

Art after Money, Money after Art

Art after Money, Money after Art

Creative Strategies
Against Financialization

Max Haiven

PLUTO  **PRESS**

Between the Lines

TORONTO

First published 2018 by Pluto Press
345 Archway Road, London N6 5AA

www.plutobooks.com

Copyright © Max Haiven 2018

The right of Max Haiven to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7453 3825 5 Hardback
ISBN 978 0 7453 3824 8 Paperback
ISBN 978 1 7868 0318 4 PDF eBook
ISBN 978 1 7868 0320 7 Kindle eBook
ISBN 978 1 7868 0319 1 EPUB eBook

Published in Canada 2018 by Between the Lines
401 Richmond Street West, Studio 281, Toronto, Ontario, M5V 3A8

www.btlbooks.com

Cataloguing in Publication information available from Library and Archives
Canada

ISBN 978 1 77113 398 2 Paperback
ISBN 978 1 77113 400 2 PDF eBook
ISBN 978 1 77113 399 9 EPUB eBook

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental standards of the country of origin.

Typeset by Stanford DTP Services, Northampton, England

Printed in Europe

All images in this book remain the copyright of the artist unless otherwise stated.

Every effort has been made to trace copyright holders and to obtain their permission for the use of copyright material. The publisher apologizes for any errors or omissions in the above list and would be grateful if notified of any corrections that should be incorporated in future reprints or editions of this book.

Contents

<i>Figures</i>	vii
<i>Dedication</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xiii
Introduction	1
Financialization and the imagination	6
The best of enemies, the worst of friends	11
Why bother? Activist questions	18
Caveats toward abolition	22
Overview	25
1. 3.5 artistic strategies to envision money's mediation	29
Crises of representation	31
Money, abstraction and transformation	37
The art of money, the financialization of art, and a half-strategy	39
Strategy 1: Revelation	43
Strategy 2: Reflexivity	46
On mediation	50
Strategy 3: Rendering labor visible	55
2. 6 artists x 2 crises x 3 orders of reproduction	64
Three theories of reproduction	67
Three artists, c.1973	74
Dawning financialization	88
Three artists after financialization	97
Conclusion	107
3. 0 participation: Benign pessimism, tactical parasitics and the encrypted common	111
You can't give it away like you used to	112
Social practices	117
Cruel optimism	123
Benign pessimism	127
Tactical parasitics	134
The encrypted common	142
Conclusion	153

4. ∞ encryption: Art's crypt, securitization in numbers, derivative socialities	154
The cryptic market	157
A financialized society of control	160
Freeport empire	163
Palaces of encrypted culture	169
A crypt within a crypt	172
<i>Popular Unrest</i>	186
Derivative sociality	189
Debtfair	197
Epilogue: Beyond crypto	207
Conclusion: Toward abolitionist horizons	213
An abolitionist approach	213
Another reproduction	218
Beyond fascism	221
Art after money, money after art	224
<i>Notes</i>	228
<i>Subject index</i>	269
<i>Name index</i>	275

Introduction

At the very outset let me assure the reader that I do not believe art needs to be saved from money's undue influence. Nor do I believe that money needs to be reformed to be more functional, rational and unambiguous—which is to say, less like art. Rather, I think that money and art, as they exist under capitalism, must be abolished, along with that economic system. And it is toward the horizon of that abolition that this book is oriented. But while you might not agree with that orientation, it is my hope that any reader with an interest in the relationship between art and money, and more broadly with an interest in the relationship between culture and economics, imagination and value, will find something useful or at least provocative in the coming pages.

I am interested in what the work of visual, performance and participatory artists who use money as a medium or material for artistic intervention and expression—what I term “money-art”—can teach us about our particular moment of capitalism and how to overcome it. With increasing regularity, critical, radical and experimental artists have incorporated coins, banknotes, credit cards and more ephemeral money-like substances (debt, blockchains, financial instruments, tax havens) into their work in ways that can offer us insights into the system of which they (both the artists and the money) are a part.

Truth be told, most of this work is atrociously bad: theoretically misinformed, conceptually lazy, technically banal, politically confused and/or aesthetically boring. But some of it is brilliant, and I think that the brilliant work, which I focus on in this book, can illuminate the darker contours of a system of global death and exploitation, the better that we might light our collective way out of it.

