

Socially Engaged Art and Decommodified Labor

Artists and their artworks circulate in strange economies. When artists desire a wage, payment often seems elusive; when they reject the payment system, their rejection offers no guarantee that money will not be attracted to their work. In this book I examine socially engaged artists and their relationships to the wage form. I assemble a collection of artists who address their own or other artists' lack of a wage to ground their method of artistic social engagement and, indeed, to critique our economic present. Sometimes this art thematizes its economic concern: Cassie Thornton, an artist who works on debt, invites other artists to construct "debt visualizations," verbal and imagistic collages of the consequences of a wageless life. Sometimes the art effects a change: Renzo Martens creates artist-run institutions that attempt to transform wageless Congolese farmers into moneymaking artists. At still other times such art allegorizes the lack of a wage: Duke Riley's pigeon-based performances and Koki Tanaka's child-oriented enactments both use as their subjects those among us who cannot be waged: animals and children.

Two anecdotes from contemporary art illustrate well how artists themselves understand their own economic possibilities and limitations. The first concerns Caroline Woolard, an artist I write about in chapter 2. While speaking at a panel on artists' pay during Bushwick Open Studios in 2015, Woolard was asked to comment on the possibility of "artists' resale rights." An almost century-old idea, such rights enable artists to continue to make money if their artwork is resold after its initial purchase, much as authors retain the right to new editions and translations of their texts through copyright protection. The audience nodded in seeming agreement at the idea; it was the first concrete proposal of the event, after all. Woolard then responded: "I've never sold any art. I don't know many artists who have ever sold anything. Most art will never sell and most artists won't make money from their art." If one does



I.1 Kreuzberg Mural by Lutz Henke and Blu. Photograph by Leigh Claire La Berge.

not sell one's art the first time, then "resale rights" are a modest proposal, indeed. The *Guardian* newspaper recently reported that 71 percent of artists in the United Kingdom are paid no wages for their work; we can only assume a higher number in the United States.¹

Artist Lutz Henke recently recounted a related, if inverse, scene in Berlin's Kreuzberg neighborhood. Along with the Italian artist Blu, Henke produced two of Berlin's most famous murals (figure I.1). As murals that have graced a thousand postcards and social media posts, these site-specific pieces had begun to star in a well-known story of urban spatial availability transformed into displacement.

As the Kreuzberg neighborhood has begun and no doubt will continue to host a revolving slate of ex-pats, as apartments have been transformed into investment properties and remediated back to an international, culture-consuming public through *biennales* and Airbnb, Henke and Blu made the decision to withdraw their images from public circulation.² They covered the building-wide murals with black paint, all the while being booed by onlookers who were unaware of their identity and who no doubt thought they were real estate developers. One of their images (left) presents the so-called golden handcuffs of bourgeois existence. Here those handcuffs are accentuated by

the capitalist temporality of the wristwatches. Too discomfited to be satisfied with their lot in life, yet too comfortable to risk changing it, those wearing the golden handcuffs wait and hope passively for a different scenario. The pieces were created in 2008 as an antagonism and provocation; by 2014 Blu and Henke understood that their art anchored “a [Berlin] art scene preserved as an amusement park for those who can afford rising rents.”³ As anyone with a rudimentary knowledge of the avant-garde knows, the path from artist-based rejection of commodification to artistic commodity is a well-worn one, and Henke describes perhaps the only available assurance that their murals would not continue to travel down it: the work concludes through its destruction, and who better to conclude it than its creators?

These stories make reference to an ill-defined moment in the social life of artistic commodities—namely, the gap between making art and making money. Sometimes the first leads to the second, but often by a circuitous route and not the one intended *by* the artist, let alone *for* the artist. In the first anecdote, Woolard interrupts a certain fantasy of possibility: that with the right proprietary arrangements in place, artists will support themselves through their art. In the second, Henke interrupts someone else’s fantasy: that his and Blu’s murals, made free, could be the *mise-en-scène* for an increase in property values and the consequent scarcity and constriction of public space. In the first moment, money cannot be made; in the second, money is being made, but not for the artists, as the public-ness of the pieces is transformed into a private, appropriative gaze. In Woolard’s case, the artist desires the commodification of her labor—who among us doesn’t want to get paid for our work?—but that commodification is not available. In Blu and Henke’s case, the artists desire that the decommodification of public space match their own decommodified labor, a process only able to be located by removing the art object from circulation. Both anecdotes illustrate the moment in which value embodied in the art object as a result of labor has limits placed on its ability to circulate as a commodity. I want to suggest that artistic labor enters a scene of decommodification in both.

The subject of this book, then, is the realization and the artistic representation of a kind of everyday, unwaged, yet formal and professional work that I call *decommodified labor* as it manifests in contemporary socially engaged art mostly, but not entirely, in the contemporary United States. I understand work as a local action in which we all engage in order to make our lives both meaningful and possible, and labor as an abstraction through which our work is organized. What I mean to capacitate with the term “decommodified la-

bor” is a kind of work that is not compensated through a wage or available through a market purchase. Nor does decommodified labor primarily derive from or circulate through the intimate settings of family, care, and love, a kind of work increasingly recognized as “affective labor.”⁴

Even the famous artists, the ones who do get paid, repeatedly turn to the themes and instances of which decommodified labor is composed—namely, those who cannot or are not paid to make art. The Russian conceptual artists Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid train chimpanzees to take and sell photographs in Red Square; Martha Rosler stages a garage sale in *Meta-Monumental Garage Sale* at the Museum of Modern Art; the *New York Times* publishes Tino Sehgal’s pay rates, which include nothing for the young children who populate his performance installations. Yet while the fact and representation of decommodified labor predominate, artists position themselves in different relations to it. Sometimes the nonwage of decommodified labor in the arts is chosen: the person working does not desire a wage, as in the case of a barter or trade, two activities present throughout contemporary art and which I address in chapter 2.⁵ Other times the nonwage is enforced: the person working cannot garner a wage, as in much student and amateur work, because their efforts are not recognized as work, which I address in chapter 1. Because most artists begin their careers as students, and because many will work as amateurs for much of their careers, this wage limitation, too, is important to my archive. Finally, other times still, because the worker is an animal or child—two new populations visible in work by artists such as Jannis Kounellis and Carsten Höller and addressed in chapters 3 and 4—they categorically cannot be waged.

Before artistic labor could be decommodified it had to be commodified. And indeed, the 1950s through the 1970s saw an incredible expansion of the possibilities for artists to sell their artistic labor through “a deluge of grants and array of agencies which led to a rapid expansion of the art-labor force.”⁶ That expansion was followed by a contraction. Decommodified artistic labor might be novel, but decommodified labor itself does not constitute a historically new phenomenon; it has been realized before and it now is available again in our contemporary moment.⁷ Yet while we are quite accustomed to an analysis of how labor or any object becomes a commodity, we are less used to a critique of how things cease to dwell in that state. Nonetheless, we do have a repertoire of cognate terms on which to draw. For example, “deskilling” designates the devaluation of a certain task, and because any task takes time to acquire, deskilling is also a reorganization of a worker’s time and life possibili-

ties. And as critics such as Harry Braverman have argued, skilling, deskilling, and reskilling reveal a dialectic unto themselves; historically they emerge and recede with new technologies. “Deindustrialization” meanwhile marks the devaluation of a certain place and its built environment. Deindustrialization is often positioned as local to the 1970s and cities such as Detroit and Manchester loom large in its imaginaries, but in fact deindustrialization has been a recurrent feature of urban life since the eighteenth century.⁸ Yet we do not currently have a term for the state in which our formal labor is devalued to the point of wagelessness while we are still doing it, and this process too ebbs and flows through modernity.

The larger concept of decommodification has been developed almost exclusively, if not broadly, in political science and legal studies, where it designates a certain independence from market forces. That independence, on the whole, is understood as a salve against whatever particular injuries an actor, or asset, might face were it to remain in the market.⁹ My aims in this book diverge from those of social science. I move the problem of decommodification into the realm of arts production and the “imaginative cogency” of art’s circulation, what I will further define as “the aesthetic.” There, I train my focus on the central commodity of labor. Yet “the aesthetic,” however defined, has since Immanuel Kant been theorized as outside the market: as antidote, as opposition, as compensation—what Terry Eagleton calls its “ideology.” And for me, the double displacement from the market that the aesthetic and decommodified labor together provide produces a surprising optic for the analysis of contemporary art. This combination becomes the lens through which to situate and analyze what many critics have considered our new avant-garde: “socially engaged art,” sometimes called Social Practice art. This kind of art aims to make a useful intervention.¹⁰

I locate decommodified labor both as it is *used to produce* and as it is *represented in* socially engaged art.¹¹ As a consequence I use decommodified labor as a device to tell a story about the rise of this moment in art history as it develops from aspects of institutional critique, conceptual art, performance art, and community arts traditions. What differentiates today’s socially engaged art from its predecessors is that it attempts both to represent forms of social inequity and to amend those forms through the artwork itself.¹² We might say, then, that socially engaged artwork is a bit like social work: it is the craft of transporting people to a more supported place—be that support economic or affective, durational or immediate. But socially engaged art is also like artwork, too: it encourages its participants to contemplate a different place and

perhaps to take pleasure in that contemplation, even if only for a moment and even if no action derives from the contemplation.

