



Art Workers Coalition, *Art Workers Won't Kiss Ass*, performance, 1969

# ART AFTER WORK

*By Victoria Campbell*

The glamour of the artist's life turned out to be just another con. For many who were fooled, it started to look like they were left with only two options. Either be a content piggy working gigs in the creative economy, or be a creative occupier protesting for a better world. But everyone knows that ideological struggles are the only things that pay worse than creative gigs. So, how did critique manage to turn into protest, whose participants became the unwitting guests of honour in institutional spaces – indoors and well heated, though no longer public.

Contemporary art has no history, but it does have its fair share of retrospectives. In Drake's video for "Hotline Bling", the camera cuts between an off-shore call center and an off-label, post-minimalist, museum-scale art light installation. The camera pans across a lineup of service workers – the Global South has replaced the suburbs as the world's chief consumer class – before framing the Canadian rapper from the inside of this knock-off James Turrell. Light and Space art offered a totalising production of experience across a totalising economy of meaning; but rap music has been doing that to language for a long time. The conjuncture of the two – rap and light art – makes for a kind of hypespiral, where time is cycled to the cellphone ring and the virtual reproduction of labour in the age of "You should just be yourself / Right now, you're someone else." Drake's outfits shift from sportscore to normcore, complete with corded sweater subtly reminiscent of Eckhaus Latta's autism-chic season line. Here, the representational horizons of race and class shift accordingly: "And I know when that hotline bling / That can only mean one thing." Beneath the patriarchal overtones of Drake's low-key, diasporic ditty is a lament for a missing worker: wherever she is, she's no longer on call.

The 2000s saw the effects of the retrospective format upon a class of institutionally groomed young artists whose claim to history was expected by mid-career. In contrast, today the virtual platform mediates the production of visibility in a historical now. Today's artists and workers are cool and lean like postindustrial, postminimal people should be. "The rhythms of print media defined the operations of the dealer-critic system, [but] the rapid feedback of art trends today is actually eliminating the lag time necessary for the artist to constitute herself as an artistic subject." This, according to Michael Sanchez in 2011, though he adds that without temporal-linguistic gaps, there can in fact be no subject.

Contemporary art has no history because it is itself a platform: a coercive grammar, perpetually ready to deliver. Interchangeability and equivalence are the social algorithm of capital; but value – meaning – is produced as a system of differences. As I write this, I'm traveling between New York and my hometown, a diverse Southwestern metropolis with four military bases and half

that many museums. Unclear to me is what even constitutes artistic activity anymore; unclear as to whatever market I'm trying to disrupt. The distinction is subtle until the muralist-slash-tattoo-artist-slash-performer hands me a business card. In this part of the state, business cards, websites, and biographies are required for non-white and working-class creative types in order to prove they're not criminals.

I'm white and female and can afford to be an amateur. The cultural gap between where I come from and where I am now expands in proportion to my class aspirations. Dad wants to know why I can't find a way to sell my art on the internet. "For the same reason I don't sell sex on the internet" feels like the only appropriate response.

Back in New York, I'm living collectively and supporting myself via loose networks of solidarity, informal patronage, casual gig slinging, experimental software development, art criticism, and the occasional boyfriend. It's all very avant-garde, in the sense that it's doomed. "As workers, we are to be liberated from the constraints of a permanent career, given the opportunity to make our own way," writes Nick Srnicek in *Platform Capitalism* (2016). It's an idea that echoes the dreamy optimism of an experimental practice on the grounds of capitalism's extension over the whole of life, disintegrating those very boundaries it had once depended on; namely, that between productive work and unproductive (or reproductive) labour. Art into life, in other words. The tacit understanding between my family and me is a statistical one: I moved to the East Coast in 2010 to become an artist and ended up an art worker instead. What actual labour this entails is anyone's guess.

