the working class.” The Occupy movement has made clear that “workers” are no longer a coherent category, and hence to organize around any single notion of employment, given its instabilities and multiplicities, makes little sense. A slogan that declares “artists are the 99%” speaks to the economic conditions of most artists, who often piece together part-time work to pay the rent, teach in adjunct positions, have mountains of student debt from their art degree, and lack health insurance.

But we need to think hard about what the phrase “art worker” means, its inconsistencies and its elisions. Is the reemergence of the term “art worker” a recognition of the pervasive blurring of art into labor, or is it an overly sim-
plistic conflation of artist and worker, yoking those two together unproblematically? If we can admit there is no such thing as one kind of “worker,” then we must account for the fact that “artists” are likewise not a coherent category. We must keep in our focus the global art industry that maintains its connections to and is integrally part of the “1%.” We need to parse distinctions that threaten to collapse: not all art is work, not all work is art, and the class distinctions embedded within these terms still matter. Cultural production is a specialized, or as Hans Abbing calls it, “exceptional” form of work, one that has ties to markets, alternative or gift economies, and affective labor. We should not erase distinctions or lose a sense of nuance in order to call for solidarity.

The Art Workers’ Coalition, in its lifespan from 1969 to 1971, did accomplish many things, including an incisive institutional critique that helped illuminate connections between artistic industries, the military, and corporations. It agitated for more oversight in the art world in a time, then as now, with vast inequalities and a star system that rewards some and not others. But the AWC should function less as a triumphant moment than as a cautionary tale: it fell apart in part because it did not offer a sustainable analysis of the co-articulation of race, class, and gender. The art workers circa 1970 were never fully able to recognize this key fact: artists often have, and use, many class-based privileges that many other workers do not have, not the least of which is access to cultural capital.

How have these precarious times changed how we conceive of both art and work? If we take our cue from Virno, we might speculate that our notion of performance has undergone vast transformations that bleed from the cultural to the economic. Yet the contingencies upon which the idea of “artist” or “performer” rest have always in part been based on class privilege, an aspect that is underexplored in Virno. I might go so far as to say that “artists” are not “workers,” which is precisely what makes occupational realism legible as a form of practice – there is a gap between these non-identical categories wide enough that their bridging feels surprising. If art were already work, or work were already art, these projects that redefine art as work and vice versa would simply fail to register as inversions, as conceptual frames, or as critiques. For many people, working and struggling to survive financially makes creating art less possible; at the same time, work contains within it the possibilities to envision new sorts of relations.

As Kathi Weeks puts it, “Work is not only a site of exploitation, domination, and antagonism, but also where we might find the power to create alternatives on the basis of subordinated knowledges, resistant subjectivities, and emergent models of organization.” Potentially, the freshly minted art workers of the Occupy movement will not fixate on getting a bigger piece of the art-market pie, and instead will continue to instigate a robust, subtle, and
complex analysis of economic conditions attuned to larger struggles against inequality. This is a moment to talk openly about privilege, debt, economic justice, and art as a space of imaginative possibility that has the potential to transform how we think about work, and performance.

Notes

1. This is a radically condensed version of an essay published in *TDR: The Drama Review*; I thank Rebecca Schneider for encouraging me to contribute and for her sensitive edits. Shannon Jackson also provided helpful commentary, as did Mel Y. Chen, Matthew Jesse Jackson, Luis Jacob, and Jim Voorheis. Audiences at Extra City in Antwerp and Leuphana University Lüneburg pushed me to refine my arguments. Finally, thanks to Gregory Sholette and Oliver Ressler for inviting me to excerpt this text.


As this cluster of activity suggests, 2011 was an especially fertile year for conversations about precarity, the recession, and artistic production. See also “Precarity: The People’s Tribunal,” convened at London’s Institute of Contemporary Arts in March 2011, and Hal Foster, “Crossing Over: The Precarious Practice of Thomas Hirschhorn,” *Berlin Journal*, no. 20, 2011, pp. 28–30.


10. Ibid., p. 52.

11. Ibid., p. 56.


14. Other artists with projects in this vein include Linda Montano, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, and Bohyun Yoon (all of whom are discussed in the original version of this chapter). In that longer text, I also consider the sociological use of the term “occupational realism,” which considers how “realistic” it is for low-income job-seekers to aspire to certain occupations given their class status, their level of education, their race, and/or their gender.


