

Art's Values: *A Détente, a Grand Plié*

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1. The term “ethical” in this context exceeds associations with morality and is used to circumscribe positions that relate to the referent’s non-instrumental qualities.

2. The term “functional” in this context is used to circumscribe positions that aren’t necessarily related to the referent’s instrumental qualities but allude to its “use-value” to society in non-economic terms. For example, the cultural sphere is often said to be socially functional when it provides for different constituencies to have claims to visibility.

3. This line of response is best represented by the mission statements of contemporary art institutions.

4. For example, the negative reaction to Paul McCarthy’s giant “butt-plug” inflatable sculpture on Place Vendôme in Paris in October 2014.

5. This approach chimes with the “push-back” by representatives of the art field to the funding bodies’ demand to have rationalized and quantifiable justifications in applying for art grants.

6. See for example Andrea Fraser. *Le 1%, c’est moi. Texte zur Kunst* 83. September 2011. pp. 114-127

THE TERM “VALUE” INVITES THREE obvious readings: ethical¹, functional² and economic. Depending on the referent, the three readings may appear to be distinct, intertwined or identical. The question of “contemporary art’s value” likewise elicits a multiplicity of knee-jerk reactions. For one, what is at stake at the level of value is quickly attributed to “the artwork” as art’s pinnacle unit. Some are then inclined to affirm contemporary art(works) as valuable contribution(s) to the world that they inhabit³; those not so keen would call out contemporary art’s irrelevance, ludicrousness or even harm.⁴ Another approach is to argue that the question shouldn’t be posed in the first place since artworks defy blunt rationalization or may be threatened by it in some fundamental way.⁵ What these responses suggest is an understanding of value that is a mix of ethical and functional readings, while the tendency to forefront objects and their discursive claims as the truth of art lurks as a suppressed premise. Often kept entirely separate is the question of contemporary art’s monetary valuation, which no longer presumes a primary link to artworks but which instead poses “the market” as the domain that subjugates “artworks” to its rationale.⁶ The “market dimension” is thus often left occluded as an account that threatens contemporary art’s value with narrow economic instrumentalization. In a similar key, contemporary art’s socio-institutional ecology may be perceived as crucial to determining conditions for artistic production and artworks’ circulation but only is so far as it *affects* art rather than *acting* as one of its determinants.

For the purposes of the presented argument, the ambiguities inherent to the term “value” in the English language are taken as a convenient launch pad for a discussion on the schism that exists at the level of contemporary art’s ontology, which prioritizes singularity over systematicity. This essay contends that there exists a fundamental rupture in the notion of contemporary art’s value between, on the one hand, the socio-cultural and political claims of artworks and, on the other hand, their economic and infrastructural realities. This predicament is here elaborated from the perspective of contemporary art’s historical inheritance as a paradigm that understands itself through its object-particulars rather than as a systemic totality. This disarticulation permits the ethico-functional value to stand at stark odds with the infrastructures that carry it, which not only leaves contemporary art vulnerable to attacks of disingenuous discourse but perhaps more crucially inhibits art from moving beyond critical reflection and representation, perpetuated at the expense of self-effacement, towards a constructive participation in the real.

The essay sets the scene by sketching out how the evolution behind contemporary art has been predicated on the project of perpetually redefining the art object, pausing on conceptualism and the post-structuralist turn as the inaugural moments of critique’s supremacy in defining art’s value within a semantic configuration. While allowing for greater integration of art’s socio-institutional ecology within art’s ontology, the emphasis on semantic singularities continued to obstruct their seeping into art’s operationality. The attempts to affect a transformation aimed at systematicity at that specific historical juncture offer important case-studies for speculating on the reasons of their failures and the possibilities for repurposing their logic in the present moment. Approaching the contemporary moment from this side of “now”,

a discussion is launched on the more recent methodological formations in art that have taken shape with the infrastructural innovations brought about by the internet and the concomitant resurrection of artistic interest in systemic intervention and enactment as the necessary means of moving art beyond critique's deflation.

Scene I: The Rise and Fall of Critical Art

From late 19th century French modernism's revolutionizing of painting and sculpture to art's complete semantic overhaul in the 1960s, the trajectory that has led to contemporary art as the art paradigm *du jour* is one of art's ontological liberalization—loosening up of norms that dictate what art can be.⁷ Conceptual art, underwritten by Duchampian “anarchism”, marked a crucial transition. Divesting the artwork from materiality as a foundational pillar, conceptual art opened up a new plane of ontological possibilities by eliciting a shift from the developmental basis of art rooted in linear transformations of art's formal concerns to a paradigm where art became a plane for renegotiating semantics.