I find scenes of decommodified labor in the training of the art student; in the artistic deployment of animals and children as well as in artist-run institutions of barter and exchange; and indeed, in the kind of “socially engaged” business practices that are often conflated with art practices. What is important for me is that each iteration of decommodified labor functions without reliance on a wage. Animals were for centuries considered crucial workers in multiple industries. Indeed, it was only with the rise of a broad-based wage system that they were disbarred from such work. Children, too, have long been important economic agents and only recently were they stripped of that status in the Global North. That those members of our social world who were once workers now appear in artwork *as artwork* without remuneration is an important constituent of my argument. It is important that those bartering and exchanging activities, which might be waged or thought of as either work or an adjunct to artwork, appear here both as unpaid and as the artworks themselves. Together such formations constitute but do not exhaust my class of decommodified labors.¹³ This approach may seem overly restrictive to some readers—what about slavery? what about indenture? what about the Global South?—and yet, as I argue throughout this book, the ability to limit a wage to certain times, places, and people is a crucial feature of accumulation and therefore deserves some conceptual adherence. The wage renders the non-wage productive. As Marx himself says: “Capital . . . is not only . . . the command over labour. It is essentially the command over unpaid labour.”¹⁴ He consequently affirms that “the secret of the self-expansion of capital resolves itself into having the disposal of a definite quantity of other people’s unpaid labour.”¹⁵

My primary archive derives from contemporary socially engaged art, but as I exfoliate the term “decommodified labor” throughout the book, one will see how it has become a cultural discourse and practice unto itself. Of course, the “internship” has long been placed outside the bounds of “suffer or permit to work” since it has been interpreted as being “for the educational benefit of the intern . . . [because] the employer derives no advantages [from it].”¹⁶ That logic is transformed in a scene of decommodification: now the work *is* work and it is unpaid. Much of reality television, for example, runs on decommodified labor: those “real” people we see on television often forgo a wage in exchange for “exposure.”¹⁷ It was recently reported that the corporate-hipster company Urban Outfitters asked its employees to “volunteer” for six-hour

holiday shifts. Such volunteerism would be like work but without the wage.¹⁸ In an episode of the popular HBO series *Girls*, one character notes to another that he has taken “a new job as an assistant to a curator of dance. It’s unpaid, but it could lead somewhere.”¹⁹ Whether in cultural production, in cultural consumption, or in the content of various cultural texts, decommodified labor limns our present.

As a site to translate between theories of labor and capital, of art production and art criticism, I believe decommodified labor is the missing term in contemporary discussions about art and value, as those conversations relate to socially engaged art.²⁰ While Shannon Jackson and Claire Bishop have written incisive treatments of this art, they have not offered an economic basis for it. When, for example, Shannon Jackson claims that Social Practice art orients itself around a “de-autonomized aesthetic,” I would add that decommodified labor governs such an “aesthetic”—by which she here means “style.”²¹

Two remarkable recent books by John Roberts and Dave Beech do offer such a basis for that economic specificity, yet they do not use their economic terms heuristically to analyze art. Decommodified labor has more precision and conceptual specificity than John Roberts’s term “second economy.”²² It organizes a historical process in a manner that Dave Beech’s “commodification without commodification” only hints at as a category. I use decommodified labor as both an object of an analysis and a site for interpretation. It denotes a dialectical process that may be located at the level of capitalist production and in daily life, in critical theory and in the next DIY gallery show. Within critical theory, I understand decommodified labor to be a pivotal term between the two narratives and idioms that we use to understand our current economy: Marxist theories of an intensification of labor under a regime that is sometimes called the “real subsumption of labor to capital,” and neoliberal theories of an end of labor and its replacement with “human capital.” Decommodified labor provides a material and conceptual site to investigate how the shifting composition of value and the structure of surplus appropriation finds a potentially critical form in arts production.

This book’s title, *Wages Against Artwork: Decommodified Labor and the Claims of Socially Engaged Art*, alerts us that I will be tarrying with the long opposition between various ideologies of the aesthetic and the corresponding understandings of the economy; the subtitle itself indicates more precisely the matter of intercourse: how socially engaged artwork incorporates and critiques decommodified labor. The phrase “wages against” artwork is taken from Silvia Federici’s 1970s pamphlet, “Wages Against Housework.” In an

odd and perhaps utopian bit of historical misremembering, Federici's essay has often been explained as a demand that women's home-based labor, from sex to mothering to all varieties of care—what would now be grouped under the rubric of affective labor—be monetarily compensated. This sentiment has been colloquially inscribed through a modified title, "Wages *for* Housework," after the feminist movement of the same name. And indeed, one often hears Federici's text inaccurately called "Wages for Housework." But as Federici herself explains, "I actually titled [that] essay 'Wages *Against* Housework,' because it was very clear for us that wages for housework was at the same time wages against housework."²³ Wages are needed and wages are not enough, a historical contradiction that Peter Linebaugh notes has been present since the inception of wage form.²⁴

Commodification is likewise needed and commodification is likewise not enough. Decommodification points to another space that portends the arrival of another time. Like its theoretical root, commodification, decommodification should not be ethically categorized as good or bad; it should not be categorized ethically at all. Certain artists whom I critique herein seize a space of decommodified labor as liberating; others paint it as ironic; still others understand it as constricting and delegitimizing. Some understand it as historical, a lineage to another past, and some see it as novel, a gateway to a different future. Using examples from socially engaged artwork, I identify a reconfiguration of both commodified labor and a transformation of some of the concepts used for the analysis and periodization of art that derive from art's fraught relationship with the commodity, including autonomy, purposelessness, and medium. Decommodified labor will denote in this book multiple social and artistic forms, but its most basic conceit is the nonwage or the nonmonetary remuneration of formal labor.

My claims are twofold, and I hope they will resonate in art criticism, cultural studies, and critical theory. First, I argue that those writing about socially engaged art have yet to produce an economic concept to buttress their criticism. Because such art is devoted to working on all that can be redistributed, this economic concept is of signal importance. Second, I suggest that decommodification be understood as a complimentary trend to that word we hear so often: "commodification," a process memorialized in the pejorative phrase "that's so commodified." We must also begin saying, "that's so decommodified." And then we must ask two questions: Why does decommodified labor seem so prominent now? and, Why has it been so forcefully distilled in the arts?

I suggest that the pervasive decommodification of cultural labor today may be interpreted as one response to what various critics have understood as the late-twentieth-century shifting composition of value, whether that moment is diagnosed as the end of the Keynesian compact, or the rise of financialization, or the neoliberalization of the state. An emergent financial infrastructure has allowed for the increase of the price of assets without either a wage increase or an inflationary currency adjustment—both of which could have transformative social effects. In my last book, *Scandals and Abstraction: Financial Fiction of the Long 1980s*, I explored the financial aspects of this economic transformation as they were mediated through American literary texts and what I called financial print culture.²⁵ Here I continue that work by exploring the flipside of the problem, as it were. I investigate the changing composition of labor and the changing artistic production that this reconstitution engenders. When money's price is too high, labor's price will suffer, and that suffering has left a trace in contemporary arts practices.

**Approaching Decommodification:
Aesthetics and Labor, Art and Work**

To produce a theory of decommodified labor suitable for the arts, one has to begin with the centrality of the commodity in organizing our understanding of the concepts of art and work, and our understanding of the more philosophical terms that organize and critique such content—namely, aesthetics and labor. In this section I demonstrate how central the commodity has been in structuring our thinking about how and why we work, and how and why we create spheres of social life seemingly antagonistic to work, such as art. In the subsequent two sections I then derive from political economy and art criticism a theory of decommodified labor.