Ultimately, then, this book uses money-art to help me tell a story, or really a suite of short stories, about the relationship between culture and the economy in a time when the line between the two is increasingly blurred. These are not heartwarming stories about the capacity for the heroic, transcendental imagination to vanquish the crass materialistic profanity of money. Rather they are stories about how radical artists respond to and work through an evolving if chaotic form of capitalism, a system of money's rule over society, that actively and necessarily incorporates, harnesses, recodes and commodifies our imaginations, our sense of agency and our creative and communicative powers.

I have no faith that art can transformatively challenge or defeat this system. Art cannot save us from financialization and we cannot save art from it. Indeed, one of the core arguments of this book is that, in spite of much romantic ballyhooing to the contrary, art and money have never been as far apart as we might like to imagine: money and art have been encrypted in one another since capitalism as a system began to form in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

With activists and artists in mind, as well as scholars, the chapters of this book hold art and money in an uncomfortable proximity in order to help us to better reckon with the possibilities and perils for the radical imagination in a moment of financialized, neoliberal capitalism as it spirals further and further out of control.

This book comes at a moment when the art market is booming, largely thanks to the sickening way that rising global inequality also gives rise to a growing legion of super-elites—euphemistically termed “High Net Worth Individuals” (HNWIs)—who have a hankering for art, especially, it seems, contemporary art.¹ In the last 15 years or so, astronomical records have been set, then broken for the hammer price of works by still-living artists at the world’s duopoly fine art auction houses, Sotheby’s and Christie’s, but this represents only a fraction of all the work sold in the notoriously murky, cronyistic, and one might even say deeply corrupt, market for art.

Beyond market sales, multinational corporate behemoths are eager to sponsor spectacularized exhibitions of blue-chip artists at branded museums and galleries in order to associate themselves with the *au courant* charisma of “the contemporary.” Cities and regions around the world, grappling with the massive economic changes of neoliberal globalization, look to contemporary art institutions as catalysts for economic growth and social revitalization. Glitzy art fairs—temporary trade shows where galleries sell hot new work—have expanded and multiplied around the world. While we might (wrongly) imagine the super-wealthy as all conservative patricians with a refined taste for art treasures that have stood the test of time, many of today’s smash-and-grab oligarchs and coked-up fast-money financial magnates seem to hunger for the frisson of daring, provocative, boundary-pushing, offensive and sometimes even “political” art, renegade in both form and content.

Yet worries that this overheated, vain and spectacular art market assigns “incorrect” prices to art works—essentially that the market is broken—seems to me to miss the point entirely, as does the concern that it represents a bubble that must inevitably burst. Such concerns rest on a belief in the exceptionalism of art, the idea that it isn’t and should not be like any other commodity under capitalism. In this book I argue that,

as with all exceptionalist arguments, these concerns largely function to reproduce the order they claim to be critiquing, even if that critique does have an element of truth. Instead, along with Suhail Malik, I see the financialization of contemporary art as particularly interesting not because it is the quirky exception to the broader system of financialization, but precisely because it represents the norm that is hidden in plain sight.² The art market is an important instance and example, almost a living satire, of the frankly weird and obscene dynamics of financialization in capitalism more broadly: the dance of appearances, speculations and mystifications, wrought both by and for the beneficiaries of growing (and deadly) global inequality.

If there is one concern about the financialization of art that is vital to stress, it is that, like the financialized capitalist economy at large, the art economy is defined by massive and growing inequality. It's not only that a tiny fraction of working artists make a living while the rest toil in (allegedly romantic) obscurity. It is also that the production of this abject and impoverished obscurity is the very condition for the glitz and glamor of the upper echelons of the art world. As Gregory Sholette argues, it is the hidden dark matter of artistic labor, the work of innumerable unsung artists or would-be artists, that allows the stars to shine so brightly.³ More than that, the art world and art market sit astride of a global capitalist economy where the vast majority of people are never afforded the time or resources to exercise meaningful creative expression, let alone have it celebrated. For all the talk of the rise of the creative economy, most people lead lives haunted by exploitation, drudgery and poverty. A political-economy of contemporary art must take this as its starting point.

