

**RAPHAËLE JEUNE** *ARTISTS AND THE PUMPKIN*

*Crossing Values* is an attempt to make an encounter and a confrontation between, on the one hand, the various praxes of artists casting a particular eye upon the world and lending form to this outlook, and, on the other, the economic (goods and services) production practices which belong to the 'world of work and labour' and to the world of companies, large or small, public or private.

At the heart of both artistic endeavour and corporate activity we find work—and labour—understood as the involvement of the human faculties (intellectual and physical) in a value-creating process that transforms reality. The arithmetic of this value depends on a certain number of parameters and rules, which differ from one another in these two areas of activity. *Crossing Values* is a proposal to explore this notion at the intersection of the two, by shifting the boundaries between them, by getting the people involved to meet each other in their respective arenas, and by bringing together artistic approaches and methods which question their own economies in relation to their industrial and entrepreneurial counterparts.

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The work of the 63 artists invited to Rennes, most of it made specially for the Biennial<sup>1</sup> and described in this publication, attests to the scope of this problem set, which links the issue of the artist's status and output with the new economic conditions of our hyper-industrial societies<sup>2</sup>.

The contemporary period highlights the urgent need to question the working conditions human beings are compelled to tolerate as they construct a productive system that surpasses them; it also prompts us to observe creative attitudes which—in order to hijack, denounce or contradict them—are taking over its most noteworthy features: the dictates of productivity and performance, the standardisation of professional practices and loss of meaning in work, the takeover of subjectivity by management, precariousness, the merchandise-in-the-making factor of cultural and intellectual productions, and the like.

If we go back a bit over the course of History, we find that artists have always been keenly aware of changes occurring in work. At the time of the industrial revolution, when labour became a freely tradable good, the painter elected to free himself from genre subjects and use the power of his artistic work as he saw fit.

Later on, the movement involving the Avant-gardes responded to the industrial streamlining of production and its smothering of human involvement by inventing overall systems of existence, as if to rediscover a lost oneness and unity (Suprematism, Futurism, Dadaism, Surrealism, and so on). The capitalist exploitation of property adopted as its own the power of representation, in which a radical gesture such as Duchamp's readymade pierced a hole by directly presenting an object transfigured by the idea.

The thirty affluent years from the immediate post-war period to the mid-1970s saw workers' leisure time becoming organised; the passage of the world into spectacle thanks to mass media led artists to blur the line between art and life in order to reinstate the full significance of experience undergone. Illustrative of this was the notion of 'permanent creation', as developed by Robert Filliou, who declared that "art is what makes life more interesting than art".

In 1969, just when the art market embarked on its great upward leap, Filliou saved his *Œuvre sans valeur* [Valueless Work] from the status of merchandise to which it was destined. In its original form, based on a principle of equivalence dear to the artist, this makeshift assemblage underwent an endless succession of transactions, permutations of given objects by people who held it in their hands and who, through this operational method of collective and fluctuating value, made decisions about the work. The endless alteration of its components by persons other than the author upset the quoted price of the *Œuvre sans valeur*. Ten years earlier, the Italian Giuseppe Pinot Gallizio had also short-circuited the commercial art system by producing *Industrial Paintings* sold by the metre (at very reasonable prices). Similarly, in 1964, Pieter Engels produced his *Re-paired Chair*, one of his *anti-products*, given away for a few florins, as would a mere shopkeeper. Shortly after that, Iain Baxter<sup>3</sup> founded the company called N.E. Thing Co., a busy make-believe organisation whose purpose consisted in dealing with 'anything': catering, landscape marking, classifying reality in terms of "aesthetically claimed things" and "aesthetically rejected things", business consultancy, and so on. Lastly, for more than 30 years, Bernard Brunon, founder of the house-painting company That's Painting Productions, muddled his painterly identity with that of commercial service provider, offering art collectors and simple customers alike one and the same service, for the same price.

