



Michael Eddy, Sapporo, October 17th 2014

Past Performance Is Not a Guarantee of Future Returns: On the Collection of Experience *Michael Eddy*

Francais translation a pagé (pg XX)

Our lives could be called collections of our selves. Our identities are tangled piles of experiences, memories, facts, narratives, timelines. We order, make chronologies, rank, and label these for a minimum of sanity, as well as tweak them according to specific desires. We relegate to the stacks those details we would be better off to forget. Even without our being conscious of it, this collection documents our sprawling “data bodies,” which are recovered, reordered, reincarnated by others, indeed while we are still alive.¹

As a profession, artists to a certain extent embrace these acts of collation as tools of the trade: the portfolio holds a crucial position as both a collection of accomplishments and as a deliberated insinuation of future performance; the accompanying biography is a tool not only to inventory but to corroborate the recognition of artistic quality. Order and visibility constitute us as coherent individuals for others to see. Within these lists, projects themselves can divide down into components, forms, contents and contexts, signatures and references; that is, when they aren’t explicitly composed of literal series and sequences, mirroring in our individual administrative capacities the wider compilation that circumscribes us.

For our personal collections are nested inside of other collections—institutions, communities, societies, nations, the world—and in turn these dig in like oedipal colonies in our DNA.² “We are the institution” insofar as we accept the banal pragmatism of “institutional determination” as the logic that organizes our value systems. *We must be inside, for there is no outside.* As such the line of reasoning curves into a self-fulfilling loop, in which the only possibility we have is to reflect on our own complicity and position in the scheme of things. This much has been summed up by Gerald Raunig and others, in arguments against the “cynical or conservative invocations of inescapability and hopelessness” that afflict the solidifying of so-called second wave institutional critique. To reinvigorate the relevance of critique, Raunig advocates flight, exodus, and a restless *instituent* practice, without illusions that institutions can be purged wholesale, but with the potential of these measures to deviate from certain structuralization and rigidification.³



Following this parallel we can feel the inertia of “collection” begin to budge, from the noun of a stable kingdom towards the verb of actively meeting the world. We not only fall in line but walk the line: collection, not merely mirroring, is reflexive; not merely reconfirming the canon, is reconfiguring. In the world I am writing from - and in which you are probably reading this - the realm of the collection is pervaded by commodities. And just as instituent practice alternately faces instrumentalization and isolation, the edge a collection treads is the border between regimes of value.

On the one hand, when we collect something we take it out of the circuit of its normal consumption process.⁴ The collected object—money even—is freed from the loop of mundane commodity exchange and lifted to a semiotic and aesthetic sphere where it can be appreciated in itself like a shell found on a beach.⁵ For Jean Baudrillard, it would be more like appreciating ourselves; whereas with Walter Benjamin it would amount to a more faithful commitment to an object.⁶ Although we would have to exercise care in applying this outline wholesale—for the very reason that found natural objects like river stones do not otherwise partake of any specific use-value, and art works are subject to a special type of consumption—the “abstractive operation” of collection is the consistent feature across these different types of objects, linking them to those “economic objects” known as commodities, “*any thing intended for exchange*” And so on the other hand this same shift of abstraction from context is what allows a different sort of exchange to occur, and can lead to an object entering or re-entering commodity circulation, playing by different rules. Such instability in the social understanding of an object has been addressed in the concept of “the commodity potential of all things,” which seeks to accommodate the “biography” of an object as it moves between market economies and other societies.⁷

“Generally speaking, the typical collector is the typical capitalist.”
- John Dewey⁸

The most literal and unselfconscious calculations of art as capital appear in the pop culture tropes of financial markets and auctions, as well as in urban development discourses and increasingly in neoliberal cultural policy. This shouldn’t be conflated with capitalism proper. Despite the social and cultural overlaps with an unhinged capitalist society (pointed to in admonitions on the affirmative character of culture, society of the spectacle, celebrity and consumer culture, precarization and post-Fordism, etc.), recent reassessments of art’s position relative the capitalist mode of production make a point of refuting the claim that the work of artists is economically capitalist in nature.⁹

