

## The Self as Artwork in the Age of Digital Capital

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It is perhaps no coincidence that, when I started to gather my ideas on issues of digital labor, digital capital, and how digitality has affected art, its making, but most importantly its audience, I was held up by two distracting and at the same time very indicative activities relating to my own "digitality" and "plugged-in-ness."

One was the fact that, as an independent filmmaker myself, I had to write some urgent emails to friends—those who Emily Best, the founder of Seed&Spark, a site that supports all things moving picture related and helps filmmakers fundraise their projects, would call my "social capital"—to bring them on board as executive producers to help finance the post-production on two of my current documentary films. The other distraction came from the fact that while surfing the web for media artists to prove my points about how digitality had impacted the content and value of their art work, and especially their engagement with a co-producing audience, I got stuck becoming a new paying audience member myself, not only of the engaging art, but of some of the merchandise displayed on the artists' websites. So I took the opportunity to get my son a tee-shirt with a cat and paint brush printed on it, and my Viennese sister-in-law a dark green "Fuck You hoodie" for Christmas that I thought she would appreciate. And naturally I did not end up empty-handed myself.

As internet-marketers are perfectly aware, shopping for others is an opportunity for self-gifting as well.<sup>1</sup> After all, what's the distinction between play and work, anyway?

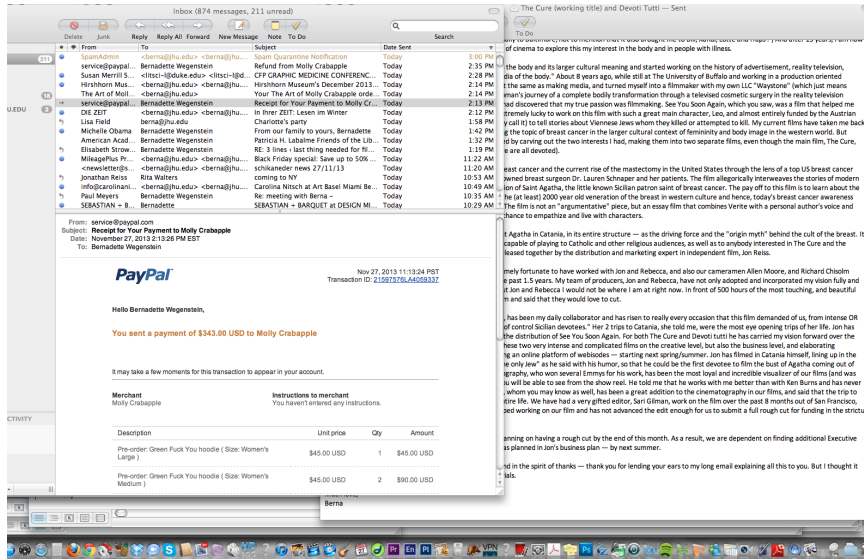


FIGURE 1: Berna's computer while writing this article.

So I asked myself: what does my own digital behavior and screen-persona tell me about digital labor in this day and age? In a negative light, it cuts straight to the core of what Trebor Scholz has described "netslaving" in his critical account of "facebook as playground and factory." What Scholz and other Marxist theorists of the internet have stressed is the fact that digital labor happens silently and turns legions of surfers into unpaid drones, "much akin to those less visible, unsung forms

<sup>1</sup> See the recent Times article: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/29/business/retailers-sly-message-get-yourself-something-too.html>

of traditional women's labor such as child care, housework, and surrogacy."<sup>2</sup> One recently debated example of digital labor that struck me in this regard is the video game *Wasabi Waiter* developed by Knack, a start up from Silicon Valley. This game logs a user's strategies of problem solving to draw conclusions about that person's leadership and innovation capacity. So, yes, this is "netslaving," in that this game that "helps you screen job applicants" as Knack's website puts it — is not a game but a personality test with an entertainment bonus.



FIGURE 2: Wasabi Waiter Screenshot from Financial Times, March 21, 2013:  
<http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/812e6856-8b18-11e2-8fcf-00144feabdc0.html>

As Jon Reiss, a strategist of independent film distribution with mostly new (and some old) technologies, reminded me before I set out to write the above email to possible future investors

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<sup>2</sup> See Schultz, *Digital Labor*, Intro, p.2. see also Jaron Lanier, *You are Not a Gadget* (New York, Vintage: 2010), who argues that Facebook users should be paid for their time there.

in my films, it used to be that Damien Hurst had to schmooze with the Guggenheims at a party to which he would have already had the privilege of being invited. But now, in what Emily Best labels the "social capital" of my personal acquaintances, I can turn anybody into a mercenary, with a small but meaningful contribution, and they don't need to be the Medicis. Nor do I have to be Michelangelo or even camouflage my talent with the level of empathic table waiting that I am able to attain on *Wasabi Waiter*.

