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Some Call It Art.

From Imaginary Autonomy to Autonomous Collectivity

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Isn't it rather, all things considered, that I remain suspended on this question, whose answer I tirelessly seek in the other's face: *what am I worth?*
Balzac

Western culture has, at least since the enlightenment, defined the artist as set apart from the rest of society. The best known version of this artistic autonomy is the constitution of the solitary genius. Today, that imaginary realm of independence is increasingly visible as an ideological construction. Yet, like other myths, including those of nationalism and race, the manifest falsity of artistic autonomy remains operative within specific circles as a mechanism of control (As Slavoj Zizek quips, the subject of ideology *knows very well, but…* [1]). The target of this control is the potential power to excel management, something all creative work represents. By necessity, this control includes the administration of the working artist herself, a practice that dates back at least as far as Plato's writings about the ideal republic. Curiously, the idea of artistic autonomy has played a dual role in this regulatory logic. This separation presents a symbol of transcendent freedom that has been especially useful to bourgeois ideology.

Art and museum culture is the secular religion of capitalism. It provides a space for inner meaning in an otherwise spiritually empty world. The return of Art for art's sake as exemplified by the neo-conservatism of critic David Hickey proves just how durable this mythology can be. At the same time, the idea of autonomy implies that art, as well as labor, can stand alone and be self-sufficient from the managerial class. This is the version of autonomy that draws my attention here. The question I pose asks if it is possible, perhaps even necessary, to *retool* the bankrupt idea of artistic autonomy, not as a means of withdrawing once more into a closed-off aesthetic sovereignty, but instead as a model for sedition, intervention and ultimately political transformation that reaches beyond the realm of art itself. If such a redemption is conceivable, it first requires a final emptying-out and decomposition of artistic autonomy as a bourgeois ideology. That task raises another set of questions. How and for whom is this evident fiction useful? Perhaps this is more clearly stated in terms of *when* is the term art invoked and in whose presence? It is an inquiry that can not be addressed without taking into account the social and economic changes taking place at both the local and international level that are in turn directly affecting the actual practices of artists themselves. This transformation is most evident in the cultural climate of the United States.

Despite the so-called "boom" years of the 1980s or the purported "new" economy of the 1990s, most working people in the United States today are financially worse off than their counterparts of the 1960s who enjoyed far more evenly distributed income levels, lower housing costs, and strong welfare support systems. [2] According to economist Doug Henwood

"Overwork is at least as characteristic of the labor market now as is underwork. Nearly twice as many people hold down multiple jobs as are involuntarily limited to part-time work (7.8 million vs. 4.3 million) - and well over half the multiply employed hold at least one full-time job." [3]

Furthermore, Henwood argues that "We see plenty of wage polarization, a disappearance of middle-income jobs, the loss of fringe benefits, longer hours, speedup, and rising stress ..." [4]

What has brought about this polarization? Art Historian Chin-tao Wu is not alone when she argues that the Reagan and Thatcher regimes initiated a "fundamental political transformation" that affected all aspects of contemporary society, including art practice.

"Postwar social democratic consensus of welfare-state capitalism in Britain, and to a lesser degree in America...was replaced by an aggressive advocacy of the so-called free market economy...This transformation called on every corner of society to endorse a philosophy of "limited government, deregulation, privatization and enterprise culture." [5]

One key strategy of this shift included the undermining or outright elimination of social welfare programs. Facing the dismantling of the so-called safety net and increasing unemployment, workers were forced to compete with each other and with overseas labor while intensifying productivity. Longer work hours and multiple job holdings now extend the work-week beyond the forty hour limit once fought and died over by working class movements in the nineteenth century. Again, Henwood points out that "Since 1969, full-time employees in the United States have increased by a full workday the hours they put in each week, and in the past two decades, the number of people working over 50 hours a week has increased by a third." [6] The cumulative effect of this move towards privatization and what might be described as neo-proletariatization is bearing fruit in the self-proclaimed liberal-centralist economies of Bill Clinton and Tony Blair. However, while the working class in the United States is enjoying an unprecedented absence of unemployment as well as rising wages, the lack of health care for over 42 million Americans, an overall indebtedness to credit providers and an immense and growing gap between the income of average workers and the wealthy managerial class also reveals the potentially disastrous side-effects of this so-called economic miracle. [7] As theoreticians Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt argue, this structural disparity, as well as the imperative to control dissent against the world market, are part of an emerging global system they term "Empire" which is

