

Hans Namuth,
Jackson Pollock, 1950,
gelatin silver print,
37.6 × 35.1cm.
Courtesy the estate
of Hans Namuth
and National Portrait
Gallery, Smithsonian
Institution,
Washington, DC

Artistic Labour, Enclosure and the New Economy

– Alberto López Cuenca

Labour has become a frequent topic in contemporary art.¹ However, this text will focus not so much on the topic of labour as on the way in which contemporary artists labour. Under the eminently financial, speculative and flexible conditions set by the New Economy, how has artistic labour changed?² In 2002 Mexican artist Carlos Amorales presented, for the first time, *Flames Maquiladora* at the South London Gallery. Visitors were asked to cut wrestling shoes out of vinyl sheets, working as if in a *maquiladora*, one of those assembly plants set up by transnational companies in Mexico to exploit cheap local labour. Amorales

Alberto López Cuenca sketches a history of artistic labour to suggest forms of creativity that can oppose the logic of the New Economy.

did not make his visitors work as a mere parody of these practices, however, but rather he made the point they were actually working for the art world. Under the slogan 'Work for Fun, Work for Me', a poster explained to the public how to do the toiling for free, and in the end visitors

did not produce any wrestling shoes but simply the spectacle of performing *artistic labour*. The audience was the concrete work-force that made the art piece happen. In other words, Amorales's installation was not just a metaphor: it actually outsourced the free labour that made it possible. *Flames Maquiladora* is just one instance of the broader transformation that artistic labour has undergone in the last decades.³

Temporary and unprotected labour is far from novel for cultural producers, since most artists have historically worked under precarious conditions. In contrast to the rest of the work-force during the rise of capitalism in the nineteenth century, artists who abandoned the art academies, or never joined them, tended to labour without fixed schedules, with long periods of inactivity, and were often unable to predict the profits of their experimentations. Artistic labour was only incidentally productive for capitalism. Art might have been the expression of the national imaginary, a critique of bourgeois values or the externalisation of the inner self, but it was never a significant resource in the production of capital. Things have changed lately. The uncertainties of art production might have been unmanageable for the highly rationalised Fordist mode of production, yet they have become central expedients in the New Economy. Creativity and experimentation

1 Labour under capitalism has been a topic at least since nineteenth-century naturalist art, as in the case of Constantin Meunier's sculptures of workers and Jean-François Millet's paintings. More recently, exhibitions such as 'Work Ethic' (2003–04) at the Baltimore Museum of Art and the works of Santiago Sierra, SUPERFLEX and many other artists have taken up the topic of labour. In this respect, see Marina Vishmidt, 'Situation Wanted: Something about Labour', *Afterall*, issue 19, Autumn/Winter 2008, pp.21–34.

2 The term New Economy is commonly used in contemporary sociology and political economy to refer to the financial, speculative and highly technologised economy of the 1990s. In this text I use the term in a broader sense as the mode of production that has become dominant since the 70s in Western countries and the developing world. This New Economy has strongly relied upon the financial, media and entertainment and cultural sectors as resources for the production of capital. For a general characterisation of the changes the New Economy has brought, see Richard Sennett, *The Culture of the New Capitalism*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009. A more detailed account of the transition from the old to the new economy can be found in David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Inquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989. As for the issue of the transformation of labour in this context, see any of the canonical works of André Gorz such as *Métamorphoses du travail, quête du sens: Critique de la raison économique*, Paris: Galilée, 1988, while for a more recent account see Andrew Ross, *Nice Work If You Can Get It: Life and Labour in Precarious Times*, New York: New York University Press, 2009. Angela McRobbie has dealt with the issue of cultural labour and the new economy in England in "Everyone Is Creative": Artists as Pioneers of the New Economy?', in Tony Bennett and Elizabeth Silva (ed.), *Contemporary Culture and Everyday Life*, London and New York: Routledge, 2004.