We all know what a commodity is: a trivial thing, a thing outside us, and a thing whose looks are deceiving. Marx uses the language of vision, first glances, and awkward impressions to introduce what he calls the commodity form. He explains that “a commodity is, in the first place, an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another. The nature of such wants, whether, for instance, they spring from the stomach or from fancy, makes no difference.” And famously, for Marx, “a commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. [Yet] its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing.”²⁶ Likewise, we all know how the commodity's armature will unravel and unwind. Its simplicity and easy apprehension will soon transform into “metaphysical subtleties

and theological niceties” whose hermeneutics and historical disposition will become the sine qua non of the capitalist mode of production. Central to its subtleties is the fact that while anything may take the form of a commodity, only one action may generate the value found within it: the expenditure of human labor power.

According to Marx, capitalism’s uniqueness is found in the fact that everyone has to sell her labor to someone else as a commodity. This ceaseless, global exchange of labor power generates the social world of modernity in which we are all connected locally, nationally, globally through our commerce. This is a world in which all things, services, and actions may be and will be commodified, or purchased by someone who has paid for the right to our labor for a certain amount of time. When I speak of the commodity, as I will do throughout this book, I mean to emphasize human labor. Yet even as it comes to define our lives, the selling of labor power produces a fundamental misrecognition; namely, the value of commodities seems to be located in the things, not in the labor of the people who made them. Marx notes that such a scenario produces a world governed by “material relations between persons and social relations between things.”²⁷ Such a worldview may seem totalizing, and it is. Yet in the history of critical theory, one possible and tenuous exception to this regime has been continually noted and returned to: the capacious sphere of the production of and reaction to natural and artful stimuli known as “the aesthetic.”²⁸ Simultaneous to the emergent eighteenth-century capitalist reality that all goods and services, that some people and most property, could be sold, the category of the aesthetic emerged to circumvent commodity relations. “In a notable historical irony,” Terry Eagleton writes, “the birth of aesthetics as an intellectual discourse coincides with the period in which cultural productions [begin] to suffer the miseries and indignities of commodification.”²⁹

As with “commodity,” “aesthetic,” too, is a term in need of definition and specification. Its use varies widely across critical theory, art criticism, and philosophy where indeed it denotes radically different problems. Sometimes it is a freestanding noun—“the aesthetic”—meant to designate a social sphere of historical experience. More often though, it is used as an adjective to qualify a type of response to external stimuli: “aesthetic category,” “aesthetic experience,” and “aesthetic judgment” all hint toward this usage. At its most generic, “aesthetic” has come to mean something like “style” or “artfulness,” a use that reminds us of the term’s link to sensuousness as encountered in time and space. I will use the term rather normatively. For the sake of clarity and argumentation, I will avoid using “aesthetic” to mean art or style. I am less concerned

with aesthetic response, aesthetic judgment, and the manner in which we reflect on stimuli and synthesize those reflections as individuals, but I do refer to the literature related to this idea. My primary engagement is to understand “the aesthetic” as a sphere of cultural production and consumption that offers a fleeting respite—even for a moment, even if contingent—from the capitalist imperative to buy and sell labor, and from the philosophical imperative to think concept-based thought. A collective “horizon of imaginative cogency,” I will use “the aesthetic” as it constitutes a sphere of shared historical experience in which “serious play sublimates purposeful activity or where an illusory freedom from function provides a necessary critique from praxis.”³⁰ That may seem unfashionable, perhaps too Kantian, or indeed *wrong*—“contemporary art is post-aesthetic art,” argues Peter Osborne.³¹ Yet despite its varied usage, its seeming obsolescence after conceptual art, the aesthetic remains an “irreducible dimension” of modernity. To be organized by the aesthetic is to be shepherded by what Eagleton calls “the ideology of the aesthetic,” for better—one can realize an otherness to capitalism—or worse: the realization likely won’t be realized, but rather it will be subsumed.³²

In a different, perhaps more practical idiom, we may speak of the relation between waged work, the result of labor power sold as a commodity, and artwork, one site that prompts aesthetic judgment taking the place of nature from Hegel on. As aesthetic judgments refer to art—that to which people have a particular and a not moral or rational response—and as art often contains noncommodified labor, art gradually came to represent the autonomy contained in the aesthetic. Those characterizations are quite ideal, but we will let them stand for the moment as they allow us to enter a long historical and philosophical conversation about what it means to work for oneself or to work for someone else in order to complete the tasks that carry us from one day to the next—what critical theorists have termed “social reproduction.”³³ The making of artwork is a kind of labor that is usually taken to be qualitatively distinct from social reproduction. Marx himself specifies that “works of art are not taken into consideration [in his study of capitalism] for they are of a special nature.”³⁴ In Dave Beech’s contemporary language, art is an exceptional economic object—one that doesn’t follow economic logics.³⁵

What distinguishes this special nature of art? According to philosophical aesthetics, in a world in which we are compelled to make ourselves useful to others by selling our labor, the artwork distinguishes itself by being useless. Here we see art’s relation to “the aesthetic,” a site divorced from praxis and that can be used to critique praxis. What can one actually *do* with art? It

does not have an immediately realizable purpose. When individuals make an aesthetic judgment about art, they do so for their own reasons. Nonetheless, as anyone who has ever appreciated an artwork knows, at that moment of subjective impingement, the moment when the artwork means something to someone, it does offer a *sense* of purpose. Thus an aesthetic judgment produces, in Kant's words, a sense of what is "purposeful without purpose."³⁶ Theodor Adorno proffers that in a society where everything must have an instrumental purpose—namely, the making of money through the exchange of labor—only objects without such purpose may offer a critique of that system. Adorno claims that "insofar as a social function may be predicated of works of art, it is the function of having no function." Indeed, he insists: "Only what is useless can stand in for stunted use values."³⁷

To understand what the aesthetic is differentiated from, to understand why theorists continue to view it as perhaps decreasingly autonomous but autonomous nonetheless, one only has to compare it to the world of work. Unlike the freedom and particularity involved in aesthetic judgment, and unlike the refusal of art to be useful, almost everyone has to work in order to get their needs met. Some of us choose the work that we do, but few of us may choose not to do any work, and many of us would select other jobs were the choice a truly free one. As Michael Denning correctly notes, "the workplace remains the fundamental unfree association of civil society."³⁸ It is through that site of unfreedom, however, that most of us meet our basic needs; find our friends and our partners; and indeed orient our lives. Kathi Weeks argues more expansively that "Waged-work remains today the centerpiece of late capitalist economic systems It is not only the primary mechanism by which income is distributed, it is also . . . the basic means by which status is allocated After the family, waged-work is often the most important, if not sole, source of sociality for millions."³⁹ For whom we work, with whom we work, for how long, and under what conditions impart dimensions of the experience that rarely fall within the scope of a worker's own agency. The world of work as an imperative and a need, as a seemingly chosen structure that ultimately comes to structure us, acts in concert to compose something no longer reducible to work, but rather better conceived of as the social form of labor.⁴⁰ There is waged work and there is artwork, and the two have been long opposed in our divided social world in which art and work, labor and aesthetics, confront each other. We can now understand this binary as a constitutive disassociation: the aesthetic with its freedom and labor with its unfreedom have been long understood as oppositional categories.

That does not mean that those who produce the experiences and objects we often reflect on through aesthetic judgment (art, food, nature even) do not work or that such products cannot be purchased; rather, it means that histories and criticism of labor and histories and criticism of the aesthetic must be mapped on divergent theoretical—if not practical—trajectories, even while they follow the intimate contours of careful disarticulation and opportunistic trespass. Work conducts the worker toward an end: finishing the hour, finishing the day, perhaps even retiring, if one is lucky. Work's end-oriented and time-based structure, memorialized in Marx's famous chapter of *Capital*, "The Working Day," is too necessity-bound, too organized, and too determined to be aesthetic.⁴¹ Work has a purpose and the aesthetic produces a feeling that is "purposeful without purpose"; the working world is codified by a whole series of regulations and laws, whereas the aesthetic provides a sense of "lawfulness without the law," in Kant's words.⁴² But neither work nor the aesthetic remain static categories, and subjects and purveyors in both realms necessarily transform and expand their scope by appealing to the other. Because they are generatively opposed, these two categories must also appeal to each other for ongoing contrast and redefinition.

