Plastic Givens, Hard Stops: a short Overview of Forms and Forces of Negation in recent and historical Art

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Art is a social mediation that has, to varying degrees since securing autonomy in the modern era, come to represent a utopian space in which the imperatives of labour, accumulation and instrumental rationality are suspended, if not critically disputed. Such a position, with all the idealist, ameliorative and ethically detached implications that attach to it, takes on a different cast in the recent period. This period has seen art pressed into neoliberal social agendas, coming into its own as an asset class in an era where it has mirrored or anticipated the real fictions of finance, as well as being inflected by radical discourses of abolition. Here, we would like to keep in mind contemporary political discussions of abolition in communisation, afropessimism and gender abolition, but here we are focusing on art-immanent gestures of self-abolition. These are played out on a stage illuminated by utopic gesturality on the one side (as canvassed by theorists like Suhail Malik on ‘CA’ - contemporary art, in one relevant debate) and the strictures of neoliberal governmentality on the other. Both these movements, although in highly differentiated ways, modify the autonomy of art. Therefore we’d need to interrogate the presumptive dismissal of ‘autonomy’ as a reactionary discourse for contemporary art. This dismissal has become an orthodoxy in recent decades, but perhaps it is of limited use when there can still be leverage in excavating the negative meanings of autonomy, inasmuch as they connect to practices and theories of autonomy outside the institution of art.

Here, we wish to critically pose the question of if art dissolves into work or life, does its critical capacity become eroded?

Yes: becomes just another form of precarious/contingent labour, alternately, management

OR

No: it potentially challenges art’s regulative illusions of autonomy in the social division of labour and acts to reconstitute both art and work through strategies of negation or refusal

In this essay, we’d like to focus on the relationship between discourses of self-abolition as they are played out in contemporary communist theories of negation, and the way negation has been performed in and as art, and then, more specifically, in feminist art and film practices – the question of strike and sabotage seen from the
perspective of women’s work, be this artwork or housework. Further, abolition needs to be considered as a dynamic that is immanent to art since modernity and into the current era, not simply conjunctural to say, the impact of social crisis or revolutionary blurrings of the art and life distinction. This is, on the one hand, to flesh out the gendered and racialised dimensions of the ‘refusal of work’ or discourses of negation and self-abolition of social forms in this theory, on the other to query the moralisation of gendered and racialised ‘reproductive’ and ‘affective’ labour in some of the thinking around intersectionality and queerness that poses an alternative or complement to more orthodox Marxist conceptions of class-struggle driven revolutionary practice.

The relationship between production and reproduction has been a core issue for feminist art practices in recent decades and in the present. The depiction of working women or women’s work, in and outside of the market, constitutes a strong strand in the image-politics of feminist art and film. However, there is another, perhaps more oblique strand wherein the artist identifies with being a worker, but it is not clear whether their work is productive, reproductive or simply unproductive. In this mode art’s relation to work may, at first, appear only mimetic. In this sense, we can loosely periodise two phases of such gestures in the art of the 20th century: an heroic one, often male, (think Rodchenko or Varvara Stepanova wearing a production suit, or the appeals to industrial work, even if often ironised, made by people like Robert Morris, Edward Kienholz, Richard Serra and Andy Warhol) in which artists sought to identify with the worker as the agent of history, and an anti-heroic phase, taking hold in a period in which work and its logic had subsequently become generalised for all genders, where artists appropriate the gestures of ‘work’ to make subaltern forms of labour present and disruptive to the categories and institutions of art and labour (think Mierle Laderman Ukeles washing the steps of the Wadsworth Atheneum, Francis Alys holding a placard renting himself as a ‘Turista’ amidst the other day labourers in Mexico City’s Zócalo square, Pilvi Takala turning up to work as a marketing intern to conspicuously do nothing).

Looking to these practices in dialogue with queer, black studies and feminism can sharpen the somewhat routine appeal to ‘purposeless purpose’ (Immanuel Kant) in Western art by not being content with the performed evacuation of the value of work from a perspective of an always-already sanctioned detachment from use, and it draws this work into dialogue with current debates on self-abolition in queer, communist and black theory. A critical distinction Frank B. Wilderson III makes between ‘trying to build a better world’ and black opposition to such a project can be traced back to Kant’s project of ‘universal common sense’ of which art via the critical faculty of judgement is constitutive of universal subjects, from which black life is constitutively and practically excluded. Therefore, against Kant’s positive enlightenment project which enshrines art in the production of (white) universality which is world building, Wilderson opposes a negative ‘irreconcilable’ project which wants to ‘destroy the world.’ One way our account is influenced by this work is in making a distinction between the employment of art in programs to improve the world, by states, NGOs or artist communities, where it frequently contributes to e.g. gentrification (improving the world for the middle-class) and the persistent negativity of art, both vis a vis other art and the world as it stands, a negativity which puts it on the same side if not in the same mode as political struggle. Recent incidents such as the call to remove and destroy Dana Schutz’s painting of a press photograph of Emmett Till in his coffin, included in the 2017 Whitney Biennial, throws a hard focus on the uneasy dialectic between a standard account of negation-as-autonomy and a more volatile stance of negation-as-struggle that forms the parameters for political action in the sphere of art, particularly attending to the radical cancellation (rather than expansion) of ‘the world’ enunciated in the afro-pessimism’s black radical idea of ‘destruction’.

