

Leigh Claire La Berge: Wages Against Artwork – Decommodified Labour and the Claims of Socially Engaged Art

It is not true that artists make no money because there is no money to be made in the arts. In April 2019, Arts Council England reported that the arts and culture industry grew by £390m in the fiscal year 2018/19. That most artists (and art critics) are unable to survive off their wages in the UK is clearly part of a culture of nonpayment within the arts. It is also a global problem in which the art world is perceived as an autonomous commentator on human rights, but is also an active participant involved in the extraction of labour from a large, lower-waged class which yields capital for the wealthy few.

Genuine attempts to pay an artist for their labour reveal a dogged unwillingness and near impossibility within our current structure to fairly remunerate an artist, including the simple adoption of an hourly wage for the preparation of an exhibition or performance. Despite this, and sometimes because of it, artists have found more personal freedom through seeking ways to function without the use of money.

Leigh Claire La Berge's *Wages Against Artwork* looks at both of these artist-led strategies: efforts to calculate and remunerate what is really owed to the art labourer, particularly the art student who goes into debt to gain entry into the art labour force, but also instances in which professional artists decommodify artistic labour through skill swaps, time banks and what La Berge dubs 'playing-at-work'.

Wages Against Artwork applies Marxist theory to examine the function of value and waged labour as sites of profit in the art world, a key concept for La Berge being how 'decommodification' is understood as one of voluntary relinquishment or forced exclusion of an object or service being exchanged for a wage. For La Berge, a particularly fertile field in which to carry out this analysis is socially engaged art. She discusses projects such as Caroline Woolard's *OurGoods*, 2008–16, and *Trade Schools*, 2009–19, both of which produced 'institutions as art' in which bartering networks functioned solely through skill swapping or trade, so that money was neither earned nor expended.

La Berge also examines artworks by artists who have self-defined as socially engaged in some way and who use unpaid labourers as a material element in their work, an example being the labour of the horses which feature in Janis Kounellis's 1969 work *Untitled (12 Horses)* – here the adage 'like a work-horse' resonates. Further, in our current wage-based society, animals can be exchanged for money and used as money but they cannot earn it. La Berge's exploration of nonpayment in this case is pinned to the fact that 'animals in art come to us as already mediated by their aesthetic wagelessness and their ability to be stand-ins for the art worker whose socially engaged art aims at a redistributive aesthetic'.

La Berge's analysis of decommodification in the art world is supported by her synthesis of two bodies of research. In the first, art historians such as Julia Bryan-Wilson and Claire Bishop display a critical orientation on socially engaged art that is described in the *Wages* introduction as 'political', wherein capitalism is understood as an omnipresent aspect of our socio-economic present but not necessarily the direct subject of

analysis. Bryan-Wilson and Bishop both focus on the social function of artworks, which for La Berge does not adequately address the economy of how those works function. Similarly, the work of critical theorists such as Dave Beech and Marina Vishmidt on the circulation of value have largely engaged with art's economic specificity, but for La Berge this focus on the proposition of the aesthetic object as distinct from the economy (and thus society) could do more to directly address the emergence of artworks which expressly purport to engage socially with the economic system from which art is supposedly exempt. La Berge's synthesis of these two critical orientations is an exploration of how the aesthetic can actually 'make, not simply reflect, economic claims'.

What La Berge brings to the conversation around artist wages and the economic function of artworks is an effort to situate wage exploitation (the unpaid gallery intern and low-valued jobs) or the deliberate refusal of wages (skill swapping) or the inability to assign a wage (animals, children) within an analysis of how wagelessness structures the conditions through which a socially engaged artwork can be made, including how the conditions of pervasive wagelessness are represented in socially engaged artworks. Why would the socially engaged artwork be a useful point of analysis? Well, as 'socially engaged' tends to signal an attempt on the part of the artist to effect meaningful and positive change in the society in which they live, it is certainly illuminating that many of the socially engaged artworks discussed could only be executed through the use of unpaid labour. An example is Koki Tanaka's interviews with children for his 2016 Liverpool Biennial work *Provisional Studies: Action #6, 1985 School Students' Strike*. La Berge withholds judgement on these instances of decommodification. She doesn't ask the reader to decide whether unpaid labour in these contexts is good or bad, but she does render in great detail the complexity of the attempts to make, and not simply to represent, economic change through artworks.

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The Stuart Brisley Interviews: The Art of Performance and its Afterlives

Stuart Brisley's work is, at the best of times, formless and slippery while nevertheless possessing an aura of resistance which, to an extent, is embodied in this timely and necessary publication. The book takes the form of a series of interviews punctuated with mostly black-and-white images of Brisley's work. The series of interviews, conducted by curator and writer Gilane Tawadros (also featuring his occasional collaborator, curator Maya Balcioglu), spans an astonishing seven decades of work.

The interviews were staged over a period of ten months, from December 2016 to September 2017, and here are divided into three parts. The opening interview focuses on the contexts in which Brisley found himself making work during the 1960s.