The question of whether or not art is a commodity, however, has been turned over many times: its resemblance to the calculability that

commodities embody refers to the labour time and investment poured into art practice;¹⁰ meanwhile the seeming absurdity of its inflated prices has been observed as closely tied to art’s apparent suspension beyond the calculability of value, lifted on the balloons of symbolic capital.¹¹ As non-waged, non-productive labour, even in its application of manufacturing and studio assistance, and in its manner of consumption, it is wholly exceptional. It is only with the artwork’s entry into the commercial gallery that it encounters its first true capitalist operation. It may seem cosmetic or counter-intuitive, but it is argued that art’s starting point as a commodity—an exceptional one, but not as investment capital—is what offers an outlet from the cycle of the bottomless accumulation of capital, toward a model for exchanges on more mutual grounds (C-M-C¹ vs M-C-M¹).

Because of the exceptional nature not only of the artwork as a commodity, but as practical work, I would like to take it further, to the source points for production, which must take a detour through the “emotional situation” surrounding work. Labour, at the expense of time and energy, was the collection of money. This relation always swung hugely, but at least had found some recourse in “the principle of equivalence, which stands at the foundation of the most rigid hierarchies and the most ferocious inequalities, [but which] guarantees nonetheless a certain visibility of social connections, a commensurability, a system of proportionate convertibility.”¹² These values (ethical and financial) characteristic of a “society of work” have been widely upended in the current climate of fear, cynicism and unlimited insecurity portrayed by Paolo Virno; correspondingly value becomes fixed only to an abstract opportunism. Virno focuses on the most negative and generalized (self) disciplinary aspects of this evolution, but the “positive” perspective, if you can call it that, of abstract opportunism is that celebrated where the disparities in value and distribution potentially present the most reward, as in startups, stock markets, the entertainment industry, and to a certain extent the art world.

The real experience of art practice can be conceived of as somewhere between this feeling of incalculable potential and the difficult working through of materials which aren’t quite so adaptive as our own personalities. There is some sympathy found in Diedrich Diederichsen’s half-ironic rationalization of artists’ *constant capital* as derived from “unpaid extra time and often informal extra knowledge [taken] away from other daily activities”; his point is that, accounted in a way that more accurately reflects the genesis of art works, the collection of time congealed in them is broadly speaking not as overvalued as is often presumed.¹³ But it also alludes to the airy viscera that is gathered through our lives, as a collection of material for the purposes of art, or not.

I am choosing to refer to this under-accounted portion in terms of experience. This word comprises a field of numerous ambiguities and

contestations that spans the history of philosophy, to which I wouldn't add much by weighing in with a specific, inadequate definition. I will, however, assert a couple of basic traits for my purposes, certainly collected from somewhere, but allowed to remain uncredited: that in the human, experience sits slightly closer to memory than perception, that it influences both and is influenced by both, but that it always exceeds our boundaries. This is significant within a discussion about artistic labour because it acknowledges an input and an outside that can't conveniently be subsumed under the terms of production or activity that frame discourses on alienation (another doozy of fraught terminology), and alienated labour specifically. And yet it is fair to say that perceptions, memories, experiences are retained, that is to say collected—in production, strictly speaking, or not. From such a point of view, Marx's "objectification" could potentially be seen as the retention unto itself of experience, and the subsequent abstractive operation of the collection could be its interlacing with alienation (though that brings in the implication of a natural self, whose debate I would again defer to others to clash about). The nuances between production, collection, experience, alienation, and objectification could be teased out until their tapered ends fit together, perhaps; or alternatively the whole thing might be a shadow play inside the cave of alienation. But I have a hunch there would still be something left hovering, like a fly in a laboratory.

Experience, then, is the most inscrutable ingredient in commodities, if experiences can't constitute commodities themselves. This is said in spite of experience used in job interviews to denote training and accomplishments; in spite of proposals of an experience economy to supplant the service economy (following goods and commodities, in reverse chronology—with Starbucks as the *avant garde*); and in spite of the fact that one's technologically enhanced daily life and social activities generate mountains of financial value and power for a few corporations (as alluded to in the concept of "data body"). What gets in the way is the troubled nature of experience.