As artist and writer Andrea Fraser, among others, insists, it can be all too comfortable and beguiling to assume that the pathologies of financialization simply feed parasitically on the otherwise neutral or benign art world; instead, we need to pay close attention to the way the entire field of contemporary art is embroiled in this game, not only the auction houses, art dealers and mega-museums but also the whole global art production chain: independent galleries, art schools, art writers and critics, even artists themselves.⁴ As we shall see throughout this book, financialized money trickles down (unevenly, unfairly) and influences *all* art-world spaces in some way, even spaces that are avowedly independent and allegedly radical. As Martha Rosler has pointed out some time ago, "contemporary" art functions by mining its own margins, by endlessly seeking the experimental or once-excluded frontiers of artistic creation and bringing them to the center of its operations.⁵ Obsessed with the production of newness, coated in many layers of extremely

sophisticated and erudite commentary, “contemporary” art is relentlessly imperialistic in its hunger for new sources of value to tap, just like finance itself.

And yet in order for contemporary art to be financialized, to become a financial asset, it can’t just be relentlessly subordinated to the needs of profit. In order to be “contemporary” and produce saleable newness, it needs to retain a latitude for freedom, a sense of play, a measure of cryptic (and encrypted) semi-autonomy. Contemporary art is economically valuable as both “contemporary” and as “art,” and can therefore be financialized, precisely because it somehow retains and manifests its own refusal of capitalism’s axiom of value.⁶ Later in this book I will offer the notion that such art represents a crypt within a crypt, hence the potential source of its haunting power and limited radical potential.

This is one of the key contradictions that animates this book, and it has larger implications. My approach to financialization is one that does not see it simply as a dystopian nightmare imposed on the world from above (though its machinations and impacts are indeed horrific) but also a reorganization of capitalism toward harnessing and putting to work the ingenuity, creativity, imagination and “autonomy” of each social actor.⁷ I’m not arguing against a notion of financialization as the game of a small number of global elites who use their incredible financial power to transform economics, politics and society more broadly—it is largely that. But this game also depends on making each of us into a financialized subject, a vector by which a financialized *logic* enters into ever more spheres of life. I am interested in financialization as a way that capitalism, in an age of globalization, digitization and crisis, percolates into the fabric of society, or into the practices of sociality.

My wager in this book is that looking at the way this is happening in the field of “contemporary art” might reveal something important about how financialization works more broadly, and how we might better fight back. I am less interested in the capacity of art to challenge this socio-economic order and more interested in how the strange status of this (ever widening) set of activities we classify as “contemporary art” offers a unique (though also highly limited) laboratory to experiment with new tactics and strategies of rebellion, subversion, refusal and revenge. This may be why, while recently there has been a growing cynicism toward “political art” and its possibilities to transform the imagination, there has at the same moment seemingly been an explosion of people (only some of whom call themselves artists) using art as a method, a weapon or an alibi toward activist ends.⁸

So “art after money” implies at least two things: (a) the way contemporary art is both pursuing and pursued by financialization and (b) the



Figure 1 In his 2011 piece *Rat Traders* Austrian artist Michael Marcovici employed scientific methods to discover if lab rats could be taught to correctly predict the behavior of financial markets. Marcovici transformed segments of historical records of the fluctuations of various futures markets (currency, oil, etc.) and used an algorithm to transpose them into a series of tones within rats' hearing range. Placed inside a standard "Skinner Box" used in laboratories worldwide to study animal behaviors, rats were played segments of sonified market data and given the option of going "long" or "short" on the investment. If they were correct, they would get a small ration of food. If incorrect, a small electric shock. 80 lab rats (40 male, 40 female) were trained for three months by this method, at the end of which certain rats were clearly top performers. These rats were bred together to create a new generation of rat traders, which Marcovici reports generally outperformed their parents. The experiment was ended shortly thereafter, however, according to Marcovici because he didn't have room in his apartment for any more rats. The project received worldwide media attention, which Marcovici met with an ironic earnestness, suggesting even that he had begun negotiations with hedge funds to sell them specimens from the (presumably patented) eventual strain of super rat traders. Image courtesy of the artist.

possibilities of art and the radical imagination to refuse and resist this situation, and to shoot beyond it. Conversely, "money after art" implies: (a) the roles contemporary art plays in the reproduction of financialized capitalism and (b) the reorientation of (at least certain aspects of) financialized capitalism toward creativity, representation, the imagination, speculation, spectacle and participation.