3 I use the notions of *work* and *labour* as synonymous. If none of them is adjectivised as *salaried*, they simply refer to the human capacity to produce and create. John Holloway, following Marx, sharply distinguishes between *labour* and *doing*. That is, between waged labour and the human capacity of producing its form of existence outside the capitalist logic of production. See J. Holloway, *Crack Capitalism*, London: Pluto Press, 2010.

have been accepted at the expense of extremely flexible labour conditions. In this sense, contemporary artists, along with the rest of the work-force, commonly hold more than one job and accept hourly wage rates rather than annual salaries — circumstances that have led to the development of new forms of production and survival.

Artistic Labour and the Rise of Capitalism

I do not intend to merely repeat the argument that flexible art practices have been key in fostering post-Fordism.⁴ Nor do I intend to reduce all contemporary art to a mechanical consequence of the current conditions of production. Instead I would like to consider the ambiguous relationship that artistic labour has maintained with the market economy — for it is not at all clear that artistic labour necessarily leads to the production of commodities or that it can be productive. This ambiguity is currently made evident by the coexistence of divergent commercial and non-commercial artistic strategies that range from the harnessing of a social work-force to be capitalised in the art market as ‘relational art’ to the articulation of self-managed, autonomous projects seeking to produce non-hegemonic social practices. In this text I’d like to call attention to this heterogeneity of artistic practice and its uncertain relation to the logic of market capitalism by focusing on the historically complex link between artistic labour and the conditions of production since the Industrial Revolution.

Although art can be and actually often is reduced to a commodity under the general laws of the market, it still seems to stem from a peculiar kind of labour. There is no significant modern thinker who did not greet art as exceptional — from Shaftesbury, Friedrich Schiller and G.W.F. Hegel, to John Dewey, Theodor W. Adorno and Clement Greenberg. They saw art as not just an agreeable experience or the expression of beauty or the result of genius: in the eighteenth century it became linked to the idea of emancipation,⁵ and was considered capable of awakening people from their ignorance and subjection. Today the power of art can be understood in an increasingly expansive mode: the exceptional character of art does not lie in the object or experience it produces but in the sort of social relations artistic practice can put in motion.

According to Karl Marx, capitalism is a *social relation* of production. That is, capitalism is a set of practices, institutions and techniques organised to accumulate capital through the production and circulation of commodities and the provision of services. Capital is a process. Questioning the objectified dimension of commodities, John Holloway writes: ‘We need to dissolve the thing-ness of these things, understand them as social relations, understand them as the forms of existence of our social subjectivity, our doing.’⁶ It is from this perspective that it is significant to ask what the exceptional condition of art is. When we ask what artistic labour produces, we are also posing the question of what sort of social relations art produces. So, what are the social relations that art requires *and* configures in its practice?

The idea of immaterial labour has become common currency in contemporary critical discourse in characterising the working conditions of the New Economy. However, it tends to downplay the material and bodily engagements of workers in the productive process — whether of signs, stock options or installations. Moreover, even though it may have been rendered invisible or outsourced, the harshness and unpleasantness of labour is still central to the contemporary way of life. Artistic labour is differentiated from other forms of labour not for being ‘immaterial’ but by its ambiguous relation to the hegemonic conditions of production at a given time. While obviously being materially inscribed in the general working conditions of nineteenth-century capitalism, artistic labour did not neatly fit within them. It was part of the new logic of the market and yet not totally regulated by it.

The exceptional character of art was exalted during the Age of Capital, the period in which the Industrial Revolution made labour abstract and exchangeable by transforming the population en masse into an unskilled work-force. In this context artistic practices

4 Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello in their *Le Nouvel esprit du capitalisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999; *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (trans. Gregory Elliott), London and New York: Verso, 2005) are the main advocates of this now popular view. See the criticism raised by Maurizio Lazzarato in ‘The Misfortunes of the “Artistic Critique” and of Cultural Employment’, *transversal* [online journal], January 2007, available at <http://eicpcp.net/transversal/0207/lazzarato/en> (last accessed on 17 January 2012).