Experience has long served as the intangible feature of art that escapes capture into commodity form. By the time of Allan Kaprow, the "only underground avant-garde art" had to be ferreted to brief, unrepeatable moments, eschewing the publicity of museums and spectacles.¹⁴ In the ideas that greatly influenced this line of thinking, Dewey's *Art as Experience*, the experiential as fact of an organism living in an environment comes prior to aesthetic experience, prior even to its formation as an experience; that is, as a whole that "carries with it its own individualizing quality and self-sufficiency." Dewey's concern was with anchoring aesthetics to everyday perceptions, against idealizing and compartmentalizing views of art that had reached their contradictory apogee in the modern period. Experience is a factor that runs through an art object in the encounter with material itself, not

only on the level of thematic or representational stuffs. However, with this process of singularization into wholes of aesthetic experiences, an analogous type of abstractive operation has taken place within one's disposition; memory takes on the qualities of a collection. One thereby finds embedded in the book notions that sound distinctly commodity-esque, like "transferred values" and "artist's capital."¹⁵ Does this indicate that we are stuck inside the collection, because the collection is in us—that we can try to walk away from capital, but with each step we just generate more?

Following the trauma of the First World War, Benjamin had declared the "bankruptcy" and "poverty" of experience.¹⁶ This is moreover restated and elaborated by Giorgio Agamben, who inserted that not only catastrophe but even "humdrum daily life in any city," demonstrated that experience is no longer accessible anymore, can no longer be "possessed."¹⁷ Agamben's narrative traces the descent from a time in antiquity when imagination played a key role in one's psychic life through to when science had taken on the only possible position of authority in the current age. One's life as a possessable whole had been dismantled and rendered accountable to a project of accumulating knowledge that indeed can never be fulfilled. Despite the seeming depiction of a time when we had been fully present to ourselves and which was irrecoverably lost, the advantage of Agamben's story is that authentic experience as he puts it is not absolute or pure experience, but a critical dilemma split between species and history. The outlook from both authors points to a sort of jubilee on the insolvency of experience, to beginning anew, but within a history that is always in front of us: in Benjamin's case, he advocated embracing the state of barbarism to which culture had been reduced, seeing poverty as a kind of blank slate. For his part, Agamben placed the only window onto authentic experience at the point of *infancy*, where language meets the ineffable, which is not only a developmental state of the individual, but "history's transcendental origin" that one must continuously pass through and seek after. The gap between language and speech becomes the opportunity to intervene in this historically conditioned state of dispossession.

What does such a beginning look like? In Benjamin's case, emptiness and sparseness assert a frank renunciation of the accumulated cultural stockpile and a cold humour regarding its heritage. The possessive bourgeois walls are peeled off for the transparency of glass; collection has defaulted and the comfort of self-confirmation is wiped of its traces for the stark new. How does infancy appear, however? Its history cannot be erased, but rather the linguistic means of experience must be a site of continuous struggle; this collection can only resemble a decoding and recoding that pull history along as it works through its means of self-awareness. If this sounds less like Deweyan abstraction, it is because it is not concerned so much with the expression of "quali-

ties which *all* particular objects share, such as color, extensity, solidity, movement, rhythm, etc.” as it is with the mystery of the particular object whose capacity to share is the very question. Whether these, as abstractions, would resemble each other, is another story.

From this perspective, for experience to have any value, its value must be the subject of intense deliberation. This sounds benign in light of those, like Georges Bataille, whose inner experience would be satisfied with nothing less than the extreme limit, the end of the possible in man: “no other value, no other authority,” “it cannot have any other concern nor goal than itself.”¹⁸ These aspirations, with their mix of passion, despair and sacrifice, proved impossible for Bataille in his life, as critics pointed out: “For after all, M. Bataille writes, he occupies a position at the Bibliothèque Nationale, he reads, he makes love, he eats.”¹⁹ In short, he participated in a community as well as in a “restricted economy,” whose reality could never be sustained by inner experience. Bataille’s defences sounded anything but introverted: “If, as appears to me, a book is a communication, the author is only a link among different readings.”²⁰ And Bataille’s writings had indeed underscored the community’s necessity for the value and authority of experience—though perhaps only in a community to come.

