

## **Meeting Halfway**

by Joanna Spitzner

for *“The Manufacture of Ultramarine Blue,”*  
a project by Beck Shaw at Grizedale Arts, UK.

In Walter Benjamin’s well known essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” he writes that the technical reproduction enables the original “to meet the beholder halfway.” A work can be experienced in a person’s living room rather than a cathedral, within one’s own comfortable settings. It is a move from an institutional space (the church, the state, History) into a domestic space, and often a space of leisure. The reproductions Benjamin refers to are those used in leisure: the phonograph (music), the photograph (family, art, travel), the postcard (tourism).

The shift from authority at a distance to empowerment at the local, well as “meeting halfway” is an important aspect of “The Manufacture of Ultramarine Blue.” The halfway can suggest something not quite full as well as an inbetweenness among parts (a compromise), and both of these aspects are enacted through the various processes and relationships formed in this work. In engaging with the memories of the past, as sense of loss, and perhaps diminishment, enters the project. Through creating spaces of circulation and juxtapositions, critical relationships are formed among parts. The factory site itself is indicative of this: what was a site of material production is now the site of experiential production.

The withdrawal of the Recketts Colours factory from this community marks a point of loss economically, loss of a focal point of shared experience, and of material production in working life. These experiences re-emerge in the cycle of production and reproduction developed by Becky Shaw in collaboration with its participants. The losses are not compensated for or regained in recreation, but remain a fact. “The Manufacture of Ultramarine Blue” engages in diminishment not by fixing symbols, but rather by temporalizing representations and creating inbetweens. The fact that an economic base and productive experience has withdrawn is its most basic fact. In its place, a different

economy appears. The community that forms in these moments is not a conventional class-based one, in which people identify in relation to productive/capitalist force, but one that exists in various states of negotiation.

The production diagram for this project aligns the steps of this new process with those of the manufacture of pigment. Each process is placed next to one another; they stand in relation to one another. This strategy of placing next to one another, being with another, occurs throughout this project. It creates an inbetween space, where parts are respected yet also complicated by their proximity to an other. The new manufacture mimics a capitalist form of production, complicating it through the experiences of late (post-industrial) capitalism, while honoring the material experiences of labor.

What has been created is an economy: the management of local resources, the regulation of parts or functions to an organic whole, production and distribution. The capital within this economy is not money, but socialness.

The Recketts factory ran in a Taylorist fashion: it operated on a break down of each labor process into component motions (the hand, bodies, movement, wet/ dry, heat/cool) and into fragmented work tasks. The end product itself extended this compartmentalization externally as well because the manufactured blue was ultimately a component of something else—the “blue” was shipped to other factories to become a quality of another object.

Marx wrote of history rooted in the material production of life itself, of social relations based in material production—that forms of consciousness arose from this experience. Once material needs are met, other needs, such a family, can be turned to. Central to his writings is the concept of alienation: a worker is alienated from the goods he produces. Through his labor, natural resources become commodities and his own labor, which is objectified, becomes external to himself. Labor becomes something that can be exchanged, like any other commodity, and the activity of labor loses its sense of individual worth.

It would seem that leisure is the space for worthwhile activity. “Leisure is a state of being in which activity is performed for its own sake or at its own end” (de Grazi,15). This would suggest it is separate from work, where we perform activities for others. But leisure is related to work— at a basic level, it defined by being what we do when we are not working. Leisure it not merely “free time,” although the sense of freedom is important to it: what one does with one’s leisure time is of one’s own choice. Not all of our time away from work is spent in leisure, we run errands in our free time or do the wash, and these wouldn’t be considered leisure. Leisure is an activity, but unlike work, it is not for the production of goods to be sold, but for the production of self and the production of experiences of choice.