The emerging theoretical spectra of post-structuralist critique were put to use as engines for shredding the oppressive mechanisms of traditionalism and socio-cultural taboos. Emancipatory agendas geared towards the dissolution of gender inequalities, heteronormative dominance, white supremacy, classism and sexual repression found an outlet in the increasingly daring and transgressive artworks that no longer had to be contained by formal pressures. To this extent, the emancipatory zeal in conceptual art's ontological orientation found its match in the post-structuralist socio-political *Weltanschauung*, signaling a shift away from an art *necessarily* linked to its formal qualifications to one that instead employs context reflexivity and socio-political sensitivity as key determinants of its objecthood. This developmental trajectory allowed for the sociological and the contextual dimensions of art to become more embedded in art's ontology, tying art's value to the more general societal conditions and operations.

The art object of the 1960s and 1970s became a prism through which these various environmental conditions were brought into focus. While the notion of infrastructures is more aligned with the notion of “environment” here, in many ways it was minimalism's focus on the more narrow understanding of the term that opened up the possibility for integrating larger systemic concerns into art's agenda. For example, the logic by which minimalism accentuated the ontological ties between the art object's presence and its physical environment was schematically mirrored in the more openly socio-political works that strove to comment on a certain state of affairs by playing on the aesthetico-conceptual disparity between the artwork and its societal habitat.⁸ This intentionally created “disparity,” or the pivotal *critical* gesture, would open up a semantic field for a more nuanced or a completely contrarian understanding of the targeted conditions, which in turn qualified *difference* as the prime organizational feature of art. Hence, while the idea that Abstract Expressionism (which ontologically resonates far more with pre-conceptual practices) served an important role in propagating liberalism and America's export of “freedom” during the Cold War, something similar

7. John Roberts. *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art after the Readymade*. London: Verso. 2007.

8. Another way of looking at what Michael Fried called minimalism's “theatricality.”

9. This is evident, for example, in the separation between the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (1966) and its counter-part the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (1966) in the field of human rights—another crucial system for liberal global ordering. The separation was justified by the idea that while negative freedoms need to be adopted universally, economic rights were conditional on the country's opportunities. This in effect justified policies that proclaimed high moral values but permitted bullying newly independent colonies into signing economic agreements that put them at a significant economic disadvantage for decades to come.

10. Perhaps most starkly represented by the global scale hypocrisy of the “War on Terror”, which attempted to defend liberal values, most prominently the rule of law, by acting outside of law of altogether (as evidenced by extraordinary renditions and secret camps for the terror “suspects” detained without due process).

11. Both were against the position that keeping art at a distance from social reality was what guarded art's ethico-functional value.

12. Jack Burnham. Systems Esthetics. *Artforum* 7. no. 1. September 1968. pp. 30-35

could be said about practices driven by critique, even if playing into larger (predatory) political agendas was not (and perhaps even contrary to) critique's aims. The logic of critical differentiation, as it was and continues to be manifested in critical art, is a *de facto* contribution to validating the liberal-democratic agenda as an ethico-functional imperative, which positions negative freedoms and respect for difference as society's foundational pillars, while occluding society's material organization.⁹

Critique's normalization with the seemingly endless proliferation of critical agendas and corresponding art objects as signs and signifiers detached from their signified is part and parcel of post-structuralism's self-ghettoization in the realm of semantics. On the one hand, the claims of critical art are understood to require the real for content, but on the other hand, their socio-political value to *the real* is delimited by art's contribution to discourse and viewer experience. Consequently, the idea that the value of art can only be assessed discursively and/or phenomenologically has streamlined the notion of art's autonomy into governing what art's value may be, thus reaffirming the schism between content and the systemic.

At the same time, given the changing conditions of global ordering and the generally acknowledged failures in the implementation of the liberal project in recent decades¹⁰, the critical gesture in art no longer possesses the same kind of political currency as when it was believed to function as a counter-force to oppression (at least discursively). While contemporary art has become a global phenomenon and criticality its defining feature, the devastating repercussions of economic liberalization and the sense in which precarity and (existential) risk have come to structure the lived experiences of the majority of the world's population pose an uneasy contrast. As a result, viewed from the perspective of art's value to society, context-sensitive critical art seems to have arrived at a cul-de-sac as a progressive socio-political paradigm even, or especially, when its monetary valuation has soared.

Scene II: A *Détente* Attempted

The displacement of materiality as art's ontological prerequisite in favor of a tension between the object and its environment, as established by conceptual and minimalist practices, also effectuated an evolutionary branch of art that prioritized oneness over autonomy. Deviating from the critical mode, this integrationist approach was methodologically and strategically more aligned with the Russian Constructivists' and Bertolt Brecht's vision of art's value.¹¹ While remaining historically marginal, and having broken off at various junctures, the integrationist approach that emerged with the conceptual/post-structuralist turn made important inroads to reconciling art's proclaimed values with art's infrastructural and economic realities.