"characterized by the close proximity of extremely unequal populations, which creates a situation of permanent social danger and requires the powerful apparatuses of the new society of control to ensure separation and guarantee the new management of space." [8]

Artists, especially sculptors, painters, and crafts people, are in an even poorer state than most working people in the United States, especially when compared to other specialized professionals. While the overall artist population has grown considerably (doubling between 1970 and 1990 [9]) and while some 164 programs offering graduate and undergraduate art degrees became available in 1980, the actual median income of visual artists today remains concentrated in the 10,000 to 20,000 dollar range, not enough even to afford housing in cities like New York, Chicago, or San Francisco. [10] In addition, the rate of unemployment for artists during the past few decades has averaged about twice that of other professional workers. [11] Since approximately half earned less than $3000 from their art and a quarter earned only $500 from art sales in 1990, not surprisingly, most have little choice but to work several jobs, often in an alltogether different field, in order to maintain a close to living wage. [12] The "drop-out" rate among artists is also high and unlike in other professions carries a financial reward. According to an unpublished study, one third of those who graduated from a major U.S. art school in 1963 had given up making art by 1981 and were actually earning more money than those who continued being artists. [13] At the same time it is a mistake to picture the contemporary artist as a bohemian or social outcast. While U.S. artists' economic situation is far less secure, they remain strong participants in civic society. For one thing, they are better educated than most other specialized professionals and over eighty percent of artists surveyed in a 1999 study by Columbia University voted in local, state and federal elections. Seventyfive percent of these people were registered Democrats and those earning less than thirty thousand dollars reported performing one to four hours of community service each week during the previous two years. [14]

As difficult as it has always been to be a practising artist in the U.S., artists today must also contend with the withering of public support and an increasing dependency on private money. In practical terms this means learning how to market oneself. While museums and other support structures for artists claim cultural autonomy from capital, as Chin-tao Wu points out, the new corporate enterprise culture only appears to be at odds with the institutions of art.

"Indeed multinational museums and multinational corporations have become in many ways inseparable bed-fellows. Despite the fact their proclaimed aims and purposes may be worlds apart, they share an insatiable appetite for improving their share of a competitive global market, their ambition involves them in physical expansion and the occupation of space in other countries. It also involves making aggressive deals in an open marketplace and maneuvering capital (money and/or art) across different borders." [15]

Perhaps this new global cultural hegemony is best summarized by one of its own: the director of the Guggenheim Museum chain Thomas Krens who, without a trace of self-doubt, boasts of the museum's corporate alliance stating, "We have put this program of global partners in place, where we have long-term associations with institutions like Deutsche Bank and Hugo Boss and Samsung." If the museums and palaces of high culture have appeared in the past as a shelter for civic life, set apart from the vulgarities of capitalism, less than two decades later the effect of the massive economic restructuring that started in the 1980s is evinced by the increasingly eager and unashamed embrace not only of corporate money but also of corporate values. This open display of affection for the private sector flows not only from artists and museum administrators, but also from institutions of public education, civic welfare, even criminal incarceration. [16] Nor is this condition of privatization likely to remain localized within the United States or Great Britain. As the entrepreneurial model gradually takes hold in museums as well as state and civic institutions of every kind, the aura of artistic autonomy can not help but be jeopardized. According to cultural critic Masao Miyoshi, under pressure from the totalizing influence of trans-corporate capitalism:

"...museums, exhibitions, and theatrical performances will be swiftly appropriated by tourism and other forms of commercialism. No matter how subversive at the beginning, variants will be appropriated aggressively by branches of consumerism". [17]

Even if Myoshi's bleak prophecy is not our collective future, at least in the United States the effect of corporate hegemony has already forced into view a *confrontation between the symbolic position and actual practices of art*. It is most apparent when one looks at changes in the institution that occupies the symbolic center of American high culture: The National Endowment for the Arts. Recently the National Endowment or NEA has been involved in heavy campaigning to regain the support of the United States Congress and the populace at large. It has approached this by attempting to prove that art is *not* a purely symbolic or autonomous activity, but is instead a kind of labor that contributes to the overall well-being of society in direct ways, including public education and community service. A recent document entitled the American Canvas Report, sponsored by the NEA supplies the blueprint for a post-Cold War approach to public patronage in which artists and arts agencies are encouraged to venture into:

