

Elizabeth A. Povinelli

Holding Up the World, Part II: Time/Bank, Effort/Embankments

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These short remarks emerge from a conference that two editors of *e-flux* organized at Documenta 13 around the provocative assertion “I am my own money.” Julieta Aranda and Anton Vidokle did not hide their investments. The panel was an extension of their globally situated Time/Bank, a tripartite arrangement consisting of a labor-exchange website, a series of conferences/panels, and curated exhibition spaces. At the center of Time/Bank is a working web-based skills exchange network in which participants offer and earn “hour-dollar” credits for labor exchange. “Time banking is a tool by which a group of people can create an alternative economic model where they exchange their time and skills, rather than acquire goods and services through the use of money or any other state-backed value.” But Time/Bank is not one thing. It is a series of forms of activity – a working labor-exchange network for the art community; an evolving concept about value, time, and labor in the context of art and global capital; and a series of exhibition spaces for insubordinate objects – meant to produce a form of life.

Rather than mere statement then, “I am my own money” is a demand and an assertion about something this is real and yet not actual. Time/Bank claims that the skills that I have, the skills that I am (my art, my thought, my affects and senses; my life as an exercise of my potential), *can be* the vehicle of not merely a new form of labor exchange but a new form of the social. What I already am could be the foundation for what is not yet. When we act on the fact that we are *already* our own money, we will no longer need the authorized currencies supporting what actually is. We will instead exchange the concrete forms of our specific capacities, and in doing so, change the actual world in which we live. I will directly invest in you, and you in me. I will give you my capacity for perfect pitch; you will give me your ability to write software. Insofar as these kinds of capacity exchanges are oriented to an attentive other, the basic structuring category of social interdependence will be the specificity of my and your being and becoming in the world, rather than our measure against the illusion of an abstract coinage.

The tripartite activity-concept of Time/Bank and its assertion “I am my own money” stretches across two contemporary concepts of insubordination, if not insurrection – the concept of immaterial labor and the concept of the virtual – with the hope that these concepts could be concretized. But are these concepts adequate to capturing a certain kind of event, and certain conditions of the event, so as to create a counter-actualization (effectuation)?¹ In particular, how do these concepts help us

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understand something I have called “the tense of the quasi-event” (but that others have called “crisis ordinariness”² and “slow violence”³) and the conditions of the emergence and endurance of the otherwise? What would happen if we substituted the concept of Time/Bank with Effort/Embankments? The answers to these questions are not clear-cut.

For Negri and Hardt, immaterial labor refers to the *informationalization* of capital that came about when the service sector broke free of the service sector, reorganizing and resignifying the labor process as a whole. As a result, the service industry can no longer be thought as merely referring to low-wage burger and coffee shop employment or call center employees. The service industry now refers to an entire reorientation of labor, production, and consumption, including the financial sector, dependent as it is on information and communication technologies oriented to learning about and responding to the desires of others. This information-communication network includes communication between software and machines and between commodities and market desires (other machines, other consumers, other producers). It doesn’t matter what the concrete technology is. All sorts of technologies of information collection are deployed, including new algorithms that mine buying habits, paper slips distributed in hotels marked “give us feedback,” and Facebook and Twitter feeds. What matters is the heart of this new logic of labor – affective-informational loops oriented toward capturing the desire of the other so that capital can insinuate itself ever more exactly, ever more anticipatorily, as the object of the desire of the other.⁴ To be sure, service capital also seeks to anticipate what is real (virtual) rather than actual (“the next big thing”). But it does not seek to stage an antagonism of desire, out of which, the Hegelians posit, would come a world historical unfolding that began with the master-slave and that would end with the universalization of equal recognition.⁵ Capital seeks to anticipate our desire, not antagonize it.