Responding to the new vistas opened up by post-war technologies in the dissemination, management and processing of information, what felt urgent to such visionaries as Jack Burnham was for art to step into a leadership role in steering and defining systemic developments.¹² Taking the conceptual turn as a cue for bringing the dissolution of the object's material base to its logical conclusion, Burnham's “systems

esthetics” advocated for the object’s complete submergence in societal infrastructures.¹³ The approach was staunchly opposed to preserving a special—or “autonomous”—status for art as a hangover from modernism:

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*

In the past our technologically-conceived artifacts structured living patterns. We are now in transition from an object-oriented to a systems-oriented culture. Here change emanates, not from things, but from the way things are done. The priorities of the present age revolve around the problems of organization. A systems viewpoint is focused on the creation of stable, on-going relationships between organic and non-organic systems, be these neighborhoods, industrial complexes, farms, transportation systems, information centers, recreation centers, or any of the other matrixes of human activity.¹⁴

The increasing ubiquity of the television and the advancements made in computational technologies were taken by Burnham as signs that the speed and scale by which these technologies could *order* the world would make the spatio-temporally bound nature of individuated experience less and less relevant as far as its impact on the overall system is concerned. For Burnham, objecthood had to be debunked in favor of systemic interventions that not only made use of the existing technologies but *directed* them with a political imperative in mind:

In an advanced technological culture the most important artist best succeeds by liquidating his position vis-a-vis society. [...] The significant artist strives to reduce the technical and psychological distance between his artistic output and the productive means of society. Duchamp, Warhol, and Robert Morris are similarly directed in this respect. Gradually this strategy transforms artistic and technological decision-making into a single activity—at least it presents that alternative in inescapable terms. Scientists and technicians are not converted into “artists,” rather the artist becomes a symptom of the schism between art and technics. Progressively the need to make ultrasensitive judgments as to the uses of technology and scientific information becomes “art” in the most literal sense.¹⁵

In Burnham’s vision, objecthood’s dissolution was a far cry from art’s destruction or putting artists “out of work.” On the contrary, for Burnham art had the potential of becoming the directing vector of society’s advancements in virtue of art’s/artists’ inclination to make use of the existing mechanisms with an agenda that escapes the narrow rationalizations and prescriptive functionalities attributed to these infrastructures within their “home” domains (be it physics, IT, finance or media).

The strength of dedicated disciplines and professional spheres lies in their ability to create sophisticated instruments through their precisely defined knowledge systems and self-perpetuating logics. This in turn is also their greatest weakness in keeping sight of the all-encompassing oneness that defines far-reaching horizons. Propelled by a commitment to their established codes, these spheres and disciplines are themselves in part “victims” to modernity’s heritage of parcelling out knowledge systems

16. As exemplified by Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Random House Inc. 1994.

17. Marcel Duchamp's "readymade" showed that art is what is legitimated as art by those that have the authority for such a "baptism." This is exactly the logic that gave birth to branding as a trigger for desired consumption. Meanwhile, Andy Warhol understood the allure of mass production coupled with marketing, and presented as art (thanks to Duchamp).

18. In other words, reduced to the bare logic of their operation as symptomatic conditions.

by granting each entitlement to autonomy.¹⁶ Yet, while the emerging "self-dedicated" sphere of (for example) information technology deploys autonomy to create ever more sophisticated products aligned with a set of internally-set criteria (e.g. computing power, functionality, but equally growing/business-sustaining profit margins), the ontological dispersal of art that Burnham wished for would have meant that art could make use of its status as *nothing-in-particular* and *potentially-everything* in becoming *that* which keeps sight of far-reaching horizons. The *value of art* that Burnham's approach advocated for had highly ethical connotations and thoroughly functional repercussions.

The unlocking of art's potential initiated by conceptualism was for Burnham a reason to see art as an instrument through which systemic advancements could be utilized and probed while being subjected to criteria that go beyond the immediate interests of that specific discipline/technological advancement and with consequences that are practical rather than simply discursive. The latter condition establishes an essential distinction from what may otherwise appear as an elaborate critical artwork: Burnham's artist operating at the level of systems esthetics is an infiltrator, not a tourist.

The artistic practices that Burnham provides as his examples, however, are somewhat discordant with Burnham's vision given what we know about them decades later. Both Duchamp and Warhol, each in their own way, succeeded in importing nascent systemic advancements into art; branding in the case of Duchamp, and mass production and marketing in the case of Warhol.¹⁷ Duchamp's and Warhol's ability to incorporate novel business tools into their artistic production through literal capitalization is definitely part of Burnham's design for art. What is missing, however, is a transformative (or at least a transformation-driven) intervention into the operational domains of these systems that transverses the divide between art and "the world" by attempting to modulate the system as one. Instead, both Duchamp and Warhol end up reaffirming systemic developments by "progressive" capitulation disguised as artistic strategy that hinges on, and preserves, art's separation from "the world."

On the other end of the spectrum from Duchamp and Warhol, are such artists as Robert Morris, Donald Judd, Les Levine and Allan Kaprow. Reading their practices on purely schematic terms¹⁸, and with the knowledge afforded by hindsight, it is evident that their preoccupation with the systemic, and experiments in diluting the spatio-temporal prescriptions of gallery-sited objects, were shortchanged by the implicit insistence on the unique status of the phenomenological experience of art. The latter proved to be a way of reasserting the auratic principle of art by redefining and expanding what an art object could be, thus remaining within the prism of objecthood's singularity even if the object's content could now deal with the myth of the singular authentic manifestation.