This leaves us in a complicated position regarding the question of experience’s involvement in artwork, and by extension in the production and exchange of commodities. On the one hand, we have poverty, ineffability, hiatus, impossibility; on the other we have capital, transferred values, communication, *pumpkin spice latte*. And maybe we begin to get a sense of the lopsidedness of this whole inquiry, as commodities, premised on a discourse of desire and consumption, can only be positives, while what we have been calling experience arguably just as often comes in any imaginable shade of negative. Art at its most doubtful, uncertain, pessimist, and alienated is still stranded on the side of positive in this sense, though all its doors may open onto the negative, onto the vastness of experience which always exceeds it. The limited positiveness of the artwork is however not only beholden to this ocean: it can reconstruct or call forth particular experiential processes (for instance, mediate the negative unattainability), or as Bataille suggested, shift the orientation of experience depending on the community it collects.

Maybe the question, then, isn’t so much about how abstracted experience gets embodied as value in art objects, but the dialectical tension an art work can produce within the experiences of its communities. David Graeber pointed to the problems of Appadurai’s positing the commodity as the transcendental category of object, locating its formation in exchange as opposed to production, and foregrounding even in gift-giving the self-interest and calculativeness characteristic of markets: “writing as if all exchanges are simply about *things* and have nothing to do with making, maintaining, or severing social relation-

ships (...) the end result is anthropology as it might have been written by Milton Friedman.”²¹ As I said, in the world I am writing from, the realm of the collection is pervaded by commodities. We must take care in an age of networks, moreover, not to assume that by shifting importance onto relationships as opposed to things, our collections simply bypass alienation and commodification; this is a time when “sharing” has lost its innocence and contacts have defined values in a competitive field. But it would be a very contemporary mistake to assign an irreversible, causal role to commodities as that which brings the collection into being.²² A different classification system of the collection could take many other forms, for example indexed along the lines of politicized autonomy, or premised on the right to insolvency itself, or configured according to the pleasures of pure creative potential.²³

However, the word for what would be the grounds and conditions for the collection of authentic experiences, escapes me.