Art Strikes

Art, in capitalist society, defines itself and is defined negatively with regard to social labour. Sociologically speaking, an analysis would take in more concrete empirical determinations, with the generally ‘pre-modern’ (non-industrial) conditions of artistic production, as recently highlighted by...
Dave Beech’s Art and Value, to be read against the managerial, administrative and educational roles which comprise the range of employment roles for many artists who are not sustained solely by market success. But sticking to the framework of form-analysis, one that is informed both by Marxist categories and their application in the work of Frankfurt School critical theorists such as Theodor Adorno and Alfred Sohn-Rethel, we emphasise that art is not labour in a capitalist sense. It thus exhibits some of the elements of work refusal, of being on strike. We are interested in how art can be discussed as a refusal of work structurally in capitalism but also how it can become politically re-configured by refusal of work outside of art. In that case, what is art that it can go on strike? How does this reflect on attempts to politically implement analogies between art and labour (such as the art strike)? Art strikes tend to encounter the problem that since art is not directly compelled by the division of labour founded in other sectors its withdrawal of labour is barely noticed. Art strikes therefore tend to be performative propositions.

The earliest explicit use we have found of the term ‘Art Strike’ is in Alain Jouffroy’s essay ‘What’s To Be Done About Art?’: “The abolition of art can really occur in the actual time and space of a pre-revolutionary situation like that of May 1968. It is essential that the minority advocate the necessity of going on an ‘active art strike’ using the machines of the culture industry to set it in total contradiction to itself. The intention is not to end the rule of production, but to change the most adventurous part of ‘artistic’ production into the production of revolutionary ideas, forms and techniques.”

The problem with Jouffroy’s proposal is that without ending the rule of production, avant-garde artists would simply swap one privileged role for another. Instead of providing entertainment for a privileged audience, artists are to form themselves into a vanguard providing ideas, forms and techniques for the masses. While such a role may be attractive to the artist, it does nothing to alter the oppressive domination of a so-called creative elite over the rest of society. It is also the case that so often when art does take a ‘socially engaged’ role, it is in this professionalised sense which maintains such class distinctions structurally even if thematically it may ‘question’ them.

Under the recent swathe of austerity measures enacted by Western governments in the wake of the 2007/2008 financial crisis, some artists and institutions began to conceive of a positive role for artists, revisiting programmes of the American New Deal’s Works Progress Association (WPA) as an historic convergence of affirmation of work and art, and art: work as: “In the highly charged political atmosphere of the Great Depression, left-wing project employees not only painted, acted, and wrote, they demonstrated, published newspapers, and led sit-in strikes to protest WPA personnel and wage cuts. Artists from many different leftist points of view also embraced causes such as industrial unionism, civil rights for black Americans, and support for the anti-fascists in the Spanish Civil War.”

Artists, employed or otherwise directly dependent upon the State, began to identify as workers. Especially when the state threatened to take the work away. In a partial sense, the International Workers of the World’s dream of ‘one big company’ vs ‘one big union’ had, for this brief period, begun to take on the semblance of reality. But all roads led to war. The US policy of depression era pump-priming paid off when it became the largest capitalist producer in the world, rapidly overtaking France and Britain as Europe was decimated in the early 1940s. From this perspective, the affirmation of work, promulgated by Aleksander Rodchenko, El Lissitzky and others in the USSR in the 1920s and the WPA and other organisations in the USA in the 1930s come to mirror each other through their participation in, and championship of, state-building projects. Artists became more or less directly employed by the State as part of a period of social (re)construction led by states in capital’s interests. If the affirmation of labour during this period understood itself as a form of opposition to the inhuman augmentation of capital’s powers, the post-war period apparently turned this equation upside down. Art became the expression of the democratic freedoms of triumphant capitalism (as seen with Abstract Expressionism). The problematic then became one of assessing how art did not only find integration in state-building projects, but how art came to legitimate processes of capital accumulation that themselves had vital geopolitical dimensions.