"a broad range of community-based activities. In 1996, fully two-thirds of the 50 largest LAAs [local arts agencies] addressed five or more of the [following] issues: Community Development Issues, Cultural/Racial Awareness, Youth at Risk, Economic Development, Crime Prevention, Illiteracy, AIDS, Environment, Substance Abuse, Housing, Teen Pregnancy and, Homelessness". [18]

One post-script to artistic autonomy therefore is the recognition of the artist as social worker. However, the indirect consequences of this cultural utilitarianism in a capitalist economy are just as predictable. Let me again quote from the NEA American Canvas Report which celebrates this shift in the most unabashed language.

"While there are no one-size-fits-all models for the integration of the arts into community life, two areas in particular -- urban revitalization and cultural tourism -- are especially popular right now, and both were the subject of much attention at the American Canvas forums. In many respects, of course, revitalization and tourism are simply two sides of the same coin: as cities become more "livable" and more attractive, they'll prove increasingly alluring to tourists, whose expenditures, in turn, will help revitalize cities. As mutually reinforcing pieces of the same puzzle, moreover, both urban revitalization and cultural tourism invite the participation of arts organizations. The arts can come to these particular "tables", in other words, confident that they won't be turned away." [19]

Here is a new, post-public, post-cold-war artistic pragmatism. It accepts the need to "translate" the value of the arts into more general civic, social and educational terms that will in turn be more readily understood, by the general public and by their elected officials alike. Nevertheless, such phenomena as gentrification and the displacement of low income residents that accompanies the movement of artists into cities is one social problem not even on the NEA radar screen. Meanwhile, cultural tourism and community-based art practice must be thought of as a local consequence of the move towards a privatized and global economy. If the remnants of public, civic culture aim to make art appear useful to the voting population as a form of social service and tourism, then how long can the idea of artistic autonomy and its celebration of individual freedom, even in its current, transparently bankrupt form, remain useful to the de-territorialized needs of global capital? In other words, what position can artists expect to hold, symbolically and economically, in the coming, trans-national corporate hegemony?

In the universal language of finance, the "fine" arts make up a pretty thin slice of the overall leisure and entertainment industry [20] . Still the image of artistic freedom and autonomy has for some time now presented a colorful (if imaginary) life-style choice for the overstressed and over worked professional. (Consider the way lawyers, brokers and psychiatrists rush to buy "lofts" in gentrified art ghettos.) Yet that role may be on its way out as popular culture and advertising have come to bestow an artistic aura on basketball players, movie stars, rock musicians and now corporate entrepreneurs. Perhaps it is not the apparent autonomy of the artist but her actual productive constitution that, in terms of Hardt and Negri's thesis, serves the global economy as the very prototype of the new worker. Far more than most other workers, artists are in fact trained - in fact train themselves - to adapt to changing and unstable economic conditions. Consider the way the artist is at once highly specialized, yet infinitely re-trainable, willing to volunteer enormous time and labor to generate cultural capital (that is typically accumulated by others), while in theory remaining subversive towards institutional power, even though seldom is the artist willing to subvert the power that most affects her: the art industry itself.

Privatization and the "new" economy also have other, more immediate consequences for artists who continue to think of themselves as autonomous producers that make art for galleries and museums. For one thing, expanded work schedules (in those other paid jobs that support one's artistic career) simply allow less time for making art. This might be seen reflected even in the choice of materials contemporary artists' employ. Think of easel painting, modeling in clay or casting in bronze. During the early twentieth century these were overpowered by more direct methods of art making such as collage, photography, steel welding and assemblage. As life (and production) speeds up, time-consuming methods are broken down or eliminated. Today, even these relatively instantaneous techniques for producing art require quantities of time beyond the means of many artists. For them, the computer combined with graphic applications is the art studio of our day. This is especially true in such hot real estate markets as New York City and is a logical extension of what the late artist and art historian Ian Burn describes as a "de-skilling" of artistic craft. Together with critic Lucy R. Lippard, Burn argues that in the 1960s conceptual art did away with artistic proficiency as a means of avoiding the commodification of art. According to Lippard, the process culminated in the total disappearance of the art object. [21] The unanticipated outcome of de-skilling is the merging of high and low art and a contemporary generation that serves as aesthetic service providers rather than object makers. [22] Art historian

