



**PROJECT MUSE<sup>®</sup>**

# Occupational Realism



Figure 1. “This Is My Occupation.” Occupy Wall Street takes the Brooklyn Bridge. New York, October 2011. (Photo by Bianca Garcia; courtesy of Getty Images)

*Julia Bryan-Wilson*

## 1. occupy: to hold a position or an office

In 1998, California-based artist Ben Kinmont began his longest and most involved conceptual project to date: he opened his own bookselling business. The piece, which is ongoing, is entitled *Sometimes a nicer sculpture is being able to provide a living for your family*, and Kinmont’s use of the word “sculpture” harks back to Joseph Beuys’s notion of “social sculpture” as “how we shape our thoughts into words [...and] how we mold and shape the world we live in” (1993:19). Kinmont specializes in antiquarian books with a focus on gastronomy, and in this capacity attends auctions, participates in bookfairs, works with libraries in need of development, logs his inventory,

negotiates prices, and ships books to private and public collections around the world. *Sometimes a nicer sculpture* is meant to function both as an income-generating bookselling trade and a performance that is legible as such in the art world.

For Kinmont, it is important that his business function *as a business*; it is not enough for him to gesture symbolically towards the world of commerce by, say, printing up ironic letterhead or opening a fake storefront. As a result, he partakes in what I have termed “occupational realism,” in which the realm of waged labor (undertaken to sustain oneself economically) and the realm of art (pursued, presumably, for reasons that might include financial gain, but that also exceed financialization and have aesthetic, personal, and/or political motivations) collapse, becoming indistinct or intentionally inverted. These are performances in which artists enact the normal, obligatory tasks of work under the highly elastic rubric of “art.” Here, the job becomes the art and the art becomes the job.

“Performance as occupation” participates in the rising tide of discourse regarding the interconnection of contingent labor, artistic value, and precarity. Precarity is one name given to the effect of neoliberal economic conditions emergent in the wake of global financial upheaval, recession, and the reorganization of employment to accommodate the spread of service, information, and knowledge work. It designates a pervasively unpredictable terrain of employment within these conditions—work that is without health care benefits or other safety nets, underpaid, part-time, unprotected, short-term, unsustainable, risky.<sup>1</sup> Debates about precarity—and an insistence that artists belong to the newly emerging “precarariat”—have been increasingly taken up within contemporary art, as evidenced by exhibitions such as *The Workers: Precarity/Invisibility/Mobility*, which opened in 2011 at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, as well as anthologies like *Critique of Creativity: Precarity, Subjectivity, and Resistance in the “Creative Industries”* (Raunig et al. 2011) and *Are You Working Too Much? Post-Fordism, Precarity, and the Labor of Art* (Aranda et al. 2011).<sup>2</sup> A group of cultural and educational laborers in London organized themselves into the Precarious Workers Brigade, and they have mobilized to protest arts funding cuts in the UK, the economic and power dynamics of unpaid internships, and other issues; their posters ask questions such as “Do you freelance but don’t feel free?”

The ascendance of the term “precarity” connects to research in the last few years by sociologists such as Pascal Gielen, with his consideration of the congruence between artistic practices and post-Fordist economies (Gielen 2010). But this alleged congruence has wider consequences, as it underscores the need to understand artistic occupations temporally. As Pierre-Michel Menger’s 2006 report on artistic employment notes, “the gap is widening” between brief vocations and lifelong careers:

How do short-term assignments translate into worker flows and careers? From a *labor supply* standpoint, one artist equals one long-term occupational prospect, especially when employment relationships are long-term and careers are well patterned. But the gap is

---

1. For more on risk as constitutive of the “new modernity,” see Beck (1992).

2. As this cluster of activity suggests, 2011 was an especially fertile year for conversations about precarity, the recession, and artistic production. See also “Precarity: The People’s Tribunal,” convened at London’s Institute of Contemporary Arts in March 2011, and Hal Foster’s article about Thomas Hirschhorn’s “precarious practice” (2011:28–30).

*Julia Bryan-Wilson is Associate Professor of modern and contemporary art in the History of Art Department at the University of California, Berkeley. Her research focuses on art and labor, conceptual art in the Americas, and feminist/queer theory. Her book, Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era, was published in 2009 by the University of California Press. She is a frequent contributor to Artforum and has written for Art Bulletin, the Journal of Modern Craft, October, and many other publications. juliabw@berkeley.edu*

widening between the vocational commitment and the way it transforms into a career: self-employment, freelancing and contingent work bring in discontinuity, repeated alternation between work, compensated and non-compensated unemployment, searching and networking activities, and cycling between multiple jobs inside or outside the arts. (Menger 2006:4)

As Menger's text implies, the temporal mentality of artistic labor (contingent, intermittent, brief) has long resembled what is now called precarity. What happens, however, when artists—who, being popularly imagined as models of precarity *avant la lettre* as they do not earn



Figure 2. Ben Kinmont, Sometimes a nicer sculpture is being able to provide a living for your family, 1998–ongoing. Ben Kinmont *Booksellers*. (Courtesy of Ben Kinmont)

steady wages in any conventional sense and have neither a secure employer nor a consistent, stable workplace—redefine art as work out of necessity, motored by a new urgency to “provide a living for your family,” to cite Kinmont?

When I first conceived this essay, I wanted to provisionally define occupational realism as it functions both as a genre or style of performance as well as an attitude towards work that sheds light on the specific class conditions of artistic production and identity. Within economics, to think occupationally means to think variously about professional status or employment; feminism further understands

nonremunerative labors such as housework or childcare, traditionally performed by women, as occupations. As I have been writing, and as the Occupy movement has grown around the world, I have been further impelled to rethink how “occupation” in terms of a spatial political strategy might connect to “occupational” practices that specifically interrogate labor and value. If occupational realism stems at least partially from jobs or work undertaken by artists because they “have to” (though the issue of compulsion, need, and choice is unevenly applicable), this form of practice also raises questions about the potential strategic or operational value of precarity: its capacity to redefine social relations, aesthetic and affective production, and class structures.

In addition, the language used to describe the current conditions of precarity draws heavily upon the rhetoric of performance, as performance skates the line between live art and art that is lived. According to theorist Paolo Virno, post-Fordist capitalism, with its emphasis on flexibility, has led to an expansion of “living labor,” such that not only all of our working hours, but our very desires and thoughts have been absorbed into new regimes of work (2004:53). But Virno sees a space of political possibility within what he calls “virtuosity,” which “happens to the artist or performer who, after performing, does not leave a work of art behind” (in Gielen and Lavaert 2009).<sup>3</sup> Within his formulation, artistic performance (which in some Marxist understandings is posited as the paradigmatic outside, alternative, or other to deadening alienated wage labor) as a form of activity that generates surplus value without an end product, has become not a specialized case unique to performers, dancers, musicians, and the like, but has

3. In her essay in this issue, Shannon Jackson usefully complicates Virno's definition of “virtuosity” through the lens of theatre, dance, and music as opposed to visual art (Jackson 2012).

turned into the general condition of “servile” waged work. Virno writes: “The affinity between a pianist and a waiter, which Marx had foreseen, finds an unexpected confirmation in the epoch in which all wage labor has something in common with the ‘performing artist’” (2004:68).