This tension continues to pervade art criticism, producing its own local dichotomies. For Adorno, art famously has a "double character as both autonomous and social fact." Adorno's key claim is that although art's autonomy and commodity status are in tension, each requires the other and each may express the other. Jacques Rancière narrates the same tension through the language of art history: "The mixing of art and commodity is not a discovery of the [19]60s . . . as soon as art was constituted as a specific sphere of existence, at the beginning of the 19th century, its producers began to call into question the triviality of reproduction, commerce, and commodity [and] as soon as they did so, commodities themselves began to travel in the opposite directions—to enter the realm of art."⁴³ Jacques Attali is perhaps the most succinct: "The artist was born at the same time his work went on sale."⁴⁴

Today we know this tension under the endlessly asked, although not endlessly interesting, question: *Is art a commodity?* If it is a commodity, is it of the same kind as a car or a t-shirt? If it is not a commodity, why isn't it? This kind of internally generative tension not only delimits many discussions of art; in Boris Groys's account it has become definitional of what contemporary art *is*. The question has been incorporated into the artwork itself through this rhetorical chain: Is art a commodity? Yes. Should it be? No. Therefore, the artwork will become a commodity that is self-critical of its own commodity

being; it is a commodity that wishes it were otherwise. Groys uses this opposition to construct the term “paradox-object”: “to be a paradox-object is the normative requirement implicitly applied to any contemporary artwork,” he states.⁴⁵

While tensions between art and commodified labor are both philosophically and historically rooted, they take specific forms at discrete historical moments: sometimes the distance is greater; sometimes an intimacy is produced. From the Dadaists to the situationists, from the constructivists to Fluxus, the avant-garde has long refused the distinction between the categories of art and work, arguing that the very categorical separation itself is yet another form of social unfreedom and proprietary regulation. The constructivist instruction for artists to “abandon their inquiry into art as a mode of production and enter the realm of production itself” is perhaps the most direct confrontation with this separation, but there are others.⁴⁶ Think of the situationist staging of actions on the way to work, the Duchampian nomination of mass-produced commodities to “readymade” art objects, Fluxus sales or Andy Warhol’s adoption of a terminology of production in his studio: it was *The Factory*. To this we can add dancer Yvonne Rainer’s “task-based” performances and painter Gerhard Richter’s “capitalist realism”—each reminds us of how art incorporates work into art so that art may critique work.

Yet we also see have begun to see business participate in this dialectic and make its own claims. In a fashion similar to that of artists’ attempts to overcome this division by challenging the bounds of art, employers too have offered their own ameliorations to work. The activities and durations that constitute work shift constantly even as any given employer will attempt to extract more time from its employees in exchange for less money. An appeal to the aesthetic may provide a route to doing so. For example, an employer may organize an extracurricular excursion for its employees and describe the activity as partaking in the pleasures of the aesthetic away from the demands of the working day. The term “playbor” has recently begun to circulate in the world of “social entrepreneurship” (an equally worrisome term); both denote the miscegenation of labor with its opposite: fun, equality, pleasure.⁴⁷

But surely, such employment strategies that seek to make work fun and pleasurable are only the flipside of a trend in the arts that Julia Bryan-Wilson has called “occupational realism,” her term for artists undertaking a work-like task as their artwork. She provides the example of the artist Ben Kinmont running a used bookstore and designating its management as his “art.”⁴⁸ If artists can call any work-like activity art, then why can’t employers label any

activity *not-work* and partake in their own avant-garde? And as Marina Vishmidt has so succinctly argued, “any activity that is not work can be art.”⁴⁹ The closer to work the art dwells, the more radical is its longed-for critique of this divide. Artist Daniel Bozhkov took employment as a Wal-Mart greeter and his actions while working became his piece, *Training in Assertive Hospitality*.

And finally, we see the tension between art’s freedom and work’s unfreedom in the narration of artists’ lives. Cultural critics including Andrew Ross and Sarah Brouillette have argued that the kind of insecurity that pervades today’s precarious employment landscape is only the broad reapplication of the working lives that most artists have long lived.⁵⁰ So-called new-economy companies took the rebellious, anti-institutional conception of the artist and imported it into their working worlds, not through forms of social critique that such artists espoused but in the form of the social insecurity those artists often endured. As artist Andrea Fraser has argued, “artists have become the poster children for the jobs of insecurity, flexibility, deferred economic rewards, social alienation, cultural uprooting, and geographic displacement.”⁵¹ Indeed, Jasper Bernes has noted that the same 1960s moment of “the end of art,” in Arthur Danto’s famous words, was also declared by sociologists to constitute the end of work.⁵² These twin spheres require each other for both expiration and continuation. In each of these categories—themselves staged at different levels of mediation: social sphere and individual response—we see both a *longue durée* of commodification’s structural logic and a historical specificity of its contours.

Yet for anything to exist as a commodity, much less for a commodity to become a cultural dominant, certain features must be adhered to: first, a commodity is made by wage labor; second, it is sold on the market. Foremost, that rubric describes the worker herself. Workers are made by their own labor power, a proposition fully expressed by early social contract theorists who claimed that each of us (with the usual race and gender prohibitions) has property in our own body because we work.⁵³ And the worker made by herself constitutes the basic commodity of labor power that she possesses and will sell on the market. This fact makes labor our most unique commodity, because unlike a car or a sofa, labor daily regenerates itself through the life process of the worker, and usually through women and raced and colonized subjects’ care work.

The crux of our problem is not the paradox-object, in Groys’s terms, but the paradox-subject, because the basic commodity of capitalism, the rubric of the commodity form, is human labor. As Marx asks, “Whence arises the

enigmatic form human labor takes as soon as it assumes the form of the commodity? Clearly it arises from the form itself.”⁵⁴ To ask whether art, education, medical care, land, and so on, exist as a commodity is a pointed but limiting question. For the commodity is a reflexive form: it presumes its own limits and abilities as able to be surpassed, and this is part of its basic structure. The only way out of this predicament is to leave behind the ontological question, Is said object a commodity or not?, and instead ask, How and when do humans as laborers sell their labor power in the form of a commodity? Crucially for this book, what happens when they are unable or unwilling to sell their labor in arts production?

That question leads us to the decommodification of artistic labor. The ideology of the aesthetic has been to theorize art as outside of the realm of commodification. But historically we know that art very much participates in commodity circuits. Artworks are sold; artistic labor is sold. And yet, as the possibilities to conceive of oneself as one who has artistic labor to sell have multiplied through various schemes of professionalization, labor’s share of value has been decimated. This economic fluctuation has transformed art’s philosophical claims to nonvalue. The central economic transformation that undergirds this book is located in the mid- to late 1970s, when the U.S. economy was restructured to the advantage of financial operations and to the detriment of labor.⁵⁵ While various stock indexes have since 1970 risen three and four times their value—one measure of finance—wages have remained largely stagnant. Labor’s share of social wealth has declined. Workers’ wages and forms of social welfare have shrunk and in some cases disappeared. Under such conditions, we will work more and more for less and less, and I argue that in some cases we will work for nothing at all. Nowhere is this as true as in the arts. Thus John Roberts proffers that art exists in a “second economy[, a] precarious realm of under-monetized and unwaged artistic activity that the majority of artists now operate within.”⁵⁶

Feminist theories of social reproduction, Black Marxism, queer theory—each of these traditions has investigated the necessity of unwaged labor to the perpetuation of capitalism. But those investigations have not extended to art, much less to socially engaged art, an art practice that claims to orient itself differently to the demands and confines of the aesthetic as such by treading on the grounds of material necessity, sociality, and a host of other practical concerns through its explicit engagement with the economy. I find this omission surprising. Nor has the point been made of a radical change in the claims of labor up to and including its decommodification in art generally,

even as the problem of representing labor has been fundamental to modern and contemporary art production and critique. In a claim that resonates with the Keynesian moment of the 1940s to the 1970s, and with broad-based artistic commodification, Helen Molesworth notes that “the unifying principle of the extraordinarily heterogeneous field of post WWII avant-garde art was a concern with the problematic of artistic labor.”⁵⁷

And certainly the need to address how artists’ labor has been transformed was not only a part of art practice but a part of art’s expanded field of activism. Think of the Art Workers Coalition, so active in the 1960s and 1970s, which insisted that an artwork is made by the *art worker*; or of the activist group to come out of Occupy Wall Street, “Arts & Labor”; or of the contemporary arts organization W.A.G.E. (Working Artists for a Greater Economy), which attempts to integrate artists into the cooperative economy movement.⁵⁸ Arts & Labor perform a certain substitution in their name: they make reference to the 1960s Art & Language group of British conceptual artists. If we accept their substitution, that of labor for language, then we as critics are faced with a problem similar to the one that greeted 1960s critics when they attempted to evaluate conceptual art.⁵⁹ Today, however, the shift is not from medium to concept but from concept to social practice, or in the prescient words of Raymond Williams, “from medium to social practice.”⁶⁰ Economic history, critical theory, art history and criticism, and indeed arts practitioners themselves all suggest that a change in the valuation of labor provides a much-needed site for the contemporary historicization of art’s categorical specificity.

