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Artists, debt, and global activism

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Abstract

This article examines how artists, activism, and works of art may contribute to a more textured understanding of debt in contemporary society and culture. The diversity of aesthetic practices and range of strategic interventions in which artists are organizers and activists are manifest in the Global Ultra Luxury Faction (G.U.L.F.), advocacy initiatives by Working Artists and the Greater Economy (W.A.G.E.), and alternative, trans-local projects such as the Arts Collaboratory. These activist interventions provide the context for an examination of how artists have seized upon discourses related to debt and finance to produce works that offer a critical reappraisal of the global economy. Artists' projects by Martha Rosler, Cassie Thornton, Zachary Formwalt, and Michael Najjar challenge audiences to rethink the invisible networks of debt and exchange by creating new visual vocabularies for 'seeing' debt. The emergence of activist groups, such as Liberate Tate, has also signaled renewed interest in the ethics of corporate sponsorships, museums, and environmental issues. A heightened awareness of the ethical dimensions of debt and global support for activist movements may contribute to new notions of citizenship and performative democracy that can incite individual and collective renegotiations of how we might critically rethink debt.

Keywords

Activism, art, debt, globalization, museums, sponsorships

Introduction

In January 2015, a conference entitled 'The Artist as Debtor: The Work of Artists in the Age of Speculative Capitalism', held at the Cooper Union in New York, signaled the increasing number of projects that interrogate the nexus of artists, debt, and the flows of global capital, and that are informed by art and activist interventions. The conference questioned whether the extraordinary profits from contemporary art sales are related to mounting debts incurred by art students, the reliance of museums on a contingent workforce or unpaid labor by art students,

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or investments by museums in urban gentrification and real estate development (Fusco and Fischer, 2015; Heddaya, 2015). Such debates underscore the complexity of relations within the art world, in which artists, museums, galleries, art fairs, sponsors, collectors, and audiences are inextricably linked in asymmetrical networks of exchange, dependency, and debt.

This article examines how artists, activism, and works of art may contribute to a more textured understanding of debt in contemporary society and culture. Recent discussions on art, activism, and debt are reflected in protest movements that have gained further momentum from Occupy, such as Strike Debt, in which artists have played a central role. As Yates McKee (2013: 784) points out, "Artists facilitate assemblies, envision strategies and tactics, design propaganda, issue communiqués, stage performances, lead trainings, cultivate alliances, and administer media platforms of all sorts". The diversity of aesthetic practices and range of strategic interventions in which artists are organizers and activists are manifest in the Gulf Labor Coalition and its collaboration with the Global Ultra Luxury Faction (G.U.L.F.), which protested the labor practices of the Guggenheim at the construction site of its new museum in Abu Dhabi; advocacy initiatives by Working Artists and the Greater Economy (W.A.G.E.) regarding the status of artists, digital art, and more broadly, the neoliberal DIY economy; and alternative, trans-local projects such as the Arts Collaboratory.

These activist interventions provide the context for an examination of how artists have seized upon discourses related to debt and finance to produce works that offer a critical reappraisal of the global economy, the boundaries between the material and immaterial, or the abstraction of financial exchange and the concrete implications of debt. Although financial networks and forms of 'debiting' are increasingly processed through virtual systems of exchange that seem to elude understanding, I will argue that artists' projects – both individually and collectively – challenge viewers and audiences to consider and rethink invisible networks of debt and exchange by creating new visual vocabularies for 'seeing' debt. Works by Martha Rosler, Zachary Formwalt, and Michael Najjar contribute to debates on global finance by destabilizing the relations between the virtual and the material, as well as the spatial politics of debt, by intervening in and interrogating the spaces that are occupied by global capital, including the implications of debiting the environment.

The emergence of new activist groups, such as Liberate Tate, has also signaled renewed interest in the ethics of corporate sponsorship and environmental issues, as the case of British Petroleum's sponsorship of the Tate Modern demonstrates. Here I will argue that discourses surrounding museum ethics reflect corporate cultural politics that relate to forms of neoliberal 'accounting' or 'accountability' as a mode of debt (Joseph, 2014). Finally, I will briefly discuss how the ethics of debt and new forms of activism may incite 'global citizens' (Weibel, 2015a: 25; Weibel, 2015b: 60-61) to rethink their own implication in complex networks of debt.

Debt and institutional critique

In *Debt to Society*, Miranda Joseph observes that debt has assumed a "particularly prominent role in the contemporary regimes of capital accumulation" ranging from financial instruments, to consumer and student debt, and mortgages, "stripping assets from individuals in their roles as citizens and consumers" (2014: ix). Joseph situates debt as a defining aspect, and intrinsic dimension, of social relations that bind individuals and institutions to processes of indebtedness through forms of neoliberal 'accounting'. Debt as a constitutive element of social relations also points to the nexus of debt and power – or as Maurizio Lazzarato (2012:

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33) puts it, the role of debt as an "archetype of social relations" that is grounded in "an asymmetry of power and not that of a commercial exchange that implies and presupposes equality". Within a field of social relations that is increasingly defined by debt, we can also identify intersections with contemporary discourses on art and activism, most notably in debates on 'relational aesthetics' or 'socially engaged art' (Kester, 2015). Nato Thompson (2015: 17, 20) argues that two dimensions have informed these debates: social aesthetics, which reference art and art institutions as contested spaces in neoliberal economies; and tactical media, defined as "guerrilla cultural production that would disturb specific political structures". This expanded field of socially engaged art intersects with and contests capital investment (e.g., collecting and art investments), individual and institutional debt in the 'cultural sector' (e.g., student debt and museums), and the funding of the 'arts' in neoliberal economies.

These intersections also point to institutional and systemic processes of accounting "as components of complex performative representational practices" (Joseph, 2014: x) that have individual and institutional consequences, e.g., in the management and corporatization of art and culture (e.g., museums), and in establishing individual and institutional 'accountability' within cultural politics. In this regard, regimes of accounting and managing:

> … pervade lived neoliberalism across a wide array of institutions and domains: financial accounting in its managerial mode (cost accounting) and the 'metrics' (statistical measurements) meant to track the efficacy of practices and programs are the technologies by which most public institutions are managed (and held 'accountable'). (Joseph, 2014: xi)

For Joseph (2014: 25), accounting also represents an analytical intervention that can expose the manner in which individuals and communities are impacted by forms of debt, and how institutions – from correctional facilities to university curricula – are subject to regimes of accounting and financialization. Financialization is multiply coded in the signification of networks of representational, quantitative, and qualitative exchanges – from the abstraction of the algorithms driving virtual stock exchanges, to the particularization of student debt and subprime mortgage practices, to art collecting (and art fairs) as a financial instrument for the transfer of capital. Arjun Appadurai (1990: 298) defines such flows of global capital in terms of increasingly deterritorialized "financescapes". The processes of deterritorialization or 'glocalization' fuse capital, commodities, currency, and speculation with virtual technologies and exchanges, complicating perceptions of local, material exchanges and virtual realities. As Angus Cameron (2015: 18) points out in his analysis of society's relationship to currency, "our mental maps are not yet up to date with the emergent geographies of money". The financialization of art markets also reflects the complexity of mapping art and global capital or, as noted at the outset, the links and dependencies of the art world to debt and finance.