FINANCIALIZATION AND THE IMAGINATION

The notion of financialization is taken up at some length in this book's second chapter. There, we contrast three radical artists working with money around the year 1973 and three parallel artists working in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis to discover how the vast increase of the power and influence of the financial sector has transformed aesthetic, economic, political and cultural conditions. We dig deeper than the commonplace definitions of financialization that see it merely as the meteoric rise of the so-called FIRE (high Finance, Insurance and Real Estate) sector in the globalizing capitalist economy. No doubt this rise is important, but not only because of the sheer might it affords to the CEOs and executives of hedge funds, investment banks, private equity firms, bond-rating agencies, wealth management companies, and asset-management behemoths (many of whom are key art collectors and sit on the boards of leading art institutions, not coincidentally). As numerous authors demonstrate, this dominance gives these firms, who are largely interested in maximizing short-term returns by any means necessary, incredible disciplinary power over practically every other actor, large or small, in the capitalist economy. Nation-states and sub-state public bodies (municipalities, metropolitan transit services, public utilities) must increasingly go, year after year, cap in hand to global financial markets to borrow money to make ends meet, much thanks to years of neoliberal economic policies (pushed by the FIRE sector) in the name of tax breaks for corporations and the wealthy.⁹ Corporations themselves, in fields like manufacturing, retailing, research and development or logistics and transportation must reorient themselves away from producing a good or a service and toward improving quarterly stock performance, even if it means sacrificing long-term strategy or unleashing human or ecological chaos in the frantic search of lower costs and greater profits.¹⁰ Meanwhile, most of the world's basic foodstuffs are now traded on global futures markets: the substances themselves may not move an inch but the rights to them may transfer hundreds of times a week, with sometimes catastrophic effects on those who rely on them. Housing and land has become a realm of intensive speculation in a global marketplace, both in terms of urban property gambling and rural land-grabbing.¹¹

As De Pryke and Gay note, financialization is the process where practically any source of social or economic wealth is transformed into a revenue stream to be purchased and put into play on globalized markets.¹² Crucially, financialization has facilitated and been facilitated by the acceleration of digital technologies which have created a network of global speculative markets. Arcane methods like derivatives contracts,

counterbalanced portfolios of assets and securitization have, with the help of both new theories and ever more sophisticated computers and algorithms, created a system of interlocking if chaotic gambits among the world's wealthiest people and corporations.¹³ But as abstract and occult as these gambits may indeed be, their effects on the global economy at large and on almost every company, government, commodity, institution and person are dramatic and often, in sum and in specific, disastrous.

But here we come to a deeper meaning of financialization as well: it is not only this set of structural changes in the capitalist economy, and it is not only a period of time (roughly 1973 to the present) within which this shift occurred). It is also, according to a number of theorists, a wholesale transformation of the fabric of social and cultural life, the rise of what Randy Martin calls a new “logic” of sociality, a new grammar of relations and relationships in an interconnected world.¹⁴ For instance, education, healthcare and other basic human necessities that were formerly, in some jurisdictions, considered public goods have been reconfigured as personal “investments.”¹⁵ Indeed, as Wendy Brown notes, in a neoliberal epoch when we are all instructed to envision ourselves as entrepreneurs, an increasing number of qualities, capacities and relationships become assets to be leveraged in an unapologetic but, we are told, meritocratic free market that has largely consumed society.¹⁶ While largely this investor persona is targeted at the would-be middle class, the sub-prime mortgage meltdown, as well as the recent enthusiasm for social impact investing and microfinance schemes is a fine indication that, increasingly, financialized capitalism is invested in transforming the very precarity, poverty, marginalization and inequality it has helped create into vectors for speculation.¹⁷

As I argued at some length in my 2014 book *Cultures of Financialization*, as dystopian and megalithic as this paradigm may appear at first glance, it is vital we see it as the product of the competitive and seemingly autonomous agency, creativity and imagination of many social actors.¹⁸ On the one hand, financialization is not some vast conspiracy by elites, though some degree of elite collusion and cooperation is necessary for the system's reproduction. More importantly, it is a system driven forward ultimately by competition and antagonism between financial players, each seeking to outdo one another and survive in an unforgiving market ecosystem. Second, while most of us struggle to survive under greater debt burdens and navigate a world of increasingly exploitative corporations and austere governments, financialization also depends on each of us non-financiers cultivating, harnessing, reorienting or recalibrating our own creativity, agency, imagination, subjecthood and relationships

toward financialized survival, and this is sold to us as freedom and empowerment, even a means to achieve greater, more noble ends.