5 See Ernesto Laclau, ‘Beyond Emancipation’, *Emancipation(s)*, London and New York: Verso, 1996; and Jacques Rancière, ‘The Aesthetic Revolution and Its Outcomes: Emplotments of Autonomy and Heteronomy’, *New Left Review*, issue 14, March–April 2002, pp.133–51.

6 J. Holloway, *Crack Capitalism*, *op. cit.*, p.110.



Carlos Amorales,
Flames Maquiladora,
2003. Installation
view, Dutch Pavilion,
Venice Biennale.
Courtesy the artist
and kurimanzutto,
Mexico City

claimed autonomy and the work of artists became more noticeable as manifestations of a different form of labour, as reminders that there were other forms of working in the interstices of the logic of industrial production.⁷ Obviously it was not only artists who set in motion this ambiguous relationship to the new hegemonic social relations determined by capitalism. There was a panoply of outcasts — unproductive and shadowy characters — living in the margins of the new urban centres of the nineteenth century.⁸ Yet artists held a singular position: even if they were often viewed with suspicion because of what was considered to be their dubious morality and their irregular working habits, they were also admired among the bourgeoisie for their sensibilities and the outcome of their *work*.⁹

The non-profitability of artistic ‘production’ was explored by the avant-garde as art’s political force, as being not only a different way of representing the world, but also as a different way of *producing* it.¹⁰ As the fate of the avant-garde has made clear, there is nothing in the artwork as an object that prevents it from being integrated as commodity into the market. In fact, since the nineteenth century it has been evident that the results of artistic labour can always be commodified, regardless of the peculiar labour invested in its production.¹¹ The emancipatory aspirations of modern art, including the avant-garde, did not necessarily mean that artistic practice and its results would be absolutely above the new set of social relations governed by capitalism. Art can be produced within conditions that it does not necessarily foster. Such ambiguity is well captured in Theodor Adorno’s

7 This conviction that artistic labour is essentially different and morally superior from industrial labour lies, for instance, at the bottom of John Ruskin’s and William Morris’s defences of craftsmanship amidst the whirlpool of the Industrial Revolution.

8 Outstanding is Henry Mayhew’s taxonomy of the variety of *working* characters that developed in London, the first industrial city in the new age of capitalism, which he detailed in a series of newspaper articles that were published in book form in 1851. See H. Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, London: Constable, 1968.

9 See, for instance, Jerrold Seigel, *Bohemian Paris: Culture, Politics and the Boundaries of Bourgeois Life, 1830–1930*, New York: Penguin Books, 1986.

10 See Krzysztof Ziarek, *The Force of Art*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004. In the case of Soviet constructivism, the political force of the avant-garde meant the actual dissolution of art and the artist into the everyday. This was a way of integrating the artist in the productive social fabric for a revolutionary purpose. In what sense has the New Economy achieved this integration in economic but not revolutionary terms? For a historical approach to the artist as producer in Soviet constructivism see Maria Gough, ‘Red Technics: The Konstruktor in Production’, *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution*, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005.

11 For an example of this case of appropriation see Marilyn R. Brown, ‘An Entrepreneur in Spite of Himself: Edgar Degas and the Market’, in Thomas L. Haskell (ed.), *The Culture of the Market: Historical Essays*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Aesthetic Theory: the artistic labour that produces artworks is part of the general social work-force but it does not have to add up to the hegemonic social relations of production; it can generate social relations that are worthless or non-productive for capitalism while arising within its scope.¹²

The New Economy and the Blurring of Artistic Labour

In order to make profits, capitalism has needed since its inception to conquer and colonise both natural resources and labour power.¹³ Capitalism has always been acquainted with what the economist Joseph Schumpeter calls 'creative destruction'. Its expansion implies the crisis and obsolescence of its established forms of production and the social relations that underpin them. The key issue here is an ongoing process of *enclosure*, which involves the alienation of resources from the world of subsistence and their transformation into commodities to be bought and sold for profit. In this sense, to ensure that surplus value can be made out of people's ability to work, this ability must adopt the commodity form, and such a form has become as pervasive as the practice of flexible wage labour. What is notorious today is the integration of ways of doing that were previously thought of as scantily productive — among them, of course, artistic labour.