An institutional perspective on accounting that foregrounds the links between debt, regimes of accounting, and financialization is, I would argue, also particularly relevant to cultural institutions and their accountability – i.e., how museums account for social, cultural, and ethical responsibilities within the matrix of neoliberal cultural politics (Rectanus, 2002; Wu 2002). Moreover, the *trans*-institutional dimensions of accounting (e.g., museums that financialize their collections as corporate assets, or corporations that appropriate the representational functions of museums for corporate museums and themed environments such as *BMW Welt*) expose the intersections and disjunctures of capital and social relations. However, such trans-institutional connections also emerge across seemingly disparate domains, such as prisons and museums, which cannot be reduced to a single social field. In

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this regard they are reminiscent of Michel Foucault's 'heterotopias' (Hetherington, 2011). For example, Andrea Fraser's intervention at the Whitney Museum, *Down the River* (2016), interrogated the contradictions of new prison construction and the concurrent boom in museum construction since the 1970s, (which amounted to the financialization of the prison and museum 'sectors' as capital investments). Fraser utilized audio recordings made at the Sing Sing Correctional Facility (in Ossining, New York) as a sound installation within the empty exhibition space of the fifth-floor gallery, to bring the acoustic environment of incarceration into the context of the museum space (Viveros-Fauné, 2016). Fraser observed that: "Museums increasingly are warehouses of wealth, capturing surplus in the form of artworks that are no longer financially productive. Prisons are institutions that warehouse surplus labour and populations that have been economically excluded from the labour market" (quoted in Burns, 2016: Paragraph 4).[1] The questions raised by Fraser also speak to museum ethics and their financing, highlighting how museums increasingly promote their social engagement in order to validate their contributions to the socio-cultural infrastructure, while at the same time leveraging their debt to governments, patrons, and corporate sponsors through the financialization of their assets (i.e., collections and 'brand'). As a result, activists and artists have increasingly recognized that cultural institutions "resemble components of a 'system' to be used and occupied" (Sholette and Ressler, 2013: 12).

Art+activism

As noted above, recent discourses regarding art and activism have not only gained heightened visibility through the spatial politics and practices of protest movements such as Occupy or Strike Debt – they also intersect with discussions revolving around socially engaged art. In 2015, FIELD: A Journal of Socially-Engaged Art Criticism, edited by Grant Kester, was launched "in response to the remarkable proliferation of contemporary socially engaged art over the past fifteen years. This is a complex, contradictory and unruly area of practice that is distinguished by its extraordinary geographic scope" (Kester, 2015: 1). In particular, Kester underscores the role of participatory art, performance, and collaborative projects – both with respect to art institutions (museums, biennials, galleries), audience engagement, and within a broader topography of social activism. In this context, FIELD is envisioned as an experiment "to determine if dialogue across institutional, discursive and disciplinary boundaries can produce a more incisive critical and analytic frame for socially engaged art" (Kester, 2015: 3).

In his preface to *Global Activism: Art and Conflict in the 21st Century*, Peter Weibel (2015b: 23) observes an emerging "performative democracy" that simultaneously engages and confronts the social web, big data, and globalization.[2] Against this background, he underscores the pivotal role of crises in shaping performative democracy, ranging from climate change to financial crises: "Today's protest groups, for example, the *indignados* or the Occupy movement, constitute new 'cultures of repair' as it were, which search for ways out of these crises and the partial inability of politics to act" (Weibel, 2015b: 24). While Weibel argues that the legacies of the Occupy movement and forms of environmental engagement have created new constellations of "global citizenship" that gained momentum from activist NGOs such as Greenpeace and Amnesty International (pp. 24-25) and intersect with a heightened awareness of global financial flows, these crises also expose the implications of individual and collective debt. The merger of art and activism (or 'artivism') points to a trans-local performative democracy that is informed by critical responses to debt, finance, global capital, and the emergence of diverse protest movements and collaborative projects in the 'post-Wall' era.

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In the context of these social movements, Marcela Fuentes describes artivism as:

> [P]roductions by artists who use their craft to mobilize concrete action in response to social issues. The term 'artivism' characterizes a drive toward action in the making of an artistic intervention. In artivist projects, the main goal is to trigger responses and not merely represent a state of affairs. 'Interruption', 'disturbance', 'dislocation' and 'reappropriation' are some of the terms employed to account for the ways in which artivist practices engage different spheres of action and discursive formations – social, artistic, scientific – as 'ready-mades' that are intervened to question the status quo. (Fuentes, 2013: 32-33)

As Kester observes, the topography of activist movements, art, and trans-local collaborations is complex. Here, Sven Lütticken (2015) refers to Marion von Osten's designation of emerging trans-local organizations, "which are locally embedded but networked internationally," or para-institutions that "work in collaboration with more traditionally established institutions, even though these may themselves be pursuing an alter-institutional practice" (Choi and von Osten, 2014: 274, 283). However, Lütticken (2015: Section 1) notes that "in entering into alliances with art institutions, they run the risk of relapsing into a purely strategic and pragmatic approach to the frameworks in which they operate". In his essay 'When Protest Becomes Art', Sebastian Loewe (2015) also examines the problematic implications of institutional alliances by tracing the transformation of Occupy into an art installation at the 7th Berlin Biennale [2012] and an intervention at Documenta 13 in Kassel [2012]. Rather than gaining new impetus for social engagement (and exposing the interdependencies of art, politics, and capital), Loewe argues that, by making Occupy an object of display, or staging an intervention at Documenta 13, the movement's potential for political action was largely aestheticized:

> This operation mitigates the political arguments of the protest by dissolving them into questions of taste and sense, leaving almost no space for political agitation. Instead of migrating to the art world and partaking in international biennials, activists should put effort into the analysis of the systemic, antagonistic foundations of inequalities, damages and grievances, in order to prevent moralistic criticism. (Loewe, 2015: 199)

By creating sites for display and viewing, which documented protest rather than engendering new forms of protest or institutional interventions, the critical potential of the movement was transformed into a museal artefact or became a reenactment that failed to address the context into which it intervened (Forbes, 2012). Thus, the uses of Occupy shifted from the social field of contemporaneous engagement to the exhibitionary field of historical observation and spectatorship. As an activist intervention, the recontextualization of Occupy to exhibition platforms revealed little about the linkages among art, politics, and finance, and nor did it interrogate how museums, biennials, or art fairs are implicated in the art-finance nexus (Kester, 2015: 4).