Virno sees virtuosity as a way to move beyond narrow considerations of political action, artistic production, and work as existing in separate spheres. For Virno, the virtuoso’s activity “finds its own fulfillment” and must include an audience or “witnesses”; he stipulates that it contain some sort of public or social component (52). Virno relies heavily upon the language of theatre; he discusses the performance, the script, the score, and the audience as he charts an opening out from work to the realms of cultural or creative activity, and finally into the sphere of the political (56). But what about artists who move in the other direction and mine the procedures of labor in the service of their performances? How does occupational realism thematize and make legible the conditions that Virno describes, as well as indicate what Virno overlooks?

## 2. occupy: to fill up (time or space)

Kinmont’s assertion that his business is his art is hardly exceptional. In one sense, such an assertion is a conceptual art strategy that began in the early 20th century with Marcel Duchamp, in which something (either an object or an idea or a gesture) is appropriated, put into quotes, framed, nominated, or bracketed “as art.” In the wake of this logic, art’s very contours loosened and blurred to accommodate two of its ostensible opposites: “life” and “work.” There is, however, a key distinction between post-Duchampian strategies of nomination and artists who begin to understand that if their activities already resemble art, they might as well name them as such. Here, they do not “decide” to feel or think of their life or work as art, but just the opposite: they start feeling and thinking it before they know it, because of the effects that Virno describes.

Indeed, the art-into-life experiments of the early 1960s—in which virtually any thing or activity could be redefined as art (such as Alison Knowles’s *Make a Salad*, 1962)—led to a flowering of late-20th-century artists declaring their jobs to be art.<sup>4</sup> In 1966 Canadian artist duo Iain and Ingrid Baxter formed N.E. Thing Co. Ltd. (they legally incorporated in 1969), and until 1978 mimed the procedures of business, including printing up business cards, attending conventions, and even sponsoring a junior hockey team. Though the Baxters aimed to be a moneymaking enterprise, their satirical take on the trappings of corporate culture and bureaucracy “did not yield the sustainable economic base, which they envisioned” (Lauder 2010:57–58). Similarly, Gordon Matta-Clark and Carol Goodden’s New York City art project/functioning restaurant *Food*, opened in 1971, was shuttered after two years because they could not make it a viable business.

While some artists have pursued a corporate model, others have individually taken on temporary working-class identities. To list only a few: in Linda Mary Montano’s *Odd Jobs*, 1973, the artist announced her availability to do housework such as light hauling, cleaning cellars, interior painting, or gardening. She did so in part to transform, mentally and affectively, the labor she was already doing to make money. As she wrote, “I liked what I was doing when I called it art” (Montano 1981:n.p.). After finding a nurse’s dress in a thrift store, Montano offered herself up for house calls to sick friends and printed cards that listed her skills and services, including “massage, chicken soup, visits, temperature taking, and forehead holding, etc.” The nurse outfit not only functioned as an apparently visible confirmation of her abilities to perform these tasks, it also lent some credibility to her capacities by acting as an authorizing uniform. Montano’s piece resonates with recent writings by Italian feminist Silvia Federici, who has discussed how debates on precarity have under-theorized the role of women’s reproductive and household

---

4. For an intelligent and comprehensive look at a wide range of artists (from Yves Klein to Kinmont) who explicitly engage with the commercial sphere, see Luis Jacob, *Commerce by Artists* (2011).

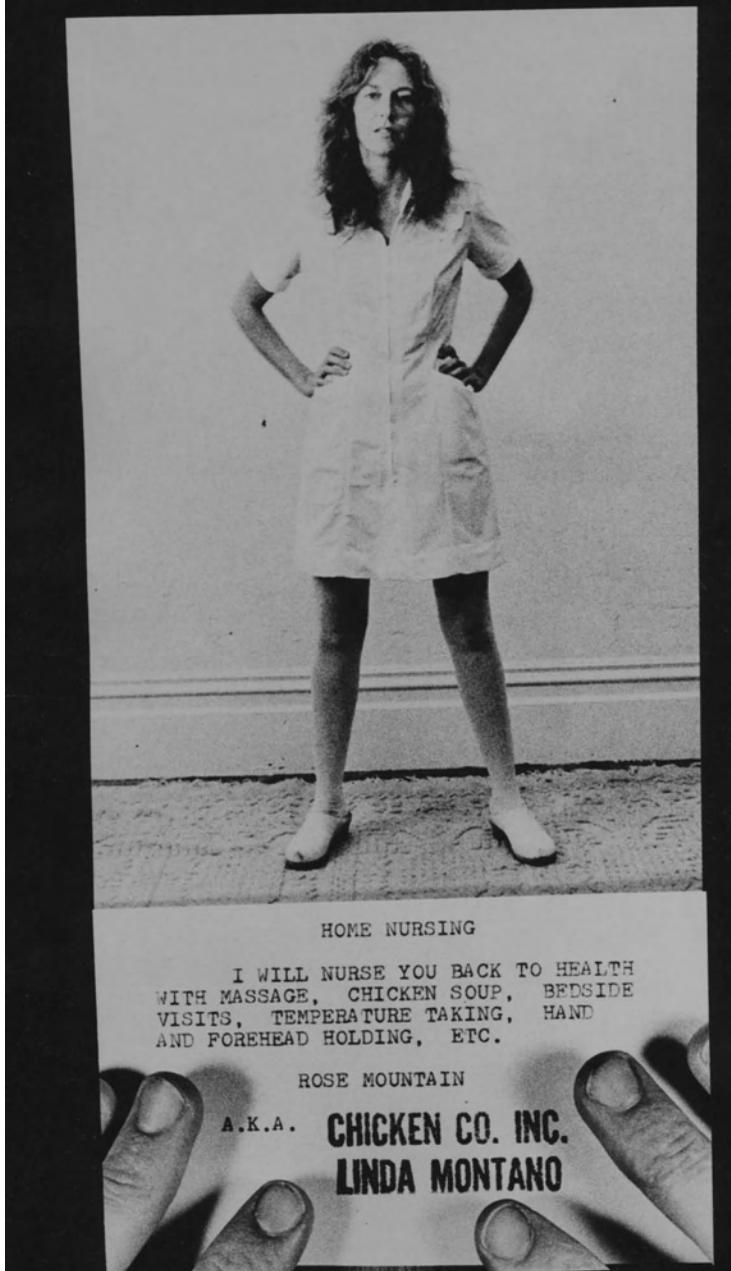


Figure 3. Linda Mary Montano, *Home Nursing*, 1973. Performance documentation. (Photo by Mitchell Payne; courtesy of Linda Mary Montano)

labor (2008). Such feminist perspectives are vital, especially since one substantial vein of occupational realism involves women artists such as Marina Abramović, Cosey Fanni Tutti, and Nikki S. Lee “performing” sex work to explore questions of sexualized service (see Bryan-Wilson 2012).