Endnotes

1. The rule rather than the exception; as described twenty years ago: “The data body is the total collection of files connected to an individual. (The data body has always existed in an immature form since the dawn of civilization. Authority has always kept records on its underlings. Indeed, some of the earliest records that Egyptologists have found are tax records. What brought the data body to maturity is the technological apparatus.” Critical Art Ensemble, *Flesh Machine: Cyborgs, Designer Babies, & New Eugenic Consciousness* (self-published, 1995), accessed 1 August 2014, <http://www.critical-art.net/books/flesh/flesh7.pdf>
2. “If the peoples and the things of the world are the collected, and if the social categories into which they are assigned confirm the precious knowledge of culture handed down through generations, then our rulers sit atop a hierarchy of collectors. Empire is a collection of countries and of populations; a country is a collection of regions and peoples; each given people is a collection of individuals, divided into governed and governors - that is, collectables and collectors.” John Elsner and Roger Cardinal, “Introduction,” *The Cultures of Collecting*, ed John Elsner and Roger Cardinal (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 2.
3. Gerald Raunig, “Instituent Practices: Fleeing, Instituting, Transforming,” in *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique*, ed Gerald Raunig and Gene Ray (London: MayFly Books, 2009), p. 8.
4. “Possession cannot apply to an implement, since the object I utilize always directs me back to the world. Rather it applies to that object once it is divested of its function and made relative to a subject. In this sense, all objects that are possessed submit to the same abstractive operation and participate in a mutual relationship in so far as they each refer back to the subject.” Jean Baudrillard, “The System of Collecting” in *The Cultures of Collecting*, ed John Elsner and Roger Cardinal (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 27.
5. “...the numismatist...does not hoard purchasing power, but treats money like pinned butterflies, waiting to be put behind glass. S/He collects totally different kinds of exchange as if it were fragments of dead nature, passionate and perhaps melancholic like a botanist.” Paolo Virno, in *Under Pressure: Pictures, Subjects, and the New Spirit of Capitalism*, ed Graw et al. (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2008), p. 43.
6. “But one thing should be noted: the phenomenon of collecting loses its meaning as it loses its personal owner. Even though public collections may be less objectionable socially and more useful academically than private collections, the objects get their due only in the latter.” Walter Benjamin, “Unpacking My Library: A Talk about Book Collecting,” in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 68.
7. Arjun Appadurai, “Introduction: Commodities and the politics of value,” in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 3.
8. David Graeber has objected that that by failing to mention production as contributing to values, Appadurai’s explanation reduces all human acts to consumption. To a certain degree this fits the present use of collection, but I will return to its criticism later.
9. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Penguin, 2005), p. 8.
10. Dave Beech, “Questions of Value - Dave Beech and Toni Prug on Art, Value and Price.” Paper presented at Nottingham Contemporary, Nottingham, UK, live-streamed 19 March 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uizn46s8Lig>
11. Diedrich Diederichsen, *On (Surplus) Value in Art* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2008), pp 35-36.
12. Isabelle Graw, *High Price: Art Between the Market and Celebrity Culture* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2009)
13. Paolo Virno, “The Ambivalence of Disenchantment” in *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, ed. Michael Hardt and Paolo Virno (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p. 32.
14. This is in relation to the primary and not the secondary market, to which only very hard-pressed commentators assign an amount of reasonableness. Diedrich Diederichsen, *On (Surplus) Value in Art* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2008)
15. “To the extent that a Happening is not a commodity but a brief event, from the standpoint of any publicity it may receive, it may become a state of mind. Who will have been there at that event? It may become like the sea monsters of the past or the flying saucers of yesterday.” Allan Kaprow, “The Happenings Are Dead: Long Live the Happenings!” in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2003) p. 59.
16. “There are in our minds in solution a vast number of emotional attitudes, feelings ready to be re-excited when the proper stimulus arrives, and more than anything else it is these forms, this residue of experience, which, fuller and richer than in the mind of the ordinary man, constitutes the artist’s capital.” A.C. Barnes, Director of the Barnes Foundation where Dewey taught, quoted in Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 118.
17. Walter Benjamin “Experience and Poverty” in *Selected Writings, Vol II*, ed. Michael W. Jennings et al. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 732.
18. “The question of experience can be approached nowadays only with an acknowledgement that it is no longer accessible to us. For just as modern man has been deprived of his biography, his experience has likewise been expropriated. Indeed, his incapacity to have and communicate experiences is perhaps one of the few self-certainties to which he can lay claim. ... Modern man makes his way home in the evening wearied by a jumble of events, but however entertaining or tedious, unusual or commonplace, harrowing or pleasurable they are, none of them will have become experience.” Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience*, (New York: Verso Books, 1993), p. 13.
19. Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience* (New York: SUNY Press, 1988), p. 7.
20. Jean-Paul Sartre, quoted in Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2006), p. 380.
21. Georges Bataille quoted in ibid Jay, p. 381.
22. David Graeber, *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dreams*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), p. 32.
23. To bring back the question of objectification vs. alienation: “The effect of conflating the distinction is a misreading of Marx that enables the category of labor historically peculiar to capitalism to operate ontologically: the very thing Marx wishes to call into question and combat.” Amy E. Wendling, *Karl Marx on Technology and Alienation*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 214.
24. Among these, on autonomy we could mention the community tradition of seed-saving in the peasant movement as a form of collection as means of sustainable social reproduction rather than of wealth accumulation. The right to insolvency can be picked up from Franco Bifo Berardi’s somewhat fragmentary book *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2012), in which language and debt have been yoked together by the semiotizing transformations of finance capitalism. To recast this in terms of experience, we could see it as demanding the poetic freedom to experiment as well as to be exhausted, undeterred by the threats of our experiences accumulating existential debts.
25. “Pure creative potential” is David Graeber’s wording, which we might understand as what in our experience contributes to our ability to create and maintain relations among people and objects—in short our capacity to consciously produce the world: “I think one might even go so far as to say that in all the most sophisticated formulations, pleasure ends up involving not just the effacement of self, but the degree to which that effacement partakes of a direct experience of that most elusive aspect of reality, of pure creative potential (whether biological, social, or aesthetic—though the best sorts I suppose partake somewhat of all three)... ” Graeber, *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value*, p. 260.

Michael Eddy, Sapporo, October 17th 2014