One of the key ideas in Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello's *The New Spirit of Capitalism* is that capitalism has no programme, no social or political project beyond producing, circulating and accumulating capital. This implies that capitalism has to absorb and integrate the social and political projects that criticise it as if they were its own programmes. It is for this reason that, for these authors, the integration of new forms of dissent plays a central role in the current logic of capitalism.¹⁴ Capitalism is in need of continuous growth and the latest addition to its ranks has been social and creative labour.

It is clear that room has been made to adopt many of the singularities of artistic labour in the productive process. During the second half of the twentieth century, quite often the artwork *was* the spectator put at work in a setting proposed by the artist. The spectator made art 'happen'. In John Cage's *4'33"* (1952) — in which one or several instruments do not play a single note for 4 minutes and 33 seconds — the creative labour of the listener makes music happen out of silence and random noise. It has become more and more difficult to find a pure spectator, and the same can be said for identifying a full-fledged author. In this sense, we can follow the argument of the thinkers aligned with the Autonomia movement who stressed that what is at stake in post-Fordism is not the end of work, but work without end.¹⁵ We can say that in the 1960s the issue was not the death of art but the birth of art without end. Everything could become art; anyone could be an artist.

Interestingly, it has been the remaking of the artist's studio as a space of production that has signalled the overlapping of kinds of labour that were previously separated.¹⁶ Abstract Expressionists were still toiling with romantic ideas of 'the artist in *his* studio' that were rooted in the nineteenth century. In the 1960s the heroic media construction of Jackson Pollock, as built in the popular imagination by Hans Namuth and others, still loomed large. Caroline A. Jones has masterfully shown how the working space of the artist underwent dramatic transformations in that decade.¹⁷ Focusing on Andy Warhol, Frank Stella and Robert Smithson, Jones demonstrates that not only was the space of the modern studio

12 See especially Chapter 12 ('Society') in Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor), London: Continuum Books, 2004.

13 Silvia Federici makes a strong argument in this regard in *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*, Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2004.

14 See L. Boltanski and È. Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

15 In this regard see the now well-known writings of Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life* (trans. Isabella Bertolotti, James Cascaito and Andrea Casson), Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004; Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy* (trans. Francesca Cadel and Giuseppina Mecchia), Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009; Maurizio Lazzarato, *Il lavoro immateriale: Forme di vita e produzione di soggettività*, Verona: Ombre Corte, 1997; and Christian Marazzi, *Capital and Affects: The Politics of the Language Economy* (trans. Giuseppina Mecchia), Cambridge, MA and London: Semiotext(e), 2011.

16 This overlapping may be partially explained by the academic professionalisation of visual artists since the 1960s, which makes their education closer to that of academic disciplines such as architecture, design and sociology. Such a process of academic levelling also makes sense of the theoretical and multidisciplinary turn in most of contemporary art practice. See the seminal book by Howard Singerman, *Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.

17 Caroline A. Jones, *The Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996. For a less critical but ampler approach to the artistic studio space, see Mary Jane Jacob and Michelle Grabner (ed.), *The Studio Reader: On the Space of Artists*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2010.

Overleaf:
BijaRi, *Combate*
(*Combat*), 2005,
urban intervention
presented as a
4-round boxing
match and footage,
Patriarca Square,
São Paulo. This
project was part
of 'Cubo' ('Cube'),
a multimedia urban
intervention project
conceived together
with five other
artists' collectives
from São Paulo.
Courtesy the artists

made obsolete but that the very idea of the artist was drastically transfigured in this period. Artists were not just working outside the traditional studio space: they actually were requesting architects, designers and engineers to join them in their strategies. In turn, artistic labour became a more recognisable form of productive labour. Jones's observations are just the tip of a very deep transformation in the working conditions of contemporary artists.