Other examples: Bonnie Sherk flipped hamburger patties during the graveyard shift on weekend stints under the title *Short Order Cook*, 1974, at a San Francisco, California, diner called Andy’s Donuts as part of her extended exploration into gender, labor, and what she referred to as “cultural costumes” (in Bradley 2005:189). In a snapshot documentation of this piece, Sherk is caught in action by the griddle with her floppy white chef’s hat. She also redefined a job she had as a waitress as a performance, entitling it *Waitress*; in such pieces, her customers were by and large not aware that as she was serving food, she was also playing a role as a self-conscious artistic act. The work was made available as a performance to an art audience primarily when photographs such as these circulated in art contexts.

In 1981, artist Tony Labat trained to be a professional boxer in *Fight: A Practical*

*Romance*—a pugilistic piece that, when seen alongside Montano’s domestic housework, raises questions about the performance and exaggeration of gender difference. More recently, in 2000 Bulgarian-born Daniel Bozhkov undertook a performance in which he worked at a Maine Wal-Mart as a “people greeter.” This piece, entitled *Training in Assertive Hospitality*, involved him helping customers navigate the store; between shifts, he also painted a fresco in the Layaway Department. A photo of the artist in uniform shows Bozhkov in one of the aisles of the store, an American flag hanging behind him; his Wal-Mart issued vest is laden with text indicating that he is there to serve, including the question “How may I help YOU?” Bozhkov’s piece demonstrates that occupational realists put their emphasis on mainstream employment structures; such artists might experience, as a side benefit, coming into contact with different communities, but stand at some remove from social art practices in which those interactions are the central focus. Though relational projects also contest the boundaries between art and work, artists whose works com-

prises organic farming, community outreach, or public-policy advocacy use their practice as a way to engage with, produce, and actively envision *alternative* economies, rather than directly inserting themselves into *normative* economies, as occupational realists do.

The roster of artists who embody the joint roles of performer/worker does not include the many artists who investigate the realm of wage labor by employing workers in the space of the art institution, such as Oscar Bony. For his project

*Familia Obrera*, 1968 (Working

Class Family), Bony paid a blue-collar worker, machinist Luis Ricardo Rodríguez, along with his wife and their 10-year-old son, twice Rodríguez's normal hourly wage to sit on a pedestal during an art exhibition at the Instituto Di Tella in Buenos Aires (Cullen 2008:90). By contrast, occupational realists insist on *doing the work themselves*, standing bodily in the space of labor. Hence they are also distinct from artists like Santiago Sierra, whose performances involve hiring workers to carry out menial tasks, sometimes within the space of the art institution. Sierra presents workers as objects to be watched, and this spectacularization frequently removes workers from their usual labor (at least for the duration of the art event). By contrast, occupational realists like Kinmont, Sherck, or Bozhkov do art as they work, within the normal contexts and spaces of work, and they work as they do art; this precise overlap, simultaneity, and multiplicity is crucial.

If most occupational realists are uninterested in putting their labor within the context of traditional museum or gallery display, they are equally uninterested in what could be called theatricality, if we use the basic definition of theatricality to mean “of or for the stage.” Other meanings of theatricality—that which is marked by pretense, extravagant exhibitionism, or artificial emotion—further highlight what these artists are intentionally *not* doing. In fact, they often do not want their customers or colleagues to witness or acknowledge what they do as art—they want to vocationally “pass.” Kinmont speculates that few of his customers are aware that his bookselling is also an art project—and if they are aware, they are prone to take him less seriously as a dealer. That is, though Virno's idea of the virtuoso demands an audience, that audience is here complicated and fractured—there is a “work” audience which need not or should not know that one of its workers has a value-added position as an artist, and then there is the “art” audience.

Oakland-based artist Sean Fletcher commenced *Becoming a Life Insurance Salesman as a Work of Art* (1996–2002) after he realized he could not survive on his art practice alone and had to take a salaried job. As a relic from his performance illustrates, he signed, dated, and numbered the back of some of his business cards, remaking them into a “limited edition” artwork. Fletcher was fired when his bosses discovered that he was curating small shows in his office after hours, thus violating some of the protocol of the business world by taking up space during non-work hours, and inviting people into the office who had “no business” being there. These performances tell us something about the temporality of precarity: unlike a weekend inhabitation, or a permanent condition, jobs exist for unpredictable time spans before people rotate away, move on, are laid off, quit. Occupational realism as a performance mode unfolds in similarly



Figure 4. Bonnie Sherck, Short Order Cook, 1974. Performance documentation. (Courtesy of Bonnie Sherck)



Figure 5. Daniel Bozhkov, *Training in Assertive Hospitality, 2000. Training and work as People Greeter at Wal-Mart, Skowhegan, Maine.* (Courtesy of the artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery)

vague registers of time—a few years here, a few years there, so that its durational aspect hovers between the brief or temporary and the lifelong. Fletcher’s project demonstrates that both the art performance and life insurance position demand that he present *himself* as a coherent product to be trusted and valued. As “self-branding” has become a prevalent ideology of contemporary life, artists who make themselves and their business into their art unmask how the emphasis on self-marketing and entrepreneurialism long known to artists now pressures many neoliberal subjects.

Some occupational realism echoes classic ethnographic or investigative reporting techniques in which scholars or reporters become embedded among their observational subjects. In fact, Barbara Ehrenreich’s bestselling book from 2001, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, in which she spent three months doing unskilled labor in order to determine conditions of living on a low wage, took up pre-

cisely the same sorts of jobs as some of the artists just mentioned (food service like Sherk, cleaning houses like Montano, working at Wal-Mart like Bozhkov). As Ehrenreich discovered, the idea that she was “deceiving” anyone quickly unraveled: “There’s no way, for example, to pretend to be a waitress: the food either gets to the table or it doesn’t. People knew me as a waitress, a cleaning person, a nursing home aide, or a retail clerk not because I acted like one, but because that’s what I *was*, at least for the time I was with them” (2001:9). Yes and no: Ehrenreich assumes intimate knowledge about low-wage life in a very brief amount of time but never turned to these jobs, as many do, out of true desperation. She follows the long tradition of journalistic exposés about the deprivations of working-class life (think of Nellie Bly going undercover in a Pittsburgh factory in the late 19th century). Ehrenreich insists that she is not a “blue collar wannabe” but establishes rules of approach, somewhat like a sociologist, before plunging in to “get her hands dirty” (4).