The artistic strategies that resemble a Burnhamian undertaking more closely are those that have attempted to use "art" as a "supplemental" mode in infiltrating systemic configurations in order to rewire them. In his "manifesto" on systems esthetics, Burnham mentions Hans Haacke. Indeed, the artist's early projects from the 1970s aimed to undo the assumed neutrality of certain power figures/institutions

by showcasing their integration into a wider array of predatory interests.¹⁹ Haacke's practice thus seems closest to Burnham's vision from all those mentioned by the author. However, despite Haacke's interest in causing a shift in society's systemic arrangements through his practice as an artist, the deconstructionist undercurrent of his work encouraged a stand-off between the proclaimed and the real. While Haacke's work appeared as a powerful critical statement, it lacked as a functionally prescriptive mechanism. The trade-off between offering a valuable "reveal" propelled by astute criticality and, on the other hand, establishing a programmatic instrument, is characteristic of most practices that come under the rubric of "institutional critique" or those that engage with mapping/understanding/revealing capital (relations).²⁰

The impetus behind the creation of the Artist Placement Group, spearheaded by Barbara Steveni and John Latham, and operating in the UK between the late 1960s and early 1970s, resonates with systems esthetics in its mission to streamline art into society's general productive processes. Overseeing artist placements in various institutions and corporations, APG sought to foment a new culture of production, in which the artist's supplemental role would become integral to directing the development of society's productive forces. The vigor of APG's theoretical agenda was, however, undermined by the practicalities of implementation and sustainability. Some reports attest to the failure of formulating concise enough terms of engagement for the collaborations to be effective. It may also be the case that hosting companies were not ready to engage with artists as colleagues, since the latter's role was most likely understood in a very traditional way (i.e., as providers of representational imagery). One of APG's last projects at The Hayward Gallery was organized as a series of workshops and meetings between representatives of the business world and artists. The Art Council of England, which provided APG with most of their funding, responded unfavorably to this project, putting an end to their financial support by proclaiming that "the group was 'more concerned with social engineering than with straight art.'"²¹

Although APG's short-lived history has been funneled into the category of "socially embedded art,"²² it seems that what Latham and Steveni attempted to do exceeds the ad hoc tourism of most socially-oriented (critical) art projects that tend to be more preoccupied with producing interesting social sculpture (à la Thomas Hirschhorn) than with causing systemic shifts.²³ While APG's placements were organized on an ad hoc basis, APG as a platform was an act of institution-building. The institution's mission to straddle art's ethico-functional value with economically organized infrastructures in fact goes above and beyond the ethico-functional purview of Burnham's systems esthetics. In comparison to APG's resolutely all-encompassing approach to art's value, Burnham's vision occludes the economic dimension even while proposing a radically different mode of doing art. What Burnham fails to account for is the resource dependency that is *always* the other side of any productive process, requiring an equally attuned and thought-through paradigm in order to stay true to the process' purpose.

Seth Siegelaub's "The Artist's Reserved Rights Transfer and Sale Agreement" (1971) attempted to address just that, albeit in reference to art as object particulars.²⁴ Siegelaub came up with an implementable legal structure that gave artists 15% of

19. Examples include *MoMA Poll* (1970); *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, A Real Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971* (1971); *On Social Grease* (1975); and *A Breed Apart* (1976).

20. Which in part explains the domestication of "institutional critique" and the full embrace of "Haacke"-like artworks in today's contemporary art institutions which continue to embody the problems that these works refer to.

21. Maris Jahn (ed.) *Byproduct: On the Excess of Embedded Art Practices*. Toronto: YYY Books. 2011. p. 40

22. *Ibid.*

23. From a conversation with the artist, Thomas Hirschhorn, at *Gramsci Monument* (2013) in the Bronx, NY, in which he stated that his concerns cannot be systemic since what is at stake in his work is sculpture.

24. Seth Siegelaub. The Artist's Reserved Rights Transfer and Sale Agreement. 1971. URL: <http://www.tenstakonsthall.se/uploads/58-Seth-Siegelaub-The-Artists-Reserved-Rights-Transfer-And-Sale-Agreement.pdf>.

25. *Ibid.*

26. Suhail Malik. The Value of Everything. *Texte Zur Kunst* 93. Summer 2014. pp. 66-79

profits in future resale of their works, greater control over exhibition and circulation, while also structuring their relationship to dealers by proposing that galleries receive one third of the artists' 15%.²⁵ Whereas Burnham foresaw that the merger between society's technological developments and the underlying morphability of art after conceptualism required new modes of structuring that relationship, something similar could be said of Siegelau's understanding that with conceptual art the art market was about to get much bigger and that there were hardly any structures in place to direct that expansion. The model that Siegelau proposed would have given artists far more leverage in setting the terms for art's development ethically, functionally and economically.