In contrast, issues surrounding the globalization of museums, debt, and labor were explicitly targeted by the Gulf Labor Coalition (Ross, 2015a) and its activist collaboration with G.U.L.F. Initially emerging as part of Occupy, the Gulf Labor Coalition and G.U.L.F. created a series of actions to protest labor conditions at the new Guggenheim Abu Dhabi. In its statement, G.U.L.F. foregrounds the inextricable links among trans-local labor and the debt that workers incur, cultural institutions, and global capital flows[3]:

> We see monuments to 'culture' woven into a monstrous assemblage of fossil fuels, financial power, and imperial geopolitics. Holding up the pyramid, bearing the weight of the entire edifice, are the legions of workers from Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Nepal, Philippines, Sri Lanka, and most recently, Ghana and

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> Nigeria, who seek dignity and a better future for their families. They are drawn to the Gulf by economic precariousness in their home countries, and often end up bonded to their work through debt. Many of these workers have been at the forefront of struggles for wages and labor reforms that challenge the very terms of Gulf petro-capitalism, itself embedded in global flows of capital and labor. The global cultural brands setting up in Abu Dhabi – Guggenheim, the Louvre, the British Museum, NYU – accept zero responsibility. They insist that the grievances of the workers should be addressed to the government, to the subcontractors, to the middlemen, to the 'sending country', but never to the disinterested heights of the art institutions themselves, which possess a leverage they refuse to acknowledge. (G.U.LF., 2015: Paragraph 7)

In addition to networking within the artist and activist communities (such as *e-flux*), G.U.L.F. staged interventions at public sites, including the Guggenheim in New York, where protesters distributed pamphlets during an intervention at the Guggenheim Museum on 22 February 2014. They also dropped dollar-bill leaflets inside the Guggenheim rotunda on 20 March 2014, projected an illumination onto the Guggenhiem façade on 24 March 2014, and staged an occupation of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice at the opening of the Venice Biennale in May 2015 (G.U.LF., 2015; Fischer, 2015). These protests make multiple references to the labor practices of the Guggenheim and its links to global financial power and debt. For example, the pamphlet distributed on 22 February depicted an image of the Guggenheim exterior using the iconic Frank Lloyd Wright spiral as a metaphor for the downward spiral of debt. A dollar sign followed by a downward arrow pointed to the words 'Guggenheim's Global Debt Spiral' on the spiral's façade. A large ball and chain appeared at the base of the building with the words 'Labor Bondage' (G.U.L.F., 2015: Image 2).

In November 2013, the Gulf Labor Coalition created the project *52 Weeks*, which provided a platform for artists, writers, and activists to contribute works on a wide range of issues that intersected with the objectives of G.U.L.F. For example, the project *No Debt is an Island* (2013) underscored the status of workers on the Saadiyat Island Cultural District (where the Guggenheim and a new satellite of the Louvre were being constructed) by revealing "the connections between debt extracted from workers in their home countries and the Emirates, and debt burden of students and artists in the US" (Ross, 2015b: 20). These interventions by the Gulf Labor Coalition and G.U.L.F. draw our attention to the links between financial capital and cultural capital by foregrounding the physical sites and labor practices of cultural institutions, and the politics of locality. As Andrew Ross (2015b: 35) points out, the ongoing protests against labor practices will remain relevant for the foreseeable future, given planning for large-scale projects such as the 2020 World Expo in Dubai and the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, both of which may be used "as a major point of leverage" to bring more global attention to the status of workers in the Gulf.

The protest actions by G.U.L.F. also intersect with the recent advocacy projects of W.A.G.E. by drawing attention to the globalization of labor practices, albeit in a very different context than labor in the UAE. In particular, W.A.G.E. has addressed the virtualization of cultural work and the mobility of artists and cultural workers in the DIY economy. While W.A.G.E. continues a historical trajectory of activist collectives that have advocated equitable salaries, working conditions, and a socially engaged ethic, its most recent efforts respond to the globalizing forces of neoliberal economies and the digital products of labor. In a report on 'Working Artists and the Greater Economy (W.A.G.E.): Online Digital Artwork and the Status of the "Based-In" Artist', W.A.G.E. comments:

> If artists of the 1990s came to signify the exploitable entrepreneurial precariat whose willingness to work for free sanctioned the same expectation in creative industries, helping to transform labor and the composition of cities, then the based-in artists of today are the mobile version put to paid work. They are

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> wired-up, networked carriers of social and cultural capital set in perpetual motion, transforming cities in their passage through them on the art circuit – sophisticated nomadic clans who travel to survive. (Soskolne, 2015: Paragraph 8)

While the initial goals of W.A.G.E. focused on projects that would regulate the payment of artist fees by nonprofit institutions, subsequent attempts to establish compensation standards for online digital artworks – produced by an increasingly contingent and mobile workforce – also proved difficult to transform into concrete policies or programs. W.A.G.E. determined that its plan to link compensation to living costs for a physical location was unpractical. Although artists frequently designate their place of residence as 'based-in', they are increasingly mobile with respect to the production and dissemination of digital work and their movement to 'work sites' at museums, biennials, art fairs, or alternative spaces. Lisa Soskolne (writing for W.A.G.E.) thus concludes:

> It is therefore not surprising that W.A.G.E.'s proposed solution proved inadequate. But any solution W.A.G.E. might propose within its remit to regulate artist fees in the nonprofit sector would be too small for the scope of the problem – since the scope of the problem is equal in size to the clandestine market that sustains it. (Soskolne, 2015: Paragraph 14)

Certainly, one of the obstacles to setting equitable compensation standards for artists has been a lack of transparency regarding art markets, valuations, and the networks of exchange that are frequently concealed behind notions of aesthetic value. Such networks range from the manipulation of the art market by dealers and collectors to the politics of acquisitions, collecting, exhibitions, and loans among museums, galleries, and biennials. In his book *Art of the Deal*, Noah Horowitz (2011) examines the heightened financialization of art markets, including the pivotal role of high net worth individuals (HNWIs) as collectors and investors. He observes that online platforms developed by auction houses such as Christie's (or more recently Paddle8) have opened new territories for the commercialization of art trading in virtual markets (Horowitz, 2011: 212-13). With respect to the virtualization of art markets and digital art, he also asks, however, whether online digital artwork might present opportunities for user-led communities to circumvent traditional art markets by creating alternative, virtual spaces for presentation and exchange (Horowitz, 2011: 213). In a similar vein, Lane Relyea (2013) identifies the image of the contemporary artist-entrepreneur as a manifestation of neoliberal privatization and the DIY economy, but suggests that new artistic practices linked to mobility may also provide an aperture for more critical interventions and collaborative projects. Both Horowitz's and Relyea's accounts of the contemporary art world are ambivalent. While they recognize the potential in collaborative networks for increased artistic engagement, they also identify enduring dependencies among artists, galleries, museums, and corporate interests.

Martha Rosler (2015) offers a different perspective by situating the status of contemporary artists within the historical trajectory of neoliberalism and a virtual, location-based DIY economy that shapes both the image of the contemporary artist and creates increased debt:

> As international fairs overtake biennials in grooming a newly expanded A-list, the base of the pyramid of vastly undercompensated artists spreads dramatically to support the few celebrity artists at the top. Many artists much further down in the pyramid, hoping to become successful suppliers to the higher reaches of the art market, produce objects that reflect high production values, adopting the professional standards attaching to the high-status life of their potential customers. (Rosler, 2015: Section IV.1)

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Rosler suggests that many artists are not only impacted by, but also contribute to, the DIY economy by accepting the art world logics and networks of the art fair circuit, which is increasingly dominated by finanical interests, affluent collectors (HNWIs), and corporate sponsors. International art fair directors, such as Mark Spiegler (Art Basel), have publicly acknowledged the financialization of art as an investment, such as at the opening of the 2015 Art Basel, when Spiegler stated that "art can be used as a financial asset but a very risky one" (quoted in Kobel, 2015: Paragraph 1). Global investment firms, such as UBS, also financialize art fairs by using them as a platform to target HNWIs and provide them with quantified art market data. At Art Basel, UBS launched a 'data-driven' UBS Planet Art App which would potentially eliminate the aesthetic and subjective dimensions of acquisition decisions. In this context, Barbara Casavecchia observes that:

> As algorithms run faster than humans, information about an artwork is circulated (and controlled, filtered, sanitized) before your gaze can reach it in real life. By the time you do, you feel as if formulating a judgment from personal taste, unaccountable in terms of 'likes', is subversive. (Casavecchia, 2015: Paragraph 3)

Max Haiven (2015: 44) also notes how "the new financialised elite's seemingly voracious and omnivorous appetite for contemporary, critical art is based on a hunger for artefacts whose production resonates with their own experience and socio-economic conditions". HNWIs frequently construct their identity as entrepreneur-artist-innovator in terms of global and financial mobility, not only through frequent 'jet-setting' to global art fairs, but also at global economic summits, such as the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos, Switzerland, where financial, social, and cultural issues (as well as art installations) provide a platform for the legitimation of global financial interests.