Ehrenreich was castigated by some critics for the overlay of elitism and arrogance in her project. This is one major bone of contention with occupational realism, too, in its least nuanced iterations: it taps into longstanding downwardly mobile pretensions among educated, leftist artists and writers alike, pretensions that veer close to class condescension. As one review of *Nickel and Dimed* stated:

The presumptions within cross-class narratives need to be made similarly apparent: that only someone outside of the experience of economic subjection can accurately document the physical and psychological trauma of that process; that only someone with economic privilege can call upon the sociological methodology necessary to name economic pain. (Schocket 2003:49)

However, some artists who take on the role of low-wage worker as art, like Montano, are less interested in narrating economic pain than in transforming a range of “experiences”—always admittedly limited or partial—in art. This is a persistent claim of self-aware class difference: *I know that what I'm doing right now is just a job, a job that occupies some of my time, but I have some other identity that validates me.* Educated artists might choose to be blue-collar workers with little training, but that directional flow is usually one way, for when untrained workers decide to be artists, they are often considered “outsiders”—like janitor Henry Darger, whose work is labeled as “outsider art” to mark his distance from the usual classed routes of artistic training.

The privileges of re-employment are reserved for elite mobility, in which, for example, a Wall Street broker decides to reskill as a baker, a downwardly mobile shift that is belied by the cultural capital it trades in and is correspondingly narrated

as laden with intangible psychic rewards, the rewards of doing “personally gratifying” labor. One such narrative, in which a University of Chicago PhD became a mechanic and extolled the virtues of his new-found honest labor, was told by Matthew Crawford in his (like Ehrenreich’s, bestselling) book *Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work* (2009). Others further down the class ladder, however, may not have such choices available to them—a laid-off mechanic cannot move easily into more upwardly mobile realms of employment. Contingency—which was lauded in the 1990s as a potentially radical or productive mode of thinking about art and identity formation—has curdled into the grim uncertainties of precarity.

The class-based friction felt by Ehrenreich’s critics does not accompany every project of occupational realism, especially those in which an artist becomes a knowledge worker or businessman. In Kinmont’s *Sometimes a nicer sculpture*, for instance, the class shift from artist-as-information-peddler to specialized bookseller does not seem so dramatic, or so fantastical. Kinmont absorbs into his business his interest in archives and the production of knowledge, and then rotates his bookselling knowledge back into art again, a cycle tinged with the masculine imperative to be the family breadwinner.

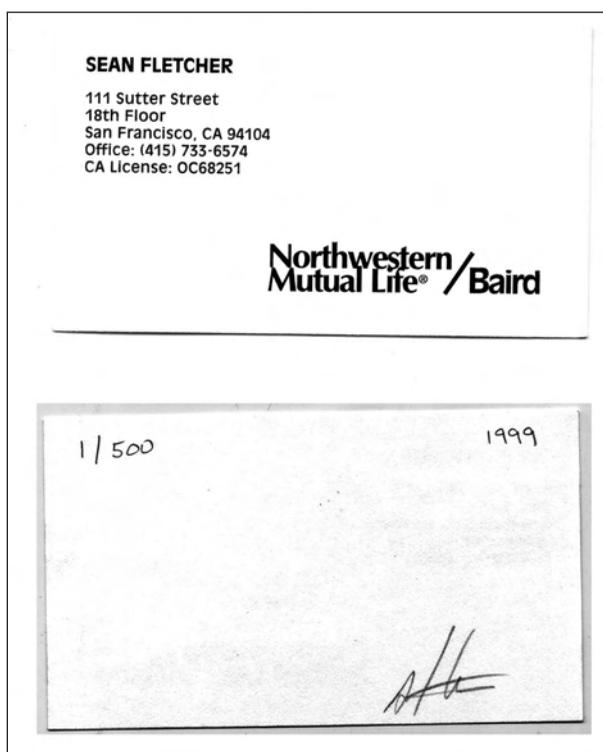


Figure 6. Sean Fletcher, *Becoming a Life Insurance Salesman as a Work of Art, 1996–2002*. A signed business card, part of six-year-long performance. (Courtesy of Sean Fletcher)

When the distinctions between art and work are eroded, does the capacity for art to critique the regimes of work likewise evaporate? Such an erasure might seem, rather, to serve neo-liberal paradigms, in which all hours of the day are subsumed under the rubric of productivity. As Virno notes, the distinction between being at work and being off work (at home in domestic space or elsewhere in leisure time), has shifted into the more arbitrary differences between “remunerated life and non-remunerated life” (2004:103). (As any freelancer knows, if you are never officially on the clock, then you never feel totally off the clock, either.)

It has been argued that, within the dotcom boom of the late 1990s, artistic work with its variable hours and its adaptable working conditions became a model for “creative” informational work like software development, and thus the critical or even antagonistic aspects of art were subsumed into byproducts of what Richard Florida trumpeted as the lifestyle-as-product of the “creative class” (2002). The optimistically heralded professionalization of art—as in Daniel Pink’s proclamation that the Master of Fine Arts degree “is the new MBA”—signaled not only that (some) artists stood to make a lot of money doing design or content work, but that professionals were being redefined as artists (2005:54). And what is for sale or highly valued in this new professional creative class is something akin to professional style. At the cusp of the post-industrial turn, C. Wright Mills noted that what is on offer with the professionalization of work has become a matter of attitude and affect—what he calls marketable personality (1951:241).

Importantly, “occupational realism” as a phrase has other meanings that resonate beyond the art world, notably emerging in education, behavioral psychology, and sociology in the mid-1950s to discuss the structuration of class mobility and the relative lack of ease of moving from one class position to another in the United States. This research, proliferating within academic departments of social work, education, and counseling for the last few decades, discusses the discrepancy between levels of aspiration in adolescents or first-time job seekers and their “actual” potential to achieve those aspirations (see Coffee 1957; Stokes 1977; Paap 1997). Within this context, occupational realism means, to put it simplistically, how much someone’s planned-for job matches his/her eventual employment, how realistic one is about one’s eventual occupation. To desire to be a plumber when one “grows up,” and to be enrolled in a vocational program in which one would acquire plumbing skills is to have a firm sense of occupational realism. To desire to be a world-famous astronaut when one is an economically disadvantaged student with bad grades and test scores (which themselves gauge and measure class status) is to express a low degree of occupational realism. In other words, how closely do your fantasies hew to your already-determined class station, to your access to cultural capital, to the role you are expected to play? According to these studies, for certain subjects (especially those that are low income, nonwhite, and/or female), if those fantasies are mismatched, quality of life plummets when they enter the workforce (Thomas 1976). To imagine a life other than the one you were handed is, in these studies, to set yourself up for failure; it is better to aspire down than to aspire up.