As an asset class, art may briefly store capital in its circuits through the upper echelons of value chains.
Yet, art is not capital or value, but, in this sense, only the form of appearance of capital before it moves back into cycles of investment. Art generally circulates via non-profit institutions and contexts, and where it interacts with profit-making institutions (dealers, auction-houses, collectors) these are rigorously defined by their separation from a wider capitalist marketplace. Were capital to be stored in this way (in the form of art), it would amount simply to a hoard and be exposed to intense devaluation or destruction of value at any point: “CAPITAL is at present the work sustaining ability. Money is not an economic value though. The two genuine economic values involve the connection between ability (creativity) and product. That explains the formula presenting the expanded concept of art: ART=CAPITAL.”

Beuys’ first sentence is entirely reversible: one might say that ‘work/labour’ is the capital sustaining ability (or force). Certain capitalists might see it the other way around. Certainly the artist appears as a sort of entrepreneur, she may even be a capitalist in private life (owning capitalisable assets, extracting rent, employing assistants), but in her art production she is an artist, or she is not. Art depends for its definition on being not-capital not-labour.

In more recent decades, artists and ‘art workers’ have sought to expand and complicate the range of models of labour politics, with groups such as W.A.G.E. taking their organising cues from the generalised atomisation and competitive habitus that reproduces precarity as norm in a largely privatised and non-state supported cultural field, particularly in the U.S. The intensifying predicament of debt-loaded austerity and political desires to realise some of the radical thematics of contemporary art practice also subtends moves to recognise the specificities of artistic practice as systemic ones, hence as working conditions with a class component.

But this is not thereby to forward the claim that art can be directly socially useful as an outcome of its position in networks of activism or its producers’ ethical orientation. This would be to mistake a tactical position for an ontological one: Art’s politics are embedded in its relationship to the conditions of its own production as art (social production as well as, or even instead of, empirical production) – what Adorno would call its ‘heteronomy’ which refers to social infrastructures that are not internal to the discourse and methods of art, but which radically shape its development. It cannot in this sense be fully autonomous. But from yet another side, how can we make sure this dialectical trajectory doesn’t stop there, or get frozen?

**Strike and the Negative**

Art strikes ‘succeed’ when they partake of the existing negativity of art, because art is a negation of the conditions and limits of socially useful labour. Labour strikes ‘succeed’ in limited terms when they extract concessions from an employer; they ‘succeed’ in an extensive sense when they overcome the logic of the limits within they were previously contained e.g. strikes spreading across sectors, from factory strike to rent strike. Where art strikes and labour strikes might converge is in the consistency of their non-labour, their purposeful activity: purposeful because purposeless in capitalist terms. During the strike, workers, beyond the intensely demanding exigencies necessary to keep the strike going, may direct their energies towards anything that isn’t value-producing work. In a sense these are the stringencies which apply to the artist’s metier everyday, but this ‘autonomy’ meets heteronomy in the strictly defined channels which govern the presentation of art. And both, find themselves in the position of un- or de-alienated labour in an alienated capitalist world.

**Reproductive Strike**

We’ve been working with many examples of art strikes. We have also conceptualised a number of broader strike genres we are interested in: ‘reproductive strike’.*

Labour becomes visible when it is withdrawn. The strike both negates and materializes labour – this is its politicizing function. There are many ways of drawing attention to the fact that forms of ‘nature’ are actually forms of ‘labour’, particularly when it comes to reproductive work (Wages for/Against Housework would be a good example). By making tertiary forms of ‘work’ visible, such as housework, sex work, cleaning etc., the political question about
the structural role of this work can be opened up, for gender and class politics. Marx talks about following the worker and the boss into the ‘hidden abode of production’ as where you really see what’s going on beneath the apparent equality of contracts and exchange of labour time for money in the market, this is where the domination and exploitation really unfold as an intrinsic part of capitalist production. Leopoldina Fortunati talks about the ‘arcane’ or the ‘hidden abode of reproduction’ which is even more hidden, because gendered, unmonetized and in the so-called private sphere, than the ‘hiddenness’ of the factory floor.

Reproductive labour, in the Marxist feminist narrative, is a category designed to re-cast, as work, the duties performed in private and coded as natural which enable the activities that go on in public and are coded as cultural, as a means to move the private into the public and to politicise the enforcement of the distinction in its structural aspect, i.e. as gendered and (if at first less emphasised in the analysis) racialised exploitation. However, reproductive work is not exempt from what Marx had in mind when he said 'it is one of the greatest misunderstandings to talk of free, human, social work, or work without private property. 'Work' is essentially the unfree, inhuman, unsocial activity, determined by private property and creating private property. The abolition of private property becomes a reality only when it is understood as the abolition of 'work'. Thus we have to be aware of the tendency in some current articulations of the feminist politics of reproductive labour to affirm reproductive labour in using it to critique 'productive' labour and / or art. This occurs both in autonomist Marxist feminism, which urges the ‘self-valorisation’ of reproductive work and the reproductive worker as a revolutionary subject, as well as to more anarchist positions, which sees reproductive work as an unqualified good from the communitarian perspective of withdrawing from capitalist social relations and sustaining communities ‘outside’ the market. This has been elaborated by critics as a question of ‘feminist workerism’. [123] Which in turn has been subject to critique from writers such as Miranda Joseph and Endnotes, who note that a politics of reproduction that takes as its objective the fostering or defence of sociality structured by a notion of community or commons, as against the bad abstractions of capital and the state, doesn’t go far enough. What leaves many articulations of the politics of reproduction open to these kinds of critiques is that they affirm reproductive work but otherwise. However, the space of this otherwise, unless it is filled by some kind of socially transformative process, affirms both work and gender as they are currently constituted, as if it could lead us out of the crisis if only it was ‘valued’ adequately.