Invisible online workers play, and one of the most playful activities they engage in is *buying*. But buying can become laborious as well: while looking at the art world of writer-illustrator Molly Crabapple's, I would get stuck buying her latest holiday merchandise and being tempted by her *Saint or Whore* series of very affordable prints while thinking about the *value* of her very art. In fact, Crabapple has turned the whole idea of digital labor into an art project. In her 2012 legendary kickstarter campaign for *Shell Game, an Art Show about the Financial Meltdown*, the artist commented on the political situation with six giant paintings, such as the *Great American Bubble Machine*, which she exhibited in New York at a "faux art gallery" both live and for the internet for one week. Here is how she addressed her audience: "It doesn't seem right to make an art show about the way financial elites screwed us up and only sell things that financial elites can afford. So I'm turning to you to create an art show that anyone can be a part of. Your support in this project will help me cover the cost of creating spectacular art that's meant for everyone to enjoy. And help me do it without asking the permission of rich people."<sup>3</sup>

Crabapple's meta-commentary on making an art show about a political crisis that was caused by the rich is a brilliant way to let her audience "talk back." In this way the artist

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/mollycrabapple/shell-game-an-art-show-about-the-financial-meltdow>

repurposes the very idea of her leftist criticism—i.e., that we have created an unsustainable "financial bubble" and that it is not "right" to make an art show about it—into a political action that makes this bubble pop by audience participation, and by appropriation of the very value that is questioned. Buying and engaging in Crabapple's six giant paintings may have felt for participants like taking some of the money back from the rich, and re-appropriating it for "proletarian ownership." Meanwhile, she more than doubled her original goal for her kickstarter campaign with a total of \$64,799. The question to be asked about this audience—who according to the pictures on her website (which documented that kickstarter campaign in order to create yet another meta-commentary) were protesters in the Occupy Wall Street movement—is not if it was their intention to make Crabapple famous, but *how* it felt to them engaging with Crabapple's art work? To quote media theorist and historian William Uricchio, how, beyond funding, might this engagement manifest itself: "Might they draw in their circle of friends? Promote the project and its cause in a personal way, encouraging others around them to share their interest? Might they, in other words, take a more active role in proselytizing the project, thereby having a social stake in its use, than a non-involved participant?"<sup>4</sup>

Uricchio's question, in the case of Molly Crabapple, can definitively be answered: yes! The artist has 33,802 followers on twitter who take an active role in proselytizing her projects. But this still does not answer the question of how an audience may *feel*, having turned Crabapple into a commodity herself, helping her realize the 6 giant paintings that she wants to give birth to—and let's not forget that second denotation of the word *labor*. Is this audience-midwife truly *participating* in the artist's success of having

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<sup>4</sup> <http://opendoclab.mit.edu/research-forum-william-uricchio-on-engagement>

created that added value? And if so, how? What of the artwork have they *bought*? And finally, how is this audience different from the mercenary who is given the opportunity of giving the "gift" of participating in the creative process?<sup>5</sup>

The answer given by Trebor Scholz and other leftist theory-laborers of digital labor would be that this audience is not only potentially *unaware* of the economic processes of this sponsorship and thereby exploited into this participation—similar to women who are exploited in their homes where they labor silently as wives and mothers while their husbands are realizing their own professions—but more importantly, their "co-production" does not even feel like work to these kickstarter backers, indiegogo donators, or "seed and sparkers" on Emily Best's website, because all of these audience-participants are entertained with the idea of "owning" a piece of art in the shape of a DVD with the signature of the filmmaker, a poster, a handkerchief, a digital download — or whatever it may be. In other words, this audience of "silent proletarian co-producers" is held hostage by the fact that they too are now able to own a piece—albeit not of the actual art in the sense that they are making it *happen*, but a piece of merchandise in the *place* of the art.