Taking into account the strictures on class mobility, these studies emphasize that within the US, movement out of one class and into another is infrequent and exceptional. They also emphasize that the adult’s question to the child, “What do you want to be?” is not only fundamentally about identity (the molding of selfhood into the shapes disciplined by work) but also about forecasting and projecting into the future—a future that is marked by labor structuration along lines of class, race, and gender, and increasingly considered precarious. One influential study from 1966, based on a national survey of children and teenagers in the US, *The Adolescent Experience*, found strong gender-based differences between the boys and girls they studied in terms of wishes for their future selves: “Girls do not show the same level of clear and active realism in regards to mobility. The girl’s future must in some sense remain ambiguous—it depends so much on sexual realization and being chosen in marriage” (Douvan and Adelson 1966:78). This striking passage brings up complex, and painful, questions of volition and agency, not least as it relates to gender. We must account for the discrepant meanings of “occupational realism” here: for artists, it is about an educated choice to redefine remunerated labor within

the value structure of art. The educational/vocational usage of “occupational realism,” which describes the necessity of being *realistic about class limitations*, demonstrates that “job choice” is for some only illusory, and for others an obvious mark of privilege.

### 3. occupy: to seize possession of and maintain control over

In 2005, South Korean-born artist Bohyun Yoon circulated a postcard on which he declared his upcoming performance piece, *Two Year Soldier Project*. As he explains, “As a male Korean citizen, I have to serve in the military for two years. At the time, I thought of myself as an artist, so I ‘disguised’ myself as a soldier for two years” (Yoon 2011a). Compulsory military service, national obligation, and creative authorial intent collide as the artist declares himself to be “undercover,” a double agent in his own mind. Within this piece, he might appear to all observers to be embodying the position of soldier, but his self-identification as an artist—one who was physically and logistically unable to make material objects for a designated amount of time—also distinctly imbues his military actions with extra value because he executes them as an artistic performance.

That he embodies this work of soldiering differently (at a critical remove, perhaps, or conversely, with fiercer concentration?) is somewhat implied, yet we would have no sense of this difference if it were not for the postcard announcement’s photograph of him wearing a hand-made transparent vinyl camouflage outfit, a glass helmet, and holding a blown-glass gun, an outfit that he obviously did not don when actually on duty. “No opening reception, not open to the public” states the text on the back of the postcard. The formal declaration of this artistic “disguise” presumably fell away once he enlisted and, sans glass accessories, was indistinguishable from the others with whom he trained and worked.

The bohemian *déclassé* drag of some artists (such as Sherk) as they dipped in and out of the working-class labor force is distinct from the literal demands made upon Yoon. His status change was beyond his control: his decision to reinvent his military service as part and parcel of his art was in response to his lack of choice. Yoon has an MFA and was trained in the glass department of the Rhode Island School of Design; he wanted to stay in the United States after he graduated but in order to extend his visa, he had to return to South Korea and carry out his conscripted military service. On his postcard (which was circulated to a US audience in advance of his enlistment), Yoon shows himself at-the-ready, facing the viewer with his gun in hand, a parodic stance made absurd by his transparent outfit that produces the opposite effect intended by camouflage, as it renders him more visible, more vulnerable, more open, and more at risk. His hand-blown glass gun and glass helmet, in addition to being nonfunctional, are likewise fragile and might shatter with impact.

The glass helmet is the only material artifact from Yoon’s two-year piece, aside from the postcard, journal entries, and the two-year gap from 2005 to 2007 evident on his CV, which otherwise shows a busy itinerary of group and solo exhibitions. During this period he was engaged in his all-consuming performance without access to his own art-making tools or materials. Interestingly, however, during his active service in the military, Yoon primarily worked as a graphic designer—the same sort of job he might have had if he was supporting himself as an artist invested in material forms of art making. At the same time, this graphic design work was done under the scrutiny of the military with the constraints of their harsh schedule, and he endured a significant amount of militaristic mental training.

Yoon’s two-year piece also summons the idea of occupation as militaristically conquered space—though for him, the space of occupation was not land, but his own head. He is now working to minimize or work through the experience, to expel from his mind the procedures of the training. He has described himself while in the military as both occupied and preoccupied: distracted by his soldiering from his normal thoughts. It is a preoccupation that now requires

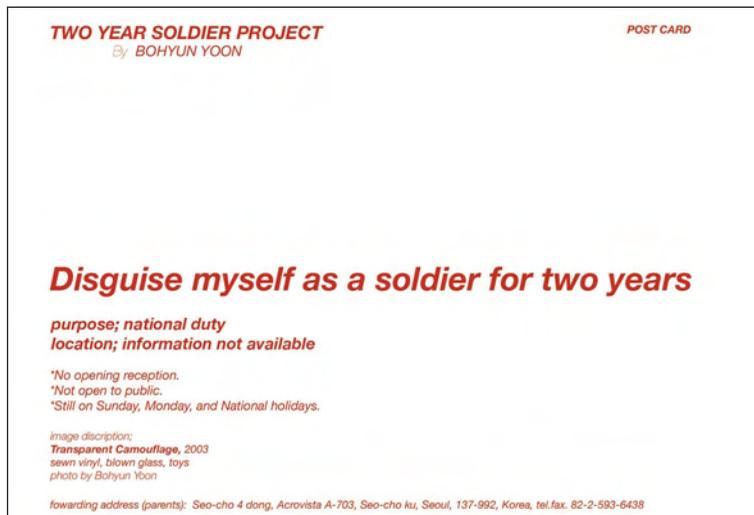


undoing; since he left the military, Yoon has focused his art on interrogating systems of social control.

As a performance, *Two Year Soldier Piece* asks: What is the work here, where is it manifested, how does it become legible, and what are the mechanisms of its materialization? *Two Year Soldier Project* (whose after-effects continue to resonate through Yoon's art and thinking) insists upon the non-identity between the worker and the job, opening up a space between being and doing. In the above discussion, I mentioned vocational "passing," but perhaps that is not the right phrase with regards to occupational realism. For the idea of passing presumes one stable identity, permanency, or authenticity against which drag is thrown into relief. What Yoon's performance makes clear or renders transparent is that, under precarious conditions,

one switches between radically different positions and/or occupations, performing differently according to shifting circumstances.