More recently, Gilles Mahé, through his company Gilles Mahé & Associés S.A. (1990) and other creations (for example, *Gilles Mahé joue au golf en pensant à Rudy Ricciotti* [Gilles Mahé Plays Golf While Thinking of Rudy Ricciotti]), has been developing a body of work akin to an art of living, challenging the traditional production and distribution conditions of art. And since 2005, Mud Office, with its organic economics, has been re-appropriating economic processes as a vital principle to be tried and tested.

All these approaches shift artistic action from the object toward the transaction, from the art market towards the 'classic' commerce of goods and services—a commerce whose mechanisms they share—by questioning and hijacking

1. About forty works were specially produced for *Crossing Values*, fourteen of them as part of the *Séjours de Recherche et de Création en Entreprise*, or SouRCE residencies.

2. I borrow this term from Bernard Stiegler, who uses it to describe our present-day society, which, according to him, does not come after the industrial age (we would use the term 'post-industrial' if that were so) but rather takes industrialisation to its pinnacle—that is, to a situation in which everything can be calculated.



them. These artists, involved along with others in the 'dema-terialisation of art', foreshadow and accompany the great change of labour into immaterial work that the computer revolution has brought about.

This latter cannot be separated from the culminating globalisation of capital and industry, the consequences of which have not escaped the attention of artists, in particular the increased competitiveness which forces companies to show themselves to be ever more reactive and pliable if they are to survive.

Faced with the imperative of competitiveness, which is squeezing the vice of work ever tighter, faced with buzzwords such as *efficiency*, *performance*, *streamlining*, and *cost control*, which are back-burnering the non-quantifiable share of human actions, and faced with the hunt against 'non-productive' time, slowness, doubt, and the unforeseen, artists are introducing a reversal of values. The mathematical organisation of production and the acceleration of the pace of work prompt Benoît Laffiché to look elsewhere for another time-related conception of work. In India, he films the barehanded demolition of a building, by men whose physical rhythm seems to be imposed on the work site, not vice versa. Versus hyper-production and the ensuing loss of meaning, Jean-Baptiste Farkas advocates "much more of less" with his Glitch<sup>3</sup> brand, and the re-arrangement of what already exists through his IKHÉA©SERVICES. These users' manuals for reality, like instruction no. 13, *Remakes*, and no. 15, *Handmade corrections of the world surrounding us*, work by subtracting, copying, recycling, destroying, and botching, and radically challenge the "always better, always more" ideology.

Claudia Triozzi and Marie Reinert invite employees to divert their own productive body language into a musical and choreographic process. Alain Bernardini suggests that workers make improvised, larksome and gratuitous use of the work environment in which they are usually bound to efficiency. In the proposals made by these three artists, employees—'functionalised' individuals—become idle people, free thenceforth to work with the artist.

By re-activating a pamphlet opposing the bourgeois ideology of work, a text which has not aged, the collectif 1.0.3 has carried out, together with a research laboratory dealing with virtual reality, a major work of programming to enable people to read—by the intermediary of a *Wiimote*—Paul Lafargue's *Droit à la paresse [The Right to be Lazy]* (1880)<sup>4</sup>. Jean-Luc Vilmouth likewise invites us to suspend our hard-working frenzy through a rudimentary tool embedded in a hole that the tool itself helped create to measure: the pick is hampered in its function of transforming the world, and it is our entire relation to technology and labour that is called back into question.

The ongoing upheaval of industrial geography, at the beck and call of the movements of capital and blind to local human realities, is another consequence of globalisation on work. The concern with competitiveness has entailed the outsourcing of large production units to China, India and Eastern Europe, following the countries of southern Europe and Taiwan, en vogue in the 1980s but subsequently too costly. Chen Chieh-jen remembers this in *Factory*, an attempt to give life back to an abandoned Taiwanese factory, by the silent and attentive presence of former female workers among the rusty tools and the stacked furniture they used to use. His film reveals the outcome of an economy that sweeps away all before it, without any regard for the lives that nevertheless nurture it. "Capitalism kills", as Claire Fontaine's neon work declaims loud and clear.

Because activities with low added value (manufacture of material goods) are distributed in countries where manual labour is cheap, the developed countries can focus on the immaterial share of production (services, knowledge, culture, research and development), whose added value is high.