The opening shot of the Bruce High Quality Foundation's work of pedagogical cinema *Art History with Labor* (2012) is of Slavoj Žižek at Zuccotti Park looking slightly more dishevelled than Bernie Sanders after the 2016 election. "We are all losers" – he feeds this line into the People's Mic – "but the true losers are down there on Wall Street!" The pithy comment is then reblogged, retweeted, repeated: a scene now so canonical that it's obfuscated my memory of the actual event. But so goes art history, too. The BHQF's film is a kind of feature-length syllabus that reads like an art worker's manifesto – a didactic stream of consciousness that includes Mad Men, Nixon, and the Works Progress

Administration (WPA) followed by shots of the Obama campaign and Chris Burden digging his own grave. From watching the television coverage of Makode Linde's *Painful Cake*, one gets a sense of how the ruling class uses culture to mediate power. The 95 chapters of the forty-odd-minute-long film are a direct reference to Martin Luther's argument against the purchase and sale of indulgences by the Catholic church.

*Art History with Labor* is one of the few pedagogical artefacts that remains from the BHQF's attempt to critique contemporary art on the grounds of its reproduction, which included, from 2009 to 2015, the zero-tuition university BHQFU. At the time, I was an art-school dropout with the mindset that to have no future meant there'd be nothing to pay off. This sentiment would echo into the debtor's suffrage that occurred in the wake of Occupy Wall Street, largely spearheaded by American art students: MFAs at the USC graduate school dropped out en masse, as did many during the efforts to sustain free tuition at the Cooper Union. When the production of art requires the reproduction of artists, it makes sense to place the political, economic antagonism within the ideological assembly line of the school: a factory. Artists are both workers and products of high-income economies. The pedagogical turn at the end of the 2000s demonstrated that the art institution, like the post-Fordist economy that informs them, didn't so much localise a certain form of value production as spatialise the reproduction of its social base.

Ten year later, there is no longer any work. There are just activities, and the possibility that value can be extracted from them across the content platform that is the historical now. The early 2010s saw a rush to baptise the emerging decade with terms like "post-internet" or "post-89." These theoretical frameworks, built beneath official discourses – many of which focused on new strategies of representation made possible by web 2.0 – were a roving political argument targeting the work of art on the grounds of its ideological, as opposed to technological, modes of reproduction. Art can do anything, be anything, and work everywhere, all the while leaving open and ambiguous the messy question of who's actually making it. *Making it* – does one ever "make" art any more than one "makes" money? And don't both require a kind of misrecognition of its very forms of production?

Those of us who *made it* burnt out with blue chips on their shoulders. Those who didn't went to grad school, and the rest of us just worked it as best we could. We took art-handling jobs and internships and gigs as temporary as the rideshares we used to get to them. It's the work of art in the age of contemporary reproduction, and if it comes off as pure aura, it's because aura is the only thing anybody can still capitalise on.

"We all met up in the lobby of the Sony Building," artist and organiser William Powhida recalls, "then we'd head to White Horse Tavern to drink and cry." A drawback to working in the attention economy is that it zaps your memory. So I've taken to doing phone interviews from the back seat of Ubers. Still, a lot gets lost in the supposed progress of history: "What we noticed," Powhida continues, "was that nobody had any experience. The last time artists organised as a working class was in the 1980s."

The relationship between artists and the working class has always been a troubled one. I'm thinking about Carl Andre's insistence on dressing like a car mechanic in the early days of the Art Workers Coalition, or Robert Morris's attempt to organise actual bricklayers. The latter project proved disastrous when the construction workers union, during an AWC demonstration at the Met, revealed their pro-war sentiments: a huge no-no in an art world making serious efforts to shift the public perception of the Vietnam war. This desire to include workers in the political demands of artists forced an important contradiction regarding art's position in relation to capital: artists could be workers, but workers couldn't, necessarily, be artists. The AWC had ties to both the anti-war movement, and also remembered the WPA state-sponsorship to artists for public works. But this was high conceptualism and the immaterialisation of both finance capital and the art object. Nobody was going to line up to paint a community mural if you paid them.