Still, I use the contested word *realism* to signal that performances of this sort are not just "acts" (though they are suffused with potential irony). At the same time, neither are they about unmediated access to anything that might be called "real"—itself always fugitive, phantasmatic,



Figures 7 (above) & 8. Bohyun Yoon, Two Year Soldier Project, 2005–2007. Postcard announcement, front and back. (Courtesy of Bohyun Yoon)

and illusory. Within theatre history, realism signifies a range of practices that began in the 19th century in opposition to the romantic dramas popular at the time, including naturalism, which often depicted bodies at work and/or at leisure in extended mediations upon the two (see Styan 1981). Within art history, Realism refers to a school of painting that originated in France in the 19th century. It was championed by Gustave Courbet and was understood as a politicized reaction to the 1848 Revolution, in which artists felt they were charged with showing the structures of social and political relations with all their ambiguities, including “class conflict and expropriation” (Clark 1973:116). Courbet was not the first artist to depict labor or laboring bodies—but he meaningfully placed peasant labor next to his own labor as an artist, thereby producing resonant homologies. Occupational realism, which began in the late 1960s and early 1970s along with postindustrial economic changes, likewise reveals ambiguous, difficult, and unresolvable conflicts about class, including professionalization, waged work, and volition.

Beyond theatre or art historical notions of Realism as a critical style, these artists are “realists” in the sense that they are insistent about the overlap between realms of art and work. Artists like Kinmont or Yoon or Fletcher effectively function as booksellers or soldiers or life insurance salesmen. They perform their duties within the actual sites of bookselling and soldiering and salesmanship. In addition, they are employed within the discourses of state-enforced, economically prescribed self-identifications, in which everything from census forms to visa applications ask us to name our occupation (meaning business, or legitimate wage work) with a singular word or phrase. What position do you fill? What space do you regularly occupy? These artists undermine the singular grammar demanded by these questions, as they perform roles as both artists and as wage earners. For artists whose employment becomes their art, their lives are dually occupied, toggling across the slash: bookseller/artist, artist/military man. Yet for Yoon, who did not have the privileges associated with educated white males with US citizenship in a time without a military draft, the question of “choice” proves much more volatile.

#### 4. occupy: to engage or employ the attention of

Within capitalism, art has long figured as a special type of production. It is also understood to catalyze a special type of sensory orientation; doing something “as art” is meant to increase attention or awareness on the part of the doer. In Montano’s *Odd Jobs*, she took on work not only as a way to generate money but also to shift her own affective stance towards activities which otherwise seemed onerous, boring, or laborious. In a related vein, Mierle Laderman Ukeles in 1976 asked 300 maintenance workers in a building in New York to reconsider their work as art for one hour a day, in her piece *I Make Maintenance Art One Hour Every Day*.<sup>5</sup> She gave out buttons emblazoned with the title for the participants to wear and documented workers as they went about their business in an effort to destabilize the distinctions between dignified art-making and presumably rote, even numbing tasks such as sweeping or vacuuming. Ukeles did not dictate how her newly nominated artists would go about their “maintenance art,” and there was a range of responses (from amusement to suspicion that she was working for the US Department of Immigration). In the end, the piece attempted to unsettle ideas that art exists in a sphere separate from non-commodity-producing service work.

What does it mean to be at work but not occupied—that is, not fully devoting one’s attentions to the task at hand? Is this partial focus assumed to be the condition of most contemporary work? How might art also speak to this space of mental elsewhere-ness? The idea that “art is a calling,” demanding full presence, increasingly does not hold up, as plenty of art is outsourced to others, is made during states of boredom, or even explicitly thematizes distraction, and much “work” is performed with vigilant, intense, or reverent focus. In the past few years, when I have mentioned the likes of Ukeles, Yoon, or Fletcher in my classes, my students want

---

5. For more on Ukeles, see Molesworth (2000) and Jackson (2011).

to know how these differently interpellated workers *felt* about what they were doing, as if in response to some pervasive desire for art to be personally transformative. Did the attitudes of the maintenance crew change in the wake of Ukeles's intervention? Did Yoon or Fletcher have a different mental or emotional relationship to training for war or selling insurance because they had been designated "performances"?

My students have been frustrated by their lack of access to the thought-processes involved, especially irritated at how Yoon and Fletcher have corrupted what is romanticized as an activity apart from the sphere of work—art—and turned it into a form of toil that seems to offer no emotive surplus, no aesthetic dimension, no moral lesson. This frustration points to the stubborn residue that clings to authorially invested artistic activity; the intent of the artist still carries disproportional significance. When precarious work—flexible, contingent, part-time—closely resembles artistic labor, at least outwardly, does the main distinction between art and work remain an internal thought process, a feeling, an attitude? How "committed" are these artists to inhabiting their roles, how much control or manipulation of their emotional life do they exercise? Their performances succeed, in part, to the degree that they disappear, at least to us witnesses, into the contours of their labor. There is no way to measure how the free-floating frame of "performance" might have an impact on the "work" these artists did: they had no script to follow, no character to play, no narrative to trace.

But the ultimately unknowable interiorities of Ukeles, Yoon, and Fletcher are of less concern than the question of uncertain valuation. These performances insist that there might be some separation of intent from activity, some division of labor in which the activity's registration as art remains distinct from that of work—that is, in the realm of affect. What is more, the actions of these artists are granted an extra sheen of value; the added component of artistic labor, however immaterial, implies that the self-reflexive performer might have a different level of awareness about their work than does the ordinary worker. For his part, Fletcher always considered himself fully both an artist and a salesman. He did his job during the day, but was also preoccupied with his after-hours art career. For Yoon, during his two years, even when in uniform, his answer to the question "What do you do?" varied depending on who was asking (Yoon 2011b). These definitions and identifications are messy, partial, and contingent.

Hito Steyerl's recent take on art and labor places occupations in opposition to waged work: "An occupation keeps people busy instead of giving them paid labor" (Steyerl 2011). But for some artists, occupations are routes into artistic value and meaning, as well as to remuneration. I asked Kinmont if he feels differently doing his bookselling job knowing that it is art. He is a perfect case study since he had worked as a bookseller previous to *Sometimes a nicer sculpture*, but in that previous employment he had *not* considered the work an art piece. He responded:

I think I do, absolutely, think about it differently. It has to do with how you chose to define art. For me, art is about an awareness of the creation of meaning. Deciding that it is art is a tool or a device by which to see how it is meaningful to me. It helps me align my priorities. Sometimes it is still drudgery or tedious—the backbreaking, dirty, boring work of packing up books—but it is also meaningful to me to work in the area of cultural preservation and to contribute to my family. (Kinmont 2011)

Crucial here, again, is the fact that attentiveness trumps Duchampian nomination; this is not a one-time act, but an ongoing process of consideration paid to conditions that already exist. Kinmont has described this as a relatively taxing method of working, akin to bilingualism, since the languages and codes of one value structure are so different from the other and he finds himself constantly translating from one to another.