By this logic, competitive companies are those which innovate, keep an eye on sociological trends both great and small and on the slightest spark of novelty, which question and challenge themselves and digest and transform the inventions of others. This race for innovation turns human 'capital', that factor of creativity, into the supreme resource of the immaterial economy. With the acceleration of decision-making and production processes, employees

3. Glitch is a brand that extols the negative qualities of articles and certain services it provides: "Glitch is *Much more of less!*, a craze for the negative which will harm what is average."

4. Paul Lafargue, *The Right to be Lazy*, Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company, 1989.



must be not only creative but also adaptable to change, and capable of varying responses. These tendencies channel with them a whole managerial literature<sup>5</sup> intended to make the artist, with his 'creativity' and his 'project-by-project' method, the prototype of tomorrow's worker, more or less wittingly endorsing the neo-liberal ideology of work flexibilisation, which in turn gives rise to its greater precariousness. According to certain authors, the future form of the company will be akin to an energy flow of variable intensity, without set limits and forever in motion, somewhere between the real and the virtual, within an immaterial economy where work time and living time interpenetrate. Julien Prévieux gets it right when he introduces, in his (negative) answers to employment advertisements, considerations which go beyond his mere professional skills and touch on issues of existence (*Lettres de non-motivation [Non-Motivation letters]*). Romain Poussin, for his part, orchestrates the make-believe company Transitway as needs arise, each time writing a new chapter of its story and bringing in interchangeable characters responsible for its temporary embodiment before once again vanishing into the great virtual void. Let us wager that artists will manage to thwart this attempt at instrumentalisation through their skills of exemption.

If there is no longer any talk of vocation in art, and has not been for some time, the notion has also lost its meaning in the hyper-industrial economy. Professional tasks are confused less and less with a processing of matter, whose outcome is easily quantifiable in terms of productivity. Nowadays, they are taking on more fluctuating forms, with outlines that are hard to define. As a counterpoint, we can see in Pascal Rivet's *Dartymobile*, as in all his vehicles, the intentional production of a cumbersome and useless form, a handmade wooden replica of a *utilitarian* van: a surplus of matter as anti-productive as it is meaningful, where we can detect the sum of labour that it costs the artist. Another vehicle is the Sausalito *Marin* bicycle, whose frame the British artist Simon Starling has remade in a somewhat rough and ready way with the aluminium of a Charles Eames chair and vice versa, thus manufacturing in several months two objects that were industrially produced

in just a few hours. The working time of matter by the body, in the 'replica works' of these two artists, contrasts with the dizzy evolution of productive schedules using digital technologies. The dematerialisation of work is signing the gradual end of a vision of having the same profession for life, and is introducing a new relation to time. We can no longer claim to be improving our skills and accumulating experience throughout our active lives. Contemporary flexibility requires workers to have a capacity for adaptation which complicates the narrative of their stories.

Faced with changes of pace and the growing precariousness of forms of employment, the American sociologist Richard Sennet points to the danger of a "loss of the memory of experience" and a need for a self-narrative in the workplace, for a basis of identity-related landmarks in the wavering state of roles and ruptured situations. The short films gleaned from the Internet by Jean-Marc Chapoulie—anonymous self-portraits made at work—illustrate this pressing need for self-representation through which to reconstruct one's story. In the film made by Ludovic Burel and Noëlle Pujol, *Rien n'a été fait [Nothing Has Been Done]*, three characters are busy perpetuating, in the present, a past life spent in a factory long since closed.

Nowadays, professional identity and seniority are thus less promoted than is an ability to develop one's skills—that is, an ability to become interchangeable. How can the artist respond to this situation buy by questioning his place, his role, and his own skills and/or lack thereof? With *Cushy Job* (1996), Gianni Motti claims the status of artist in his job as assistant to other renowned artists, and the subordinate dimension of this activity undermines the issue of the author. Adel Abdessemed purely and simply offers his resignation... which is impossible (*Adel Has Resigned*, 2001). In the collaborative schedules he proposes, such as the *Problems Generator IIIII* activated during *Crossing Values*, François Deck shares his skills as well as his non-skills as an 'artist-consultant' with the people taking part. The notions of author, form, and work are thus widespread in a collective production that has to do with the public space.