The dominant topics in the discourse of 1960s and 70s social revolts against labour were the denunciation of hierarchies, authoritarianism, strict working schedules and the separation of design and execution — in short, participants critiqued the industrial division of labour. Against the rigid hierarchies of industrial production, demands for autonomy, self-management and unrestrained creativity were raised.¹⁸ Maurizio Lazzarato agrees that this wish list has since been granted by capitalism. However, the result has not been a more 'authentic' life for workers but their conversion into neoliberal subjects, 'entrepreneurs of themselves'.¹⁹ The expansion of entrepreneurialism is symptomatic of the blurring of distinctions between worker, owner and consumer, and the coincident collapsing of leisure into labour, the public into the private.

DJs and VJs perform in São Paulo to denounce the process of gentrification and to support the struggle against it undertaken by local residents. Images of the conflicted city centre are screened on an impressive seven-metre-high white cube while music blasts and people hang around and dance. *Combate* (*Combat*, 2005) is a project by the Brazilian collective BijaRi, which has worked since 1996 in the visual arts, design and multimedia. The group has shown its work at the Bienal de La Habana (2003) and in 'Living as Form' (organised by Creative Time, New York, 2011), among other artistic contexts. However, BijaRi does not just make 'socially conscious' art, it also develops projects for different clients: advertising firms; government agencies; and private companies, such as Motorola, Red Bull and the Discovery Channel. In 2011, for instance, it organised the *Garage Project*, an interactive installation of 26 G-LEC panels on the stage of a music event hosted by Citroën in São Paulo.

The activities of contemporary collectives and artists such as BijaRi and Carlos Amorales are far from the isolated studio practice in which modern artistic labour took place. Resembling something close to an architecture firm in its organisation, Amorales employs a team of computer programmers, graphic designers, artists and other assistants to work on heterogeneous projects worldwide — planning an installation in Venice for the 2003 Biennale, producing a mural for the Fridericianum in Kassel in 2009 or managing an alternative music label such as Nuevos Ricos in Mexico since 2003. As for BijaRi, for its sixteen members — among them architects, designers, programmers and visual artists — the working conditions of their 'studio' resemble those of a newsroom or marketing agency. Far from the solitude of the modernist artist's space where the inner self supposedly expressed itself, now a bunch of people gathers, chats and moves in a communal environment of exchange and discussion. Notable is the presence of the computer in these expanded working spaces, the *dispositif* that has most clearly blurred key Fordist distinctions. It has become an at once industrial and cultural tool that embodies a compromise between control and creativity, and has at least temporarily tamed the criticism unleashed in the 1960s against the monotony of labour.²⁰

