

The Radical Imaginary II: Reclaiming Value

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ZK/U — Center for Art and Urbanistics
& KUNSTrePUBLIK

2022.09.09 - 12.03

“Un-working” or reclaiming value?

**A conversation with curators Erik Bordeleau,
François Lemieux, Marilou Lemmens and Bernard Schütze.**

This conversation reflects on the research from 2019 to 2022 that led to the development of the exhibition *L'imaginaire radical II : désœuvrer la valeur/Reclaiming Value*, a discursive program and publications.



■ SEPTEMBER 2022

A COLLECTION
OF ESSAYS ON
THE PRACTICE
OF ARTISTS

M. L.: In 2019, the team at VOX asked us to envision an exhibition to be presented as part of the work cycle *The Radical Imaginary*, a series of exhibitions exploring the stances that artists have taken vis-à-vis certain institutions and their histories. From the start, we determined that the economy would be the institution studied for this second iteration, but we also wanted to do more than just an exhibition. We hoped to employ other means of communication and exchange to arrive at a multiplicity of perspectives on economic and financial practices, issues of governance, and environmental challenges.

The title of the exhibition, *Désœuvrer la valeur/Reclaiming Value*, is two-faced like the god Janus, and gives a good sense of the binary movement driving our project. It is about value, its forms and its impacts in the recent past—primarily in the last 10 to 15 years—but also about a desire to look ahead, to a future that is sensitive to the social and political forces that come into play in developing or dismantling certain versions of the economic imperative and its imaginary.

To start with, we could ask ourselves: how was the question of value addressed as part of this project and how was it articulated around the four main focus areas of our thinking?

B. S.: Yes, I think it's important to look back at how we delineated the question of value and stated that desire to simultaneously “un-work” it (in French, *désœuvrer*) and *reclaim* it anew. The guiding principle *désœuvrer la valeur* conveys a slight friction of meaning that generated the spark of our self-proclaimed “electric squad.” It suggests an action that deactivates, unmakes and renders inoperative, therefore opening onto new possible uses, per the expression borrowed from Giorgio Agamben. In our title, inscribing *valeur* (understood here as the field of the financialized economy and of its operational codes and modes) right after the verb *désœuvrer* effects a drift to a differently coded ground, namely that of art. Insofar as art, a field of “unproductive productivity” in terms of economic usefulness, is engaged in suspension of ordinarily prevailing functions so as to invent other possible ones (codes, modes), it is a privileged space for “inoperative operations.”

Since that tension created by the verb *désœuvrer* is fiendishly difficult (impossible, even) to transpose into English, in the end, after lengthy discussions, we opted for the translation “reclaiming value.” Like its counterpart in the French title, the gerund *reclaiming* opens up a polysemic field of action at the intersection of art, politics and finance. The verb refers to more than the action of demanding a right, something owed, a commodity, etc., as the French *réclamer* does; it also contains the noun/verb *claim*, which is fraught with meaning in the area of finance, where it can refer to a title or right of property, an asset or a debt. And these are issues that are critiqued by many of the works we are presenting. So I find that this bilingual title, in metastable equilibrium, sums up the spirit of our project well.

But let’s return to the four theoretical focus areas we defined. To remember their names, I applied a mnemonic that uses letters; namely, D/E.M.O.S./F., for: 1) decolonize/ecologize; 2) measure; 3) organize; 4) speculate/fabulate. Looking back to the fall of 2019, when we were in a pre-pandemic and pre-war period, it’s striking the extent to which those four markers served us well, both for delineating the theoretical issues around value and for selecting the works.