Brandon Taylor refers to some of this new de-skilled work as "slack art." [23] The use of ephemeral materials, dead-pan performances and aimlessly shot video appears to avoid major investments of labor and materials while it thumbs its nose at the over-produced art of the late 1980s (such as Koons, Holzer, or Longo). Yet with a slight shift of context, "slack art" becomes indistinguishable from many other informal practices among people who do not identify themselves as artists. For example, how, other than by location, is an arrangement of products purchased through a retail catalog or borrowed from someone's attic any different from the work of Jason Rhoades, Laurie Parsons or Sylvie Fleury? The Duchampian argument that context is everything no longer satisfies. While readymades provoked questions about the definition of art by working against a normalized artistic tradition *inside* the museum, in the current dissipated, post, post-modern world, such work is indistinguishable from advertising and pop-culture that has already adopted the legacy of subversive art itself. When a prestigious museum like the Guggenheim displays motorcycles and Armani suits, is this not an inevitable response to the breakdown between the fine arts and other forms of artistic-like production taking place both inside and outside the museum?

Meanwhile, the publicity-machine that drives consumer culture has always required a great deal of moderately skilled, visual labor, even if this labor is repetitive and uninspired in nature. For every Marcel Breuer or Olivetti there is an army of lesser artisans who perceive graphic design not as a profession but as toil that is nevertheless still preferable to sheet-rocking apartments or waiting on tables. Graduates of fine art programs (artists) are finding employment laying-out innumerable retail catalogs, book covers, movie posters, liquor ads, travel brochures; and most of all producing website designs. Globalism accelerates this trend. As the borders that once separated national economies implode, the demand for design, packaging, and commodity labeling explodes and with it the job market for "creative" labor. This phenomena is already affecting academia, as evident from the growth of *visual culture studies*. Concurrently, at the level of artistic practice, a very small gap appears to separate the production of so-called fine art and that of commercial, visual culture. Simply from a practical perspective, the increasing throng of artists using digital technology in their art makes it impossible to draw an absolute line between the kind of artistic labor done for money and that performed in the service of fine art. Indeed, a new ethos appears to be emerging among some digital practitioners that sees no contradiction between an avant-garde world-view and entrepreneurial business skills. Like the early avant-garde, the post, post-modernist digital artist claims a new utopianism. The one crucial difference is that now avant-garde practice must also be viable as a business enterprise. By using modern marketing techniques, dot.com-*gardism* actually operates in a vanguard, productivist mode, treating the consumer as a producer, even as its artistic agenda mixes aesthetic play with profiteering. All of this puts a new spin on the classical avant-garde call to transform art into life, a point I will return to below. Yet, where does this leave the traditional idea of artistic autonomy? What purpose has artistic autonomy served the state, and is its practical demise truly a reason to celebrate?

According to enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant, the special categorization of art as a human activity that transcends the material world depends upon an a priori separation between nature and culture. At the same time the artist can breach this divide through that singular person known as the genius. Kant states that:

"Since talent, as an innate productive faculty of the artist, belongs itself to nature, we may put it this way: *Genius* is the innate mental aptitude *(ingenium) through which* nature gives rule to art." [24]

Perhaps the most influential art critic and theoretician of the post-war period, Clement Greenberg, made use of Kant's aesthetic theories to articulate and ground his version of modernist art. If Kant "used logic to establish the limits of logic" and "withdrew much from its old jurisdiction" what was left was "all the more secure." [25] The resulting art object affirms its own conditionality and celebrates its freedom - its autonomy - from representation by rejecting any association with literature or illusory space. Greenberg's aesthetic axioms proved especially useful to post-war capitalism because, unlike the official culture of Stalinism or Maoism, modernism in Greenberg's Kantian revision offered the intellectual an aura of imagined freedom from all social

constraints. I say imagined because recent scholarship has uncovered historic alliances between Greenberg's promotion of a modernist concept of autonomy and the cold war politics of the United States. [26] Today, supporting the autonomy of the artistic genius to ward off the chill of communism is no longer a viable rational for public art spending. Indirectly citing this dilemma, Bill Ivey, the outgoing Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, recently commented, "Cold War thinking lay just beneath the cultural policy of the last century". [27] Public funding agencies, including the NEA, now must struggle to reestablish a rationale for government support of art even as citizenship is increasingly measured by one's participation in the economy as a producer/consumer, rather than by transcendental beliefs such as nation. In this post-national environment, the very notion of artistic autonomy, together with art's symbolic value, is bound to be both marginalized and absorbed by global marketing as one more brand for specialized leisure products.