I specify, then, that my focus will be trained on changes in both how and why we work, and how and why modes of artwork respond accordingly. The socially engaged art I read herein authors a demand for social reorganization, for economic equality, for education, for space and influence, and indeed for access to the power to transform social relations. And it is precisely in socially engaged art’s turn toward social function that it offers a site for engagement with the aesthetic itself. That function, and art’s seeming abandonment of its autonomy, I will argue, is itself grounded in labor’s decommodification. Engaging with the hermeneutics of the commodity form, and its constitutive obfuscation of labor in particular, Adorno asserts that “the autonomy of art is inconceivable without the covering up of work.”⁶¹ It is the commodity form and the wage itself that conceal labor. But in our moment, and with regard to artistic labor in particular, the wage has begun to disappear. We must update our understandings of labor power sold as a commodity.

Thus I follow Stewart Martin, who argues that to truly appreciate the rela-

tion between art and commodification, “new forms of commodification need to be examined as the heteronomous scene of new formations of autonomous art; [and] new forms of art need to be examined as the contradictions of new formations of commodification.”⁶² Throughout this book I argue that the decommodification of artistic labor offers a site to examine how a “new formation of commodification” responds to and reconfigures artistic practice and its critique.⁶³ Decommodified labor as it appears in socially engaged art allows us to approach anew art’s use and uselessness and work’s obsolescence and instrumentality.⁶⁴ My interest in the “uselessness” or “purposelessness” of the aesthetic is located within its schematic difference from the world of labor and value found within the commodity, and I will use this distinction to elaborate my idea of decommodified labor as both a political economic and aesthetic category.

Yet some socially engaged artists themselves have militated against this precise tradition of “the aesthetic.” Think of artist and *arte util* founder Tania Bruguera, whose work I consider in chapter 3. In 2012 Bruguera issued a great polemic that was also a performance: “It’s time to restore [Marcel Duchamp’s] urinal to the restroom,” she claimed. Bruguera indeed accomplished this restoration in the men’s restroom of New York City’s Queens Museum, with her own signature replacing that of R. Mutt. This action became a site for Bruguera to elaborate her concept of “Useful Art.” She states that “Useful Art is a way of working with aesthetic experiences that focuses on the implementation of art in society where art’s function is no longer to be a space for ‘signaling’ problems, but the place from which to create the proposal and implementation of possible solutions.”⁶⁵ How do we square such an assertion with a legacy of aesthetics, and more importantly, why should we try to do so? What economic conditions make such a useful aesthetics possible? Have we been down this path before? Perhaps. Remember Adorno’s claim: “All efforts to restore art by giving it a social function . . . are doomed.”⁶⁶

The site to elaborate this discussion is located in labor itself. My labor, as an object, cannot be separated from me as subject. If I cannot exchange my labor, that impossibility does not render it useless, particularly in a post-artisanal society where independent production is as outdated as homemade cutlery. Rather, I now have a form of labor power that should be commodified, or sold to someone else, but that I cannot sell. My labor has been decommodified. Such labor, then, may be seen as a kind of doubling and undoing both of the wage form and of the ideology of the aesthetic that developed in ongoing contradistinction to that form. At the risk of being overly schematic, let us

say this: With the decommodification of labor, we no longer critique from useless to exchangeable. Rather, we look at that which cannot be exchanged, labor, and how that labor might urge us to reconceive of the aesthetic. Decommodified labor holds together two antinomies in a reorganized fashion: unlike labor, which has been understood as ceaselessly exchangeable for a wage, art has conversely been understood as powerfully useless. Now, with a new generation of artists, their artistic labor is not exchangeable, and their work is newly purposeful.

Theorizing Decommodified Labor:

Neoliberalism, Real Subsumption, and the Claims of Labor

In 1972 the *Wall Street Journal* ran an article entitled “The Quality of Work,” which took note of current labor trends and introduced to its readers a new style of management that had begun to be referred to as “job enlargement.” Employees would be encouraged to participate broadly in aspects of work beyond their immediate, assigned responsibilities, thereby ensuring that “there’s never a dull moment,” in the laconic phrasing of one interviewee. In his classic 1974 study of twentieth-century labor processes, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*, Harry Braverman makes reference to that article and notes that it is one instance of work being degraded through its opposite, what he calls the seeming “humanization of work.”⁶⁷

In 2017 the *Journal* ran a similar article surveying work trends, this one entitled “The End of Employees.”⁶⁸ While the first article contains, as Braverman notes, some equivocation, there can be no mistaking the message of the contemporary one: continual employment has been retired. Economic historian Bethany Moreton’s recent article has a similar title with an added historical arc: “The Rise and Fall of the Job.”⁶⁹ Capital will still extract surplus value through the absorption of workers’ time—that constant cannot and will not change. Workers may work more or less; they may be unionized or not; they may capture a greater or lesser percentage of the total surplus; they may have expanded or contracted add-ons such as health insurance and retirement. But the social organization of the basic appropriation—more time for capital than for oneself—will be historically specific, and there is no reason to think it will take the form of a “job” or a “career.”

To approach the emergence of these changes is to return to the 1970s. It is there we find that the Keynesian compact—in the United States, the understanding that labor would get more of a share of social wealth in exchange for a less radical labor politics; that the U.S. dollar would set a global benchmark

and be fixed to gold—began to falter. The reasons for its demise are many and for us, less important: as Keynes himself famously said of economic durability, “in the long run, we are all dead.”⁷⁰ In the short run, however, the 1970s would produce shifts in how work was represented, critiqued, and experienced. Union membership began its long decline. Wages began their long stagnation. Faced with the fallout from Keynesianism’s demise, the Federal Reserve chairman Paul Volcker foresaw a new path: The federal government would “break unions and empty factories.”⁷¹ The United States would embrace a new, finance-led regime, one whose radical initiation became known as the “Volcker Shock.”

Indeed, since the 1970s “something very fundamental seems to have changed in the way capitalism works.”⁷² Thus begins Giovanni Arrighi’s beguiling investigation into the *longue durée* of capital’s financialization. Arrighi’s text periodizes those financial changes but it does not explore how such changes have reorganized critical theories of labor since the 1970s. Braverman’s text remains the last real Marxist treatment of capitalist labor processes delivered in a language of labor itself. Written in the early 1970s, the text indeed indexes not only the “degradation of work” but also a transformation in the language for analyzing it.

While the problem of labor has slowly worked itself into art discourses, labor as a site for investigation of the economy has receded from critical theory.⁷³ Perhaps this trend began to change with the 2011 publication of Fredric Jameson’s *Representing Capital* and of *Marxism and the Critique of Value* in 2014; if so, I hope to contribute to such a shift.⁷⁴ As Geoff Mann notes, twentieth-century economic thought itself contains a “discursive shift” in the analysis of labor as it transitions from a focus on “poverty to unemployment to inequality.” Keynesianism responded to the scare of widespread “poverty”; it sought as its object the management of “unemployment.” In its wake, particularly after the 2007–8 credit crisis, “the object of political economy became inequality.”⁷⁵ Even in this trajectory we see the conceptual diminishment of labor. “Why do we work so long and hard?” Kathi Weeks very plainly, if not plainly, asks.⁷⁶ A question so basic often lacks an answer. Instead Weeks notes how “surprising” it is that the questions themselves are so rarely asked. But is it surprising? Surely it cannot be a coincidence that institutionalized labor and critical theories of labor began to wane at the same time. In recent critical theory, labor as a concept has been diminished in Foucault-based biopolitical discourse, in the rise of neoliberal thought, and indeed, in certain stands of Marxism too, as finance has assumed a more structuring role.

In this section, I derive a theory of decommodified labor, and I proffer that such labor offers a way to think labor after financialization, a way to think the present in both its aesthetic and economic valences. I show how the appearance and form of decommodified labor may be located within, and may interrupt, what I take to be the two dominant theorizations of our economic present: the rise of neoliberalism as an antilabor discourse and the Marxist claim of the real subsumption of labor to capital as a way to maintain labor's importance. Throughout the book I will continually return to these two broad approaches. Both theories mark a change in the understanding of labor: neoliberalism obviates labor; real subsumption argues for its continued relevance and possible intensification. I am using both terms generically in this introduction, although I have written about them specifically elsewhere, and indeed, in each chapter I return to certain aspects of them. Neoliberalism and Marxism might seem to be an odd juxtaposition: socially engaged art and neoliberalism? In fact, all sorts of left-inflected discourses, from union campaigns to the *Nation*, to art criticism, to artists themselves, regularly borrow from neoliberal discourse—whether in reference to “stakeholders” or with claims of “leveraging,” whether extolling “human capital” or citing other forms of “self-investment.” That should strike the reader as a bit odd. Arrighi is right: something has changed.