Tawadros's first question centres around Brisley's work *And for today... nothing*, 1972, and how it might



Stuart Brisley, *Artist As Whore*, 1972, performance, Gallery House, Goethe Institut, London

correlate with memento mori. Brisley's response swiftly dislocates Tawadros's associations with how artists enact memento mori by positioning the work and his practice into the wider political context of that time, revealing how the direct actions he was involved in informed his work, such as the sit-ins at Hornsey College of Art in May 1968 (Books *AM316*).

Brisley's practice is one of a wide and diverse tenure of study. He attended several art schools over a period of 11 years, from Guildford and London's Royal College of Art to Florida State University in Tallahassee. He also began teaching during a period of massive structural changes in art education.

Brisley reflects on the Coldstream Report, a pair of government reports published in 1960 and 1970 that proposed and ultimately implemented changes in art education that prevail to this day (see Bernard Cohen's 'Making Art and Killing Culture' in *AM105/106*). The impetus of the report was to make artists more 'employable' by training them at art school to be potential educators. It did this by introducing mandatory complementary studies but without any pedagogical framework. 'I arrived in this liquid environment in 1966', Brisley recalls, 'and was teaching in Visual Research and we were in a sense, inventing, introducing what this could be.'

A general suspicion of institutional structures from Brisley's perspective is clear from the get-go. He tells Tawadros about his early involvement in Space (Artist Space and Studios) in 1968 and how this exciting communal scene quickly became about how 'capital moves and changes'. Brisley left Space in its early stages and, throughout the interviews, he astutely brings the practice back to the present; reflecting further on Space, he notes that, 'Today, we can see how the cultural industry is unequivocally intertwined with property portfolios.' This suspicion is also present in Brisley's repeated statement that a performance cannot be restaged on the grounds that it could never be the same as the original performance.

What comes across, particularly in the informal nature of the interview format, is his insistence that he never has predetermined ideas or notions of his work. This makes the book, in many respects, better documentation than any photograph. Incidentally, the book also contains 16 glossy colour photographs of his works, from the horrifying image of *Arbeit Macht Frei*, 1973, to the pared-back minimal image of *Writing on the Wall Is*, 2017. These images appear without captions, an incisive editorial decision that fits the artist's ideas perfectly.

Brisley's practice seems to function less as institutional critique and more as a way of revealing an undeterminable audience, and how institutions are

sustained and formed. There is a cautionary sense in how Brisley remembers these performances which serves as a poignant warning for today's younger artists who emerge into an art world that is toppling head-first towards the dogmatic rhetoric of the right through ignoring funding structures or the political affiliations of large and small institutions.

In the final interview, Brisley, Tawadros and Balcioglu recall an untitled performance referred to as *The Unofficial Action*, 1968, when Brisley and collaborator Peter Sedgley made an unsolicited intervention (what became a happening) at Tate involving the French sculptor César Baldaccini. The performance was met by threats from the curators towards the young artists: 'You're going to be banned for life.' Yet the work is now officially recognised by Tate as one of the first performances to have taken place at the gallery. Balcioglu states that it has been 'regurgitated as a marker in the Tate's history of performance' and argues that, in doing so, Tate is 'neutering the past and the present'. The relevance of these ideas to the current art world make this book a must-read for artists and educators alike.

The Stuart Brisley Interviews: The Art of Performance and its Afterlives, Gilane Tawadros, ed, Book Works and DACS, 2020, 128pp, pb, £22.50, 978 1 912570 09 6.

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Kim Knowles: Experimental Film and Photochemical Practices

Beneath the cloak of scholarship, *Experimental Film and Photochemical Processes* offers a glimpse of author Kim Knowles as a nuts-and-bolts seeker of alternative visions of the world. Knowles, a lecturer at Aberystwyth University, has run the experimental Black Box wing of the Edinburgh Film Festival since 2008, and her book, although dealing with the obsolescent analogue medium of celluloid film, is set in the digital age. The clarity of her prose is worth noting insofar as Knowles is keen to stake out complex theoretical claims. The preliminary chapters are somewhat arduous as she thoroughly reviews the existing literature and strives to make a case for a 'new materialism' in film, notably employing a 1975 essay by Peter Gidal, 'Theory and Definition of Structuralist/Materialist Film', as her touchstone. But because Knowles takes Gidal's puckish obfuscations at face value, her valiant attempts to pinpoint the kaleidoscopic meanings of 'material', 'materiality' and 'materialism' fail to yield a sharp picture.

No matter. Things become more concrete in the third chapter, which documents an entire range of films made on celluloid in the first two decades of this century. Knowles's experience as a curator and programmer is an invaluable asset here, as she presents a balanced, international selection of works by British, Dutch, French, American, Canadian and Australian artists, many of whom are unfamiliar to me. Whereas readers might have expected the book to make a case for photochemical film as a militant, rear-guard struggle against ubiquitous digital imagery, instead Knowles stresses the historical continuity of these works by anchoring them in the tradition of avant-garde films from the 1920s up through the co-op movement of the 1970s and beyond.