There is a different approach to artistic practice that comes from the philosophical tradition of Hegel and Marx. Cultural critic Walter Benjamin, for example, called on artists and intellectuals to put themselves at the service of the working class in their struggle against capitalist exploitation, to make art that actively transformed artistic means of production. He cited as examples of this utilitarian art the epic theater of Bertolt Brecht, Soviet newspapers that were authored by their readers, and the photomontages of John Heartfield. [28] Ironically, the avant-garde promise to drag art out of the museums and into life is today remarkably visible in all the wrong places. Museums and foundations now claim to nurture art as social activism, multiculturalism drives the cultural tourism industry and what remains of public funding agencies call on artists to end their isolation and become civil servants. In the post-Cold War and anti-socialist United States, the Left has joined the center-liberal establishment in its call for a utilitarian and serviceable art that integrates "the arts into community life". [29] Meanwhile, if the private sector still upholds an idea of artistic autonomy, that altruism comes with a leash which discourages artists from overtly challenging the economic foundation of their patronage. In sum, the collapse of artistic autonomy would not be so profound or irreversible if not for the changes under way in the post-Cold War political economy. As already noted, one of these changes is the privatization of civic life and the disappearance of the nation-state. The other permutation is the generalization and visibility of art-like, creative production within the collective arena of mass culture.

In the past, such things as home made crafts, amateur photography (and pornography), self-published newsletters, fanzines and underground comics had little impact beyond their immediate community of producers and users. Today, an ever more accessible and sophisticated technology for manufacturing, copying, documenting and distributing "home-made" or informal art has dramatically ended that isolation. Today, one can not escape the spread of this heterogeneous and informal art-like activity. It radiates from homes and offices, schools and streets, community centers and in cyberspace. Its contents are typically filled with fantasies drawn from popular entertainment as well as personal trivia and sentimental nostalgia. In form it can range from the whimsical to the banal and from the absurd to the obscene. It is a qualitative shift unique to the last ten years, and I will argue in a moment, the increased visibility of amateur and often collectivized cultural production is more than any other factor accelerating the withering of autonomous artistic practice as such.

The computer hacker mentality of today is not so far removed from the organized fence cutting tactics of farmers in Nebraska in the 1880s. Culture "Jamming" the system is not so different from the tactics of the Industrial Workers of the World who, at the turn of the century, battled anti-free speech laws in places like San Diego by overloading the local jails with arrested protestors. However, up to now these activities remain divided from each other, their political relationship fragmented and diffused. Yet even the most conservative analysis would find it difficult to ignore the expansion of unregulated and inventive activities made possible by the growing accessibility of communication and reproductive technologies. Without dismissing the enormous number of people still laboring in traditional manufacturing and agricultural industries, especially in developing countries, global capital's dependency on communications technology virtually assures the spread of digital networks and information technologies. One of the tasks of activists must be to see to it that the market's cellular and digital circulatory system is infected by the demands of non-technical laborers. Once

again, it is less that art is being disseminated down into society from on high, than the social matrix is itself predicated upon a submerged collective creative capacity. As Negri and Hardt explain:

"Labor is productive excess with respect to the existing order and the rules of its reproduction. This productive excess is at once the result of a collective force of emancipation and the substance of the new social virtuality of labor's productive and liberatory capacities." [30]

Therefore, alongside the passive consumption of commodities and popular entertainment there emerges a different realm in which unofficial and informal cultural capacity is exercised. The more these informal cultural producers become aware of their own capacity for creative and transformative action, the more the privileged space once reserved for "trained" artists recedes. Already, this generalized artistic activity mixes together consumption, production and exchange as it recycles and redistributes, purchases and appropriates. It is evident when people download commercial music for free, duplicate copyrighted images for personal use and in so many ways re-direct or simply loot institutional power. Many of these activities also circulate within ungoverned or ungovernable economic zones including flea markets or through the postal system or over the Internet. They vary in form from the criminal to the radical to the insipid. Each garners equal space within the expanded and informal cultural sphere. Thanks to the exploitative needs of global capital, the cost of making visible one's subjective and creative excesses is falling. In theory it is a short distance from group visibility to collective autonomy.