Can we look to art for models of anti-reproductive labour and gender practices, a type of ‘anti-workerist feminism’? The 1970s saw a number of feminist art strategies which operated to de-naturalize both art and work from the standpoint of gender politics – emptying feminised domestic tasks of natural content to fill them with social content, in a way that also interrogated the normative aesthetic and institutional claims of art. Many of these allegorised the entropic qualities of reproductive labour, de-naturalizing it by making it look foolish, futile or indeed grandly absurd. One well-known example is Mierle Laderman Ukeles’ ‘Maintenance Art’. This performance of housework in the space of art upended art’s sovereignty and the gendered ‘separate spheres’ ideology it relied upon. While feminist politics named ‘life’ as work, feminist art challenged the transcendent universality of the (male) artistic subject by proposing housework as art. In her Maintenance Art Manifesto, Ukeles notes something that brings us back to what Claire Fontaine or Precarias Deriva call the ‘strike within the strike’. Can labour that socially exists as the unacknowledged maintenance activity that goes on beneath and after work stoppages and revolutionary rupture (‘the sourball of every revolution, who will clean up’) also be suspended, and how would we envision the intensity and complexity of the challenge to established social relations introduced by a break in the continuity of care that precisely makes both alienated labour and its refusal possible? This brings us back to Wilderson’s invocation of the shortcomings of a politics of refusal which is limited to the frame of the existent and its premises – revolution is fated to be reformist unless it also attacks the preconditions of its possibility: patriarchy, the (white) Human. Such negativity shows up in the current practice of the artist Cameron Rowland, whose installations consist of furniture and accessories often manufactured in local prisons, whose racialised population does not ‘own’ their labour and cannot freely sell it, unlike the glorified ‘non-labour’ of the
These objects are rented by him and are for rent in turn, eschewing both the status of a work and these objects’ imbrication in an art market.

These gestures de-naturalise reproductive labour from both sides, so to speak – they cut away its social embeddedness, showing it purely as an activity which can be de- and re-contextualized, and on the other, they highlight the social relationship within which this activity can either acquire or lose an aura of inevitability and necessity, with all the moral implications that can have. They are also instructive as gestures of negation which recognize the antagonism not just in these art practices but in the everyday life of gender and race in general. They evacuate the work done by women, of its necessity and naturalness, evacuate reproduction of its nobility. They instead point to the entropic quality of reproductive work, highlighting waste as a creative force, pointing to the destruction of representation, with Ukeles’ dust paintings making an analogy to Duchamp’s ‘dust breeding’. This kind of ‘making nothing’ uses housework and institutionally coerced labour displaced as art to signal the loss of art’s heroic signifying power. As Elena Gorfinkel writes in ‘The Body’s Failed Labor: Performance Work in Sexploitation Cinema’: ‘This work, this labor – deskilled, untrained, and easily replaceable – matters the most because it is the most pervasive, but also because it makes itself visible by virtue of its capacity and inclination, at any moment, to stop working, to not work.’ In fact, entropy can be one of the key modalities through which we experience an alienation from the manifest or unarguable ‘usefulness’ of reproductive labour: maintenance as ‘unworking’. [12]

We might here recall Chantal Akerman’s first film, Saute ma Ville, which directly collides domestic maintenance, absurdity and self-abolition: cleaning the kitchen is just a prelude to blowing up the apartment block. Blasting all the housewives out of their kitchens. How can we not only go from art as production to art as reproduction, but at the same time continue on to a truly speculative or communist re-evaluation of the world that produces these separate spheres, that refuses their terms?

