

McKenzie Wark
**Designs for a
New World**

e-flux journal #58 — october 2014 — "quasi-events" McKenzie Wark
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The sort of things that get called “art” these days exist on a continuum which, if it keeps stretching, will probably break. On one end, art becomes a kind of financial instrument based on singularizing money into an “object” that can have provenance. It can be any kind of object – conceptual, imaginary – all that matters is that there is a document stating who bought it from who. Mind you, pictures work particularly well as such instruments, particularly if they look good in the .jpeg sent to potential buyer’s iPhone. What we might designate as the “art world” is this subsidiary financial market, one with side effects such as dissipating boredom, fostering art-fair tourism, and giving today’s rentier class conversation pieces and home decoration. Artrank.com is this version of an art world perfected.

At the other end of the art continuum, there’s the attempt to inhabit those spaces of production that the art world requires as its hinterlands – to do something else. Usually, it takes the form of experimenting in those spaces with practices of everyday life that could either have a negative, critical function or an affirmative, constructive function. Some old-fashioned art theorists insist on the negative role of art, as if still hankering for that industrial solvent smell of high modernism. But the jig is up. It’s probably time to start focusing on the affirmative, constructive side, as Chris Kraus does in her brief but illuminating text *Lost Properties*. The design component is no sideshow. Once one starts looking afresh at the art-historical past, it is actually the main event. “Fine art” was an historical dead end, no longer of much interest. The avant-gardes really aimed to “change life!” – and did.

For Asger Jorn, the artist’s role is as proposer of forms. He saw fine art as a temporary aberration, not least in its modernist incarnation. Capitalism split production into two separate domains: the production of form and the production of content. Labor gets reduced to the production of content, to the filling in of pre-given forms. Artists belong to another class, the class of form makers, makers of symbolic form, ritual form, social form, and so on. Art is a subset of design. But it is a marginalized kind of design. The strategy then is firstly to assert the role of art as design, and secondly to overcome the separation of form and content in production.

Jorn’s image of that production was the tin of soup, which is the separation between form and content taken to the limit. It doesn’t matter what content fills the can, it is just goop. He wrote about this before Warhol stepped off the path of trying to make new forms and started representing what the complete separation of form from content looked like. Art world versions

of “contemporary art” stem from this retreat from the challenge of being experimenters and proposers of form. From Warhol comes art as financial instrument, art completely separated from anything but a container function.

To what class then do artists belong? To what many years ago I called the hacker class. The figure of the hacker is perhaps a more compromised one than when I proposed it, but that only shows that there’s something at stake in such a term. Artists belong to that class which makes the new out of the old, which transforms forms. It includes not just artists but also scientists and engineers. It is a class of all those whose efforts are captured by the form of “intellectual property” and made equivalent as such. It is a class which, whatever its “virtuality,” is still obliged to work in conditions not of its making.

Of course labor still exists. Most of the world is still being proletarianized. But it is increasingly as labor which makes contents within elaborately designed forms. Labor is captured in forms that have both technical and aesthetic dimensions, and the hacker class, including “artists” and most certainly designers, have to make the forms that will capture labor. Those forms still sometimes look like soup cans,

but sometimes they look like iPads. You can think of an iPad as a Campbell’s soup can meant to hold not food goop but brain goop. It is your brain reduced to digitized slurry.

So the thing to think about is whether there can be alliances as well as conflicts between two subordinate classes: worker and hacker. The attempts to disrupt the Google buses in San Francisco actually demonstrates both. On the one hand, it’s workers against hackers, throwing rocks at their buses. On the other hand, it’s more complicated. The bus protesters had inside information from people working within Google. Not everyone who designs code is a “brogrammer” who worships Ayn Rand.

Google is itself aware of the dangers of a hacker-worker alliance, as is well captured in Andrew Norman Wilson’s *Workers Leaving the Googleplex*. The intense stratification of employees, with different colored badges offering different grades of privilege, shows among other things a certain nervousness about such alliances. When Wilson videotaped Google workers – people who scan books all day and are not allowed to ride the bus or eat the free lunch – he was instantly fired and his video confiscated.

Perhaps what we’re dealing with now isn’t actually capitalism any more – but something

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Asger Jorn, *Fraternité avant tout*, 1962. Oil on canvas. Silkeborg Kunstmuseum. Photo: Lars Bay; Copyright: Donation Jorn, Silkeborg/VBK, Wien 2006.

worse. Companies like Google are in the business of surplus information, not surplus labor power. The goal is to build and own an infrastructure that enforces an asymmetry of information, where for whatever information the user gets, much, much more is harvested. It no longer even matters whether this information is culled from work. It can also be extracted from everyday life. And lest one think Google is something of an outlier: take a look at the Fortune 500 companies and it turns out that most of them are now, in part or in whole, in the information business. Even the biggest of them, Walmart. Those big-box stores are just a physical manifestation of a financial and logistical data system. They are money and information congealed into a thing in the landscape. In that regard they are rather like art world works of art.