A selective list of current art activist practices suggests that an informal political aesthetic is already in existence, much of it emerging from loosely structured autonomous collectives focussed on production, distribution, intervention and disruption. In certain cases these groups are so interdisciplinary that the art world discourse just ignores them. This list would include some or all of the work of *RTMark, Critical Art Ensemble, Reclaim the Streets* (various locations, in both digital and actual spaces,) *REPOhistory* (the NYC based group co-founded by the author that makes site-specific public art about alternative histories), *ABC No Rio* (NYC space dedicated to all forms of counter-cultural practice, from music to graffiti to housing activism), *Reverend Billy* (also based in NYC, the "reverend" executes anti-corporate performances with his accomplices in Starbucks coffee shops and at the Disney Store on the new Times Square), *Ultra-Red* (a Los Angeles based group of audio-activists), *The Center for Land Use Interpretation* (also in LA with projects that produce tours of radioactive and ecologically damaged environments), *Ne Pas Plier* (French activists using art to focus attention on housing for guest workers), *WochenKlausur* (Austrian group that stages encounters between elected officials and marginalized peoples), *A-Clip* (Berlin-based media activists), *Collectivo Cambalache* (originally from Bogata, *CC* creates alternative exchange economies in public spaces), *Temporary Services* (disseminates art and information in Chicago streets using newspaper dispensers), *Blackstone BicycleWorks/monk prakeet/Dan Peterman* (a recycling, organic garden and art center on Chicago's South Side), *The Stockyard Institute* (Jim Duignan works with urban school children in Chicago to produce "gang-proof" armored suits), and the group *Ha Ha* (Laurie Palmer and John Ploof develop projects on AIDS, ecology and housing in Chicago and elsewhere).

These informal, politicized micro-institutions have made art that infiltrates high schools, flea markets, public squares, corporate websites, city streets, housing projects, and local political machines in ways that do not set out to recover a specific meaning or use-value for either art world discourse or private interests. At the same time, the pressures of privatization combined with a generalization of artistic activity that is most clearly visible in digital form, have sapped the words "art" and "artist" of their previously imagined autonomy. While Joseph Beuys prophesized that his social sculpture would transform everyone into an artist, the ordinary routines of the populace have done more to achieve that goal without professional artists to guide them. [31] What remains of artistic autonomy is now a specialized marketing tool of both the high-culture and mass media industries. As such, it now openly manifests itself for what it has been for some time - a label for a specific

brand of cultural capital called "art". However, the closer this idea of autonomy nears extinction or outright exposure, the more interesting becomes the possibility of its rescue. Only when it has hit the floor and gone cold might a version of this archaic idea possibly be infused with new value. If Benjamin argued that only a redeemed mankind could hope to win back its entire historical legacy, our redemption of artistic autonomy could not be a nostalgic return to the past, especially not the disengaged and heroic individualism of modernism. Nor would it be grounded in either the Kantian ideal of disinterested beauty or the Hegelian or even Marxist notion of an evolving totality. Rather this autonomy would have to recognize the end of the once powerful contradictions between artist and society, nature and culture and individual and collective. This new, critical autonomy would not even be centered on artistic practice per se, but would recognize the already present potential for political and economic self-valorization inherent within contemporary social conditions. Instead of asking what is art, it would instead query what is politics? Instead of asking if "they are allowed to do that?", or worry about the uncertain status of art's social capital, this critical autonomy would proceed to activate cells of artistic producers not afraid to utilize and manipulate the entire range of culture making (and culture-thieving) technologies and strategies that are now multiplying within the circulatory system of the global body. The autonomous status of these informal working groups or cells might indeed leverage discursive power from the lingering aura of the Kantian/Greenbergian aesthetic. They could for example borrow the idea of freedom (exemplified by art) for doing politics. What a radical notion! [32] However, they would do so in a utilitarian (thus anti-Kantian) manner, not to insure art's usefulness to the liberal, corporate state as much *new genre* public art appears to do, but as a model of political and economic self-valorization that is applicable for social transformation in the broadest sense. The point is to begin to recognize and bring to light what already exists and to re-direct or retool this so that its practitioners become self-conscious of their *already present collectivity*, a force potentially independent from what Negri and Hardt term the Empire. [33] Here a final displacement is possible. Politics superimposes itself at all levels as a practical art that is at the same time symbolic. But it does so only if we understand politics as the exploration of ideas, the pleasure of communication, the exchange of education, and the construction of fantasy, all within a radically defined social practice of collective, critical autonomy.