Abolition

In Marx’s conception, labour and capital are two poles of a contradictory unity. The contradiction between wealth and its source express themselves as parts in a contradictory and antagonistic whole, with one positive pole (capital) and the other negative (proletariat): “Proletariat and wealth are opposites; as such they form a single whole. They are both creations of the world of private property. [...] The proletariat, on the contrary, is compelled as proletariat to abolish itself and thereby its opposite, private property, which determines its existence, and which makes it proletariat. It is the negative side of the antithesis, its restlessness within its very self, dissolved and self-dissolving private property.” [13]

Whilst Marxist parties and movements of the past have tended to emphasise the opposition evident in Marx’s formulation, instead, it is the changes in the way in which these two poles are bound to each other and how that contradiction moves that presently requires our precise attention. In terms of the question of abolition, we have to ask: does abolition imply the establishment of autonomy? Or the end of the perverse, but also generative, relationship between autonomy and heteronomy?

The art historian Daniel Spaulding has noted that the ‘realization and supersession of art’ as the Situationist International put it, ‘constitutes the threshold beyond which we still cannot pass when imagining the politics of art. It represents for us something like the final form of transitivity between political and artistic gestures’. [14] This ‘transitivity’ remains a limit towards which discussions in both politics and art circle intersect with suggestive formulations from related fields. Situationist supersession posed abolition as a progressive but negative project towards which art advanced. In some sense this relied on an avant-garde teleology still bound up with the project of the workers’ movement, from which both art and workers have become uncoupled.

Recent discussions of self-abolition have intensified, with relation to gender, race and class (less so art), which is enunciated in explicit resonance with the theory of self-abolition of the working class as the process of communisation. [15] Art can be translated into the terms of self-abolition, perhaps in the interests of
the realization of an autonomy for that practice, insofar as autonomy can be realized for society in general. But can autonomy stake any claim without being stuck in and against heteronomy, which self-abolition will be part of the process of eradicating? In other words, what does it mean to hold a revolutionary position without a revolutionary horizon – to project a certain praxis which requires that horizon as praxis in order to make sense as self-abolition. Or, perhaps, since it would be more accurate to emphasise that abolition does not abolish every mediation, it assumes the space for the invention of newer better fitting mediations, we might instead call this a process of revolutionary abolition self-autonomisation?

Looking back over the long 20th century the factory worker and the avant-garde artist appear as two poles of alienated labour fatally held back from self-abolition. If in the negationist gestures of avant-garde art, art and artists’ supersession of art was premised upon the revolutionary agency of a working class who might abolish both work and class completely neither seem possible in any programmatic sense anymore.

So we end up here with a further angle of conjunction between political autonomy and aesthetic autonomy. Workers seek to be free from capital just as capital dreams to be free from labour, but these cannot both be true, or both be realized. So these two dreams of autonomy are in conflict. And a third dream, that of art’s apparent freedom from labour, which from one perspective appears as the absolute commodity (as free from the mediation of labour as finance imagines itself to be) and on the other hand as the espousal of anti-work as the proper disposition of the artist: the non-affirmation of labour, commitment to ideas and ideals, and antagonism to material wealth.

This approach poses the question of how to work with the optic of negation in the space of art. That would involve both acknowledging modernism as a sequence of negations, particularly in the context of the historical avant-garde, and reckoning with the different structural and discursive situation of today. This witnesses the affirmative expansion that characterizes contemporary art, which knows few polarities or repudiations in its rhetoric or its operations, and both follows capital and emulates it in its tendency to subsume and convert ‘alien’ material into its own substance. ‘Negation’ can, however, still perform as a sort of baseline condition for art, insofar as art is a space of non-identity and de-functionalization of subjectivities, in the words of Claire Fontaine, and of use values. As Carl Andre said, ‘a thing is a hole in a thing it is not’, which is often revised to say ‘art is a hole in a thing it is not’. So insofar as art poses this structure of ‘weak negation’, even, as Daniel Spaulding observes, it must constantly rely on positivities to ground its negations (positivities being the social infrastructures that condition and support the existence of art, such as class society, the art market, labour, money, the belief in art itself), and insofar as it constantly negates that what it is not (through incorporation, juxtaposition, parataxis), always moving the parameters for both how it makes claims and how those claims are evaluated - can we think of what would constitute a so to speak ‘determinate negation’ for art?