The first analytic I will return to throughout—that of neoliberalism—has been made popular not by economic neoliberals such as Friedrich Hayek and Gary Becker but rather by Foucault's readings of them. Within economically oriented critical and cultural theory, we have seen the transformation of Foucault's attack on a Marxist-derived critical theory of labor under the rubric of “neoliberalism” transform into perhaps the most widely accepted cross-disciplinary account of our economic present.⁷⁷ Because part of the impetus of Foucault's original challenge to a Marxist account of the economy was to undercut the conceptual leverage of labor as a historical and subjective force, we should be unsurprised that one of the effects of the broad acceptance of his account of neoliberalism has been a move away from labor as a conceptual orientation. Foucault writes: “I don't think we can simply accept the traditional Marxist analysis, which assumes that, labor being man's concrete essence, the capitalist system is what transforms labor into profit, into hyperprofit or surplus value.” And then, crucially, he continues: “The fact is [that] capitalism penetrates much more deeply into our existence.”⁷⁸ In the neoliberal account, subjects cease to be “laborers” and become investors in their own capabilities, now understood as a form of “human capital.” Yet Foucault's interpretation,

so often hailed as prescient, was also descriptive: the role of organized labor in capitalist democracies, its ability to shape public conversations and to participate in developing a social infrastructure, was, at the time of Foucault's writing, beginning its decline. Coinciding with the end of Keynesianism and traceable to the 1970s, in this scheme, labor becomes an obsolete concept.

The second analytic for understanding of our economic present is found in Marxist critical theory's understanding of the changing referent of labor in terms of an analysis which it called "the real subsumption of labor to capital." This construction likewise captures a transformation of labor and is likewise traceable to theoretical flourishing in the 1970s, as questions about the potential for class struggle and the limits of "the factory" emerged.⁷⁹ Originally a concept Marx himself used to describe large-scale industrialization and mechanization, "real subsumption" has become somewhat of a metaphor for the ability of capitalism to progress, to intensify, to extract more, and to encompass all. There is no "outside" here; capital has no other. Marx himself distinguishes formal and real subsumption as based on a move from relative to absolute surplus value. In a regime with a goal of extracting absolute surplus value, the working day can be extended to increase profit. But that increase has an end, obviously, and after its limit has been reached, a regime to extract relative surplus value takes over. There, labor may be intensified through processes internal to capitalism. As Moishe Postone explains, in the "latter stage, the determinations of the valorization process are materialized in the labor process: direct human labor materially becomes the object of production."⁸⁰

For some, real subsumption is a historical category: first formal, then real. For others, it is a logical category: these two models of capitalist appropriation are always available and shift back and forth. Perhaps the theorists who have done the most to turn real subsumption into an optic for contemporary analysis are the Italian workerists (those associated with *operaismo*). For Antonio Negri, Silvia Federici, and Mario Tronti, value extraction is hardly limited to waged work or financial schemes, and the subjects who might transform our social structures far exceed those found in unions, syndicates, and so on. Labor, the value-generating result of the sale of human labor power, is understood, through their interpretation of real subsumption, to have expanded and to refer to a whole host of human activities outside formal places of work. The conceptual specificity of "labor" loses some of its critical purchase in this tradition, too. But it does not diminish; it expands. As Jason Read explains in his wonderful reading of Negri, "capital no longer simply exploits labor, understood as the physical capacity to transform objects, but puts to work the

capacities to create and communicate that traverse social relations . . . with real subsumption . . . there is no relationship that cannot be transformed into a commodity.”⁸¹ Tronti goes further: “The social character of production has been extended to the point that the entire society now functions as a mode of production.”⁸²

The direction in which some strands of Negri’s thought have progressed—outside of the law of value—is not one that I will follow. Indeed, Negri and Hardt ultimately end up borrowing from Foucault what I would argue are certain neoliberal tendencies. But we need not track those down now. Rather, what we must note is that throughout the 1970s, as the Keynesian moment drew to a close, multiple theorists from various and conflicting traditions argued for a new understanding of the relation between capital and labor. The emerging neoliberal Foucauldian tradition and competing Marxist traditions, then, isolate a crucial shift in the category of labor: what constitutes it, what it refers to, and what it may be used to motivate.

These changes are indexed at different levels of abstraction. For Foucault, the change is categorical, prescient, and normative: labor will cease to be an operative epistemological category for the self-understanding of social reproduction. When Foucault writes that labor is dissolved “into capital and income,” his incipient anti-Marxism has led him to make a remarkable statement.⁸³ Namely, the self-narration of a subject as one who is compelled to sell his or her labor under less than free conditions has expired. Now the subject will understand herself as a possessor of “human capital” who seeks a return on her investment. Through the problem of real subsumption, theorists investigated how accumulation could transpire through and after the Keynesian wage with its unionized, stable employment and currency. These theorists used real subsumption to make crucial addenda to conceptions of who works and how.⁸⁴ Silvia Federici’s work on the constitutive relation between the unwaged and waged has been foundational to this discussion.⁸⁵ Paolo Virno’s discussion of general intellect follows from this moment, as does Hardt and Negri’s discussion of immaterial labor, “social labor,” and ultimately “immeasurable value.”

Yet some correlation may be located between the conceptual staging of real subsumption and neoliberalism. For Read, neoliberalism “is a discourse and practice that is aimed to curtail the powers of labor that are distributed across all of society—at the exact moment in which all of social existence becomes labor, or potential labor, neoliberalism constructs the image of a society of capitalists, of entrepreneurs.” Reading a similar history, George Caffentzis rejects

“immeasurable value” but does cite Hardt and Negri to note that, “in the same moment when theory no longer sees labor, labor has everywhere become the common substance. The theoretical emptying of the problem of labor corresponds to its maximum pregnancy as the substance of human action across the globe.”⁸⁶ As many of us come to work longer, harder, and for less money, the neoliberal theory of the economy arrives on the scene to declare an end to labor.

Furthermore, both constructs challenge the wage as the rhetorical and material centerpiece of capitalist organization and subjectivity. Indeed, they both respond to the end of the Keynesian compact.⁸⁷ When human potentiality is renarrated as human capital, all actions may be reconfigured as both an investment opportunity and hence, as a choice and as a site of “freedom.” When laboring life is reconceived as real subsumption, one is never “off the clock,” because all activities have the ability to produce surplus value; that is, all activities might be labor. In Foucault’s scheme, there is no labor; after real subsumption, all is labor. In Foucault’s scheme, the investor of human capital might turn anything (a crime, an illness, a marriage) into a site of risk-based profit; in real subsumption, capital might turn anything (an email, a fantasy, a nap) into a site where surplus value is generated.

Within the conceptual space between these two traditions and the historical realities they index, I want to suggest a configuration of value in which the wage is diminished but the formal organization of work—its rhythms, commitments, and narratives—remain. This I call *decommodified labor*. Already in its terminology, “decommodified labor” may appear paradoxical. “Labor,” as opposed to work, already *is* a commodity; labor implies the incorporation of work into capitalism. Why wouldn’t “decommodified labor” simply be labor power—that with which humans are endowed—before it is sold? Why route labor power through a commodity chain only to then claim an exception to that chain? The answer to such questions is that with decommodified labor the commodity chain is still in place, as are the presumptions of wage labor and the infrastructure of associated benefits and losses, but the wage itself is either refused, rejected, or deemed incommensurate with the work. Decommodified labor may be understood as one experience of real subsumption. On the one hand, we can’t stop working; everything seems to be able to produce a profit. On the other hand, labor that is waged has been in retreat. We can’t stop working and we can’t seem to get paid for the work that we do. Enter neoliberalism, under whose logic wagelessness may be narrated as a failure of self-investment: it’s not that one didn’t get paid, it’s that one’s investment did not produce the desired return.

