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Introduction: Art in the Time of Capital

Martin Young

For the duration of Maria Eichhorn's exhibition, *5 weeks, 25 days, 175 hours*, Chisenhale Gallery's staff are not working.

So began the short statement that adorned the front gates of Chisenhale gallery between 24 April and 29 May 2016. It was posted to all corporate social media accounts, and prefaced the automated out-of-office email.¹ Following a day long symposium on 23 April, every employee at the gallery in Bethnal Green, East London was given five weeks off, paid in full. Work was suspended and, beyond external conversations inspired by the project, so was the gallery's participation in cultural production. This artwork dispensed with a focal object, be it painting, sculpture, or performance, and instead directed attention to the usually unseen institutional apparatus on which such an object might depend. Highlighting not simply the process of artistic production but also the quotidian routines of curation and administration, Eichhorn emptied the gallery in order to show how it is ordinarily filled. The real heart of the work was not the inoperative gallery itself, however, but rather the time bestowed on the workers and the uses to which they put it. Rather than being the product of artistic labour, the artwork was the absence of artistic labour itself. In this context, the bare fact of unobligated time takes on an auratic status, elevated by whatever stubborn ideals of beauty and cultural importance are still connoted by the concept of a 'work of art' into something important, meaningful, and worthy of contemplation.

5 Weeks, 25 Days, 175 hours is an apposite work with which to introduce this collection on art, time, and capital, as it makes the gallery the locus (if not the actual site) of a series of questions about the temporalities of work and production. The essays collected here similarly turn attention away from the art object and towards the

¹ *Maria Eichhorn: 5 Weeks, 25 Days, 175 Hours*, Chisenhale Gallery, 2016, https://chisenhale.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Maria-Eichhorn_5-weeks-25-days-175-hours_Chisenhale-Gallery_2016.pdf.

institutional, professional, commercial, and productive processes on which art rests. Eichhorn's exhibition, through its instantiation of a concrete reprieve from work, hints prefiguratively at the possibility of the withdrawal of or withdrawal from paid labour. These ideas underpin the essays that follow, which are concerned with the situation of the arts within capitalism, the situation of workers within the arts, and the persistent hope that either subject may be able to escape its position.

If the concept of the piece was suggestive, the practical execution drew stark attention to the kinds of work which sustain a gallery like Chisenhale. There is the day to day activity of keeping the gallery open to public attendance; the immediate superintention of the space, the active compliance with legal responsibilities, and the daily execution of curatorial strategy. There is also the bureaucratic administration. This work is more temporally fluid; what is not completed one day carries over into the next and tasks accumulate. However, during the course of the installation, all incoming emails were automatically deleted; the staff returning to their desks in late May did not face a backlog of deferred work. There is also the work of sustaining the organisation, through fundraising and maintaining professional contacts. To this end, the gallery set up a dedicated email address, checked once a week, for urgent matters which, while arguably undermining the spirit of the piece, is also revealing about the relationship between day to day staff activity and the long term reproduction of the institution. Reorienting the approach to art to centre on time calls into question categorical certainties about, say, the separation of aesthetics and finance or the relationship between art and entertainment. Chisenhale temporarily opted out of its ordinary participation in the leisure economy, ceasing to be a destination at which time might be spent.

Moreover, to address art in terms of the temporal logics of capital is to draw attention to its troubled relationship with industrial production. Theatre, while colloquially classified as a branch of 'the arts', has enjoyed an ambivalent status in the history of art criticism, a marginality which has occasionally seen it savagely denigrated as the antithesis of art.² Art, which is generally dedicated to the production

² Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: Dutton, 1995), 116-147.

of unique works, and theatre, which is generally concerned with the reproducibility of a performance product, reveal important characteristics about each others' relationships to the temporalities of capitalist production. Dave Beech, whose influence recurs through this collection, has identified an overwhelming tendency within Western Marxism to position art as absolutely enmeshed within the economic and cultural web of capitalist society, but without a meaningful consideration of art's actual economic position. He argues instead for the political importance of recognising its exceptional status and attending to how the production of art differs from the production of other commodities.³ This economic approach, interrogating art's relation to capital, rather than to capitalism, establishes a robust analysis on which further theory and action can be built. In close agreement with Beech, Michael Shane Boyle has made what is effectively the inverse intervention about theatre. He repudiates the widespread belief within theatre criticism that performance lies outside of, or is inherently able to disrupt, the circulation of capital (a conception closely indebted to *operaismo*), demonstrating instead the theatrical performance's capacity to function quite conventionally as a commodity.⁴ And yet in spite of these divergent disciplinary contexts, in this collection theatre workers stand alongside artists and curators as subjects of a common circumstance. Indeed, the central theme of Sophie Coudray's contribution is the absolute political and historical contingency of our conceptions of what art and work are. It requires only a shift in the interests of capital to transform 'workers' into 'creatives', or 'creatives' back into 'value producers'.

5 Weeks, 25 Days, 175 hours allowed a small number of people a fleeting opportunity to step outside of their ordinary work patterns, and in doing so provides the prompt for us to imagine the possibility of more comprehensively stepping outside of the overdetermined social structures of productivity, accumulation, and exploitation. A conception of unproductive time as a weapon against capital has recurred throughout the history of art and art criticism, and is the

³ Dave Beech, *Art and Value: Art's Economic Exceptionalism in Classical, Neoclassical and Marxist Economics* (Boston: Brill, 2015), 19-20.

⁴ Michael Shane Boyle, "Performance and Value: The Work of Theatre in Karl Marx's Critique of Political Economy," *Theatre Survey* 58:1 (2017): 4-5.

central animating idea of this collection. My own contribution locates this real distinction at the heart of other critical theoretical and artistic conceptions of the categorisation of time into divisible forms. With Sophie Coudray's analysis of theatre strikes, the resistance to productivity is framed in its most codified and traditionally understood terms: absolute refusal at the site of production. The strike is a suspension of productive time, a decisive interruption into a predetermined process. Finally, however, the possibility that art might externalise itself from capital is challenged through a dialogue between Rowan Lear and Panos Kompatsiaris on the current state of the biennial. This builds on Lear's idea of 'radical inefficiency', an effort towards survival within capitalist conditions that is characterised by embracing, rather than resisting, the delays, interruptions, and stoppages that mark our lives.⁵

Compiling the various drafts of this collection was a process seriously disrupted by interruptions into the ordinary workflow of artistic/academic life, which, though precarious, irregular, and intermittent does nonetheless proceed according to capital's logic (even where it does not contribute directly to capitalist production). Health problems related to stress and overwork, the demands of paid employment, and a national wave of university strikes all delayed the production of this journal. Along the way, hours of intense work were offset by inefficiency, procrastination, and the guilty sting of wasted time. The three contributions to this collection represent an attempt to navigate these temporal problems and to consider the always compromised, always insufficient, but still always necessary strategies through which they might be resisted.

⁵ Rowan Lear, "Towards radical inefficiency: autonomy, overwork and resistance in artistic labour," *Doggerland* 4 (2017): 8-19.