

Ruminations on remuneration

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n.e.w.s (<http://northeastwestsouth.net>) was launched at ISEA2008 in Singapore. n.e.w.s. is a platform for participatory development of artistic and curatorial projects in contemporary art and new media framed by curatorial contributions from around the globe. Bringing together voices and images from North, East, West and South, n.e.w.s. reflects geographic diversity and facilitates a framework for collaboration, content and visions of change from outside the normal parameters of established art world networks. In this paper we (n.e.w.s.) would like to address the relationship between rethinking the social and economic conditions of art and the artistic context of an emergent participatory community investing in creative production on the Internet. This will be mapped out through notions of the gift, immaterial labour, debt and participatory technologies. Finally we would like to introduce our forthcoming book *Arbitrating Attention* that explores alternative models of remuneration.

Paid content

n.e.w.s. offers space for a potential series of global dialogues, transactions and collaborations concerning art and its discourse. Content is provided by contributors from different regions in the world, resulting in a rethinking and rearticulating of certain identity constructs inherent to pre-Web 2.0 generations. n.e.w.s. is non-commercial and uses the visibility of distributed networks to create value around immaterial resources in a knowledge-driven economy. Using a bottom-up, grass roots methodology in a Web 2.0 economy, what distinguishes n.e.w.s. from other online communities is its collaborative curatorial model and partially remunerated content, without being an academic, governmental or large cultural institution with structural subsidy. A system of trust and unexpected contingencies measure this intangible input. This strategy encourages a return not strictly based on attention economy (reputation) principles.

Gift, debt and return: speculations on the cultural economy

n.e.w.s. is an online context or space for creative endeavour that is not directly dependent on the market economy (or at least, that it does not exist to generate a

profit per se), nor is it co-opted for market research analysis (data mining) but is nonetheless engaged within a meta-discourse about value. What are our values at n.e.w.s.? And what are their cultural dissemination? How have these values been defined, negotiated and exchanged in virtual as well as real world 'debt' economies so far?

If the value of money - as classical Marxist theory would have it - is derived from 'labour power', or even, as some recent strains put it, more broadly from creative action - and if it is only through the institution of the wage that this creative action becomes a commodity, why is it so few of us are getting paid in a Web 2.0 economy? Some have argued that the common distinction between 'value' and 'values' is based on the commodification of labour: 'value' is simply our way of talking about the importance of actions commensurated by money (value being that which money measures), while 'values' (where familial, societal, ethical, religious, artistic) are assumed to be that which should not be corrupted by the market. (Graeber 2001) 'Values' are valued for their very incommensurability. Where do we place the Internet? It is, certainly, a sphere of social relations that is continually adapting and changing, but many of the resulting struggles revolve around the question of what sorts of value and, indeed, values, it embodies. On the other hand, this is, perhaps, only to be expected, 'if only because the most important political struggles in any society will always be over how value itself is to be defined.'¹

Notion of the gift in a user-generated economy

The notion of the gift, as developed by the sociologist Marcel Mauss², has been interpreted as assuming that gifts are not free, something needs to be returned or exchanged. Actually Mauss' essay on the gift was, he claimed, really part of a larger project on the 'origins of the idea of contractual obligation' and in a way, about the origin of debt and about how social obligations become entangled in things. Mauss even argued that the gift is about detaching pieces of ourselves, our creative energies (gifts) to create images of community. The Maussian distinction between gift exchange and economic transactions actually works by an analogous logic: the gift is largely concerned with relations between persons; a commodity exchange is equivalence between things. Gift economies, those that have not been remunerated, have always been an inherent part of capitalism - so much of capitalism functions,

¹ Graeber, David. *Towards an Anthropological Theory of Value*. New York: Palgrave, 2001.

² Mauss, Marcel. *The Gift: forms and functions of exchange in archaic societies*. London: Routledge, 1990.

exists, propagates itself because of unpaid labour: slavery, women's housework labour, child labour as well as intellectual labour by workers in the 'culture industries' but this labour disappears from social visibility.

Immaterial labour and valorisation

Immaterial labour³ theory assumes 'we' are engaged in a kind of communistic mutual fashioning where obligations cannot be quantified by definition, just harvested by capitalists, so the 'law of value' no longer exists, value can no longer be measured. Since the 1970s this has changed the organisation of production (post-Fordism) and how intellectual labour results in what Lazzarato terms the 'process of valorisation'. Valorisation is no longer confined to the factory, the value of products is created more and more by all of us, in our supposed leisure time, thus we are all basically working for free. With the advent of computers and the ability to gather data, companies harvest our creative energy to understand and market that information. Thus we are adding to the value of the product for free as we distribute parts of ourselves, spreading our 'data'. This 'gift-giving' of time, energy and knowledge (content) exists in an economy that bids farewell to the client and welcomes instead the user/collaborator (prosumer). Though both gift economies and immaterial labour raise similar questions problematising our assumptions about value in the Internet, they don't seem to contextualise the looming problem of our society: obligation, debt and remuneration.

Social creativity, data within virtual, debt economies

In social exchange, relations do not have the anonymity of money but rather provide reciprocal returns in broader terms, open-ended networking models and tit-for-tat exchanges between people. This could also be said of n.e.w.s. But how does this affect the classic (Marxist) idea of commodity fetishism, to reveal social relations hidden by things and human creativity? Etymologically 'data' is the Latin plural of datum, neuter past participle of dare, 'to give', hence 'something given'.⁴ With the advancement of computers we use 'databases' that are able to collect, store, use all forms with data acquisition, data analysis, data farming. Data mining is the art of finding hidden patterns or anomalies that are used in profiling, and applied to fields of

³ Lazzarato, Maurizio (1996) "Immaterial Labour." [Internet] Available from <<http://www.generation-online.org/c/fcimmateriallabour3.htm>> Translated by Paul Colilli and Ed Emery

⁴ Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Data>

consumer analysis, marketing and surveillance. If we 'give' data freely, as we give our time, remit our rights of privacy and right to remuneration, how can we create other systems of negotiation and payment?