5. This phenomenon has been analysed from the social-science viewpoint by Pierre-Michel Menger in *Portrait de l'artiste en travailleur. Métamorphoses du capitalisme*, La République des Idées, éditions du Seuil, 2002.



'Human capital' is thus considered, by capitalism, a resource to be made the most of. Faced with the retrieval of subjectivity by management, and faced with the demand for intense personal involvement by employees in fleeting and swiftly obsolete projects, artists are suggesting a reappraisal of the place of the subject in relation to the economy, by questioning the link of subordination: subject serving economy or economy serving subject? In their proposals, they introduce the notion of desire, the way Boris Achour does as he diverts the piping of a factory to get *conatus* flowing through them—*conatus* representing the being's aspiration to persist in its existence. They describe the power of invention of individual people, the way Olga Kisseleva does, whose series of films titled *Ma Double vie [My Double Life]* gets employees to talk about the way their jobs and their artistic activities fuel one another; or the At work collective, an anonymous group of 'people working on the side' who use their workplace as an artistic residency, unbeknownst to their boss. Other artists open up word spaces: the invitation sent out by Jean-Louis Chapuis and Gilles Touyard to "anybody in a work situation" to hand over a thought of the day for subsequent dissemination in public places and on company walls; alternatively, the posters of the writer Jean-Charles Massera, stuck on billboards in the city of Rennes with quotations gathered from different people about work—in particular the one from Maria F., a psychiatric nurse: "We are asked to quantify and put a price on our acts. It is not possible to quantify and put a price on a relationship to something human."

The difficulty of evaluating work today stems from an anachronism between the real situation and obsolete schemes of rational quantification. The late 19th-century thinker Gabriel Tarde had already understood the 'psychological' dimension of the value of work, including the affects (desires, fears, etc.) and beliefs missing from Marxist economic theory and relating to the incalculable<sup>6</sup>. However, forms of evaluation are nowadays still based mainly on criteria of productivity that can be transposed into figures. The artist Martin Le Chevalier questions this phenomenon by becoming involved in the game of having a professional evaluate, using parameters of efficiency and competitiveness, his own artistic approach and method, which cannot be made to comply with any such procedure without self-betrayal. Meanwhile, Samuel

Bianchini transposes into quantified values the free movement of the bodies of the people in front of his interactive installation, *Crossing Values*. Is the willing subject capable of taking over the economic forces that instrumentalise him? If the borderlines between the working being and the living being, between art and life, are blurred, the way they have become blurred for many artists, does this phenomenon assume the form of an ascendancy of life over work or a takeover of life by work? Is the concept of 'broadened economy' as a counterpoint to a limited economy where work is reduced to its accountable dimension, a concept posited by Georges Bataille—who considers human exchanges in the broad sense—to be included in the chapter on lost illusions? Echoing this question, and by futurising ideas gathered from public transport employees in Rennes, Nadia Lichtig formulates a poetic wavering between economic determinism and the freedom of individuals to do as they wish: "My name will be Frank. I will be 42 years old and I will be a driver..."

Gabriel Tarde's thinking also helps to analyse another form of influence of subjectivity on economic parameters. Whereas 'economic science' sees itself as having a mathematical rationality, the values which form it are indexed, like 'human' values, to the trust and mistrust to which they give rise on the basis of criteria that are not all strictly scientific. Furthermore, at a time when business language is using the expression "value creation" to describe a financial machinery oriented toward stockholders, we should not forget that market-related capitalism is based on the affects of the agents it tries to capture—like Delphine Doukhan's camera, placed as close as possible to the faces, screens, and telephones of City brokers in London in the film *Richard's Office*. "How much money do you have in your fingers within one day?" The artist's deliberately direct and naïve question is answered by the figures of value handled by these multiplying agents, unashamedly declaring the basics of speculation: when unemployment is on the rise, stock exchange levels follow suit. How can a science lead to so 'unreasonable' a consequence?