Collective Labour and the Challenge to the New Forms of Enclosure

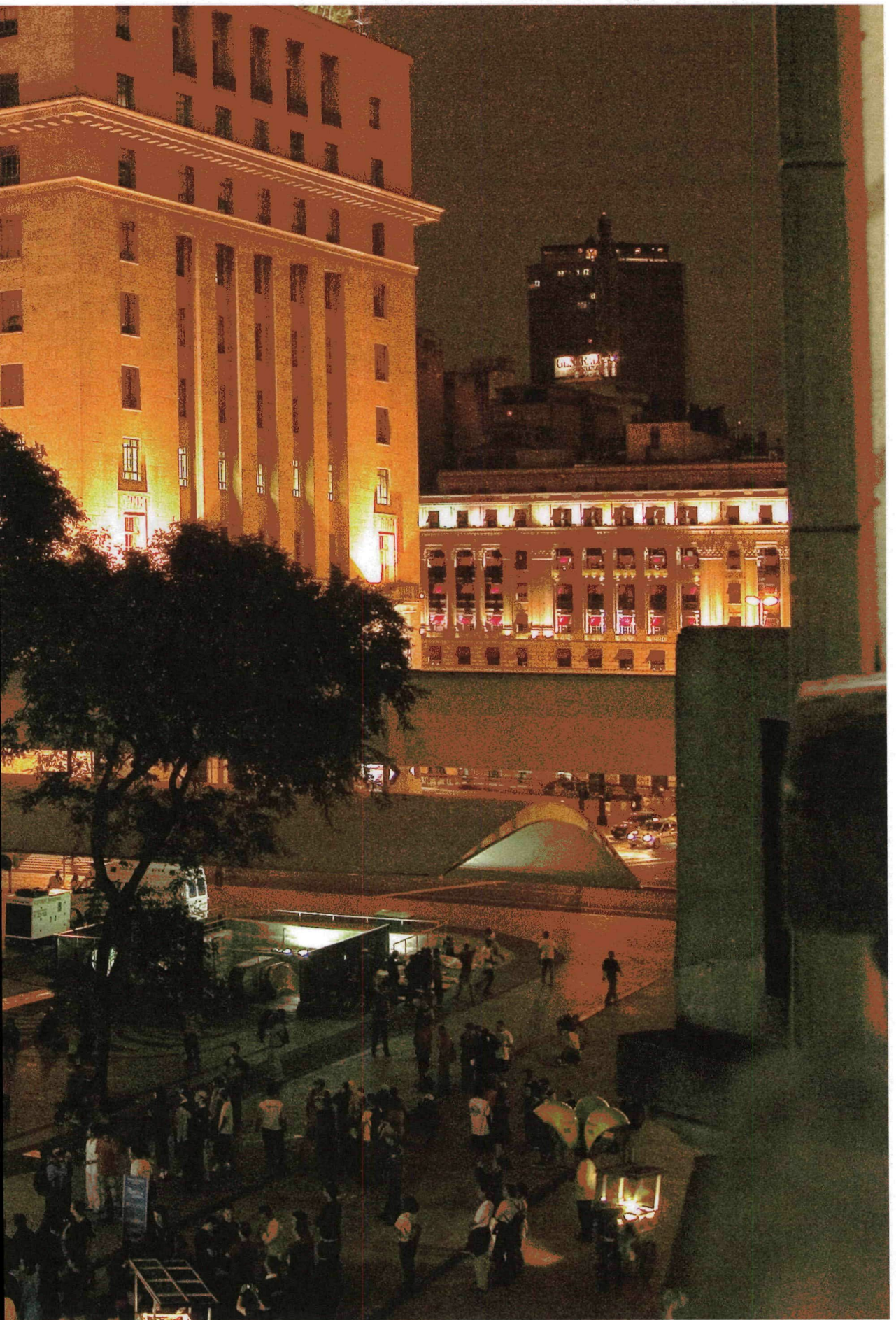
While the uncertainties and experimentation related to artistic labour were relatively unproductive in the early capitalism of the nineteenth century and in the Fordist paradigm of the twentieth, they have become essential in the growth of the New Economy. Of course, some contemporary artists have made a strong stand against the inclusion of artistic labour in the ranks of the New Economy. Many tactics of Conceptual art in Latin America in the 1960s and 70s proved to be very telling forms of resistance to capitalism's hegemonic social relations.²¹ Since then artistic labour has managed to bring its historically challenging relationship to the logic of capitalist production to the marketisation of art. One of the

18 See Brian Holmes, 'The Flexible Personality: For a New Cultural Critique', *transversal* [online journal], January 2002, available at http://eipcp.net/transversal/1106/holmes/en/base_edit#_ftnref24 (last accessed on 17 January 2012).

19 See M. Lazzarato, 'The Misfortunes of the "Artistic Critique" and of Cultural Employment', *op. cit.*

20 See B. Holmes, 'The Flexible Personality', *op. cit.* David Noble puts forward a very appealing argument about the role of the computer and the degradation of work in his *Progress Without People: New Technology, Unemployment, and the Message of Resistance*, Toronto: Between the Lines Press, 1995.