The ruling class itself has changed form. That's part of the reason the art world changed form. Art has a new kind of patron. One much less interested in the making of things than in the reaping of surplus from information. Its goal is the commodification of information flows. As such it undermines all of the old gift exchanges via which information used to flow, in the family, the community, via schooling, and so forth. What the capitalists did for the production of things, the new ruling class is doing for the production of information. I call them the vectoralist class.

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They rule through the ownership and control of the vectors of information, its stocks, its flows, its design.

The “dematerialization of art” was homologous with this transformation of capitalism into something else, something even more abstracted. Conceptual art is a side effect of the rise of conceptual business. But it was more a shift in the relation between information and its material form than a dematerialization. What transpired was an abstracting of information from any particular material expression, but not from materiality in general.

Incidentally, this is why I always dissented from certain categories made popular by Hardt and Negri. “Immaterial labor” is just an absurdity. A non-concept. What the hacker class does is neither labor as traditionally understood, nor is it “immaterial.” Nothing could be more material than the information-abstracting infrastructure in which we now are obliged to live. Nor is it the case that labor became more cooperative or collaborative. On the contrary, what the hacker class is obliged to design is the exact opposite: commodified, individualized forms of information exchange. So while I salute the fact that Hardt and Negri were at least paying attention to the right things rather than droning on about Saint Paul, I don't think their analysis fit the lineaments of what's transpired



Andrew Norman Wilson, *Workers Leaving the Googleplex*, 2011. Courtesy of the artist. For more info see here <https://vimeo.com/15852288>

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Workers produce the Guy Fawkes masks used by Anonymous at a factory in Brazil. Photo: Reuters

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Medeco key hack as presented at DefCon, the hacker conference in Las Vegas. Marc Weber Tobias and his team of lock crackers allegedly debunked the company's high-security locks at 2008 DefCon. Photo: Dave Bullock

all that closely.

Both the worker and the hacker are drafted into the production of a world against their will, and in a manner designed to pit them against each other in a war of all against all. Inequality and precarity are built into the infrastructure of labor and the everyday by design. Even the hacker class finds its conditions of existence radically bifurcated by the winner-take-all culture of the start-up. Unable to really measure the “output” of form-designing practices, the vectoral class would rather just outsource it altogether. The start-up is the perfect model of self-exploitation, where the hacker bears by far the most risk, while the vectoral class gets to hedge its bets and collect the rents on any intellectual property that might result.

I’m glad that Elizabeth Povinelli addresses the question of the *effort* that is involved in any kind of form-designing activity. Laboring is effort, but usually effort that has been standardized and segmented. Capitalism was about making labor time measurable, breaking it down into pieces and putting a price on each unit of it as time. Hacking is also about effort, but it isn’t so easy to break it down and quantify it, because it’s a kind of effort that makes qualitative differences. “Information is the difference that makes a difference,” as Gregory Bateson put it. It is very, very hard. But doing it might involve long naps on the couch, a walk around the block, waking up in the middle of the night and banging away at something until dawn. It’s a different kind of effort, with a different relation to time.

It is not “immaterial” effort. Such language just sleds us back to old-fashioned romantic ideas about where ideas come from. Nothing could be more material than producing new ideas, forms, or designs. But there’s a certain nonstandard use of the material resources. You could call it play, or experiment. You can fetishize the nonproductive aspect, particularly from an art historical point of view, but from a design point of view, what results is only secondarily negation. What results is new forms, and the very form of the new. All of what the avant-gardes did in the end is design.

Effort takes energy. The hack requires a surplus of energy. “Bataille was right.” It’s what a civilization does with its surplus that defines it, shapes it, prefigures its future. What our civilization chose to do with energy is make it measurable. And so we know that, going by the measure, this civilization can’t last. Its time is already up. It has lost all confidence in itself. We can measure exactly what’s gone wrong with what this civilization does with energy, but its ruling class can’t or won’t make the effort to do anything about it. The art they hoard shows it:

this is a ruling class in decline. The obsessive ideological bleating about “pivoting” and “disrupting” is a cover for a glacial stasis.

And so there’s nothing for it but to take their money, live as best we can, and try to build prototypes for another life in the margins. Any and every space might be a site for this. The results will likely be modest. Let’s experiment! Who knows which new forms will take off and take hold? If the continuum connecting real creation to the art world breaks, so be it. It needs us more than we need it. For those of us from the art and language academy, perhaps the key is getting out of our deeply conservative, even reactionary, adherence to specialized traditions. Let’s have done with fine art history and the history of continental high theory. No more Heidegger; no more Duchamp. We need a new archive of the present for a new kind of present time. And we need to collaborate more widely, to be in dialog with very different domains of both technical and aesthetic counter-production.

Or as Michèle Bernstein put it: “monsters of all lands, unite!”

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McKenzie Wark is the co-author of *Excommunication: Three Inquiries in Media and Mediation* (University of Chicago Press, 2013) and the author of *The Beach Beneath the Street* (Verso 2011) and *The Spectacle of Disintegration* (Verso 2012), among other things. He teaches at the New School for Social Research.

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