E. B.: Thank you, Bernard, for unpacking that title, which is about a destitution as well as being programmatic, as you suggest. We’ve been working together on this exhibition for quite a while now, and yes, a lot of things have happened since the earliest days of the project. As concerns our four-fold exploration, I would say that spontaneously I related to the “speculate/fabulate” and “organize” areas: my involvement in the project has been inseparable from a deep dive into Web 3.0 and cryptoeconomics and, more generally, an investigation into the mode of existence of finance and its futural activation potential. There is a remark by Yanis Varoufakis that I find useful for gaining a better understanding of what all this means. In this book on economics written as a series of letters to his daughter (*Talking to My Daughter About the Economy: Or, How Capitalism Works—and How It Fails*, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2017), the former Greek Finance Minister uses brilliant imagery to describe the mechanism of currency issuance and its distinctive relationship to the future. Bankers, he explains, are the only people in the world today with the authority to travel into the future and bring units of value back to the present. In a similar vein, Tom McCarthy notes in his magisterial novel *Satin Island* (Knopf, 2015) that every sales pitch implies a ritual invocation of the future, so ultimately, the entirety of our socio-economic organization depends on this. As a matter of fact, if one were to give a minimal, provisional definition of what finance is and how it acts upon our lives, one could start by acknowledging that it leaves a mark wherever we draw the future a little too strongly toward the present.

I enjoy these sorts of pseudo-ethnographic fabulations because, in revealing the tenor of our “beliefs in this world,” they also help us to embrace “the future as cultural fact,” as Arjun Appadurai has written. I think this is an essential condition for “un-working” value and, in so doing, perhaps thwarting some of its capture mechanisms. [...]

F. L.: When talking of speculation, we of course can’t ignore financial bubbles and the way they pertain to what Bruno Latour calls the “temptation of the above-ground.” “Un-working” value, in that context, would mean considering practices rooted in the here and now of communities that organize materially and that react, blow for blow, to attempts at capture by Capital. These issues are expressed, for example, through art projects that condemn economic violence and its effects, be it at the corner of Sainte-Catherine Street and “The Main,” in the morgues of the St. Lawrence River Valley, in beehives and forests, in the context of high-frequency trading, in the arcana of international law, or in the wake of the recent financial crises. *Désœuvrer la valeur/Reclaiming Value* is meant as a mutable project in progress—an invitation to experiment and give ourselves the means to shape what “counts” at the end of the economy.

The full version of this text will appear in French in *Spirale* No. 281, a special issue entitled *Repenser la valeur à la fin de l’économie*, to be published in October.

1 Beecoin – Beeholders – BeeDAO, 2019-2022

Installation. Concurrently presented at VOX and at documenta 15, Kassel



Visit the
project's
website

Bees are stewards of entire ecosystems on which humans depend every day. Our way of repaying them, however, has been to destroy their habitats, showering them with pesticides and inadvertently introducing parasites that threaten the lives of entire populations. The economic, cultural and social impact of bees on human life is enormous, but bees have no say in how we govern the riches and territories that we share with them.

Sitting at the conjunction of artistic creation, urban activism, crypto-economic design and beekeeping, *Beecoin – Beeholders – BeeDAO* is an organization dedicated to interspecies democracy and improved living conditions for bees. Based on Web 3 digital technologies and sensors that monitor the main signs of life in beehives, it is a prototypical cyberorganization that encourages wealth-sharing and knowledge creation by tapping the potential of human and non-human agents to work toward common objectives.

Gabrielle L'Hirondelle Hill

2 Orinoco Note, 2016

Thread, Virginia tobacco.
With the invaluable collaboration of Unit 17,
Vancouver

3 Cousin, 2019

Pantyhose, tobacco, thistle, spider
charm, dandelion, and thread.
Private collection, Vancouver

4 Gift, 2019

Pantyhose, tobacco, fabric flower,
wildflower, tinfoil, safety pin, and thread.
Private collection, Vancouver

5 Purse, 2019

Pantyhose, tobacco, dandelion,
dollar store locket, bluebell, tobacco seeds,
seed pod, horseshoe charm, thread.
Private collection, Toronto

6 New Growth, 2019

Fresh tobacco leaves.
With the invaluable collaboration
of the Janson family, Lavaltrie

The common feature of the works of Gabrielle L'Hirondelle Hill assembled in this room is that they comprise the same material, tobacco, a plant native to the Americas. Fresh, shredded, flattened or sewn, the leaves of the plant assume multiple forms in her pieces, metamorphosing into flags and rabbits, taking human form, or becoming sap and ink. While each of these transformations confers a specific sensory, affective and aesthetic space to tobacco, they also function on multiple referential levels in this corpus, informed by the plant's roles in both Indigenous and colonial cultures of North America.