Leisure is, ultimately, something we do for ourselves—for self-betterment; whether it is to “grow” or simply recover a sense of self after time spent at work. For Aristotle, leisure was contrasted to war—it existed in the realm of peace and was the space of contemplation, whereas now leisure is mostly contrasted to work. War and work are both things done for others, by call of a state or corporation. Leisure, in contrast, is what one does when not called by others. Leisure is those activities we pursue for ourselves, for our pleasure. It seems that the state and work provides a stronger model for community in its command to be with others, whereas leisure is self-centered. But perhaps it is the choice in leisure that allows a different sense of community—the connection to self to others not through forced commonalities, but choice of association.

What complicates this is that there is a leisure industry, our choice of activities is often highly commodified. The regulation of time and tasks expanded into public life through such things as the creation of state holidays as well as the recognition by capitalists for the need for leisure. Henry Ford understood the advantage of providing his workers with leisure time (which in the past was thought of a “lost time”), which improved morale and productivity, but also increased consumption, as workers had more time to address new needs:

"The economic value of leisure has not found its way into the thought of industrial leaders to any great extent. . . . With the decrease of the length of the working-day in the United States an increase of production has come, because better methods of disposing of men's time have been accompanied by better methods of disposing of their energy. And thus one good thing has brought on another."

Traveling, shopping, seeing a movie, these are tied to large economies, as Ford predicted would occur because of increased needs due to more leisure time. It also becomes an economic base when manufacturing isn't present. In the hierarchy of needs, leisure arises after material needs, and in late capitalism, those geographic areas which in the past were highly productive in manufacture have had to turn to the manufacture of experiences as an economic base.

The spaces of leisure in which "The Manufacture of Blue" is enacted reflects this shift. It begins in the car boot sale, a very local form of exchange, where individual merchants are gathered together in a space for leisurely consumption. The collection of all blue objects within a specific market creates a rupture with that market. They are assembled and displayed, and at the moment their value increases due to its display, its market value becomes obsolete when they are withdrawn from the marketplace. (Perhaps just as the value of the factory is recognized in its moment of leaving.)

The production of art is even trickier—it is a leisure activity Aristotle would approve of, one of spiritual and creative self-betterment and contemplation. There is an art market, and so art is also commodified, but it has always had an uneasy relationship to value. Art has a certain material uselessness which can be a source of another value, not in market terms but because of its ability to escape the market, to be outside of it and unobjectifiable. There are different forms that art takes in this project: the project itself, which seems uncommodifiable—there is no thing to be bought or sold—, and the still life paintings created by local artist, which are more commodifiable. The creation of a jigsaw puzzle of an image of paintings is the most commodifiable form. It is mass produced, and directly re-introduced into the local market. Art slips in and out of market value, and can be an inbetween space.

The still life itself has an interesting relationship to capitalism. This genre's first appearance in the Netherlands coincided with the rise of the new merchant, middle class. A common understanding of them is connected to this class' display of material wealth, love of objects, and domestic life. Still life painting not only turned away from religious and historical painting, but also the practice of commissions. Artist painted still lifes first and then sold them, rather than be hired first to create a painting. The patron bought the painting after the fact of its creation. This form of painting displayed local space—that of the interior, up close, as well as the technical virtuosity of the artist. It works within the spaces of leisure, not called by the state or other institutions, but created by an individual for the domestic pleasure and choice of another individual.

Shaw has reversed some of this. She has essentially commissioned the still-lifes from those artists willing to participate. The quantity of paintings produced is also important here. It is the relationship of many representations of these objects, not the singularity of them that gains force. The excessiveness literally intensifies the sensing of art. Jean-Luc Nancy has written:

“art” constantly replays that non-religious, non-political and also non-social and non-psychological “something” which has to do with sense and the sharing of sense: I mean “sense” beyond linguistic signification, in a sharing/division which is also that of the senses (hearing, sight, etc.) and insofar that these senses make up the “with”: nearness and distance. Hearing, seeing, touching oneself, letting oneself be heard, seen, touched, smelled, sensed: art as the intensification of “sensing,” as the technique—the multiple technique—of a letting-oneself-sense-between-us-the-passage-of-a-sense-between-us-and-the-world...” (Nancy, 17)

For Nancy, sensing occurs as a sense of touch—things brought together in a way which implies a gap (distance) as well as nearness. Throughout this project, elements are placed near one another, in contiguity. Sharing occurs within an edge or boundary within the gap of touching.