As we know, Siegelau's project did not get taken up by artists and their dealers. The benefits of an opaque valuation system, lack of transactional transparency and a "no strings attached" approach to trading in art commodities, were much greater for marketing such "exotic" products as conceptual artworks than a more onerous entitlements system, which might have made a lot of sense for artists and galleries (and even collectors) in the long term, but which did not sound attractive in the contemporary art market's start-up phase. Aided by the myth that the artist should focus on art while galleries deal with the commercial aspects of the artist's career, the foundational segregation of contemporary art's primary market (i.e., the gallery system) from art's ethico-functional value has permeated the whole organization of (contemporary) art to such an extent that it continues to exert force on today's reality on a global scale.

Attempts to reintegrate the economic dimension into art's value have been undermined or directly shut down, as was the case when APG was "penalized" by the Art Council for "overreaching" the "proper limits" of art, or when Haacke's exhibition revealing the socially disastrous consequences of a real estate developer in New York was cancelled by the Guggenheim, or when Siegelau's efforts to structure the art market were marginalized into a whimsical eccentricity. However, what did gain strength was a tactic of critical commentary that knew its proper bounds and has become the art historical norm: the artwork as a singular objecthood with claims to a unique phenomenology.

Scene III: Branding's *Grand Plié*

Today's ubiquity of critique, and the inconsistencies of its value commitments in contemporary art, appear as horizon-less norms and crisis conditions at the same time. This status quo is *normal* because a schism between art's ethico-functional dimension of value, and its socio-institutional and economic infrastructures, is where the power of the contemporary art paradigm as a mostly unwitting—or disavowing—accomplice to free market economics and global liberalism lies.²⁶ At the same time, the predicament is a crisis if the artwork's critical demands on reality should have value beyond enriching the discursive and the market's "invisible hand."

Just as with art's past systemic constellations, the resonance between the state of art and the state of "society" is instructive. A seeming lack of viable political

alternatives to the neoliberal order has meant that intervention is only possible in highly localized and temporally limited instances. The deflation of critique as a viable strategy for causal intervention may be seen as part and parcel of the more general failure of agendas that define themselves in response to the various symptoms of the dominant order, yet lack in a prescriptive program. Responding to the evident inefficacy of localist leftist counter-politics, Nick Srnicek's and Alex Williams' "Manifesto for Accelerationist Politics" addresses the issue of the Left's crisis as one of its inability to make use of the existing technologies and infrastructures:

We believe the most important division in today's left is between those that hold to a folk politics of localism, direct action, and relentless horizontalism, and those that outline what must become called an accelerationist politics at ease with a modernity of abstraction, complexity, globality, and technology. The former remains content with establishing small and temporary spaces of non-capitalist social relations, eschewing the real problems entailed in facing foes which are intrinsically non-local, abstract, and rooted deep in our everyday infrastructure. The failure of such politics has been built-in from the very beginning. By contrast, an accelerationist politics seeks to preserve the gains of late capitalism while going further than its value system, governance structures, and mass pathologies will allow.²⁷

Existing infrastructures are put forward as pivotal stages for rewiring societal codes and socio-economic processes towards a post-capitalist future. At the core of the accelerationist program is an emphasis on thorough-going systematicity that does not disavow the innovative base for ordering society under capitalism but instead makes maximum use of it for an alternative political program.

Measuring contemporary art up to left accelerationism's program, it is starkly evident that critique's atomized counter-poising, locked in singular artworks, cannot satisfy the value demands placed on art by a commitment to systematicity. Critique poses reduced characteristics of existing infrastructures as intrinsically bad or faulty objects, and it separates the content of artworks from their operational reality. While art-objects articulate a "rejection" of existing infrastructures, these same infrastructures ineluctably organize the objects and their agendas as mechanisms for perpetuating the status quo, which in turn continues to be repositioned as a begrudged reality, re-trenching the schism in art's value as a semantic field at odds with its operational reality.

The accelerationist approach presumes that new technologies and global infrastructures are systemic conditions that must not only be addressed as objects of critique but engaged with operationally. To this extent, accelerationism may also be seen as a strategy for reconciling the various denominations of "value" into something inherently unitary, thereby resonating with Burnham's systems esthetics, but only if coupled with a Siegelaubian programme for integrating market dynamics into art as a systemic undertaking.

Accelerationism's *Zeitgeist* and the echo of late 1960s/early 1970s efforts to transform art into a practice of system-oriented enactment are implicitly present in the

27. Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek. #ACCELERATE MANIFESTO for an Accelerationist Politics. In Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian (eds.) #Accelerate# *The Accelerationist Reader*. Falmouth: Urbanomic. 2014. pp. 347-362.

more recent attempts to mobilize existing platforms as the very content of art. While it would be wrong to identify these efforts with the political imperatives behind Srnicek and Williams' political project, for the purposes of the current discussion what matters is the cross-cutting ethos of addressing value in a unitary fashion, which does not necessarily reveal anything about the project's ideological dimensions.