Tobacco was the most widely traded material in the Americas prior to colonization, and still plays a prominent role in Indigenous cultures. It is offered in many contexts, and its sharing embodies some of the principles of Indigenous economies: reciprocity and interdependence, distribution and gift giving rather than accrual. In the North American colonial era, tobacco became a commodity, its cultivation tied to plantations and the slave trade as well as the seizure of land by settlers and the displacement of native communities. As the economic cornerstone of the British colonies, the plant even became key to their first currency: "tobacco notes," which represented specific amounts of harvested crop stored in a warehouse.

RYBN.ORG

7 ADM XI, 2015

Installation: 15 framed prints, 6 screens displaying real-time data, 5 serigraphs on aluminum

ADM XI is a collection of heretical, irrational trading algorithms imagined by artists and people who are not financial professionals. The algorithms are pitted against each other in fierce competition on a market organized and hosted by RYBN.ORG. *ADM XI* is an independent platform for research and expression in algorithmic engineering for experimental trading. The originality and unique character of its approach reside in applying artists' vision and know-how to imagine counter-intuitive, forward-looking automated investment and speculation strategies that challenge neoclassical economic dogma.

This work is part of the series *Antidatamining* (2006), and the concluding instalment of a trilogy on algorithm-driven finance begun with *ADM 8* (2011) and continued with *ADM X, The Algorithmic Trading Freak Show* (2013).

Slinko

8 Economy of Means, 2022

Video, 8 min 27 s

9 Economy of Means (acts 1 & 2), 2017

Archival prints

Slinko situates *Economy of Means* amid the ruins of Western ideological regimes and their conditions of production. Blending economic abstractions and living bodies, this project presents characters made of bread that take turns engaging in dramatizations of their own production, their sharing and, paradoxically, their emancipation.

Two drawings, *Economy of Means (acts 1 & 2)*, borrow directly from the aesthetic vocabulary of revolutionary propaganda, with its heroic figures and its promises. They reference the visual tropes of graphic novels and storyboarding, where the action is dissected and dynamic, suggestive of moving images. The video of the same name shows two faceless performers manipulating golden-brown bagels, breads and baguettes to represent the symbols of an equation, a calculation, onscreen: division, percentage, square root and equality. Together, the pieces attend to the notions of measurement, property, production, representation, subsistence and economic abstraction.

Tania Willard

10 Basket Rescue Operation (talking to Peter Morin and remembering Dana Claxton's talk for the CAMDO in Whistler), 2016

From the series *Only Available Light*. Birch bark basket (reclaimed from an antique store), cedar root, copper foil, laser-cut text

Tania Willard's practice examines how objects acquire a meaning and a value at the intersections of Aboriginal and colonial cultures and their overlapping bodies of knowledge and skills. In her work *Basket Rescue Operation (talking to Peter Morin and remembering Dana Claxton's talk for the CAMDO in Whistler)*, she extends this concern to the issue of cultural property return and its ethical, political and institutional ramifications. The pithy phrase "Give it all away and start again," a quote by the artist Dana Claxton flame-cut into one side of the "rescued" birch bark basket, can be read as a statement to (re)claim or demand restitution, thus binding one to future actions and promises of restitution. Moreover, in merging the terms of exchange—a gift economy—with its very object, a recuperated Indigenous crafts object, Willard's work directly cites and embodies a form of open-ended, non-accumulative value circulation in opposition to the dispossession of Indigenous cultural objects resulting from colonial modes of exchange and appropriation.

Núria Güell

11 Intervención #1, 2012

Installation: wooden door [reproduction], facsimile documents, video, 1 min 3 s

Courtesy of the artist and ADN Galería, Barcelona

Structured around protracted administrative and legal procedures, Núria Güell's works have political and social aims that lead her (or others) to circumvent established laws and rules. Her practice engenders concrete actions in spheres outside art spaces; videos, objects and documents make up their traces.