[from: Eva Sturm / Stella Rollig (ed.), *Dürfen die das? Kunst als sozialer Raum*, Wien: Turia+Kant 2002]

[1] Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 33.

[2] While productivity increased by 20% among workers between 1989 and 1999, the median real wages of men actually fell according to authors Lawrence Michel, Jared Bernstein and John Smitt, in *State of Working American: 2000-2001* (Economic Policy Institute: 2000). Meanwhile, according to *Left Business Observer* editor Doug Henwood, the incomes of the richest 5% of the population are up by 22% since 1989 with more than half coming in the last 5 years. "The inequality of family incomes in 1998 was at its highest ever since the Census Bureau started publishing annual figures in 1947," Doug Henwood, "Boom for Whom?", *Left Business Observer* #93 (Feb. 2000).

[3] "How Jobless the Future?," *Left Business Observer* #75 (Dec. 1996).

[4] Ibid.

[5] *Chin-tao Wu, Privatising Culture: Corporate Art Intervention Since the 1980s*, (London: Verso 2001), p. 10.

[6] Henwood, *Left Business Observer* #75, op. cite.

[7] "Over 1.4 million new jobs were created in 1992, and the total since the recession trough [1987] is over 12 million new jobs." Doug Henwood, ibid. Meanwhile, some 42 million Americans or 17.8% of the population have no health insurance coverage according to J. Rhodes, E. Brown, and J. Vistnes in *Agency for Health Care Research and Quality Report*, 2000. Americans also carry a total personal debt load today of one half trillion dollars or $7,564 per household according to a special issue of the *New York Times Magazine* entitled "Spending: How Americans Part With Money," October, 15, 2000.

[8] Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Empire*, (Cambridge: Harvard 2000), p. 337.

[9] The number of professional, specialty workers doubled between 1970 and 1990 and the total population of artists more than doubled in that same period with female artists tripling in number according to Joan Jeffri and Robert Greenblatt in *Artists Who Work with Their Hands: Painters, Sculptors, Craft Artists and Artist Printmakers: A Trend Report, 1970-1990*, sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts Research Division, (Washington: NEA, August 1994), p. 28.

[10] Note too that the US poverty level in 1998 for a family of four was $16,000 (US Dept of Labor) while the median income for painters and craft artists in 1990 was only $18,187. Compare this to the $36.942 average for professional workers in other fields. Jeffri & Greenblatt, p. 36.

[11] Neil O. Alper and Gregory H. Wassall, *More Than Once In a Blue Moon: Multiple Jobholdings by American Artists*, Research Division Report #40, (Washington: NEA, 2000), p. 97.

[12] According to the same NEA report: The most frequent explanation provided by artists for holding multiple jobs was that they needed the additional earnings generated by the second jobs to meet their household's expenses. This was the same reason most other professionals held a second job. Note that "Visual artists were almost three times as likely, on average, to have worked in the [professional] service industries than other artists (31% versus 11 %)." Ibid, pp. 44 - 46.

[13] A study of 300 graduates of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago were tracked between 1963 to 1980 by researchers Mihaly Csikszentimihalyi, Jacob W. Getzels and Stephen P. Kahn in *Talent and Achievement* (Chicago:1984, an unpublished report), p. 44.

[14] "Information on Artists II," Research Center for Arts and Culture, 1999, Columbia University p. 8-9. An interesting additional note is a recent survey of leading business CEO's in the U.S. whose voting record is exactly the opposite! See: Lorraine Woellert et al. "Do CEO's Vote? Not Always and Not Often" Business Week (November 6, 2000).

[15] Chin-tao Wu, op. cite, p. 213.