The recent call to ‘remove’ and ‘destroy’ a painting from the 2017 Whitney Biennial acts against a concrete instance of art by enacting a refusal of its claim to universality – it moves against the putative scope for a prominent museum to preside over the memorialising of ‘Black pain’ as national tragedy – countering that this universality has ‘been founded on the constraint of others’ and noting the painter’s participation in this erasure through operative transparency. Over the transparency of white freedom a black bilderverbot is implied and it is not surprising that arguments against the legitimacy of such a ban draw their oppositional strength from claims for the universality of free speech on principle – rather than the concrete specificity of the inequalities the ban addresses – or by challenging the apparent weakness of a letter which sought redress by directing its demands towards the institution’s curatorial team or by claiming the letter distracted from work by black artists in the show and calling instead for a more affirmative approach to the application of race politics in art. Such a determinate negation may, paradoxically, take the shape of a making visible or drawing connections where they are hidden - not to moralize what is seen and known over the hidden, but to express how ways of seeing are themselves dependent on what is structurally made invisible. This is the non-identity between art’s particularity and its universality, art as thought and practice and its culturalisation as a powerful contradiction.
In our contemporary scene it is more likely a workless surplus humanity who might meaningfully unify to abolish both art and labour from outside rather than from within poles of either art-non-art or capital-labour. This spectre of an involuntary abolition of art or work, is in a certain sense prefigured in Giorgio Agamben’s scattered accounts of ‘desouevrement’, unworking, or ‘inoperativity’. The ‘destitution of work’ is a possibility that arises in modern art, establishing the indeterminacy of life and work as a goal, but never actually achieving this. Therefore Agamben opposes Marx, who saw self-consciousness of work as the distinctive division between human and animal, and a concept which allowed humanity to reconstruct its own dependencies and reproduction, thus transforming itself and nature, potentially in harmony. Instead Agamben seeks an exit from the thorough penetration of utilitarianism and work as ‘the destiny of mankind’ by emphasising the division of potential and act in language, but maintaining a trace of their potential unity. In this sense any naturalisation of reproduction or production is negated in favour of an inoperative potential open to new uses and possibilities.

What comes to mind here also is a distinction we have been making for some time between ‘use value’ and ‘use’. Peter Osborne notes in a recent lecture that use value is a vague and abstractly negative counter to exchange value, because all it stands for is ‘some’ quality, a qualitative dimension, as opposed to the exact quantification of exchange. He then called on the concept of ‘use’ as having more potential to escape this weak negativity of ‘use value’, to the extent that it could reflect and antagonise the social and historical content of ‘use value’ and reveal it as alienated from ‘authentic experience’ as it is dependent, conceptually and empirically, on exchange. Thus it is not enough, perhaps, for art to negate use values that belong to a society dominated by the production of profit, that is, by the capitalist form of value, for art to be useless in the classical sense, to be autonomous, thus, in a simply residual, factual sense that it is exceptional in its mode of production – an aberration itself linked to histories and actualities of global colonialism and plunder-funded welfare states. Rather, it may be an issue of materialising uses not currently recognised as such or re-functionalisations of capitalist material and relations as much as their de-functionalisation.

APPENDIX

Year of Women Strike
On October 24 1975 (the UN-designated International Year of Women), 90% of Iceland’s women refused to work, cook or look after children (by 2005, women still only earn about 64.15% of men’s wages in Iceland).

Recent Womens’ Strikes
On October 3, 2016 women gathered in 90 Polish cities to protest a national abortion ban. Whilst the ‘Black Monday’ protests sought to build on the success of the 1975 Icelandic women’s strike, in Poland the normal running of business was affected only very marginally, but the protest did apparently steer the course towards the ban being voted down in parliament. With the unprecedented menace of Trump’s election and the turbulent political climate in the United States leading to a wave of feminist organizing, a Women’s Strike was called there but unfolded worldwide on March 8, 2017, (International Women’s Day, originally International Working Women’s Day when it was first organised by the U.S. Socialist Party in 1909).

Sex Strike
In Aristophanes’ Lysistrata a sex strike is initiated by the women of Athens in order to compel the ‘citizens’, men, to vote against continuing a war. As above, the strike serves to make visible previously invisible forms of compulsion, labour and dependence. Relations are turned on their head, and the social fabric unstitched in order for us to see the truth from another perspective.

LYSISTRATA:
There are a lot of things about us women That saddens me, considering how men
See us as rascals.

CALONICE:
As indeed we are!
Based on Aristophanes’ play, something along these lines, a sex-strike, is seen in Spike Lee’s recent film Chi-Raq. Though this is a pantomime, a form of carnival after which gender relations return very quickly to their norms. Norms which elide class as much as they do sexualities excluded from the black heterosexuality Lee’s films caricature.

Birth Strike
Earlier in last century, IWW activist Elizabeth Gurley-Flynn conceptualised the strike, as one of a myriad of possible forms of ‘sabotage’ -- theorised as the ‘conscious withdrawal of workers’ efficiency’. Extending the IWW’s drive to create ‘one big union’ Gurley-Flynn attempted to join together both sides of workers power, to go too fast and diminish quality, to go slow and diminish quantity. To break the rules and break the machines and tools of labour, or to adhere too closely to the rules. To unite the house-bound reproductive labour of women and that of women and male workers in the factories, she advocated a kind of birth-strike: ‘to limit the supply of producers […] to limit the supply of workers on the market’.