Decommodification comes to us from the social sciences, particularly political science, international development, and economic sociology, where it has a flat and often uncomplicated theoretical history. If commodification denotes the sale of an object or process on the market, then decommodification implies the circumscription of that sale. And because commodification often, though not always—and certainly not always deservedly—has pejorative connotations attached to it, decommodification is understood to constitute a better state of affairs. Gøsta Esping-Andersen, whose book *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* inaugurated the term in its current critical capacity, claims that “the concept [of decommodification] refers to the degree to which individuals, or families, can uphold a socially acceptable living independent of market participation.”⁸⁸

The “three worlds” of welfare capitalism outline the actual degree to which this independence is possible in capitalist democracies. Scandinavian countries circumscribe market forces most forcefully in the provision of healthcare, education, and housing; thus, their version of decommodification offers the most protection to their citizens from the caprices and deprivations of the market. The Anglosphere of England, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand somewhat circumscribe the commodification of these provisions but offer a lesser degree of protection. And the United States permits the highest degree of commodification of basic services, and thus its social sphere ensures the highest degree of precarity for its denizens. At its most immediate and concrete articulation, as the scholar John Vail argues, “decommodification is conceived as any political, social, or cultural process that reduces the scope and influence of the market in everyday life.”⁸⁹

While introducing the basic concept of decommodification, these theorizations have the additional force of underscoring that commodification is the most fundamental physical, social, and imaginative infrastructure of our present. Decommodification presumes commodification; it does not prestage it. And for me, decommodification carries more modest ambitions than communization or than “commoning” precisely because it recognizes the intransigence of commodification. In this sense, any homology between decommodified labor and the commons seems misguided. Once in a commons, uncompensated labor would no longer be decommodified because the scene of commodification itself would not exist; there would be no labor but rather, as Marx says, “really free working.”⁹⁰ We would not say that Zuccotti Park was decommodified during Occupy Wall Street; we would say it was commoned. Conversely, Bruce Carruthers suggests that in the wake of the 2007–8 credit crisis, the federal

government “decommodified” many securities. This decommodification preserved their value but halted their circulation until the market could bear their exchange at stable prices.⁹¹

In the specific case of decommodified labor, the status of the commodity is preserved, but its circulation is halted and its possibility for exchange is foreclosed. The duration of that foreclosure varies. Child labor, for example, has been decommodified in most capitalist democracies for some time. It was for centuries an important source of both waged and unwaged labor. In the United States it has been illegal since 1938, and now very few children in the United States are workers.⁹² Yet children still possess the ability to be laborers; were restrictions on child labor lifted tomorrow, we would again have child-workers.

If decommodified labor is labor that fails to return a wage even though it requires expending energies and affects in a scene indistinguishable from formal employment, then we can locate some analogue of it in both neoliberal and real subsumption–based understandings of the economy. Perhaps one cannot “invest” one’s human capital because the market for investment is overcapitalized. What, then, when one is forced to hold onto one’s human capital for longer than one would like? Or because one is always working, perhaps the wage derives from other, indistinguishable work than that for which one is supposedly being paid. In each scenario, we might speak of some equivalent to decommodified labor.

As I move through the chapters, I examine how the appearance of decommodified labor in art both borrows from and critiques the expanded labor theorized in real subsumption and the forms of investment and pricing theorized in neoliberalism. In chapter 1 I look at the tension between student-artists not being able to sell their labor and being encouraged to invest their human capital in their education. In chapter 2 I examine how artists create alternative economic institutions in order to correct a decline in, or a simple lack of, artists’ wages. In chapter 3 I explore how animals have been positioned as artists as a way to represent the devaluation of artistic labor. Finally, in chapter 4 I analyze how artists who work with children sometimes allow children to be “investments in the future” because they cannot work, and other times put children to work in a similar manner to how artists work—namely, for free.

Although many artists and critics are invested in the idioms of neoliberalism—whether knowingly or not—it is within the analysis of real subsumption in which decommodified labor in art seems most germane. Even as Negri himself has moved beyond the construct of real subsumption, indeed

of labor, I remain interested in some of Negri's explications of what happens to the temporal and spatial coordinates of work after real subsumption: How do we mark the sale of time to and from the worker, that which is the basis of the wage? The worker sells a quality (her labor power) to the capitalist for a quantity (the time for which she will work). But with real subsumption, capital loses one of its key metrics: "the working day"—or perhaps "the hour," "the clock," or any other of the metaphors through which exists the ability of capital to mark the relation between time and value—no longer possesses indexical meaning. Negri introduces a theory of tautological time and explains that "the tautology takes an intensive form, exemplified by the inability to distinguish measure from substance . . . [and] the inability to [distinguish] the totality of life from the totality from which this life is woven."⁹³

When all life is work, when should we get paid and for what? For showing up at work? For the time it takes to travel there? For making it back home? For (not) sleeping through the night? Artist-led campaigns such as "Wages for Facebook" contend that if value is extracted everywhere, then people should be compensated for everything.⁹⁴ That demand might seem utopian, but it does hint at some of the affective registers that real subsumption engenders: a feeling of both entitlement (Facebook should be ours) and dispossession (no time is my own). "When the entire time of life has become the time of production, who measures whom?" asks Negri. Not only Negri's tautology should be remembered here but Federici's, too, which is expressed as a contradiction: "wages for housework" are at the same time "wages against housework."

In art, decommodified labor reveals that the tautological time of real subsumption has been captured and transformed within the space of the aesthetic. Decommodified labor appears as a strange pause in accumulative temporality. It was always the possibility of nonwork that conceptually sustained not only the autonomy of art but also the category of the aesthetic itself. Now that time of work and nonwork must be relocated. With decommodified labor, some of the contingencies of commodification disappear; a new time is found and a new art created.

Economies of Art Criticism

The past ten years have seen the beginnings of the canonization of socially engaged art through figures including Theaster Gates and a renewed critical interest in the ontology of the art object itself. From Mark Bradford's representation of the United States at the 2017 Venice Biennale to *October's* roundtable on "The Social Artwork," across disciplines the various historical

contingencies of art's autonomy have come to the fore.⁹⁵ *FIELD*, a new journal founded by art historian Grant Kester, emerged in 2014 to foster conversations about “the remarkable proliferation of artistic practices devoted to political, social and cultural transformation.”⁹⁶ As art historians including Claire Bishop, Shannon Jackson, Kester, Gregory Sholette, Julia Bryan-Wilson, and Yates McKee have sought to distinguish socially engaged art, they have largely turned to a political register to do so, appealing to Jacques Rancière and Alain Badiou, among others. Conversely, critical theorists including Dave Beech, John Roberts, Nicholas Brown, Jasper Bernes, and Marina Vishmidt have produced, using the works of Marx, Keynes, the Frankfurt school, and Bourdieu, a corpus that positions economics, not politics, as the ultimate horizon of artistic legibility. Their critical concern is not necessarily the emergence of socially engaged art per se, but rather how the aesthetic as distinct from the economy may be theorized in different regimes of accumulation. For these critics, politics is understood as an always already economic expression.

This divergence between the political and the economic has produced a critical body of work that is organized through a certain displacement. Those critics who do offer sustained attention to socially engaged art—work that I believe makes a fundamentally economic claim—largely do so through a political register. Critics oriented toward the economic have not tended to engage this work as fully, preferring more formally inventive and formally legible traditions including photography and conceptual art. Critics whose orientation is political (Bishop, Jackson, Kester, Sholette) often use “neoliberalism” as a kind of shorthand for an socioeconomic present in which capitalism is understood as more pernicious and omnipresent. Those who engage art economically (Brown, Roberts, Beech, Vishmidt) might use neoliberalism to periodize capitalism as contemporary, but they use real subsumption as their analytic in order to insist on the economic specificity of capital and labor. Meanwhile, many artists have as one of their own guiding narratives that their work is somehow “anticommodity.” Cumulatively, when we try to think art and the economy together, what do we have? “A morass, to be sure,” in the wise words of Jasper Bernes.⁹⁷

In this section, then, I offer a methodological argument for the economically oriented interpretation of socially engaged art. We must ask: When should the economic be thematized? How should it be periodized? When should we rely on static or formalized economic norms? When should the economy be rendered as empirical and when should it be rendered in more broadly metaphorical strokes? It matters on what level of abstraction these

questions are staged. For example, whether socially engaged art best represents decommodified labor because performing art will always be less commodifiable than fine art, or whether decommodified labor in socially engaged art appears legible as art only because the aesthetic has been transformed by the inflation of finance and the deflation of labor are very different questions. In attempting to maintain a categorical specificity throughout, I endorse, and try to remedy, Stewart Martin's contention that "institutional theories of art and the 'artworld' . . . have so far been developed at a level of generality that fails to register the specificity of capitalist forms."⁹⁸

My concern in this book is organized around a transformation within waged labor. Wages, one metric of the sale of human labor power for a period of time, have seen a steady decline if not slow evacuation over the past forty years.⁹⁹ My specific concern, then, traces the resulting effects when that allotment of time does not generate money, a transaction that subtends decommodified labor. Methodologically, this construction needs to be located at multiple levels of abstraction as it moves between art and economy: it should be thematized, it should redound with an empirical specificity, but that empiricism should resonate with the infrastructure of the commodity form, itself generative of the aesthetic. That level of specificity might then undergird a periodization.