## 5. occupy: to seize possession of and maintain control over

“THIS IS MY OCCUPATION,” reads a sign held aloft at an Occupy Wall Street demonstration in fall 2011—bringing together in one terse phrase multiple definitions of employment, work, claiming territory, political strategy, and affective absorption. In 1953, art critic Clement Greenberg wrote an essay in which he considered the crisis of culture and speculated about its future, given the rapid economic changes around him in the postwar context:

The only solution that I can conceive of under these conditions is to shift its center of gravity away from leisure and place it squarely in the middle of work. Am I suggesting something whose outcome could no longer be called culture, since it would not depend on leisure? I am suggesting something whose outcome I cannot imagine. (1961:32)

Greenberg’s prophecy rings true as the unimaginable relocation of culture to work continues to unfold in the 21st century. Certainly what I am calling occupational realism will shift in relation to this new focus on occupation and intention—as with Greenberg, I find myself at a loss to imagine what exactly that might look like. But let me conclude by offering some thoughts based on my historical understanding of a time when art also went to work.

If we are witnessing a whole-scale economic shift whose only known contour is its very unmappability, its instability and uncertainty, in which workers of all kinds, diverse in their class status and in their various degrees of cultural capital, survive on the barest of margins, with no sense of security or futurity, then it could be that artists engaged in occupational realism prefigured the collapsing categories of work, performance, and art in precarious times. The Occupy movement has spawned several artists’ groups interested in foregrounding their own underpaid and undervalued labor as art workers, including an Arts and Labor contingent of Occupy Wall Street and an artists’ bloc at Occupy San Francisco. Many in these groups are reclaiming the phrase “art worker”—a term that has been deployed at various moments in the history of the avantgarde, beginning with Russian constructivism, the 1930s Artists’ Union that emerged when artists were employed through the US Works Progress Administration, and the Art Workers’ Coalition, founded in 1969 in New York City. Those affiliated with the AWC called themselves “art workers,” a term I used for the title of my 2009 book *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* as a historical nod to these artists’ own self-descriptors. By no means did I take it as an untroubled term. It had uneven currency within its own moment, as my book elaborates, and was fraught with ambivalence, failure, and contradiction (Bryan-Wilson 2009).

So I am curious, if not vaguely mystified, by how the category of the “art worker” is being resurrected. Does its most recent resurfacing mean that artists are interested in reclaiming the phrase with all of its blind spots and fault lines? What the Occupy movement’s canny focus on the “99%” has offered us is a way of finding alliances without recourse to categories such as “the working class.” The Occupy movement has made clear that “workers” are no longer a coherent category, and hence to organize around any single notion of employment, given its instabilities and multiplicities, makes little sense. A slogan that declares “artists are the 99%” speaks to the economic conditions of most artists, who often piece together part-time work to pay the rent, teach in adjunct positions, have mountains of student debt from their art degree, and lack health insurance.

But I want to think hard about what the phrase “art worker” means, its inconsistencies and its elisions. Is the reemergence of the term “art worker” a recognition of the pervasive blurring of art into labor, or is it an overly simplistic conflation of *artist* and *worker*, yoking those two together unproblematically? If we can admit there is no such thing as one kind of “worker,” then we need to account for the fact that who we call “artists” are likewise not a coherent category. We must keep in our focus the global art industry that maintains its connections to and

is integrally part of the 1%. We need to parse distinctions that threaten to collapse: not all art is work, not all work is art, and the class distinctions embedded within these terms still matter. Cultural production is a specialized, or as Hans Abbing calls it, “exceptional” form of work, one that has ties to markets, alternative or gift economies, and affective labor (Abbing 2002).<sup>6</sup> We should not erase distinctions or lose a sense of nuance in order to call for solidarity. Instead, we should theorize the complexities of art that span dematerialized performance as well as object-making.

As an anonymous open letter to the Art Workers’ Coalition in 1969 phrased it:

The word “workers” in the name [of the AWC] is a hopeful sign [...]. Suppose however that the AWC were to declare something like “all power to the workers.” In saying this they would not need to be repeating the old slogans of art in the service of the revolution which seems to have produced neither good art nor any revolution at all. Rather they might be saying that art belongs to all who can grasp it and draw energy from it. What this means in practical terms I don’t know... The cry “all power to the workers” means just that, “all power to *all* workers.” It does not mean that the oyster dredgers control blue points and the artists control acrylics. It means that energy glows as evenly as possible from each segment of society to all others; and when that happens the moral equivalent to privilege will have been found. (Smithsonian Institute 1969)

Though this letter strikes a hopeful note, the AWC never managed to bridge its concerns with the inequalities outside of the art world. The Art Workers’ Coalition, in its lifespan from 1969–1971, did accomplish many things, including an incisive institutional critique that helped illuminate connections between artistic industries, the military, and corporations. They agitated for more oversight in the art world in a time, then as now, with vast inequalities and a star system that rewards some and not others. But the AWC should function less as a triumphant moment than as a cautionary tale: it fell apart in part because it did not offer a sustainable analysis of the co-articulation of race, class, and gender. The art workers circa 1970 were never fully able to recognize this key fact: artists often have, and use, many class-based privileges that many other workers do not have, not the least of which is access to cultural capital.

How have these precarious times changed how we conceive of both art and work? If we take our cue from Virno, we might speculate that our notion of performance has undergone vast transformations that bleed from the cultural to the economic. Yet the contingencies upon which the idea of “artist” or “performer” rests have always in part been based on class privilege, an aspect that is underexplored in Virno. I might go so far as to say that “artists” are not “workers,” which is precisely what makes occupational realism legible as a form of practice—there is a gap between these nonidentical categories wide enough that their bridging feels surprising. If art were already work, or work were already art, these projects that redefine art as work and vice versa would simply fail to register as inversions, as conceptual frames, or as critiques. For many people, working and struggling to survive financially makes creating art less possible; at the same time, work contains within it the possibilities to envision new sorts of relations. As Kathi Weeks puts it, “Work is not only a site of exploitation, domination, and antagonism, but also where we might find the power to create alternatives on the basis of subordinated knowledges, resistant subjectivities, and emergent models of organization” (2011:29). Potentially, the freshly minted art workers of the Occupy movement will not fixate on getting a bigger piece of the art-market pie, and instead will continue to instigate a robust, subtle, and complex analysis of economic conditions attuned to larger struggles against inequality. This is a moment to talk openly about privilege, debt, economic justice, and art as a space of imaginative possibility that has the potential to transform how we think about work, and performance.