The nexus of global economic summit and art fair reflects an accelerated financialization of art markets that was manifest in a *Bloomberg Business* article, which made the Davos-Basel connection explicit: 'Davos of Art World Lures Collectors to $4 Billion Fair' (Kazakina, 2014). Like economic summits, the experiential dimension of art fairs (including receptions, interviews, and networking; or viewing, negotiating, and acquiring art) represent performative acts of self-legitimation and self-promotion that intersect with the institutional and systemic legitimation of global financial interests. While the financial policies represented by the corporate and political elites of the 'Davos Class' at the WEF have become sites for activist protests, the acquisition of contemporary, critical art (Haiven, 2015: 44) frequently reflects the instrumentalization of alterity by corporations (e.g., through sponsorships), which recontextualizes art as advertising in order to maximize its 'shock value' and promotional transfer (Rectanus, 2002). Moreover, art acquisitions reinforce the image politics of financial elites (and their corporate entities) as cultural entrepreneurs by associating them with the "creative class" within the DIY economy (Thompson, 2015: 160; see also Rosler, 2012). The intersections of Art Basel and WEF are thus symptomatic of an underlying crisis of legitimacy and representation not only with respect to the HNWIs of the 'Davos Class', but also with regard to the ongoing financial crises of global capitalism.

The increasing virtualization of art markets (e.g., online sales, art production, or art apps) is related to the conclusions reached by W.A.G.E. regarding location-based compensation for online digital works. W.A.G.E. illustrates the challenges that confront artists and activist movements as they attempt to map out and intervene in these networks of dependency and exchange. Yet the collective experience gained from activist projects may also incite W.A.G.E. and other groups to rethink their approaches and strategies for advocacy and collaboration.

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For example, the Arts Collaboratory is a trans-local network of twenty three organizations that focuses on art practices, social change, and work with local communities in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. The Arts Collaboratory has developed a platform for a diverse range of artists' initiatives that offer alternatives to established cultural institutions and supported networks for stronger South-South connections. Since 2012, the Arts Collaboratory has organized face-to-face meetings – e.g., through 'Assemblies' (in Senegal and Tunisia), 'Tents' at biennials, and 'Institutional and Artist Residencies' – in order to increase trans-local collaborations and knowledge sharing. The initiative's key issues now involve "rethinking of funding models, models of working with art locally and trans-nationally while unlearning the current modalities of working, and, most importantly, devising the self-sustainable and open system of trans-local collectivity" (Arts Collaboratory, 2016: Introduction). Thus, the alternative platforms developed by the Arts Collaboratory recognize that despite the global mobility of artists and art works (cited by W.A.G.E.), living conditions and wages for many artists are still determined locally, typically through galleries and local art fairs. However, trans-local collaborations can develop platforms and strategies for creating local change with a global impact. W.A.G.E. and the Arts Collaboratory thus reflect the tensions between localized institutional relations (e.g., between artists, galleries, and art fairs) that shape the precarious economic status of artists as debtors (through material and symbolic exchanges of works of art), and the global capital flows that increasingly structure art markets. Although the objectives of activist movements such as G.U.L.F., W.A.G.E., and the Arts Collaboratory are distinct, they share a common concern with the heightened financialization of cultural exchanges and conditions of cultural production that bind individuals, communities, and institutions to forms of 'accounting' and debt through material and symbolic capital.

Visualizing debt

Increasingly, artists are seizing upon discourses surrounding debt and global flows of capital to create works that offer critical responses to the global economy. Such artworks can themselves be seen as part of a larger complex of projects that increasingly shape activist interventions, both individually and collectively, within the globalized art market (Richter, 2013: 59). The question is: To what extent can socially engaged art expose the entanglements of global capital, cultural institutions, and the art world? In particular, what strategies (both aesthetic and social) have artists (individually or collectively) used to interrogate these connections and simultaneously challenge audiences to reconsider their own positions? I would like to examine several projects that seek to renegotiate the boundaries between material and immaterial notions of debt and globalized financial networks, in part by creating visual vocabularies that explore, and challenge viewers to rethink, these issues.

Martha Rosler's work, *Coin Vortex for Student Debt* (2014), addresses the upward spiral of student debt that leads to a downward spiral for artists and students who are sucked into the vortex of debt.[4] Rosler's work was presented in the exhibition *Day After Debt* at the Broad Museum at Michigan State University. The exhibition curator, Kurdish artist Ahmet Öğüt, asked contemporary artists to respond to student debt, both in the context of debt crises in the US and globally (Öğüt and Spirito, 2015). Rosler's project foregrounds the nexus of student debt, mortgage defaults, and the practices of financial institutions. The installation is a hexagonal collection box with a funnel-shaped vortex in the center of the interior of the box, and panels on the exterior that present charts and data on the debt crises that followed the collapse of financial markets in 2008-09.

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Figure 1. Martha Rosler, *Coin Vortex for Student Debt*, 2014. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Aaron Word.

The text on the base of the installation reads: "Blaming students for incurring debt, like blaming householders for incurring incomprehensibly encumbered mortgages, is like blaming the victims as though they were complicit. They were gulled, not complicit".

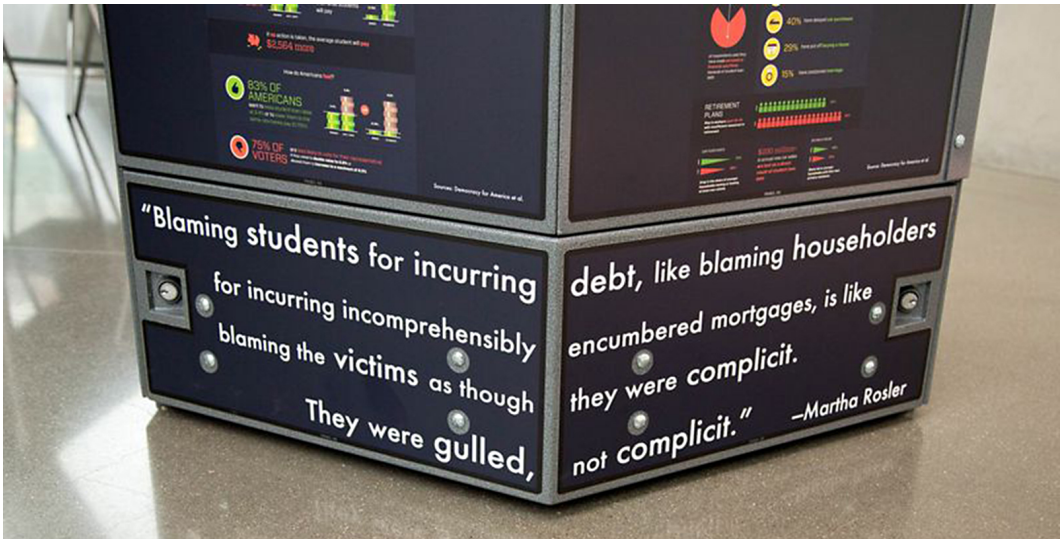


Figure 2. Martha Rosler, *Coin Vortex for Student Debt*, 2014. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Aaron Word.