We find this presence of affects at the core of the economic calculation in Harun Farocki's film *Nicht ohne Risiko [Nothing Ventured]*, a 'voyeuristic' vision of a bitter financial

6. Gabriel Tarde, *Psychologie Economique*, Félix Alcan Editeur, 1902. On this subject, see also Maurizio Lazzarato's book, *Puissances de l'invention. La Psychologie économique de Gabriel Tarde contre l'économie politique*, Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond, 2002.



negotiation. Desire for success, fear, quest for power, and a soft spot for risks among the negotiators all respond to one another in a theatrical presentation that keeps us on the edge of our seats.

Through these works we can understand how artists are striving to examine parcels of singularity and expression of the subject in the great economic matrix that organises people's productive movements. These artists do so all the more easily because they are themselves taking part, in the form of an exception—the art market—whose speculative dimension many call into question.

Art has always involved producing signs, but nowadays, when the degree of transgressiveness of a work gives the measure of its commercial value, and when 'artistic critique' is seeing itself irremediably re-incorporated and absorbed by capitalism as a source of self-legitimation, how are signs still to be made, and "how to get by without getting out", to quote the poet Gherasim Luca? More and more artists are choosing to format the terms of the contradiction by getting enmeshed in the contradiction itself—sometimes to the point of ambiguity, which they use like an ultimate trick in the face of the sign's industrial omnipotence, like the British artist Carey Young with her video *I am a Revolutionary*. In the office of a business building, helped by a coach, the artist rehearses, with difficulty, a self-promotional speech, though it is not clear whether it is glorifying the revolutionary dimension of a product or announcing the Revolution of the social system as a whole. The words seem to have lost their meaning, and uttering them over and over again in no way helps give them back their sense.

The short story by Macedonio Fernandez entitled "The Pumpkin that became the Cosmos"<sup>7</sup> gave us a warning back in 1944: the vegetable is gripped by an irresistible growth drive and devours everything it finds within reach, to the point of destroying everything 'external'. In this we can find a parable—subtitled, not unwittily, "a tale of growth"—about capitalism's basic capacity of integration, capitalism forever transforming any spark of resistance into energy for its own expansion. The artist, whose driving force is a need to respond to impossibilities through a sensitive and

unusual approach, thus operates within the system thanks to a capacity to borrow and offset, which lends visibility to the system's excesses and dysfunctions as well as its creative dynamics.

Jean-Luc Moulène becomes involved in industrial production lines where, to use his own words, he "removes control to retain quality", inventing a deviant machining process where the slightly altered industrial object becomes sculpture. Pierre Huyghe acts as a guerrilla in the commercial forum when he enters a supermarket to "unsteal" an item belonging to him by placing it, like a pirate gift, in the appropriate section.

It is in this spirit that *Crossing Values* set up an experimental area for fourteen of the invited artists: the SouRCEs programme (Corporate Research and Creation Residencies), artists' residencies spent in companies, where the possibility for art to find its way to the interior of the world of work was tested. This programme involved occupying the terrain, well removed from the colonising desire to create a 'new territory for art', in a relation of exchange and confrontation of viewpoints, where the artist did something other than cast a simple eye upon a world criss-crossed by human, social, economic and sensitive challenges. What was involved was an over-confrontation of the registers, by inviting each person in question—artist, employee, manager—to risk encounters<sup>8</sup> without any guarantee of an accountable return on the investment.

The artist is he or she who, through forms and through forms of life, invents 'heterotopic' worlds, micro-worlds that have a relationship of fundamental heterogeneity with the 'real' world, whatever the setting—workshop or company—that brought them into being. So he or she may well transgress certain boundaries to go and work the actual matter of reality, even if it means questioning from within the logical systems of the working life, having a job on the side, donning the entrepreneur's suit, or appropriating the economic customs and protocols rampant in our daily round in order to hijack them.

7. Macedonio Fernández, in "El Zapallo que se hizo Cosmos. Cuento del crecimiento", *Obras Completas*, tomo VII, Corregidor, Buenos Aires, 1987.

8. See the author's essay, *The Philosophy behind the SouRCE residencies*, p. 164.