The exhibition of these painting in the former factory site, now a hotel and spa brings to the site wholes that didn't exist in fragmented manufacture, where objects where

produced elsewhere. For the former workers who became judges for the artwork, they are presented with the intensified fruits of their former labor. The exteriority experienced when working is now their subjective judgment. Instead of value created through external relations, they are the arbitrators of it.

After this judgment, selected still lifes were placed in spaces of the body at rest and activity. The body in labor has disappeared, but reemerges as the skilled hand and the fit muscles worked out in the pool or gym. These roles of the body, not used for material production intensify one another; it is the body in activity for itself.

Finally, an image of the paintings, hung salon-style, is reproduced as jigsaw, another object of leisure and most straightforwardly a reproduction. It is the past in diminishment, including its own, layered past of its creation (from blue to object to still life to reproduction). Benjamin defined aura as “the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be.” The aura of the factory has been thoroughly weakened, its reproduction put into circulation. It is a trace of itself, and indicator of something that happened yet doesn’t identify its agents.

The structure of the economy in “The Manufacture of Ultramarine Blue” produces possibilities for bringing people together. In a traditional concept of community, what is common is foremost—a place, shared values, and shared experiences. It is a source of identification, sameness, and exclusivity. There was a community of workers, who shared the same experience of labor. It may have been shaped, in some ways, in opposition to the difficult experiences of the factory: the repetition, exposure to heat, sulphur gas, etc.. And this experience is now part of the past of this community, occupying memory.

Industrial capitalism is formed around symbolic values and substitutions: one thing is exchanged for another in a chain of substitutions. It is a metaphorical system, where equivalencies are made through the medium of money. The communities of the past are also formed metaphorically, based on a system of the similar, and gathered around symbols (symbolic power), such as the flag or the cross, external callings and even the

force of law. When this calling has been withdrawn, what forms of social experience are available?

“...association” already appeared as a bond emerging after the fact, whereas the “common” evoked a primary reality, a sharing which is given with being itself. But the question arose with this word ( and let’s say, with communism) was this: what does this sharing of being, given in being, consist of when it is no longer given in a myth, a figure, a rite, and an identification of the “common”?”  
(Nancy, 17)

This is the central question of this project. The structure of this project is not one of metaphoric exchange, but metonymic association. Metonym is based upon contiguity, combination and context. It is closely related to the synecdoche, in which a part stands for a whole. It isn’t an arbitrary bond between part and whole, but a direct association being made. Metonyms are highly relational, and temporal, and also afford a respect to its referent. The hand may be associated with the body, yet it also leaves the body intact and doesn’t purport to substitute it or subsume it; it points to the body. It allows an inbetween, and a gap in which elements are brought together, in a very physical and experiential way.

So rather than the common as a way of sharing, we are given association a method of being together. Instead of an internal sameness, something within ourselves which is the same as something within another, what we share is an external unity with others in which we must choose to recognize others as part of subjectivity. Socialness is a part of who we are, and our social relations may be contextual and contingent rather than unifying and mythic.

Associations may not always be comfortable. The origin of this project is essentially loss. The manufacture of blue is now a part of the past of the area. This is a bare fact. Allowing this fact to be, and putting in squarely relation to the present has also opened up different ways for people to situate themselves, in multiple ways. Loss opens a gap, creates a distance, into which other things can enter. That, in this project, these relations occur within the realm of leisure seems wholly appropriate. It is the space of ourselves, with others, the place of our own good. It is where we can meet each other halfway.

## References

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