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Additional texts and graphs on *Coin Vortex* document the impact of student debt. The installation creates a conceptual and visual tension between the abstraction of the vortex – a seemingly infinite void into which (student) funds disappear – and the concretization of causes and impacts of the financial crisis that are presented in the texts. For debtors, debt becomes an endless, lifelong process and existential state of 'indebtedness' or being 'in debt', whereas for the financial institutions (that created the systems of debt), solvency was regained within a matter of several years as a result of government bailouts. Rosler's *Coin Vortex*, as a metaphor for a seemingly anonymous automaton, captures the existential situation of students who find themselves indentured to decades of debt, a state that seems incomprehensible, but one that has real consequences. Thus, the work conceptually deconstructs the immaterial abstraction of (student) debt through a material representation of debiting that graphically illustrates the material state of debtors as they confront the psychological void that pulls them into a vortex of debt. As illustrated by Rosler's installation, the exhibition creates a platform that is conceptually linked to, and supports, other activist projects, including the 'Debt Collective', the 'Rolling Jubilee', and 'Debtfair', which seek to raise awareness of global debt through advocacy and resistance (Öğüt and Spirito, 2015: Paragraph 1).

Projects by Cassie Thornton intersect with *Day after Debt* by interrogating the tensions between individual agency and institutional critique. Thornton's *Application to London School of Economics* (2012) explores these tensions through a social practice of debt visualization that examines the aesthetics of debt as a medium. Leigh Claire La Berge and Dehlia Hannah discuss Thornton's multi-layered debt visualization projects, which utilize "photography, performance art, sculpture, non-fiction narrative, text, and hypertext to explore the cost and consequence of the accumulation of student loans" (2015: Abstract).[5] Thornton's visualization of debt and its documentation in artist's books (carried out in the multiple contexts of self-reflection, interviews with art students that asked them to visualize their debt, meta-critiques of art criticism, engagement with the work of Richard Serra, and the use of Thornton's work as a docent for a Serra exhibition) evolve into trans-institutional and trans-discursive processes that simultaneously deconstruct debt and create an aperture for its remediation. As La Berge and Hannah conclude:

> It is through the site specificity of the debt (…) that we arrive at the ultimate reflexivity of debt as a medium. It was only by going into more unsecured debt for her MFA that her undergraduate student debt could be endowed with the reflexivity required of a Modernist medium. In other words, her MFA debt is both cause and object of her ability to formalize indebtedness as a medium. Thornton's debt is about debt. (La Berge and Hannah, 2015: Section IV)

In the 2014 exhibition, *Global Collaborations/Zachary Formwalt: Three Exchanges*, the Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam presented three video installations by Zachary Formwalt that deconstruct the visual representation of stock and commodities exchanges (see Bouwhuis, 2014). Formwalt's videos interrogate the proliferation of construction projects for new stock exchange buildings like the Shenzhen Stock Exchange, which stake out their claim to financial interests in global cities, while also revealing how the exchange of global capital is becoming increasingly abstract. Exhibition curator Jelle Bouwhuis suggests that the tensions between the spatial politics of finance, which are deployed locally in the construction of a stock exchange, and the immaterial flows of global capital emerge in Formwalt's video *In Light of the Arc* (2013): "Since the stock trade is now entirely controlled by information technology and advanced algorithms, the trade floor itself, with its iconic golden bell, now serves only a ceremonial purpose" (Bouwhuis, 2014: Paragraph 3).

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Figure 3. Zachary Formwalt, *In Light of the Arc*, 2013. Video still. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Formwalt's projects question the extent to which historical images and photography can capture the virtual flows of capital, which often remain invisible. While he reveals the "entanglements of history, capitalism and image making", the series of video installations in the exhibition also underscores that the financial processes underlying these exchanges cannot be fully exposed and "remain elusive" (Bouwhuis, 2014: Paragraph 3). Formwalt's project suggests that the 'invisible' exchanges of virtualized capital and its increasing abstraction are in inverse relation to their impact on the everyday lives of individuals and communities. That is, the extensive virtualized trading of global capital, which now increasingly occurs through digital algorithms, has created more wealth for the few at the expense of the many. These consequences are manifest, not in the architecture and urban image of the stock exchange itself, but in the physical consequences of debt. Thus, Formwalt comments that he is "interested in the mechanics of that space; the way abstraction is at work there. And of trying to forge some connections between that imaginary realm of capital flow and the real consequences it tends to obscure" (quoted in Vesters, 2015: Paragraph 15).

As Paul Crosthwaite (2014) argues, the history of the representation of finance and notions of finance itself are aesthetically mediated in increasingly abstract images of finance. Crosthwaite (2014: 52, 59) identifies ongoing tensions between increasing abstraction and hyperrealism in the aesthetic strategies of many contemporary artists. In this regard, Formwalt's representation of the interior of the stock exchange can also be seen within the context of Andreas Gursky's photograph *Chicago Board of Trade II* (1999), in which the mass of human traders on the floor are visually de-humanized as they become an abstraction that conveys the hyperreality of the exchange (Crosthwaite, 2014: 52-53).

In Formwalt's *In Light of the Arc*, the stock exchange is also increasingly de-humanized by mediating the representation of the exchange not through the traders themselves, but through the empty spaces of the construction site and the exchange floor. In this sense, the images project an aesthetics of absence that invites viewers to interrogate the apparent lack of human agency in the stock exchange. Unlike still photography, the moving images of the video, and an audio voice-over, draw our attention to the spatial politics of global stock exchanges by capturing processes of construction and their conceptual deconstruction through the voice-over and editing of the images. Here, Formwalt underscores the material occupation of the site

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as inextricably linked to global capital:

> The material underbelly cannot be made to disappear simply through the abstraction of an economics that has become obsessed with an efficiency measured through abstract notions such as liquidity and risk, terms which have themselves been reduced to a technical language that avoids any reference to the meaning which they have outside of this discipline. (Formwalt, 2013: Paragraph 2)

While the stock exchange occupies a site of power within the urban landscape of a global city, it is the virtualization of that power through the digitization of financial exchanges that ultimately reveals the exchange building as superfluous, other than as a promotional signifier of its legitimation. Thus, the video images engage viewers in the contradictions and paradoxes of the processes of constructing and deconstructing financial exchange by at once mediating the site-specificity of the capital and materials required to construct the exchange itself, while exposing the deterritorialization of global finance.