As I will use the term, "decommodified labor" indexes an empirical reality but it cannot be reduced to one. From cultural work in museums and galleries to reality television, to professional sports, to the leagues of "volunteers" who manage schools and hospitals, to firefighters, to prisoners—millions of Americans freely and through force work without pay. *Fortune* magazine explored the situation in a 2014 article, wondering, "Unpaid Jobs: The New Normal?"¹⁰⁰ Using the feudal language of "serfs" to describe workers, that article detailed the pros and cons of unpaid jobs from management's perspective while noting how "normal" their presence had become. This avenue of investigation follows a series of books published in the 1990s that predicted work would be rendered obsolete through technology—a prognostication that has not come to pass. Work will never be rendered obsolete. Being paid for it might.

Because it is so pervasive in arts and culture, decommodified labor has routinely been figured by artists themselves, both in their performance documentation and in the work they produce. The socially engaged artist Ernesto Pujol has commented very plainly that "the theatrics of cheap even free orchestrated local labor often try to pass for [collaborative art]."¹⁰¹ Artists have responded

to this reality in a variety of ways: they have attempted to form unions, institutions, and departments and programs in universities in order to agitate for paid labor.¹⁰² Sometimes this agitation remains adjunct to their art; other times, such agitation becomes their art. Thus some of these practitioners conceive of themselves as “artists,” or artist-activists.

Critics have widely noted this reality of artists integrating labor activism into their work. Using terms such as “collaborative labor,” “dialogic labor,” “delegated performance,” and “dark matter,” art critics and historians have produced concepts that resonate with decommodified labor. Grant Kester’s wonderful book *The One and the Many*, for example, locates “a series of elisions in recent critical theory that have led to a privileging of the un-worked and simultaneous over the labored and durational.” To amend this, Kester “outlines a new framework for the analysis of collaborative art practice rooted in the reinterpretation of labor.”¹⁰³ Shannon Jackson, with her theorization of what she calls a “de-autonomized aesthetic,” asks that we understand that the autonomy of art has always been a social fiction, requiring labor from many groups, however invisible such labor may be.¹⁰⁴ Perhaps most well known is Claire Bishop’s isolation of what she calls “delegated performance,” which accounts for how outsourcing various labors within the artwork changes what that artwork is.¹⁰⁵ For Gregory Sholette, the art world comprises “dark matter,” a mass of uncompensated, undifferentiated energies, desires, and ambitions that render visible, and profitable, a miniscule number of “famous” artists. Lane Relyea’s 2013 *Your Everyday Art World* offers a slightly different approach as he investigates “how today’s network paradigm lends itself to a neo-entrepreneurial mythology about volunteerism and ‘do it yourself’ (DIY) agency.”¹⁰⁶

But some critics do use the term “decommodify” even if they do not connect it to labor. Julia Bryan-Wilson quite plainly states that “[al]though artists conventionally make highly valued objects, many art workers . . . of the early 1970s vigilantly attempted to decommodify their work via conceptual and performance art.”¹⁰⁷ If we pair this comment with her wonderful book *Art Workers*, in which she suggests that “the late 1960s and early 1970s were marked by an international mobilization of artists seeking to validate their efforts as work; that is, as effortful, productive, and managed by economic constraints imposed by subjugating ruling-class interests,” we begin to see the emergence of a critique of artistic labor.¹⁰⁸ Instead of investigating such “work” alongside the commodity form, however, Bryan-Wilson has introduced the term “occupational realism” to designate art in which “the realm

of waged labor (undertaken to sustain oneself economically) and the realm of art (pursued, presumably, for reasons that might include financial gain, but that also exceed financialization and have aesthetic, personal, and/or political motivations) collapse, becoming indistinct or intentionally inverted.” Here, she continues, “the job becomes the art and the art becomes the job.”¹⁰⁹

Bryan-Wilson’s “occupational realism” offers an almost perfect conceptual inversion of “decommodified labor” as it appears in the arts. In her scheme, most work can be artwork because so little art-based work can be labor (that is, sold as a commodity). In my scheme, because the space of art as labor maintains its integrity, because the work keeps happening in a shadow of wage labor, because it could have been commodified, I suggest that we understand it as decommodified. Indeed, one can see here a recapitulation of the discussion between Marxist “real subsumption” and Foucauldian “neoliberalism” I offered in the previous section: Bryan-Wilson offers the neoliberal version in that labor itself disappears; I offer the version in which labor maintains some categorical integrity.

That conceptual disappearance of labor reflects more than anything a neoliberal view of the world, one likely unintended. In insisting on the importance of labor as a continuing analytic, I follow John Roberts, who rightly argues in *The Intangibilities of Form* that “we need . . . a rereading of capital that captures labour for aesthetic theory.”¹¹⁰ Roberts then tracks how “artists labour, and how these forms of labour [are] indexed to art’s relationship to the development of general social technique (the advanced level of technology and science as it is expressed in the technical conditions of social reproducibility).”¹¹¹ His more recent *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde* continues this critique by redefining the avant-garde as “the recurring name we give to the conflict between free artistic labour and capital.”¹¹²

In this book, my name for that conflict is decommodified labor, but other names exist. And indeed, there are other stagings of the conflict in which either capital or “free artistic labour” assumes from the outset a stronger role. In his “The Work of Art in the Age of its Real Subsumption under Capital,” Nicholas Brown states that today we have entered a moment in which “whatever is genuinely inassimilable in artistic labor [ceases] to make any difference.”¹¹³ Under such conditions, of course, the category of art itself might vanish, but—and Brown is absolutely correct to note it—there is no historical reason that art must remain an operable category. Yet still it does. Brown appeals to Pierre Bourdieu’s “field of restricted production,” a nonmarket site where art might still flourish and in fact will gravitate toward more formal

concerns. Noting the dialectical nature of “real subsumption,” Brown notes that its seeming totality will wax and wane. Steven Shaviro takes yet another route to arrive at a similarly foreshortened moment, but he designates aesthetic judgment, not art, as the possible casualty. Appealing to a moment of generalized capitalist production, Shaviro explains: “It’s not just that sensations and feelings are trivialized when they are packaged for sale . . . it’s also that the two most crucial qualities of the aesthetic according to Kant—that it is disinterested, and that it is non-cognitive—are made to vanish.”¹¹⁴

While I claim that decommodified labor is the necessary category for analyzing and periodizing socially engaged art, I am not the first to consider decommodification itself as a paradigm of arts production. Dave Beech, in his recent and sweeping *Art and Value*, indeed turns to the work of Esping-Andersen to consider, if to ultimately reject, whether art should be considered a form of decommodification. To the commodities of housing, medical care, education as potentially decommodifiable, Beech suggests that in a Keynesian welfare state, art too could be understood through such a lens. Art too needs a public subsidy. But Beech ultimately decides that art never was a commodity. And if it were not one, how could it be decommodified? He argues that art may “be more accurately understood as preservation, conservation and expansion of a precommodified sphere of culture.”¹¹⁵ Beech suggests that “art has been commodified without being commodified.”

In moving through modern economic thought’s consideration of art, Beech spans a history from Adam Smith to neoclassical theories to the neoliberals themselves and concludes that art is “exceptional.” No real economic home for it exists. I would add that any single commodity studied closely would probably be found to be exceptional (although not in the manner that art is) because much economic thought relies on normative categories that are not applicable to particular commodities. Think of “oil” as it plays the role of exceptional commodity in Timothy Mitchell’s book *Carbon Democracy*.¹¹⁶ “Cotton” does something similar in Sven Beckert’s *Empire of Cotton*. But I would also suggest that, in a study with as much breadth as Beech’s, there should be some consideration of how the economic categories themselves might be seen differently as a result of being criticized through an artistic lens. Indeed, this reconsideration of economic categories as a result of artistic analysis is something few studies attempt, preferring instead to let the economy be a benchmark against which art is measured.

Each of these theorists seeks to locate in art what Roberts labels “a dissensual space within the heart of wage labor,” to which Roberts himself assigns

the term “second economy.” I expand on their work by specifying the kind contemporary artistic production that allows such a space to be realized both in and as socially engaged art. I seek to include a multiplicity of economic theories that may be understood as both symptoms and diagnoses of what this art’s capture of our economic present reveals by being attentive to how neoliberalism’s claim of the end of labor and real subsumption’s claim of the expansion of labor appear in and may be mediated by art itself. Doing so not only allows for a better understanding of the limits and possibilities of economically oriented arts criticism; it allows for the possibility of art itself to contribute to the economic specificity of those conversations. It will not do to read only from economics *to* art. We must be able to read from art *to* economics as well.