Becoming an accomplice to a bigger cause by the simple click of a purchase that feels entirely "egoistic," puts in a somewhat different light Walter Benjamin's famous Marxist critique of "art in the age of mechanical reproduction." Benjamin's point in this piece was that the aura of an artwork is lost by its removal from its original space and time and by its reproduction. The reinsertion of aura in the age of mechanical reproduction, an age of inherently democratized art, is the modus of 20<sup>th</sup> century fascism. Benjamin's definition of fascism is the aestheticization of

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<sup>5</sup> This is how Dan Cogan of Impact Partners puts it in his pro investment piece "How to Manage the Relationship Between Film producer and Investor."  
<http://www.indiewire.com/article/how-to-manage-the-relationship-between-film-producer-and-investor>

politics. To return the authority and mystery of ritual and tradition to objects that have been freed from that authority to be enjoyed by the masses is how fascism captivates the proletariat and incites it to participate in the endless reproduction of capital. But what about a kickstarter campaign and the digital labor of co-production in this regard? Well, it seems clear that what is at stake and what an audience buys by co-producing or helping an artist realize their work of art, is precisely not the artwork itself, but its *aura*. But if what Benjamin admired in film and elevated in the cameraman as the new "surgeon-artist" over-against the old "painter-magician" was the fact that this loss of the authority of an artwork is inherently democratic, would he not have thought similarly of a kickstarter campaign, which further democratizes movie making, and removes it from the realm of the distant "magician" artist?

In other words, how does this new way of producing and owning a piece of art via the acquisition of merchandise affect the artwork itself, i.e., the outcome of a giant painting by Molly Crabapple, my film by finding new executive producers among the "social capital" of my friends, and the very fact that artists are able to start, be supported or finish an artwork with the rhizomatic means of the internet? Does this new way of *making* affect the value of the artwork itself? And if so, how can we even assess this change? It may be that the difference lies in the active insertion of the masses into the production of the work itself. Unlike the passive reception of an artwork's aura or the netslavery of countless Facebook members, kickstarters actively engage in the production of art by choosing what projects to support and helping enable their creation. The aura of the pieces they now "own" thus has little to do with the authority of tradition or the power and mystery of ritual, and much more to do with enabling a particular and often critical

perspective. It is less, in other words, an example of the aestheticization of politics than it is of its critical counterpart: the politicization of art.

One eye-opener in this regard is the recent book by Tom Standage, *Writing on the Wall. Social Media the First 2000 Years*. As the title gives away, our engagement with social media today is not as new as we may think. Indeed, Standage draws a direct comparison between new media and "really really old media" (before the rise of mass media in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that were manipulated first by the elites and the aristocracies and then by the fascists) such as 17<sup>th</sup>-century pamphlets or 18<sup>th</sup>-century coffeehouses. For Standage our use of media today, and particularly personalized social media, is returning to its "preindustrial form," when people's individuality and opinion rose with the event of personalized distribution media such as printed pamphlets and also more generally, the rise of education, both of which threatened to diminish the leading class: "I thank God, there are no free-schools, nor printing," wrote colonial governor of Virginia William Berkely in 1671, "for learning has brought disobedience, and heresy, and sects into the world, and printing has divulged them, and libels against the best government. God keep us from both."<sup>6</sup> Standage also makes clear that certain social and political developments were perhaps sped up and enlightened by the use of distribution media, but the *essence* of a political movement, such as the French Revolution or the Reformation, cannot be reduced to or explained by the use of media that propagated them. Social media may have been a way to disseminate and to accelerate progress and change (igniting the fire to remember Jan Hus's candle, Martin Luther's flaming torch, and the recent use of social media in Arab Spring), but the media as such cannot be held accountable for the diffusion of their content. And quite frankly, returning to Benjamin, the essence of 20<sup>th</sup>-century European fascism and the use of mass media

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<sup>6</sup> Tom Standage, *Writing on the Wall: The First 200 Years of Social Media* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 125.



during the Third Reich was, if anything, an accelerant and not its essence. The essence of Nazi Germany was and remains anti-Semitism, which prevails in cultures like Austria with or without the internet. Rather, the essence of a movement, including art movements, remains something that lies outside of the question of how it is distributed or how fast it is distributed, and even how it is funded.