In 2012 Güell created *Intervención #1*, for which she intervened in a situation linking financial institutions, the real-estate industry and public policy in Spain. The country had been suffering since 2007 from the dual impacts of the burst property bubble and the subprime crisis. Pursuant to an obsolete law on mortgages, hundreds of thousands of people fell victim to property seizures and evictions.

For this project, the artist founded a cooperative, which hired a mason to remove the doors from empty apartments whose inhabitants had been evicted after the Caja de Ahorros del Mediterráneo, a savings bank that had been bailed out by the Spanish government at the start of the crisis, purchased the property at auctions. The documents exhibited are the attestation of the cooperative's legal identity. Through the protection afforded a legal entity—the cooperative—that guarantees immunity to physical persons, the properties may be opened and occupied with no risk of charges being laid, since all liability lies with the cooperative. This strategy is the same as that employed by the banks to sidestep, with impunity, the country's *Civil Procedure Act*.

arkadi lavoie lachapelle

12 Le travail que l'on rêve gratuit, 2022

Prepared space: *Shelves for life* wooden shelf created by William Warren as an open-source design
Technical drawings from Éric Bourgeois, *L'art de l'embaumement. Une introduction à la thanatopraxie*, Éditions Berger, 2002, with artist's intervention | Commemorative bookmarks with images taken from a Quebec funeral company's website | Dried flowers salvaged following funeral services
Audio consisting of readings of anonymous testimonies answering the following question: "After your death, in an ideal world without limitations, how would you imagine your body being taken care of?", 23 min 53 s | Popular education workshop on death care and home funerals | Performance.

arkadi lavoie lachapelle's multidisciplinary and performative practice elicits a dialogue between various spaces of everyday life and plumbs their potential as sources of (self)care. In that spirit, the artist spent two years completing the research-creation project *Juste pour fuir* (2021), which was about end-of-life support. The work *Le travail que l'on rêve gratuit* is the furthering of that project. Proceeding from the observation that the funeral industry instituted in Québec is rigidly regulated and driven by extreme commodification, the artist here invites us to rethink dying and after-death care based on both our desire and capacity for action.

The installation is structured around a columbarium-like shelf along with a listening station where visitors can explore anonymous testimonials of people describing how they wish their body to be taken care of following their demise. The work also comprises a practical workshop where participants are invited to a funeral service imagined by the artist as well as a closing performance during which the shelf will transform into a coffin custom-fitted to the body of the artist.

In deploying these multiple components, lavoie lachapelle invites us to turn our backs on the diktats of the funeral home in the dominant culture and reclaim modes of self-directed care, as well as to envision end-of-life care focused on dignity, the value of which eschews measurement and collection of the monetary interests in place.

Artistic adventure realized with the invaluable collaboration of Marie-Pier Beauséjour, PhD candidate and advocate for access to dying and after-death care. The artist wishes to thank Olivia Sofia, Mélodie Bujold-Henri, Natacha Chamko, William Warren, Kelly Butler, Debbie Charbonneau, AM Trépanier, Richard Cassidy, LaViolette, Sylvie Cotton, Vie Mercure, the people who shared their ideal post-mortem care, the Gham & Dafe workshop, Atelier Clark and the funeral homes that donated flowers used in funeral services. The artist acknowledges the support of the Canada Council for the Arts.

Amy Balkin

13 *Public Smog, 2004–ongoing*

Installation: facsimile documents, vinyl text on wall

For the past two decades, Amy Balkin has been committed to long-term projects that address climate change, public spaces and the commons. Her work has taken the form of financial, legal and political interventions in infranational, national and supranational systems.

Begun in 2004, *Public Smog* is a multifaceted project, the first phase of which addresses the contention that carbon offset markets can help mitigate greenhouse gas emissions and their impacts. The artist purchases offsets on the California market—in which Québec has been a participant since 2014—and those of the European Union, and then, by withholding them from trading, creates “clean-air parks.”