The "classic" mid-1990s remix of "cool/cold" corporate anonymity, vibrant party scenes, megalomaniac celebrity culture and the mainstream's "passion for fashion" came together as modes of (artistic) action by an elusive pseudo-collective known as the Bernadette Corporation (BC). Conflating all manners of identities and practices, the Bernadette Corporation dipped in and out of a variety of "real" scenes (film, fashion, publishing, art gallery-business, clubbing, etc.), morphing and remorphing with versatility as circumstances and the group's penchant for adventure demanded. The schizophrenic or "multilateral" nature of BC's practice functioned as an incisive application of vertical and horizontal integration by which corporations were gaining unprecedented power as national and transnational actors. In a Duchampian-Warholian manner, BC adopted a key mechanism for organizing power from the world of business and global politics, therefore transforming art-making into brand-making that used the framework of "mergers & acquisitions" to "conquer" new terrains.

"Art-making as brand-making," begun in part by Duchamp and Warhol and expanded on in a more nuanced and sophisticated manner by Bernadette Corporate, has become *the* formula for emulating "existing infrastructures" which, in a world dominated by transnational corporations and finance, makes total sense. In fact, looking at a significant cross-section of practices that quite clearly (and perhaps consciously) diverge from the critical model, "brand-making" emerges as the most dominant framework for attempting to leave behind contemporary art's historical inheritance of representational referentiality. Understanding art through branding also offers a different approach to understanding value. The three facets of value—ethical, functional and economic—become mutually reinforcing and interdependent. The "ethics" of a brand are reduced to its image, which defines its functions and organizes its economic dimension. In turn, the latter two allow the image to either be sustained or transformed along with the brand's strategy. On the surface, the brand-making model fulfills the demands of systems esthetics in so far as art is freed from its lockdown in singular objecthood (although "art objects" can be a component of brand-making). What is more difficult to achieve, however, is the subjugation and rewiring of market dynamics that harbors the potential for systemic transformation at the economic level. Artist brands such as Bernadette Corporation and its more contemporary counterparts such as DIS, AutoItalia, AIDS-3D, SONE but also Superflex (which is from a somewhat different strand of practices but nonetheless still corresponds to the outlined characteristics of brand-making), tend to fall back on the existing infrastructures of an opaque primary market, at best securing greater agency for themselves by leveraging on positions that allow them to *be* market actors. In other words, these brands may either themselves set up commercial gallery spaces (e.g. Reena Spaulings vis-a-vis Bernadette Corporation; AutoItalia) or mold into a market

player in a different pre-existing market (e.g. DIS's Kenzo advert, or SONE's "stock" as a video product on Getty Images).

While arguably no transformation is affected in terms of "rewiring" existing infrastructural arrangements or market dynamics, what is affected is the deep-rooted orthodoxy that reaffirms art's autonomy by not only keeping artists "separate" from the market as its active players but also keeping the art market separate from other markets. The economic intertwining that is effectuated by artist brands consolidates a more integrated understanding of value both as a continuum of ethico-functional and economic dimensions, and of diverse industries and markets. This might seem like a far cry from Siegelau's "rights"-oriented vision for the art market, but what these practices do is use the very mechanisms of neoliberal market dynamics as conditions for intervention, thus in the very least debunking the assumption that is embedded within the critical contemporary art paradigm that positions the market as an exterior force on art (qua 'object particular' artworks).

In a similar vein, what has been dubbed with the (almost immediately) discredited term "post-internet art"²⁸ once held the promise of transforming pre-internet realities. This post-millennial wave was ushered in, to seemingly release art from atavistic constraints at the levels of authorship, objecthood, distribution and circulation, while claiming to redefine what it means to be a producing artist and to have an audience.²⁹ The new constellation afforded by the infrastructural ubiquity of the internet meant that materiality neither had to be tied to the physical object nor juxtaposed to the conceptual: the virtual collapsed this distinction by departing from a one-to-one correlation of the material to objecthood. Since what has precedence in a networked environment of never-ceasing circulation is virality, art's value was claimed in this formation to be generated by the latter's intensity. Consequently, the value of the *singular* authentic artwork (whether object or concept) presumably disintegrated. Instead, art could be understood through its expansiveness both on the lateral plane of associative links and in the temporal dimension of information flow. In Artie Vierkant's words, "nothing is in a fixed state."³⁰ Authorship presumably becomes muddled as content passes hands.

In these conditions, value becomes located not in authenticity but in the inherent malleability and propensity for decontextualization of digital content. Within an idealized reality, the endless stream of information in the boundless online flattens out the peaks of power concentration present in the offline constellation of individual authors, individual artworks and narrow access corridors to art distribution. In a similarly idealized vein, another physical-world distinction that is presumably collapsed is one between artist (producer) and audience (viewer/consumer).³¹ While the critical model necessitates artist's production for further semantic completion by the viewer, the "post-internet" model requires consumption as a pre-condition of production—the now all too generic "presumption."