But rather than viewing immaterial labor as the last locked door of the prison house of capital, Hardt and Negri see it as providing “the potential for a kind of spontaneous and elementary communism” within capital. This is for the simple reason that *cooperation* and *mutually oriented* affect, the hallmark qualities of elementary communism, are “completely immanent to the laboring activity” of immaterial labor, as opposed to previous forms of labor in which *coordination* with the activity of machinery was dominant.⁶ Coordination might seem quite close to cooperation – coordination demands a high order of cooperation after all. But Hardt and

Negri emphasize the difference between something like the articulation of parts rather than a constant interrogation of others wants and needs. “Be your own immaterial labor,” they might say.



Charles Burnett, *Killer of Sheep*, 1979. Film still

Deep within the DNA of Hardt and Negri’s concept of immaterial labor as a potential insurrection within actually existing capital is their long conversation with Deleuze – Deleuze’s influence on their thought; their worry that Deleuze did not fully conceptualize political subjectivity; Deleuze’s worry that his ontology was being too quickly collapsed into a Marxist-Leninist framework.⁷ Irrespective of these thoughts and worries, the way that the informationalization of labor and capital might provide a deterritorialization of capital without positing an outside to capital is clear. Service capital provides a cartographic line that is within the given assemblage of capital but which is also against what this assemblage presupposes and, in presupposing, attempts to keep in place. In other words, the cartography of an anticapital immaterial labor is *real* – is really there in actual capital’s immaterial labor – even if it is not yet *actual*. So, if it is true that this elementary communism is real if not actual, why not attempt to actualize this real? Create an event. Make a web exchange that orients artistic labor capacities outside abstract coinage; gathers scholars and activists to think about this informationalized utopia; petition the art curators to mount the exhibit; move the exhibit from New York to Berlin to Kassel ...

I am already exhausted. I say of my colleagues: I don’t know how they do it; keep up, keep going; how they are able to do so many disparate things at such a high level at the same time and over such a long period of time. And then there are the parties.

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This anticipatory exhaustion foregrounds what is in, but often not taken up in, the literature on counter-actualizing events, namely the effort of emergence and the endurance of the otherwise. To understand what is at stake in thinking about the effort of emergence and the endurance of the otherwise, we can turn to William James, who, as we know, Deleuze greatly admired. James proposed two still counterintuitive claims, namely, that *mental concepts are forms of effort* and *the event is a fantasy*. Let's start with mental concepts. According to James, the source of mental concepts would never be found by burrowing deeper into the mind in search of ever more abstract forms. Mental life is – and thus all mental concepts are – a cacophony of “efforts of attention.” There are three results of conceptualizing the mental concept in this way. First, it demands we pay attention to the actual world in its vast multiplicity. Second, it demands we pay attention to the potential explanatory figurations (concepts) that might provide not so much an account of this world but an experiment in constituting it. And third, it demands we pay attention to where these constitutive figurations are able to emerge and why and whether or not they are able to endure the conditions of their

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emergence. For James, if we wish to find new truths, we will find them in the great energetic bustle, “the great mass of silently thinking and feeling men” and their myriad experiments in everyday life.⁸ It is there where we will see how and why, or why not, initially murky sensations become ideas by a focused effort of attention that provides them with qualities and dimensions and then tests and toughens them in the very worlds from which they emerged. If we wish to understand why new truths wither or never quite emerge, it is because the same concrete social terrains that are creating and testing truth are also continually extinguishing potential worlds and thus potential truths in the quasi-events of everyday exhaustion.

Understanding mental concepts as a form of effort, James argued, demanded that we place mental life in the social worlds in which it exists – in which it is given dimensions and qualities, and spreads. In other words, mental concepts aren't merely situated in the social world. They are the social world as expressed mentally – and this is not the social world of meaning but the social world of distributed energies and abilities to focus on the task at hand. As a result, time itself is not something that can be presupposed any longer as empty, thus lending itself to a



A customer pays with Ithaca Hours at a local store, Ithaca, New York.

homogeneously smooth exchange (I will give you x hours of my capacity for y hours of someone else's). Who has the energy to focus, and when? I can give you four hours of canvas stretching but I keep getting distracted by my child crying in the other room. This is why all mental-physical capacities, as well as truth, must be understood to exist in the "open air" of the "unfinished world," rather than as the artificiality and pretense of a normative rule or an abstracted measure.⁹ One can see Deleuze's interest in James here. No matter his ontological claims about the preeminence of difference over identity, Deleuze believes that the only place that difference exists is: in world as figurating force; the multiplicity of actual differences within these figurating forces; and the immanent lines that are real within them but not actual. And these figurating forces and their actual and real differences are not abstract or equal.