From 2010 to 2012 Balkin attempted, with the support of documenta 13, to have Earth’s atmosphere added to the UNESCO World Heritage List. Some 90,000 visitors to the exhibition signed a petition submitted in postcard form to their governments, urging them to engage with the nomination process. The exhibition’s curator, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, sent letters inviting first Germany and then all UNESCO member states to form a coalition in support of the nomination. Facsimiles of the 143 letters sent and of the 15 replies received are shown here.

Since the air is a non-state borderless system, its inclusion on the UNESCO list requires an extraordinary and complex procedure. In engaging in that bureaucratic and diplomatic process and presenting it in document form, Balkin shows how it is possible to forge a global commons, one that acknowledges the fundamental value of the atmosphere for living beings—a value that transcends any economic measure.

Bahar Noorizadeh

14 *After Scarcity, 2018*

Video, 31 min 51 s

In the USSR of the 1960s, some saw computers as machines in the service of communism, with the power to resolve the challenges of a planned economy that was in decline. *After Scarcity* is a science-fiction video essay charting the efforts of Soviet cyberneticians to build a fully automated command economy.

How might we make use of information systems to escape our current state of digital feudalism and set a course toward new utopias? What if another internet were possible? *After Scarcity* is a hallucinatory digital dive into swarms of floating points that trace the contours of urban monasteries and infrastructures, revisiting the history of the so-called socialist calculation debate that defined 20th-century economics and hinting at a different endgame for the computational power at our disposal, one that seeks something besides the total financialization of our economies.

AM Trépanier

(15) dans le souffle de c., 2022

Installation:

dans le souffle de c., 2022, video, 1 h: with Adore Goldman, Latsami, Melina May and Maeve Rose
Camera operators: Casper Wolski + Noémie Boisclair | Sound: Edith Brunette | Editing: AM Trépanier
Colour correction: Mégane Voghell | Audio correction: Simon Grenier-Poirier | Catering: Audrey Beaulé
Stage hands: Audrey Beaulé, Roxanne Labrèche P | Photo archives: Archives de la Ville de Montréal,
VM94-0802201430-004 et VM94-0802201430-009; Google Streetview; Wikipedia | Video archives:
Angela Grauerholz, in collaboration with Réjean Myette

AM Trépanier, *SEX/WORK*, 2022, neon sign

Mia Donovan, *Sex Machine 1, 3 and 4*, 2008, chromogenic prints

Angela Grauerholz, *Intersection Sainte-Catherine et Saint-Laurent*, 2005, video, 10 min,
in collaboration with Réjean Myette

dans le souffle de c. (2022) helps amplify the voices of a new generation of sex workers and activists, some of which have organized through the Sex Work Autonomous Committee (SWAC). This work by AM Trépanier combines oral history and archival documents in addressing the issue of gentrification, tracking the rise of practices and a community once associated with the site where the 2-22 building stands today, at the corner of Saint-Laurent Boulevard and Sainte-Catherine Street.

With this work, the artist is interested in the vector role of representations and discourses around sex work in Montréal and emphasizes the rise of new ways of living in public space, of embracing, creating, naming and valuing the experiences related to sex work. "Reclaiming value," in this particular case, equates to considering sex work in the here and now of communities who are organizing materially to counter attempts at criminalizing their activities and capturing capital, and the negative effects of those attempts.

With the invaluable collaboration of the Sex Work Autonomous Committee (SWAC). The artist also wishes to thank arkadi Iavoie-Iachapelle, Alexandre Piral, André Cornélius, Alexis Bellavance and Perte de signal for their support in the realization of this project. The artist acknowledges the support of the Canada Council for the Arts.

This exhibition is made possible
in part by the financial support
of the Caisse Desjardins
de la Culture and AC/E's
Programme for the
Internationalisation of
Spanish Culture (PICE).

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Acción Cultural
Española

To cite this essay:

Bordeleau, Erik, François Lemieux, Marilou Lemmens and Bernard Schütze. 2022. "Un-working" or reclaiming value? A posteriori 29. Montréal: VOX, centre de l'image contemporaine.

VOX

Centre de l'image contemporaine

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