Imaginary money

In this sense, I have tried to understand financialization from the perspective of the imagination. My curiosity has been marked by the horrific and destructive power of what at first glance appears to be completely “imaginary money.” Today, financial derivatives *alone*—essentially freely circulating agreements to make some exchange at a future date that can be priced and sold as if they themselves are commodities—circulate annually at a volume many times in excess of the planet’s gross domestic product. If financial flows of imaginary money today have evolved into a rapidly churning global maelstrom, and if they have infiltrated almost all spheres of life, then to a very real extent humanity and the earth more generally exists in thrall of a nightmare of our own collective hallucination. The financialized imagination, as I have framed it, then encourages a transformation of our individual and collective imaginations such that we not only accept the legitimacy of the speculative order but also participate in reproducing it, internalizing its logic and importing it into the fields of daily life and sociality; and in turn that broader system of the imagination is fed by the transformation of our imaginations.¹⁹

But a closer look reveals the limits of this perspective. It is all too easy to imagine that financialization is just an aberration from “normal” or well-functioning capitalism, a moment of excess that allows the “imaginary” speculative economy to detach itself and rule over the “real” economy.²⁰ But when, precisely, was money *not* imaginary? Part of the theoretical infrastructure of this book is meant to question the artificial separation of a realm called “economics,” which is allegedly the purview of the rational, the material and the profane, from a realm we call “culture,” which is assumed to be the preserve of the imagination, the intangible and the sacred. We should certainly not lose sight of the moral depravity of a system that, for instance, leaves most of the world’s farmers so poor they are malnourished while, at the same time, facilitating the engorgement of arbitrageurs and speculators who simply take advantage of split-second price differentials to trade the grains, lands and agricultural inputs.²¹ But rather than being some sort of fundamental paradigm shift, I think that financialization really reveals something much more profound about the way the “economy” as such has *always* been, in part, imaginary or imaginative and, conversely, how the imagination has never been free of the influence of, or participation in, “the economy.” And it is my conviction that we can learn a lot about these

fraught, complex and historically contextual intersections by looking at money-art.

A materialist theory of the imagination

Very briefly, my understanding of the imagination here approaches it less as an individual cognitive capacity and more a sociological phenomenon. This understanding is indebted to the work of Cornelius Castoriadis, a dissident psychoanalytic and Marxist thinker who developed a unique approach that stressed the importance of the imagination in a project of radical autonomy. For Castoriadis, all social institutions, from nation-states to the institution of marriage to the form of money we use is, in significant part, imaginary.²² After all, materially speaking nation-states are just lines on a map, marriage is just a string of magic words, and money is (these days) useless tokens, until and unless we, as individuals and a society, invest them with meaning, enact them in our daily social relations, and/or use coercive force to back them up. For Castoriadis, the radical imagination is the essential magma-like substance of negation and disruption from which all social institutions—and indeed all individual subjectivities and identities—are the momentary solidifications.²³ While they may seem necessary, eternal or unconquerable, the radical imagination can erupt and sweep them back into the molten flow, to solidify differently.²⁴

In my work, I have sought to develop a theoretical articulation of this theory of imagination with a Marx-inspired theory of value. For Marx, of course, all value ultimately derives from labor.²⁵ Traditionally, his radical version of a labor theory of value has been interpreted in a fairly conservative, mechanistic way. I have been inspired by thinkers like Harry Cleaver who seek to recall that underneath the exploitation of labor power lies the much bigger question of how human cooperation ought to be organized.²⁶ My contribution has been to insist that this cooperation is always also imaginative, and the structures, systems and models we use to organize our cooperative energies in any society requires an orchestration or semi-synchronization of the imagination between social subjects.²⁷ Economies, in this sense, are frameworks for organizing imaginative cooperation: they are shaped by the ways we imagine the value of people and things, and in turn they shape this imagination. As such, I have sought to see capitalism as not only a system for the ruthless exploitation of workers' bodies, but also one that depends on the way it can shape the imagination. This process has both transformed and intensified in a financialized age also marked by the rise of what some have called "cognitive capitalism." And it is with this in mind that I seek



Figure 2 Robert Wechsler, *The Caryatid*, 2014. Installation view. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 3 Robert Wechsler, *The Caryatid*, 2014. Detail. Image courtesy of the artist.