As La Berge (2014: 101) has observed, finance intersects with and exposes how the abstract and concrete are linked. Here, La Berge refers to Thornton's projects, such as *Application* (see above), which conceptualize and intervene in debt as a medium in order "to see how debt functions as both abstract (we are *in* debt) and as concrete (we *are* debt), thus uniting aesthetic and political economic registers" (La Berge, 2014: 102). I would suggest that this process is informed by images and interventions that also create dialectical tensions of presence and absence. Thornton's redacted texts (that block the names and identities of individuals in the *Application* project) or the absence of traders in Formwalt's images of the stock exchange, employ aesthetic strategies that explicitly foreground absence – not only in order to ask viewers to imagine who or what is not present and why, but to engage them in a dialectical reflection or visualization. Within this dialectical space, that which is perceived as invisible (the negative space of the unseen) takes shape and becomes visible precisely because it is signified as absent (as in Thornton's project of visualizing debt, or Formwalt's interrogation of the spatial politics of global financial exchanges, which foreground human agency through absence). The deconstruction of these dimensions, in both cases, may offer additional – albeit partial – responses to La Berge's (2014: 107) question: "Can the discourse of undefined abstraction help us locate new assignations and contestations of meaning?"

Tensions between the abstract and the concrete in the representation of global capital are also evident in the work of Michael Najjar, which uses the visual metaphors of the financial industry to draw our attention to the volatility and unpredictability of global markets and trading. Najjar conducted a photo expedition into the Andes mountains in order to capture a series of images, which became part of a project titled *High Altitude* (Najjar, 2008-10). The photos were digitally adjusted to reflect stock values or track the highs and lows of stock exchanges such as the NASDAQ, Hong Kong's Hang Seng, or the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers in 2008. For example, in the photo *nasdaq_80-09*, he digitally edits the images of mountain landscapes to reflect the "peaks and valleys" of the market, creating a critical signifier of the fluctuations of global financial markets (Najjar, 2013: 4, 13). This resonates with the way images of mountains are used in advertisements by investment firms.

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Figure 4. Michael Najjar©, *nasdaq_80-09*. Courtesy of the artist. <http://www.michaelnajjar.com/>

In *High Altitude*, Najjar also references the eroding boundaries between reality and simulation when he observes: "If the focus used to be on the exchange of goods and commodities, it is now securely on the exchange of immaterial information" (quoted in Anti-Utopias, 2010: Paragraph 4). The images in *High Altitude*, like works such as The Lost Horizon by artists Mathew Cornford and David Cross, appropriate the metaphors of mountain landscapes to destabilize the promotional signification of the financial industry. As Alistair Robinson (2014: 139) observes: "Each rise and fall is represented as part of a landscape that pushes and pulls at the earth, with market movements becoming monstrous forces being unleashed from under the earth's crust".

By employing images of the Andes mountains, Najjar foregrounds the less visible links between the environment and the technologies of virtual trading. In *The Anthrobscene*, Jussi Parikka traces the forms of environmental exploitation that are required to construct computers, digital games, and mobile devices that sustain everyday life in virtual worlds, arguing that:

> [the] material histories of labor and the planet are entangled in devices, which however unfold as part of planetary histories. Data mining might be a leading hype term for our digital age of the moment but it is enabled only by the sort of mining that we associate with the ground and its ungrounding. Digital culture starts in the depths and deep times of the planet. (Parikka, 2014: 56)

By creating a geological metaphor for the abstraction of the financial landscape, Najjar's work invites viewers to explore how physical and virtual landscapes are increasingly entangled and to consider their own implication in these processes. In this regard, Najjar's project exposes the less visible ways in which the environment is 'debited"' through the exploitation of resources that provide the 'raw materials' for global markets. In *A Geology of Media*, Parikka (2015: 57) underscores the geopolitical links between the more visible fossil fuels (such as refined oil) that support the global economy or lithium reserves in Bolivia that are required for batteries, and the less visible resources (such as indium) that are refined from multiple

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resources and then utilized in IT devices (see also Parikka, 2014: 44). Thus, the mountains become a metaphor for precarity – both in the sense of the volatility of global markets, and an increasing destabilization of the environment. The representation of global financial markets, in the case of Najjar's work, also suggests how artists' projects might pursue a further 'tracking' of resources – i.e., how and from where they are extracted or 'sourced' – and in doing so expose hidden genealogies of environmental debiting.[6]

While 'artivism' may occupy or intervene in museum spaces through forms of performative protest, the preceding projects by Rosler, Formwalt, and Najjar employ aesthetic strategies of activist art in a different register by challenging viewers through forms of engagement, subversion, and critical reflection within exhibition spaces. In some respects, the conceptual development of these projects (including Thornton's work) might be considered field research on the aesthetics and geopolitics of debt that (re-) mediates the social contexts of debt – ranging from housing and art school debt to stock exchanges – and engages audiences in rethinking debt by *re-visualizing how it is represented outside exhibition walls*. Although many projects are displayed within exhibitions, artists employ a range of differentiated strategies and forms of social action (including raising critical awareness, collaborative engagement, and artivism) that are not mutually exclusive. In this sense, artivism, protest, and critical interventions in museum galleries and exhibitions can inform one another, intersect, and produce creative tensions, in this case by re-visualizing and re-problematizing debt, both from 'outside' and 'inside' institutional spaces.

'Artivism' and corporate sponsorship

Corporate sponsorships of art and culture facilitate a symbolic and material exchange of cultural and economic capital that frequently conceals their wider implications for institutional dependencies among artists, museums, and corporations. Activist artists such as Hans Haacke have questioned the financial ties between cultural institutions and corporate sponsors, and the globalization of corporate politics, since the 1970s (Rectanus, 2002: 51-58). While Haacke's installation *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System* (1971) exposed the financial interests of New York real estate developers, *Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum Board of Trustees* (1974) revealed the more explicit corporate affiliations of Guggenheim Trustees by presenting financial documents as art works (Grasskamp et al., 2004: 50, 54). Haacke also interrogated the cultural politics of tobacco-industry sponsors such as Philip-Morris in his installation *Helmsboro Country* (1990), featuring an oversized cigarette package with a picture of Senator Jesse Helms, a supporter of tobacco interests, on the exterior (Grasskamp et al., 2004: 131).

In his discussion of the aesthetic strategies of activist interventions, Lütticken underscores the tensions between visuality and visibility that have informed, and re-emerged in, recent artivist practices:

> In rejecting modernist notions of visuality (the abstract image as pure form, as opticality), institutional critique has in fact refocused on visibility: making visible the activities of sponsors, the institution's implication in the wider political economy and the ruling ideology and so on. With an artist such as Hans Haacke, visibility becomes the new visuality; that is, the articulation of hidden structures and networks in forms that merge the starkness and bluntness of visibility with the complexity of the visual. Today, projects such as Gulf Labor and its campaign to pressure the Guggenheim into improving the working conditions of the migrant workers building its franchise in Abu Dhabi, Bruguera's Immigrant Movement International and numerous other coalitions of artists, intellectuals and immigrants are refocusing the issue of visibility onto those that exist below the threshold of legality. (Lütticken, 2015: Section 3)

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The examples cited by Lütticken return our attention to artivism, both in terms of art works by activist artists such as Haacke, but also art activist movements that use performance art as a social intervention. Recent interventions by activist movements not only reflect the inextricable links between art works and activism as artivism; they also point to a trans-institutional critique (i.e., corporations and museums) that can be seen through the analytical lens of debt, while also contributing to a fuller understanding of the ethics of debt that point to emerging notions of the civic and citizenship.