[16] Consider the term cultural capital employed by Pierre Bourdieu. It is a phrase that appears to "save face" for some sort of sophisticated artistic practice, and yet implicitly acknowledges the triumph of the marketplace over every aspect of life. Consider also a recent report entitled Unseen Wealth: Report of the Brookings Task Force on Understanding Intangible Sources of Value by Margaret Blair and Steven Wallman in which the authors argue that "organizational and human capital, "goodwill" and other intangibles, as well as other items that are not usually viewed as "assets" are becoming the real sources of value in corporations." The authors call on economists to use such "intangibles" for future analysis "as the dominant drivers of economic activity and wealth shift away from manufacturing toward information-based services".

[17] Masao Miyoshi, "A Borderless World? From Colonialism to Transnationalism and the Decline of the Nation State," *Critical Inquiry* #19 (Summer 1993), p.747.

[18] *American Canvas Report*, op. Cite.

[19] Ibid.

[20] The United States Entertainment business is ranked the 18th largest industry in Fortune Magazines's Fortune 500 with Time Warner ranked the 128th largest corporation and Disney the 176th in the global top 500. To get a sense of how small the "high" art world is by comparison, contrast the combined annual revenue of $6,763,989 -- based on total sales, receipts and shipments -- from museums and historic sites in the U.S. to the nearly ten times larger revenue of $60,331,549 just for gambling, amusement and recreation spending.

[21] Ian Burn, "The Sixties: Crisis and Aftermath (Or The Memories of an Ex-Conceptual Artist)," *Art & Text* (Fall 1981), pp. 49-65, and Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: the Disappearance of the Art Object* (Praeger, 1973).

[22] Andrea Fraser, "What's Intangible, Transitory, Mediating, Participatory, and Rendered in the Public Sphere?" in *October* #80 (Spring 1997), pp. 11-116.

[23] Brandon Taylor , Avant-Garde and After: Rethinking Art Now (New York: Abrams,1995), p. 153.

[24] Immanuel Kant, "The Critique of Aesthetic Judgement," collected works, (Chicago: William Benton, 1952).

[25] Ibid.

[26] Eva Cockroft "Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War," Artforum (June 1974), pp. 39-41, and Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

[27] Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, Bill Ivey speaking at the National Organization of Arts Organizations, Brooklyn, NY, June 2000

[28] Walter Benjamin, "Author as Producer," Reflections, trans. Edmund Jephcott, (New York: Helen and Kurt Wolff, 1978).

[29] *American Canvas Report*, op. cite.

[30] Hardt and Negri, op. Cite., p. 357.

[31] It could be argued that it is precisely this Kantian/Greenbergian tradition that provided the theoretical framework for the self-analysis leading to a more politicized art practice, including the work of Hans Haacke, Daniel Buren and later the "institutional critique" of younger artists like Andrea Fraser and Renée Green. Without dismissing the logic of this claim, I have tried to show elsewhere that this approach gives far too little credit to non-art world influences, including politics and popular culture, on the work of these artists. See Gregory Sholette "News from Nowhere: Activist Art & After," Third Text #45, (Winter, 1999), pp. 45-56. For a German version of this essay see the book "Metropolenkultur. Kunst und Kulturpolitik der 90er Jahre in den Zentren der Welt", ed. by Jutta Held (Weimar, 2000)

[32] The School of the Art Institute's student newspaper recently carried an article proclaiming that art was a "major force binding and guiding" a reawakening of political activism in the United States. While there is an old if unwritten history to this affiliation, the fact that young people are making these connections in the "heartland" of America is significant. Meanwhile, similar links between pirate radio broadcasters, puppeteers, culture-jammers, and direct action groups is apparent in all of the recent protests against the World Trade Organization. Joanne Hinkel, "How Art is Helping Activism" F Newsmagazine (October 2000), pp. 14-15.

[33] What we need to grasp is how the multitude is organized and redefined as a positive, political power...Empire can only isolate, divide, and segregate...the action of the multitude becomes political primarily when it begins to confront directly and with an adequate consciousness the central repressive operations of Empire. It is a matter of recognizing and engaging the imperial initiatives and not allowing them continually to reestablish order; it is a matter of crossing and breaking down the limits and segmentations that are imposed on the new collective labor power; it is a matter of gathering together these experiences of resistance and wielding them in concert against the nerve centers of imperial command." Negri and Hardt, op. cite., pp. 400-401. See also Gregory Sholette, "Counting On Your Collective Silence: Notes on Activist Art as Collaborative Practice," *Afterimage* (November 1999), pp.18-20.