Human Strike
Artist collective Claire Fontaine have formulated the idea of the ‘human strike’ as a way of addressing the role of production of subjectivity in the ‘withdrawal of efficiency’ represented by the strike. The ‘strike within the strike’ is a way to consider the complexities of negation for those who are not counted as being at work, whose work is the invisible one of reproducing social relations. This idea cuts to the depth of negation that a general strike would need to reach if it is to generate forms of life which are not simply suspending work for capital as an economic formation, but the work of capital as a social relation. It thus engages the very construction of the self as ‘productive’ for capitalism. Drawing on examples of critical negation and self-negation within political currents and the historical avant-garde they propose jamming and deconstructing the self as site of capitalist discipline – a veritable human strike.

REFERENCES

[1] Some recent theoretical tendencies have sought to criticise art’s tendency to incorporate extra-aesthetic material. In some of these accounts, contemporary art has become too indeterminate, that is, normatively opposed to any statements or commitments and given solely to ‘asking questions’ and ‘keeping things open’. Yet the suggestion that art could overcome this attitude through ‘reason’ simply seeks to escape the mediations and the subjectivity which distinguishes art from more instrumental operations. The dynamic of incorporation and production of non-meaning in art cannot simply be reversed by affirming its opposite, as if art could become the production of ‘factual’ statements about the world. Art attacks and ‘gnaws at’ its own concept. Nonetheless, enacting ‘abolition’ in art can never entirely anul meaning’s reemergence, or delayed appearance within an artwork. So-called ‘auto-destructive art was an explicit provocation to a society by irrational reason, that is, the ‘dialectic of enlightenment’ that shows progress as backing into barbarism as it loses sight of the social and ethical ends of technoscientific means. The reverse, by which art would become rational implies an affirmative art which would simply capitulate to what is, a loss of art’s own critical and negative modes of navigation and internal differentiation. On the ‘provocation of realism’ to art see Suhail Malik, “Reason to Destroy Contemporary Art”, Spike Art 37, http://www.spikeartmagazine.com/en/articles/reason-destroy-contemporary-art. For an account which considers negativity as a core part of the concept of art see Theodor W. Adorno, “Art and the Arts”, in Adorno, Theodor W. Adorno, Can One Live After Auschwitz? (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003.),385-386.

[2] Of course counter-tendencies can be recovered from each historic pole of these phases. Kasimir Malevich’s ‘Laziness as the Truth of Mankind’ sought to push the logic of productivism (i.e. overproduction) towards an edenic workless future supportive of the truly rational (i.e. not rationalised) many-sided development of humankind’s senses and abilities. ‘Work has to be cursed’. On the other hand myriad tendencies in post-conceptual art seek to affirm the use value of artistic labour (e.g. Joseph Beuys) or make art ‘truly useful’ (e.g. Arte Util), but need and use contradict one another in capitalism, their fulfillment is dependent upon the
extension and hypostatisation of want and privation. Which is to say, in order to eat, one must work, so any satisfaction is to be obtained only through the intense dissatisfaction involved in objectifying one’s own labour for the sake of an other’s need for profit. Strictly speaking, need and use as effective categories of social action are irrelevant in a capitalist society - but, ideologically, they are very powerful as incentives to work and as legitimations of the system of production. Hence the double-sided nature of value - use and exchange. In terms of art, then, Beuys’ gesture claims a position for art as ‘useful’, but in fact this gesture can only be an attack on the limited category of utility in the society within which he made it. Structurally artists do not occupy a position with the authority to designate what is useful or not. In a society based on production for value, this is determined ahead of and over them by a system of production which itself produces and authorises needs and uses, and this in turn is secured by a system of law and property.

[3] ‘They [socialists such as the International Socialist Organisation] would say, ‘the capitalist as a category has to be destroyed’. What freaks them out about an analysis of anti-Blackness is that this applies to the category of the Human, which means that they have to be destroyed regardless of their performance, or of their morality, and that they occupy a place of power that is completely unethical, regardless of what they do. And they’re not going to do that. Because what are they trying to do? They’re trying to build a better world. What are we trying to do? We’re trying to destroy the world. Two irreconcilable projects.’ Frank Wilderson III, “We’re Trying to Destroy the World”, http://ill-will-editions.tumblr.com/post/103584583009/were-trying-to-destroy-the-world

[4] The call was first issued by Hannah Black on Facebook in March 2017, and garnered a predictable amount of excited commentary on social, print and even mainstream media, getting heatedly denounced by Whoopi Goldberg on ABC’s daytime chat show, The View. Many commentators struck an unpleasantly nationalist note, querying Black’s motives in intervening in a debate on U.S. racism as a British woman, as well as more prurient speculations on her background. A consistent tendency of this coverage was that it was sensationalist and responded to the call in a reified manner, which is to say, as a publicity-seeking gesture and not to its speculative and performative elements of solidarity with historical and current black freedom struggles, in and out of the art institution, as well as to the making of an ‘impossible demand’. Unfortunately, some of the same kind of response could be observed on the left, with libertarian communist art journal Cured Quail publishing a spoof of the call whose general tone was resolutely oblivious to these dynamics, defending a post-situ stance that viewed the whole incident as a culture industry sideshow with no critical traction. Interestingly, the purity of the avant-garde critique was aided with a dank visual in the spirit of ‘alt-lite takes on ‘identity politics’.