BP's sponsorship of the Tate Modern in London illustrates the links among corporations, museums, cultural networks, and environmental politics exposed in recent projects by artivist movements as they intervene in, and attempt to change, the cultural politics of museums. Amber Hickey discusses a workshop at the Tate Modern in 2010 entitled 'Disobedience Makes History', which "resulted in an ongoing series of creative, collaborative actions, critiquing the Tate's acceptance of sponsorship from BP, and helping to open up public debate across the United Kingdom and elsewhere about the ethics of art sponsorship" (Hickey, 2013: 68). The workshop and subsequent organization of the activist group Liberate Tate brought renewed public attention to the ethics of corporate sponsorship – both with respect to corporate financial support, but also the museum's own responsibility and ethical positions in seeking corporate funding (Liberate Tate, 2016).[7] With regard to the latter, Hickey underscores the contradictions in the relationship between the Tate and BP that are manifest in the Tate's ethics policy, which states that: "The Tate will not accept funds in circumstances when… the donor has acted, or is believed to have acted, illegally in the acquisition of funds, for example when funds are tainted through being the proceeds of criminal conduct…" (Hickey, 2013: 68, 71, fn. 4). Here, Hickey notes that the Tate's "organizational priorities, that include a goal to demonstrate "leadership in response to climate change," are also in conflict with their sponsorship choices" (ibid.).

Mel Evans (2015: 15) sees the relations between cultural institutions and global oil corporations as symptomatic of wider debates over corporate power and influence: "The case against oil sponsorship is part of [a] broader resistance to corporate power in public spaces and over public and political life". In 'Tate and BP: Oil and Gas as the New Tobacco? Arts Sponsorship, Branding, and Marketing', Derrick Chong (2015) also questions whether 'big oil' has now taken over the sponsorship terrain previously occupied by 'big tobacco'. Although Chong (2015: 195) offers "a conditional 'no'" in response, he also indicates that environmental debates over corporate ethics have performed a similar function to earlier ethical debates on tobacco sponsorships, citing a letter of protest written by a group of artists including Haacke (published in *The Guardian* on June 28, 2010), that underscores the shift from 'tobacco' to 'oil' in the public consciousness (2015: 192-93).

The controversial drilling practices and environmental policies at BP were revealed as a result of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill of 2010 in the Gulf of Mexico, which focused increased public attention on BP's overall corporate policies (Pallardy, 2015). For Liberate Tate, BP's sponsorship raised serious ethical questions regarding the museum's acceptance of ongoing support: "Shortly after the gulf oil spill in April 2010, the US government filed a public lawsuit against BP for their part in the spill. If it was not clear to the public before that BP is a criminal corporation, it should be now" (Hickey, 2013: 71, fn. 6). As the group gained further momentum, resulting from the global media coverage of the oil spill and civil and criminal litigation against BP, one of its key strategies involved protests and performances that occupied the museum spaces. Liberate Tate utilized performance art as an activist intervention that fused the aesthetics of protest with performative process (i.e., as artivism) in order to destabilize the institutional and representational space of the museum, as well as

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physically occupying the museum (Evans, 2015: 140-50). In the performance *Licence to Spill*, the group poured oil on the exterior steps of the visitor entrance of the museum at the Tate Summer Party (celebrating 20 years of BP support) in June 2010. This intervention drew wide-ranging media attention to ethical issues regarding sponsorship and the Tate's relationship to BP (Chong, 2015: 181-86; Evans, 2015: 1-7). *Crude* was another performative intervention that visually deconstructed the logo and branding of the BP sunflower by referencing the environmental disaster in the Gulf:

> On 14 September 2010, a day before a Tate Board of Trustees meeting, around 50 figures dressed in black entered the Turbine Hall each carrying a BP-branded oil paint tube to create the installation art work *Crude* (also called *Sunflower*). In a circle they placed the paint tubes on the floor and each stamped on one in sequence, spraying out dozens of litres of paint in a huge burst across the floor. The resulting imprint echoed the BP 'helios' logo and anticipated Ai Weiwei's *Sunflower Seeds* installation that was to follow in the Turbine Hall. (Liberate Tate, 2016)

Evans (2015: 160-61) argues that activist performances or confrontations within galleries can create an "interstice" or "crack" in museum spaces that can challenge museums from the inside. By exposing the politics of sponsorship within the aesthetic space of the museum, audiences are confronted with questions regarding the links among art, politics, museum funding, and corporate practices. As Brian Holmes (2013) points out, some artists and art works also ask audiences to act. For example, Antoni Muntadas, who interrogates the representation of new museum projects and their internal administration, addresses viewers with the text "Warning: Perception Requires Involvement" (Holmes, 2013: 168; see also Atkins, 2012). Artivism not only challenges museum visitors and administrators, sponsors, and patrons by creating site-specific interventions and performance, it also leverages media attention to create forms of trans- local institutional critique (e.g., at art fairs and biennials).

An internal accounting of the Tate's discussion of the ethics of the BP sponsorship was exposed more fully after the activist group Platform filed a Freedom of Information suit against the Tate. The museum was forced to disclose the details and amounts of some sponsorship agreements with BP, which revealed that the "Tate provided a veneer of respectability to one of the world's most controversial companies for just £150,000 a year. The figures are embarrassingly small for Tate to go on justifying its BP relationship" (Platform, 2015). Documents also indicated that the Tate's Ethics Committee had discussed BP's tar sands projects and legal actions against the firm resulting from the Gulf of Mexico oil spill. The Tate acknowledged its "public stance on sustainability", recognised the "reputational risk" of retaining BP as a partner, but nonetheless concluded that "taking a moral stance on the ethics of the Oil and Gas sector… is outside of Tate's charitable objectives" (Platform, 2015). In 2016, BP announced that it would terminate its sponsorship of the Tate, allegedly (and somewhat ironically) due to the drop in oil prices on the global market. While Platform was cautiously optimistic that BP would also discontinue its other London sponsorships, BP claimed that it would continue its current agreements (Neuendorf, 2016: Paragraph 8).