---

6. Gregory Sholette (2011) has also written extensively on the “dark matter” and unacknowledged labor that motors the art industry.

## References

- Abbing, Hans. 2002. *Why Are Artists Poor? The Exceptional Economy of the Arts*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Aranda, Julieta, Brian Kuan Wood, and Anton Vidokle, eds. 2011. *Are You Working Too Much? Post-Fordism, Precarity, and the Labor of Art*. E-flux journal. Berlin: Sternberg Press.
- Beck, Ulrich. 1992. *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. Trans. Mark Ritter. London: Sage Publications.
- Beuys, Joseph. 1993. *Joseph Beuys in America: Energy Plan for the Western Man. Writings by and Interviews with the Artist*. Ed. Carin Kuoni. New York: Four Walls Eight Windows.
- Bradley, Will. 2005. "Let it Grow." *frieze* 94 (October):189.
- Bryan-Wilson, Julia. 2009. *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bryan-Wilson, Julia. 2012. "Dirty Commerce: Art Work and Sex Work since the 1970s." *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 23, 2:71–112.
- Clark, T.J. 1973. *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Coffee, James Madison. 1957. "Occupational Realism: An Analysis of Factors Influencing Realism in the Occupational Planning of High School Seniors." PhD diss. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Graduate School of Education.
- Crawford, Matthew. 2009. *Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work*. New York: Penguin Press.
- Cullen, Deborah. 2008. *Arte ≠ Vida: Actions by Artists of the Americas 1960–2000*. New York: El Museo del Barrio.
- Douvan, Elizabeth, and Joseph Adelson. 1966. *The Adolescent Experience*. New York: Wiley.
- Ehrenreich, Barbara. 2001. *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*. New York: Metropolitan Books.
- Federici, Silvia. 2008. "Precarious Labor: A Feminist Viewpoint." In *the Middle of a Whirlwind (Whirlwinds)*, 6 June. <http://inthemiddleofthewhirlwind.wordpress.com/precarius-labor-a-feminist-viewpoint/> (3 July 2011).
- Florida, Richard. 2002. *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life*. New York: Basic Books.
- Foster, Hal. 2011. "Crossing Over: The Precarious Practice of Thomas Hirschhorn." *The Berlin Journal* 20 (Spring):28–30.
- Gielen, Pascal. 2010. *The Murmuring of the Artistic Multitude: Global Art, Memory and Post-Fordism*. Amsterdam: Valiz.
- Gielen, Pascal, and Sonja Lavaert. 2009. "The Dismasure of Art: An Interview with Paolo Virno." *Stichting Kunst en Openbare Ruimte, Open* 17. <http://classic.skor.nl/article-4178-nl.html?lang=en> (10 December 2011).
- Greenberg, Clement. 1961. "The Plight of Culture." In *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*, 22–34. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Jackson, Shannon. 2011. *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics*. London: Routledge.
- Jackson, Shannon. 2012. "Just-in-Time: Performance and the Aesthetics of Precarity." *TDR* 56, 4 (T216):10–31.
- Jacob, Luis, ed. 2011. *Commerce by Artists*. Toronto: Art Metropole.
- Kinmont, Ben. 2011. Phone interview with the author, 14 December.
- Lauder, Adam. 2010. "N.E. Thing Co. Ltd.: From Soft Sell to Soft Skills." In *Byproduct: On the Excess of Embedded Art Practices*, ed. Marisa Jahn, 54–58. Toronto: YYZ Books.
- Menger, Pierre-Michel. 2006. "Artistic Labor Markets: Contingent Work, Excess Supply and Occupational Risk Management." In *Handbook of the Economics of Art and Culture Vol. 1*, eds. Victor A. Ginsburgh and David Throsby, 765–811. Amsterdam: North-Holland/Elsevier Science.

- Mills, C. Wright. 1951. *White Collar: The American Middle Classes*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Molesworth, Helen. 2000. "House Work and Art Work." *October* 92 (Spring):71–97.
- Montano, Linda Mary. 1981. *Art in Everyday Life*. Los Angeles, CA: Astro Artz.
- Paap, Kirsten. 1997. "Working Class Women, Occupational Realism, and Occupational Choice: Beliefs and Knowledge of Working-Class Women at First Workplace Entrance." MS thesis, University of Wisconsin.
- Pink, Daniel. 2005. *A Whole New Mind: Moving from the Information Age to the Conceptual Age*. New York: Riverhead Books.
- Raunig, Gerald, Gene Ray, and Ulf Wuggenig, eds. 2011. *Critique of Creativity: Precarity, Subjectivity, and Resistance in the "Creative Industries"*. London: MayFly Books.
- Schocket, Eric. 2003. "Poor Like Me." *Cabinet* 11 (Summer):47–53. [www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/11/poorLikeMe.php](http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/11/poorLikeMe.php) (10 December 2011).
- Sholette, Gregory. 2011. *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture*. New York: Pluto Press.
- Smithsonian Institute. 1969. Unsigned letter, in Lucy R. Lippard papers, 1940s–2006, bulk 1968–1990. Washington, DC: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institute.
- Steyerl, Hito. 2011. "Art as Occupation: Claims for an Autonomy of Life." *e-flux journal* 30, 12. [www.e-flux.com/journal/art-as-occupation-claims-for-an-autonomy-of-life-12](http://www.e-flux.com/journal/art-as-occupation-claims-for-an-autonomy-of-life-12) (5 January 2012).
- Stokes, Leland. 1977. "Effects of Key Figures on the Occupational Realism of Black Male Inner-City High School Seniors." PhD diss. New York: Fordham University.
- Styan, J.L. 1981. *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice, Vol. 1: Realism and Naturalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thomas, Mark J. 1976. "Realism and Socioeconomic Status (SES) of Occupational Plans of Low SES Black and White Male Adolescents." *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 23, 1:46–49.
- Virno, Paolo. 2004. *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*. Trans. Isabella Bertolotti, James Cascaito, and Andrea Casson. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e).
- Weeks, Kathi. 2011. *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Yoon, Bohyun. 2011a. Artist website. [www.bohyunyon.com](http://www.bohyunyon.com) (15 November 2011).
- Yoon, Bohyun. 2011b. Phone interview with author, 25 November.