Perhaps the most idealistic vista associated with (what shouldn't be called) post-internet art is the possibility for a non-mercantile economy. Since the overhead costs of producing on the internet are equal for artists and non-artists, this briefly upheld the optimistic scenario of cost-free production, lack of barriers to distribution and art

28. In part, today's disdain towards the term, apart from it being reductive and imposed as a catch-all blanket term institutionally, might stem from the embarrassment of the initial overexcitement that the possibilities afforded by the internet could transform art as we know it.

29. Artie Vierkant. The Image Object Post-Internet. 2010. URL: http://jstchillin.org/artie/pdf/The_Image_Object_Post-Internet_us.pdf. (Accessed 2015/04/30).

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Ibid.*

32. For example see Alex R. Galloway, *Protocol. How Control Exists after Decentralization*. Cambridge: MIT Press. 2004; Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics*. Cambridge: MIT Press. 2006; Shane Harris, *@War. The Rise of the Internet-Military Complex*. Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing. 2014.

33. Brad Troemell. Athletic Aesthetics. *The New Inquiry*. 2013. URL: <http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/athletic-aesthetics/>. (Accessed 2015/04/30).

34. As propagated by such figures as Jeremy Rifkin in *The End of Work: The Decline of the Global Labor Force and the Dawn of the Post-Market Era*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons. 1995; and *The Age of Access: The New Culture of Hypercapitalism, Where all of Life is a Paid-For Experience*. New York: Penguin Putnam Inc. 2000.

35. It is telling that the attempts made to provide a more clear structure for economic transactions for works with online provenance has followed a typical "offline" script, as is evidenced by such projects as Monegraph, Rafaël Rozendaal's *Art Website Sales Contract*, *NewHive*. URL: <https://monegraph.com> (Accessed 2015/09/20).

that is free (or at least equivalent to the overhead costs of its production, i.e. whatever it costs to access the internet, which offers a model for pegging art's valuation in a way that is in direct contrast to the opaque valuation mechanisms operative on the contemporary art market). This proposition resonates with an image of art that has overcome its value schism by integrating its infrastructural reality within its content and vice versa. The two function seamlessly as innate components of a unitary ethos: art that is the system that it desires for the real because it is the real. Art's sociology and transaction unite to construct art's value and a system for its valuation as one. Art's ontology is enriched by the inclusion of its historically oppressed other: transaction.

Scene IV: A Grand *Plié* of Little Consolation

In reality, the idealized scenario associated with the most profound techno-infrastructural advancement since Burnham's era has been lacking. As numerous critics of the internet have shown, the online disguises and entrenches offline hierarchies, inconsistencies and inequities, while also producing plenty of new ones.³² The fierce competition for attention means that *quantity* of content often comes at the expense of thinking through published material, for example leading to the phenomenon of "athletic aesthetics" as coined by Brad Troemell.³³ This type of acceleration is anything but resonant with the accelerationism implied by Srnicek and Williams where contentful principled orientation is a necessary precondition for understanding how to operationalize existing infrastructures towards new ends. The proliferation of content that is encouraged by post-internet's "free-market" attention economy sows the seeds for automatized hyper-production divorced from any other criteria than trending and popularity.

Similarly, the idealized paradigm of almost cost-free production for almost cost-free consumption fails to stand up to the lived realities of embodied existence.³⁴ While in theory, everyone can be an internet artist during one's free time, the source of one's livelihood must be secured elsewhere, which means that as an artist operationalizing a model of art that presumably transcends capitalist realities one is nonetheless subsumed by the economy's hegemonic formation at the basic level of social survival. At this juncture, the democratizing claims for online distribution starts to fade in attractiveness and invites the most intense versions of precarious labour. The implicit desire to transcend the existing hierarchies within the contemporary art institutional complex remains a false promise in so far as no alternative institutional setting capable of allowing online users to earn and live via social goods and offline consumption is offered.³⁵ As a result, the tendency is to fall back on the offline complex.

At the heart of the quagmire is a question of political economy: the technology may be changing the infrastructure but that infrastructure is wired to function according to specific objectives, and ultimately no technological change can elicit an overhaul of these objectives without directed political intention. This is a deviation from the prevailing techno-utopian/dystopian views where technological agency remoulds everything, including ourselves, which upholds the inevitability of the

current ideological formation—also known as right accelerationism.³⁶ Viewed from a slightly shifted angle, working through the internet may provide artists with an alternative means to asserting comparative advantage, or as Brad Troemell puts it, (successful) internet artists have a greater “leverage to sell more inherently scarce goods” (i.e. singular artworks with physical presence).³⁷ Thus, what is essentially offered by the online dimension of artistic practice is an alternative route by which artists may re-enter the existing infrastructures, both at the institutional and market levels. Here, the internet’s potential for self-branding and self-marketing becomes the pinnacle of the artist’s success in the “real” economy. Once again quoting Troemell, “the artist’s personality becomes the sellable good” developed through online presence and consolidated as a commodity in a tradable artwork.³⁸

In this particular trajectory of the “post-internet,” branding once again becomes the overarching motivation for mobilizing existing infrastructures, which is then used as leverage in becoming a more successful market player. While this presents a much less self-occluding and convoluted model than the one where the market is artificially kept separate from art, what isn’t clear is the branding operation’s ultimate mission beyond its market success. As has been already stated above, the initial attractiveness of art making as branding is the way in which the notion of value coalesces into a well-integrated whole, in stark contrast to the value schizophrenia of critical art. But the question then is what this formal shift achieves systemically.