Has art become more democratic or less in the age of digital reproduction? While social media have enabled every more insidious forms of enslavement to capital, they have also enabled a greater diffusion of art's aura and a reinsertion of the agency of the masses into the creation of art. It may be, then, that the fluidity with which new social media have been coopted for the purposes of capital has, to support Standage's point, nothing inherently to do with the media themselves, but is a reflection of a broader movement in western culture, visible over the last century, and itself a hallmark of late capitalism: the ever-increasing indulgence of the individual consumer's self at the expense of community and broader social engagement.

The Guardian reported that the OED's word of the year for 2013 was *selfie*, those ubiquitous images we produce of our selves in order to share with our friends, posting them on Facebook, Instagram, or any other of a rapidly emerging and then fading series of social networking sites.<sup>7</sup> *Vanity Fair* recently named the six most important living artists by sponsoring a poll, for which they used the votes of 100 artists, curators, and other prominent members of the art world, of whom 54 participated and the rest recused themselves.<sup>8</sup> The outcome of this "Hunger Game poll" (although granted, the artists themselves did not have to kill each other, but the curators took care of that) were these artists: Gerhard Richter, Jasper Johns, Richard

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/shortcuts/2013/nov/19/selfies-dos-donts-oed-word-of-the-year>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2013/12/greatest-living-artists-poll>

Serra, Bruce Nauman, Cindy Sherman, and Ellsworth Kelly. What do they have in common? *Vanity Fair* author Mark Stevens remarked that five out of six are white older men (which is telling in enough in itself, but this may be the topic for another article or just an angry tweet), Cindy Sherman standing out for a) being a woman and b) being under 60. But more importantly he found the connecting thread among these artists as their being preoccupied with the sense of the "I," i.e., with the question of the voice or authorship of their art. None of these artists is particularly engaged in new media, and none have needed to use the new social media to fund their art, and yet the question of the role of the *self* in their art is paramount.

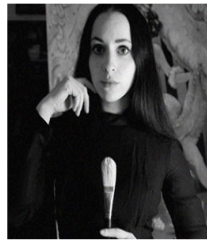
Is it not possible, then, that the turn to the self, to our selves, of the artwork in the age of digital capital is not merely a result of social networking technology but, rather, that the influence may run in the other direction? Is it perhaps the case that a millennial focus on selfhood in late capitalist society has influenced art production of all kinds, and has been accelerated and further enabled by such social media? If this is the case, then the apparently contradictory dual orientation of mass interaction with artistic production—that I can function simultaneously as a netslave and a co-producer of original art, that I can in the same moment aestheticize politics and politicize art—perhaps this is the signature quality of the work of art in the age of digital capital. Like the power of social media old and new, digital labor runs both ways. It may be that the true democratization of art depends, in the final analysis, on its ability to resist the tyranny of the self and its pullulating legion of avatars.

And what does this mean for my own selfish engagement with writing this piece while finding executive producers to finish my films *and* buying off the digital shelves of Molly Crabapple's store? Well, here is how my selfhood in the age of the digital artwork functions: in addition to some Christmas presents I bought a scarf off of Crabapples website that I thought would be a perfect gift for my future executive producer; then—on the suggestion of my producer and film strategist Jon Reiss—I tweeted Molly Crabapple about having joined twitter just to interact with her, in the hopes that she would tweet back and I could use her interaction as a case study for this very article. So far she hasn't, which may be explained by Uricchio's concern about how well an artist can really take of his or her mass audience. But this has happened: I am now the proud owner of the aura of Molly Crabapples' art, and will be more than happy to share it with any future potential executive producer who helps me fund my films.

NEW PRE-ORDERS IN THE STORE!

November 18, 2013

Gearing up for the holidays, there are currently four new items in the Molly Crabapple store.



Molly Crabapple is an artist and writer in New York. Her 2013 solo exhibition, *Shell Game*, led to her being called "Occupy's greatest artist" by Rolling Stone, and "an emblem of the way that art could break out of the gilded gallery" by The New Republic. She is the fourth artist in the last decade to draw Guantanamo Bay. Crabapple is a columnist for VICE, and has written for The Paris Review, CNN, The Guardian, The Daily Beast, Jacobin, and Der Spiegel. Her illustrated memoir, *Drawing Blood* will be published by Harper Collins in 2015.



GET IN TOUCH

Molly Crabapple

m.

FIGURE 3: screenshot from Molly Crabapples website:  
<http://mollycrabapple.com/2013/11/18/new-pre-orders-in-the-store/>