

The Additional Real, February 2008

I have a bookshelf devoted to books that tell me things such as "GDP, then, consists of two main kinds of output—consumption goods and investment goods." (P 73 Economics Explained) "In the first two decades of the twentieth century, a silent takeover began: the gradual separation of ownership from control." (P 104 The Company) "Much more difficult and dangerous is the lot of those who do not make any money with their activities, but can only evaluate them objectively and in accordance with their inner demands." (P 312 The Philosophy of Money).

As with any collection of books, I have not read them all. It is ambitious—impossible—to tackle capitalism, and I am an amateur economist at best. In the preface to the New Spirit of Capitalism, I read that in France, the term capitalism has disappeared from contemporary sociological discourse. Besides, what else is there? The economy is capitalism, but that word evokes Marx, except perhaps in America. Marx is on my bookshelf, as is Adam Smith. I am haunted by Smith's "invisible hand." Milton Friedman and his free-market followers accept this hand as a force of nature, a force that must be pure. Our economies, as our language, while constructed and historical, are abstract and concrete. It is because of my love of reading that I attempt to write, some need to enact and experience language directly.

It is because I want to understand capitalism that I explore it, and I do so sideways. We are, of course, already within it; one just has to live life to experience economic forces. It is easy to think that business has encroached into every sphere of life, that there is no outside, especially when our public has become privatized. One could make an argument for art, for cultural forms, as something that does not fit into the pragmatics of profit. If we set aside the art market: the collecting, investment, and exchange of value—a very small market—we can still have hope for art as a "useless" yet necessary experience of humanity. It is certainly true that being an artist offers no direct job prospects: only temporary commissions, grants, purchases, and most often some ancillary occupation to support oneself.

My sideways exploration of capitalism began in 2005, when I started The Joanna Spitzner Foundation. The basic premise of this work is that I get jobs and donate my wages from them to the foundation, which then gives it away to artists. I have worked 580 hours in two different jobs: as a cashier, and as an administrative assistant. I have also worked many hours incorporating the foundation, setting up its legal form. In the U.S., non-profit organizations are modeled on for-profit corporations: they must be chartered, have a board of directors, etc. Most people who have created a foundation in their own name use them to distribute their wealth and also as a tax benefit (so the government doesn't distribute their wealth). Where does this excess of money come from? Since I am reading Marx, I say it is from surplus value—where all profit is derived—created by labor. This is more difficult to distinguish in a time where investments are made in the abstract financial realms rather than the industrial ones. Wages are literally non-profit, an anti-surplus, a cost. It is through these asides: selling labor, giving, art (the obsolete base/superstructure?) that I can circle around and into the normative influences upon life.

In many ways, my project is an historical one. This form of philanthropy is not the most innovative. Its roots are in Andrew Carnegie's treatise *The Gospel of Wealth*, published in 1889. Philanthropy in America has almost always been left in private hands, from the running of poor houses to finding cures for diseases. Today, we may continue question the operations of capital, but "responsible" corporations can display the direct and indirect good they provide. Just as Carnegie believed that those who distinguished themselves in business are best qualified to determine the distribution of public good, so too, do we turn to private bodies—corporations—to make up for the lack of public wealth. There has been much written about the Gift: excessive, sacrificial, manipulative, irrational, altruistic rather than self-interested. This is an opening, a distinct contradiction in the ideology of capital. Is the Gift a part of capitalism or outside of it?

I find my heart is in the experience of work itself, rather than its gifts. This celebration of the worker is nostalgic. I have been overcome by a Benjaminian desire to go back and fix things. I find my interest in jobs more acute at a time in my life when my own paid work is stable. It does not seem so far away when I had no other choice but to be a cashier. Now that I this position is in my past, I want to become it. I can find the history of others who have worked these jobs—the shop clerk and the office clerk, both only opened up to women through war-shortages of men and deskilling through technology. I have to imitate a version of myself to get these jobs, to make lies of omission to qualify, to appear as if I fit the position.

The idea of art as imitation is ancient (see Plato, in my collection but not well read). This idea of mimesis, of art as a false real (a representation), strangely becomes the means by which I can negotiate my desire to place art within ordinary life. I have been dissatisfied, for some time, with the exhibition value of art, its existence in a space distinct from the world, geared towards visibility. The visible word seems to lose its power, for me, overcome by ubiquitous media. It is that invisible hand that I want to connect with. It is an unfigured absence that affects our presence. I do not know if making something real, albeit through imitation (the corporate model, the worker, the philanthropist) is art that is more useful, or more powerful. I think of the role-playing as less falseness than a mark, it is what allows for distinction within real life.

Rather than mimesis, mimicry may be the best way to think of entering this practice. Roger Caillois, in "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia," wrote that:

From whatever side one approaches things, the ultimate problem turns out in the final analysis to be that of *distinction*: distinctions between the real and the imaginary, between waking and sleeping, between ignorance and knowledge, etc. -all of them, in short, distinctions in which valid consideration must demonstrate a keen awareness and the demand for resolution.

He is writing of insects that take on the appearance of their surroundings, an irrationality in the natural world, of losing oneself into one's surroundings. While these forms of mimicry are visual, it is not the world of the visible, but of touch, of becoming part of one's environment, of indistinction and permeability. These regions of ambiguity are where the addition, the substitution, the excess take hold.

I do not wholly lose myself in the role-playing I undertake in this project, but the impulse

is there: for direct experience, for connection to the “real” world. My ego is subsumed, it becomes permeable, in the anonymous position of a job. But it also feels like a double reality, an additional, simultaneous experience. I am aware of my work as a performance, but that distinction highlights the position of stand-in that is inherent in any job. This is where the meanings of work—the verb—become present: activity, effort, tasks, making. Work’s other meanings—the noun—a work of art, a completion, needs its supplement.

--Joanna Spitzner