[8] This separation, however normative and established, echoes the relation between the ‘de-functionalized’ underpinnings of the autonomy of art and the rest of social production insofar as art markets function as the cypher of the most unregulated, ‘affective’ imaginable form of capitalist exchange, thus acting as a mirror image to the autonomy of finance. Their lack of regulation in turn makes them highly attractive for prosaic financial malfeasances such as money laundering. See Suhail Malik and Andrea Phillips, “Tainted Love: Art’s Ethos and Capitalization”, Malik, Suhail and Phillips, Andrea. (2012). In ed. Maria Lind & Olav Velthuis, Contemporary Art and its Commercial Markets, (Berlin and New York: Sternberg Press, 2012). Also Katya Kazakina, “An Auction House Learns the Art of Shadow
Banking”,


[10] There is also great ambiguity across these debates about what ‘reproduction’ actually refers to - is it unwaged domestic maintenance and ‘care work’ or is it also paid employment, whether in the home or in state institutions such as healthcare and education; and what about ‘services’ in the market? The vocabulary of ‘affect’, ‘care’ and ‘work’ is where Marxist categories and identity politics find rich but also potentially or actually problematic overlaps. See the Viewpoint magazine debate on Cinzia Arruzza’s work:
https://viewpointmag.com/2015/05/04/gender-and-capitalism-debating-cinzia-arruzzas-remarks-on-gender

[11] Our questions about the diversity of labour conditions in US prisons were initially raised by some of the plot points in the hit TV show Orange is the New Black. Not all US prison labour is compulsory, but this does constitute one of the most highly restricted and disciplinary and therefore ‘non-free’ labour markets:

[12] Reproductive work is entropic, it produces nothing: ‘‘After a day’s work, no matter how tiring, the housewife has produced no tangible object-except, perhaps, dinner; and that will disappear in less than half the time it took to prepare.’ See Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, “The Manufacture of Housework,” Socialist Revolution 5, no. 4 (1975), A ‘woman’s work is never done’, etc. (and indeed it can be offered that all ‘socially necessary labour’, wherever it is performed, waged or no, shares this entropic quality as a hallmark of the experience of alienated labour). See Endnotes, “The Logic of Gender” for reflections on the ‘non-necessity’ of reproductive work, and its persistence as the ‘abject’ that sticks to women even when ostensibly fully integrated into capitalist employment markets. https://endnotes.org.uk/issues/3/en/endnotes-the-logic-of-gender


http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/value-form-and-avant-garde

[15] Some notable examples would include, P. Valentine, “The Gender Rift in Communisation”,

[16] Adorno’s assertion that in the (eliminative) modernist tradition ‘each artwork is the mortal enemy of the other’ seems to require some revision here. Labour competition and the informalisation of labour impinges ever more on the production of art, but does the other dialectical unity still hold


[18] Originally an interactive computer game, a web series, Benjamin Nuel’s work, *Hotel*, eventually became a feature length film first screened on TV: Arte, mai 2014. The work takes a typical gaming scenario and resituates the characters in a position of desouvrement, de-activation or unworking. ‘Peace now reigns between the Terrorists and Policemen who have escaped from a video game and have now retired to the country, to a strange hotel guarded by a chicken. Unused to being idle, they struggle with boredom, they play games, chat and philosophize - while the world around them is slowly crumbling...’ Through recursion, glitches, entropy and threatening black abstraction the algorithmic abstraction of an increasingly synthetic world is brought into alignment with the refuse (of) personas left in the wake of deactivated, or redundant, social roles. We are left to ponder the space that nothing opens up. It is a space of critical boredom, a world picture of social things and persons without use or determination. Benjamin Nuel, *Hotel* (trailer), 2012, https://vimeo.com/38380296

[19] “Contemplation and inoperativity are, in this sense, the metaphysical operators of anthropogenesis, which, freeing the living being from every biological or social destiny and from every predetermined task, renders it open for that particular absence of work that we are accustomed to calling “politics” and “art.” Politics and art are neither tasks nor simply “works”: they name, rather, the dimension in which the linguistic and corporeal, material and immaterial, biological and social operations are made inoperative and contemplated as such.”, Giorgio Agamben, “Elements for a Theory of Destituent Power”, (translated by Stephanie Wakefield), Essay based on a lecture given in Central France 1 in the summer of 2013, 17-18.