Sponsorship and cultural politics

The exchange of cultural and financial capital is not always as overt as an oil company providing financial support for an exhibition in an attempt to maintain a positive public image or effect a promotional transfer from the brand of the cultural institution to the corporate image. Although many sponsorships seem to focus primarily on marketing communication and public relations, relegating them to mere publicity would overlook how sponsoring is also

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embedded in comprehensive corporate strategies that go beyond promotional transfer of brand recognition. Referring to BP's extensive sponsorships of cultural institutions within London (including the British Museum, the Royal Opera House, and the National Portrait Gallery), Hickey (2013: 69) notes that: "Through their visual and textual association with institutions with desirable 'profiles', this money affects the way society views these corporations. Therefore, the acceptance of corporate sponsorship can indirectly, but drastically, impact our communities, our health, and our environment". I have argued elsewhere that sponsorships (as well as 'patronage' from corporate leaders or corporate foundations) function as an instrument of corporate cultural politics, which attempts to maintain the corporation's socio-political legitimacy by drawing upon the capital of "corporate responsibility" in order to maintain influence in local and global politics – ranging from labor and trade relations to the environment (Rectanus, 2002: 22-43). Moreover, sponsorships frequently deflect attention from the corporation's own involvement in the production of culture and the impact of their products and policies within the contexts of everyday life. In this sense, a singular focus on the ethics of sponsorship within the 'cultural sector' may overlook underlying and less visible forms of political lobbying that instrumentalize culture, as one strategy among many, in order to effect socio-political change favorable to corporate interests and products.

The image of the sponsor as cultural patron also masks the creditor-debtor relations that emerge from these exchanges (i.e., between the sponsored institutions and sponsors) and how these relations shape and are shaped by the larger networks of cultural and economic exchange. In order to position their financial interests in terms of social responsibility, corporations signify responsibility within discourses of (social) accountability, thus creating an elision of financial responsibility and social accountability in which financial decisions are legitimized through social interventions (such as sponsorships) that are also predicated on exchanges of capital. In order to validate their social responsibility, corporations may, as Arjun Appadurai suggests, attempt to deploy immanent rather than extrinsic ethics:

> The external or transcendent sources of ethics identified by Weber … have been replaced in the corporate world in general, and the financial sector in particular, by various forms of immanent corporate ethics, indexed by terms like transparency, accountability, corporate social responsibility, good governance … thus making the justification of calculative actions immune from broader ethical images and doctrines. (Appadurai, 1990: 529)

The social transactions that represent a 'balance sheet' of accountability within corporate discourse also function, within the contexts of cultural politics, as forms of neoliberal legitimation of public policies, which support incremental privatization of public institutions, mixed-funding schemes, and corporatization of managerial practices among non-profits. Museums such as the Tate and Guggenheim have integrated the instrumental logics of corporations into their branding and operations – functioning as global corporate sponsors in their own right, both in terms of providing 'services' to artists and audiences, but also in attracting global audiences to the museum as a site of tourism and cultural consumption (Rectanus, 2002: 175-212). While corporations deploy notions of social responsibility in order to deflect public discourse from the impact of corporate products and practices, the case of BP-Tate sponsorship and the Guggenheim labor practices indicate that sponsorship and corporate cultural politics also represent contested public spaces, as the interventions by activist groups demonstrate.

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Conclusion

"The new activism is a war between individual and institutions, subject, and system", states Peter Weibel (2015a: 60). By deconstructing, remapping, and reconceptualizing the landscapes of debt, artists are creating new visual vocabularies and new forms of visibility that make audiences increasingly aware of the inextricable links among the seemingly immaterial flows of global capital, cultural institutions, and the material consequences of debt in everyday life. Yet, these projects also challenge audiences – including activists, museum visitors, and patrons – to rethink their own implication in the material and virtual ecologies of debt by reconsidering notions of the civic and forms of activism. With respect to our discussion of debt and the environment, activist groups such as Liberate Tate and Gulf Labor Coalition have recently created stronger trans-local collaborations that address environmental issues. This was evident in the protests at the 2015 Paris Climate Summit, which took place inside and outside the Louvre and were organized by a coalition of groups (including Art Not Oil, Liberate Tate, Occupy Museums, and G.U.L.F.) demanding that the museum terminate its connections with the oil companies Total and Eni, and announced future actions to take place under the banner *#FossilFreeCulture* (Davis, 2015: Paragraph 3). Not only has there been a significant expansion of global activism, Thompson (2015: 153) suggests that art activism has increasingly shifted from tactical to strategic interventions, i.e., longer-term projects that take place in spaces over extended periods of time.

Three key dimensions emerge from recent projects that engage debates on art, activism, and debt. First, art works and arts activist movements have the potential to contribute to a fuller understanding and broader awareness of how debt is entangled in institutional networks of finance, society, and culture. By attempting to expose the interrelationships among global capital, debt, and the art world, artists and activist movements not only reveal the asymmetrical dependencies of the DIY art world; they also demonstrate the linkages between culture and society that are increasingly defined in terms of the financialization of a wide spectrum of social exchanges as forms of debt.

Second, linkages among financial markets, corporations, and the environment, as well as the debiting of resources that are utilized for the production of digital devices in the IT economy, challenge audiences to consider their own implication in 'debiting the environment'. This second dimension suggests a more complicated position for audiences by situating them simultaneously within networks of dependency but also as 'consumers' who can potentially seek alternative models of environmental sustainability or engage in ethical debates and activist interventions with an environmental focus. Alternative discourses related to debt, finance, and global capital not only increasingly intersect with artivism and protests (which question the ethics of institutions such as museums and corporate sponsors); they also engage broader publics by raising awareness of lifestyle choices (e.g., by visiting a cultural site or event supported by a corporate sponsor) or consuming products. While a heightened awareness of the trans-institutional implications of debt is embedded in many artivist interventions, activist movements and many activist artists clearly seek to effect fundamental and transformational institutional change.

Third, as movements such as G.U.L.F., Liberate Tate, or Platform have focused greater attention on the globalization of cultural institutions and their ethics, what is emerging is also a new consciousness of the civic and citizenship (Weibel, 2015a) based on diverse forms of social engagement that consider global citizenship as both a right and a responsibility to engage.[8] Here, Hal Foster (2015: 124) has also called for "new accounts of citizenship" under neoliberalism in which artists can play a critical role. Thus, the heightened awareness of the ethical dimensions of debt as well as a more widespread, global support for activist NGO's or

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movements intersects with, and may contribute to, trans-local expressions of performative democracy, global activism, and notions of citizenship with a pronounced ethical dimension that can incite individual and collective renegotiations of how we might critically rethink debt.

Notes

1. However, prisoners have also been used extensively by state correctional facilities as part of the labor market.
2. As Elżbieta Matynia (2016: Paragraph 1) notes: "Performative Democracy is neither a theoretical model, nor a system of governance, but a locally conditioned process of either enacting or enhancing democracy by citizens. Initiated and owned by the people … At its core is the constitution of a free public space, where people demand their rights and discover their own performative capacities. This is where the anonymous, impersonal and 'institutional' way of speaking is replaced by the people's concrete, individual, and distinctive voices".
3. Btihaj Ajana (2015: 327-31) suggests a somewhat more optimistic reading regarding the potential of new museum projects in the United Arab Emirates.
4. Rosler's concept of the vortex and debt spiral also was evident in the image of 'Guggenheim's Global Debt Spiral' used by G.U.L.F. on its pamphlet protesting the Guggenheim's labor policies in Abu Dhabi.
5. See also the extensive online documentation of debt visualizations developed by Thornton (2016).
6. La Berge and Hannah (2015) make a similar argument regarding paint as a medium.
7. See the Liberate Tate website with respect to further references and media reception of its projects and documentation of performances.
8. In this context, it should also be noted that there have been populist movements from the right that emerged during the 1990s as part of the wider terrain of performative democracy – not only after 1989, but also in response to recent debates on migration, refugees, and terrorism.

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