The art-activist project of the 70s was thus a struggle for economic power and institutional leverage, but it was also the political negotiation of art in the context of radical shifts in labour and society. So was the case for 2011, which saw the widespread adoption of the iPhone. The strategic expertise of Occupy lay mostly in technical knowledge of digital media platforms, and strategies of

civil resistance, but the absence of a strong union presence at Zuccotti Park was noted early on. We knew how to block traffic, not how to organise a strike. We knew how to work, but we didn't know how to politicise it. The nostalgia is real: Beneath Mark di Suvero's *Joie de Vivre* (1998) – a public sculpture that flanks the southeast corner of Zuccotti Park – one could find institutional powerhouses such as Nato Thompson (then head of Creative Time) holding court alongside New York City street performers. The Yes Men provided open access to NYU's Performance Studies department, Martha Rosler haunted the periphery of urban transformation with little pretence, and everybody made cardboard signs. The Arts & Labor sub-working group that emerged underneath the di Suvero eventually moved to the Sony Building: a wild postmodern skyscraper on Madison Ave. Working group sessions often lasted hours; one could expect rage, tears, and beers.

Members of the taxi workers alliance, domestic workers, interns, adjunct faculty members, graffiti artists: the question we asked of arts and labour wasn't just one of "what counts as art, what counts as work," but "what counts as historical alliance between sectors of society that differ ideologically yet resemble one another structurally?" Unlike high profile street protests, labour organising isn't sexy. You don't see the atrium of the Whitney Museum in the name of a raise as you would in the name of those impacted by ideological oppression. This is further complicated by the dissociation of politics from economic relations.

In 2009, A.K. Burns posed the question during a public forum of what it would look like for non-profit institutions to compensate artists as they would their custodians, or any other worker the institution pays. That is, to pay artists in something other than exposure. The gesture did more than just raise awareness around compensation practices in an art world still fat off the 90s institutional boom. Arts & Labor stopped meeting in 2014, but many splintered off into other groups such as Decolonize this Place and Occupy Museums, at which point the fact of addressing cultural production from the standpoint of labour got a lot more difficult. The displacement of the political impact of wage-labour relations away from the developed world is often played out on the stage of the art institution as a struggle for the displacement of the canon. Since

when does ideological struggle get you paid? This might be a question for the next wave.

The relative "success" of the Movement of the Squares was thanks in part to a general social hemorrhaging and availability of surplus time; or, some level of occupational flexibility on the part of the student generations. In an open letter released by the arts labour organisation W.A.G.E a year prior to Occupy, the artist is positioned as "a contracted subcontractor, a self-employed employer, and ... often unemployed". This would characterise the actual social demographic of the grassroots movement, which was comprised of those who had the time to contribute to social organising and those who could profit symbolically from it. By the next year, Occupy had earned its own retrospective, or at least a spot on the biennial circuit: protesters contributed, for free, to the 7th Berlin Biennale. The presence of artists at Occupy is detailed by Yates McKee in his 2016 book *Strike Art: Contemporary Art and the Post-Occupy Condition*, in which the creative occupier is credited with generating the political representations that emerged in the movement's wake. But everyone in the movement was a creative, just as in capitalism: business as usual needs to get a little unusual in order to commercialise something new.

It's only in hindsight that I can see the spatial hegemony of the corporate plaza in terms of the spatial hegemony of the museum complex: the only difference is that the latter includes an admission fee. It wasn't until friends started recalling the sheer stamina required to make it through organising meetings that the open-air corporate plazas claimed by Occupiers came back into view. Once held across the city at locations such as the Sony – urban buildings and plazas zoned as "Privately Owned Public Space", or POPS. Today, when we're expected to learn on the job and socialise at the museum, there's little difference between the art worker, the art audience, and the content that exists between them. The ontology of the new or newly renovated museum, such as the Whitney Museum or the soon-to-be-completed Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, is now also *privately owned public space*.

If the first half of the decade was all bodies in space – something messy, something monumental, something that gave zero fucks about what the presumed margins were of the institution, or of

society – I remember the second half as all margins. The conversation in 2011 positioned the artist as a service provider but not as a social worker; and after 2015, the ideological struggle in the art/activist trajectory replaced the economic one. Interesting that museum copy plays along – these days it's the institution that's the main service

provider. The occupation of privately owned public space is no longer necessary, as the museum now situates itself as the primary point of access for all social engagement.

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