The reason why an integrated conception of value is important is because by closing the gap between the ideological make-up of claims that are traditionally associated with content and environmental realities, content need no longer be monopolized by discourse but can *function* as an intervention into *the real*. While the power of branding is in its functionality, the fact that branding is a functional operation to further the product/service within an existing socio-economic environment does not necessarily reveal anything about its content’s ideological orientation. In other words, “an intervention into the real” is not a victory prize in itself because in fact that’s the most mundane description of what advertising companies, political lobbies or private citizens paying (or not) their taxes do all the time anyway. The reason this becomes an important standard against which to measure contemporary art as an ordering system is because of its structural propensity to split *the real* into the discursive as a foundation of what art *does*, and the infrastructural as a coincidental reality that art (unfortunately) has to *deal with*. Meanwhile, artist brands that capitalize on existing platforms that aren’t based on that split may accordingly eclipse that predicament but that does not mean that they are doing something above and beyond what these platforms are doing already; at least not in terms of eliciting a deviation from the existing ideological orientation.

The question of the *value* of non-self-effacing value in mobilizing existing infrastructure to systemic transformations is a crucial one because it brings to the fore a tension between left and right accelerationism. The latter is in effect an intensification of the existing conditions through its reaffirming reproduction of the existing infrastructure’s internal logic. Left accelerationism, on the other hand, requires a modulation in the platform’s logic despite the capitalization. In essence, this implies undoing

36. Nick Land. *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings 1987–2007*. Falmouth: Urbanomic. 2011.

37. Brad Troemell. *Athletic Aesthetics*. *The New Inquiry*. 2013. URL: <http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/athletic-aesthetics/>.

38. *Ibid.*

the foundational logic of perpetual private gain towards modes of social redistribution. By way of a very simple example, this would mean that the mechanics of desire that drive the advertising industry would be adopted to recode private consumption into engaged citizenship. Or, perhaps, the utilization of financial market mechanisms would be a means of reconfiguring financial entitlements.

This does not seem to be the impetus behind the existing artist branding strategies, or at least, no articulated ideological position that leans in that direction has been put forward. In part, this may be due to the fact that political alignment is a flawed branding strategy because for one it looks too similar to critique, and, also, it is unlikely to get much traction within a socio-economic environment that is staunchly apolitical at the surface and neoliberal at heart. The pressure is then on the specific terms of engagement with these platforms and the nuances through which the operationalizing takes place. Changes to systemic conditions need not be immediately tangible or game-changing, but the impetus needs to be discernible if art's value is to have integrity that isn't just a matter of formal integration of its component parts. Formulated in a slightly different key, the intended integrity of critique should not be thrown out with the bath water; it just needs to find its reentry into art at the level of operationally that isn't disavowed as extrinsic to what art *is*.

What has been sketched out here is a terrain for understanding the repercussions of art's value as a fragmented composition and as an integrated constellation. The two approaches were grounded in specific historical trajectories both within the narrow field of art history and in the context of more general societal conditions and systems of ideological ordering. The conceptual turn in art was put forward as a pivotal moment for reorganizing the principles that govern art's ontology, taking Burnham's systems esthetics and Siegelau's "Artists Resale Rights Contract" as setting the tone for more contemporary models that follow an integrationist approach to value.

It was argued that while "post-internet" does introduce new notions of what counts as materiality and arguably creates alternative access routes to the professional field, both of which may count as formal and sociological innovations, the funneling of all infrastructural claims back into singular artworks through digital channels becomes first and foremost an exercise in branding. Branding is also singled out as the chief operational mechanism for artistic practices that do art by capitalizing on existing non-art platforms. Despite the formal echoes with new ideological formations summarized by accelerationism, it was concluded that these practices resound more with accelerationism's right/conservative variant (not necessarily intentionally) given that they are ultimately geared towards capitalization as a means to market success rather than as a strategy for socially transformative intervention.

The main assertion motivating this line of argument is that conceptual art did not go far enough in transforming art's ontology. Today, having learned the "lessons" of critique, it is paramount that singular objecthood becomes finally dispensed in favor of an integrated value system. However, it is also evident that this is not in itself a

necessary condition for socially transformative art. The default tendency of systemic dispersal is to reaffirm the logic of economic atomization and comparative advantage in a world governed by second-order observation logic. What needs to be overcome is the agent-brand conception of a networked society, which is itself so foundational both to post-internet practices and those that utilize existing non-art platforms, and it needs to be overcome in favor of a systemic activity that goes beyond liberal conceptions of socio-economic organization. Ultimately, that might lead to art as a program “branding” rather than the individual-product branding that it is today.

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