The expansion of credit money and giving 'data', produces an implicit tautology. Computers, which keep track of the complex lines of transaction that were invisible when done with hard, material currency, simultaneously also provide complex ways of hiding abstract securities, collateralized debt obligations and credit default swaps that have accrued so much that this amount of debt is larger than 'real' economies.

Virtual labour and virtual economies

Virtual labour and virtual economies are made possible by exchanges of value on the Internet. Derivatives, mortgage-backed securities and other synthetic constructions are the replacement models for classic 'wage labour' and are based on debt securitization. How can financial obligation become an infinitely expanding promise of future profits without false value? Is the origin of this value really in the unpaid labour of the Internet? In attempting to understand the link between new forms of virtual labour and virtual money, might we need to look at them not only from actions of 'gifting' but from the perspective of obligation, debt and remuneration?

Remuneration for labour or contributions (user-generated content) on the web is through gift-economies, debt economies and mostly, attention economy (visibility). This distribution of attention is reflected in theories such as the 'The Long Tail' (Anderson), which proposes that instead of economy and culture focusing on the mass market, where hits are related to popularity, the niche market will enable a longer (tail) of supply. New distribution mechanisms, from digital downloading to peer-to-peer (P2P) markets such as e-bay, mediators taking a tiny cut of vast numbers of transactions, offer more return. But where will the borders reside of speed, access and censorship and what sort of power relations will determine them?

Participatory technologies

In an age of digital participatory interaction through word, image and social software, alternative models of distributing knowledge can arise, resulting in future productivity. n.e.w.s. is attempting to leverage the potential of participative technologies and communities to facilitate the possibility for an artistic discourse through paid content.

How can we negotiate the attention economy of the Internet with remuneration? If the n.e.w.s. business model is premised on funding from cultural organisations worldwide that specifically support local as well as international endeavour, how do we retain autonomy while fulfilling the interests of top-down structures? In order to pay contributors n.e.w.s. is seeking out alternative models of exchange, collaboration and vocabularies by engaging visionaries and financial supporters in order to bridge not only fields of interest but non-profit and profit-seeking enterprise. We also happened to win a prize as a result of which we are (partially) financially supported to write a 100-page book that rethinks the social and economic conditions of art in the 21st century and speculates potential models for remuneration.

Arbitrating Attention

n.e.w.s. will tap the undercurrent of new economic experiments in the way artistic activities can be de-framed yet incorporate survival tactics for sustainability in our forthcoming publication: *Arbitrating Attention*.⁵ The rise of the attention economy – that is, the economy inherent to the 'society of the spectacle,' of which the mainstream contemporary artworld is both the proving ground and the emblematic outcome, shows every sign of continuing into the future at the same inexorable pace it gathered in the twentieth century.

What exactly do we mean by the 'attention economy'?

Simplified, is attention-getting not a form of symbolic capitalization, akin to a 'reputational economy'? Build on existent stock, expand the audience, in short, exploit attention-getting to capture whatever opportunities the new economy offers. In this respect, and in this economy, attention is capital. Here the challenge for immaterial labourers is to extract their surplus value without the expectation of overthrowing the system. Art today has become an extreme exacerbation of twentieth-century attention economics, where the artist's standing in the reputational economy is determined by his or her coefficient of specific visibility.

⁵ For full proposal text please see <http://northeastwestsouth.net/node/251>

What we mean by a 'shadow economy'?

Payment, in the form of money as we know it, is now a virtual transaction except in 'shadow economies' of illegal activities with cash payments and billfolds (suitcases of money for drug dealers and human smugglers). But what we mean by shadow economy is different. Instead of visibility, conversely, the 'shadow economy' is based on a model of inattention; that is, of a deliberately impaired, deframed attention. Thus a shadow economy is dependent on the structures of the broader economy even as it shifts the emphasis on where value is placed and how it is defined.

Shadow economics on and off the web

The attention economy really took off with Web 2.0 – less a technological paradigm, really, than an innovation in capital accumulation based upon the private captation of community-produced value – and has admittedly done so with the complicity of the users' community. Increasingly though, this model of attention-in-lieu-of-remuneration has faced a two-tiered challenge from its own shadows: a post-media response from the 'sensual web' of the pre-existing unplugged world, which might ironically be termed 'web 0.0' – that is, not the web at all, just the broad cognitive network of human interaction; and an explicit expansion for developing instruments and resources to run user-generated content on public websites. This focus on paid web-usership is technologically embryonic, though it may ultimately be a platform for remunerating not the classic category of 'authorship' but the more extensive and more inclusive category of 'usership.'

Being net-based or neighbourhood-based is not the issue, for ultimately this new economic model is in the shadows of the mainstream attention economy. Social exchange, happenings and relationships are not anonymous like money but rather can provide retribution in longer terms, open-ended networking models - exchanges. In both counter-models, the resources themselves are siphoned off from the edges of the attention economy.

Being the change we want to see

To sum up, the attention economy – through its foundations and similar apparatuses – has no choice but to fund knowledge production ventures, of a more or less playful but nonetheless serious nature. Shadow economic players (whatever their social

status or realm of activity) sieve off a portion of the resources and re-channel it to other shadowy operatives, allowing a de facto venture-capital injection that then is reinvested in rethinking the very notions described above forming the basis for renewing our modes of transmitting knowledge. What the shadow knows.