San Francisco, 1906.

Thus rather than a Time/Bank, we might seek to establish an Effort/Embankment – some way of building modes of enhancing different regions of effort. The problem such an Effort/Embankment would face is the actual conditions of energy distribution – the kinds of "events" that account for the lack of effort of attention. Events of even the most dramatic and self-evident sort are already constituted out of the dispersion of a multiplicity of quasi-events.

James makes this point clearly in observations on the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, published in *Youth's Companion* magazine. James notes that "the earthquake" was usually personified, often deified, even though in fact "earthquake" is "simply the collective *name* of all the cracks and shakings and disturbances that happen. They *are* the earthquake. But for me *the* earthquake was the *cause* of the disturbances."¹⁰ Even the activity of

shaking should not be given an identity: "the shakings" are an endless series of mutually composing relations, some still, some moving, some small – a fly's wing, a footprint – and some quite large – a highway, a molten flow. Moreover, all of these events are constantly occurring in and across every assemblage, even as each assemblage's abilities to persevere have already been reinforced or compromised. And this constant personification of a set of distributed quasi-events as morally personified force has a direct impact on our understanding of effort as an ethical failing or testimony. While acknowledging that we measure ourselves and others by many standards (strength, intelligence, wealth, good luck), James claims that "deeper than all such things, and able to suffice unto itself without them, is the sense of the amount of effort which we can put forth ... the effort seems to belong to an altogether different realm, as if it were the substantive thing which we *are*, and those were but externals which we *carry*."¹¹ In other words, those for whom no effort has been invested are then held accountable for not having the conditions for making the right kind of effort – the kind of effort that would eventuate a kind of event: the new, amazing, world-transformative concept-activity.

How do we think about various explicitly aestheticized forms and genres of concept-activity that at once analyze and make worlds in which these efforts of attentive endurance are formed, thickened, and extended? And where and with whom?

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This is the second of a four-part meditation in this issue on the problem of time, effort, and endurance in conditions of precarity, and pragmatic efforts to embank an otherwise.

Elizabeth A. Povinelli teaches in anthropology and gender studies at Columbia University. She was previously editor of *Public Culture* and her most recent books are *The Empire of Love* (2006) and *Economies of Abandonment* (2011). Her writing and filmography focuses on the conditions of otherwise in Late Liberalism. She is a founding member of the Karrabing Film Collective.

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See Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1995).

2

Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2011).

3

Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2013).

4

See Elizabeth A. Povinelli, "After the Last Man: Images and Ethics of Becoming Otherwise," *e-flux journal* 35 (May 2012) <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/after-the-last-man-images-and-ethics-of-becoming-other-wise/>

5

See Elizabeth A. Povinelli, "Routes/Worlds," *e-flux journal* 27 (Sept. 2011) <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/routesworlds/>

6

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press), 294.

7

See Michael Hardt, *Gilles Deleuze: An Apprenticeship in Philosophy* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1993). Nicholas Tampio has also argued that the "assemblage" is the political subject of Deleuze's virtual ontology. See Tampio, "Assemblages and the Multitude: Deleuze, Hardt, Negri, and the Postmodern Left," *European Journal of Political Theory* vol. 8, no. 3 (June 2009): 383–400.

8

William James, "The Present Dilemma in Philosophy," in *Pragmatism* (New York: Dover, 1995), 15–34, 29.

9

James, "The Present Dilemma in Philosophy," 20.

10

William James, "On Some Mental Effects of the Earthquake," reprinted in James, *Memories and Studies* (Rockville, MD: Arc Manor, 2008), 86–93, 88

11

William James, "The Will to Believe," *The New World* no. 5 (June 1896): 715.