strongest and most interesting tendencies has been to collectivise artistic labour beyond individual authorship to make art a process of social cooperation. In the 1990s, as a reaction to the rise of finance capitalism and its cultural logic, the Spanish group Preiswert Arbeitskollegen set itself the task of recovering control of the communication channels that form the contemporary ecosystem, acting as a 'society of non-alienated work'.²² The German name of the group refers to the idea of equating 'price' (*Preis*) with 'value' (*Wert*) — that is, *Preiswert* is the result of labour that does not subscribe the commodity form and thus eradicates its surplus value. The group resorted to cheap and reproducible means such as graffiti, T-shirts, stickers and postcards to activate its strategy of recovery of the means of sign production. Preiswert was not made up of 'professional' artists and never sold its work for profit or in the art market. The most interesting outcome, however, was not so much the critical signs produced and sent into circulation but the collective, unwaged and pleasurable character of the group's working process — i.e. putting into practice other forms of life in the interstices of the New Economy. The group disbanded in 1999, as they had originally planned, seeking to avoid the accumulation and management of any capital or symbolic gain. What was left was the reflexive gratification of a communal non-alienated experience. Preiswert is just one among many artistic collectives that have given priority to how they work and the social relations they form. Their contribution to the challenge of the New Economy was to set in motion the radical ambiguity that artistic labour carries with it.

The norm of capital accumulation is amoral. Capitalism needs to reduce people to work-force in order to abstract their labour power and create profit. What is missing here, as Marx and so many others have noted, is an ethical dimension of work. Simon Critchley writes that what 'distinguishes an ethical [relation] from other relations (to oneself or to objects) is that it is a relation with that which cannot be comprehended or subsumed under the categories of the understanding'.²³ In the case of the relationship to others'

Preiswert, *Sit tibi terra Levi's* (*Let the Earth Rest Lightly on You*), 1991, postcard. Courtesy the artists

21 See the reading of the period being developed by the international network Conceptualismos del sur, <http://conceptual.inexistente.net/> (last accessed on 17 January 2012).

22 Juan Pablo Wert Ortega, 'Preiswert's Improbable History', in *Una historia improbable: Preiswert/Stalker. doc* (exh. cat.), Málaga: Centro de Ediciones de la Diputación de Málaga, 2008.

23 Simon Critchley, 'Deconstruction and Pragmatism: Is Derrida a Private Ironist or Public Liberal?', in Chantal Mouffe (ed.), *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, London and New York: Routledge, 1996, p.32.



Preiswert, *iFelices pascuas!* (Happy Easter!), undated, greeting card. Courtesy the artists

labour, this ethical dimension means the impossibility of completely integrating others into any purely instrumental process. It is precisely this ethical dimension of work that enclosure threatens but never completely eliminates.

Artistic labour can still activate social processes that bring into play that which is threatened by the logic of the market — and so question the amorality and abstraction of the New Economy. The current revival and strength of ideas such as the commons is a sign of this. As opposed to the enclosure of labour and material resources that capitalism

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requires, the commons refers to what is shared and held in common — from land to software and knowledge. As John Roberts has noted, capital's 'dirty secret' is the suppression of social wealth.²⁴ In its most recent manifestation, this suppression of social wealth has taken the form of crowdsourcing — a kind of enclosure that expropriates the doing and creativity of

people in order to capitalise it in the market. Crowdsourcing's logic operates in a movie such as *Life in a Day*, made up by one-minute video contributions from tens of thousands of people who uploaded pictures of 'their' day on 24 July 2010 to a stream on YouTube, as well as Spencer Tunick's pictures of crowds of naked individuals that freely offer themselves to be photographed in public spaces.²⁵ However, enriching the commons can still be a challenge to that process of enclosure if it results in an ethical approach in which the role of people is not just to give away their time and creativity as resources to be exploited. In the context of the New Economy, the issue at stake is whether artistic labour works for or against the enrichment of this social wealth.

24 John Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art After the Readymade*, London and New York: Verso, 2007, p.33.

25 See <http://www.youtube.com/user/lifeinaday> (last accessed on 17 January 2012). Hollywood director Kevin Macdonald then edited the footage received into a film that was released at festivals.







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