

Catalogue Essay for Roslyn Helper's solo exhibition at MOANA, Perth Australia, 2016 - <http://moana-ari.com/exhibition/interventions-in-live-chat/>

Roslyn Helper's *Interventions in Live Chat*

In *Interventions in Live Chat*, Helper conducts a series of on-line conversations with customer service and sales representatives. The workers advise her in acquiring a series of products that will help her build a career as an artist. The process is documented and then presented in the gallery as a new commodity.

The transparency of Helper's process situates artistic production within a system of consumption. The work alludes to certain truths that a gallery context usually obscures—the artist's behavior is framed and shaped by market forces; the art object is invariably the result of a set of relations with auxiliary workers and service providers. Acknowledging and foregrounding these commercially mediated relations draws an equivalence between artistic production and other forms of commercial activity. By viewing the work we might become aware that art is actually a lot like any other commercial activity. The work self-consciously restages a particular kind of value production in order to examine the banal, economically determined nature of the relations that produce it.

Whether this operation produces a critique or another intellectual, relational or aesthetic experience is of course open to interpretation. But for the sake of my broader argument here—the interventions might be read as an immanent critique of art's seamless imbrication with global flows of capital. Or they might be read through 'institutional critique' (immanent critique's artistic sub-genre) as exposing the illusory nature of the value and prestige produced by art institutions. Helper's work resonates with Hans Haacke's seminal institutional critique. In 1986 he wrote:

In spite of the mystique surrounding the production and distribution of art, we are now-and indeed have been all along-dealing with social organizations that follow industrial modes of operation, ranging in size from the cottage industry to national and multinational conglomerates.¹

Helper's work also speaks to another set of concerns beyond the peculiarities of art as a social system. If we zoom out further we might construe the work as a critique of capital's continued annexation of life beyond the traditional commodity form. Social life, language, creativity and basic communicative impulses have been incorporated into capital's mode of production. Over the last 50 years or so there have been epochal changes to (or perhaps more accurately, additions to) these modes of production. Value no longer resides only in concrete commodities and their utility. It now also resides in immaterial manifestations of language, aesthetic experience, services and conceptual constructions. We no

longer only have factories for making shoes and cars (they mostly exist elsewhere), we now have factories for the concept, the aesthetic, the narrative, the look, the interesting idea, and perhaps even the soul. The culture industries (taken here to include visual art), have become the exemplary model for capitalist production.²

In the 'post-fordist' milieu, to use Paolo Virno's term for this new type of economy—capitalist production instrumentalises basic human qualities. The production of capital comes to depend on human language, culture, and our very proclivity towards thinking.³ The dismantling of the welfare state by leaders like Thatcher and Raegan, the decline of manufacturing and other material industries, and massive gains in efficiency—coupled with the rise of networking, communications and data processing technologies, has produced a new type of economy. As the work of the artist, musician, designer, brand engineer and so on, has taken on new economic significance, various forms of art practice have begun to speak to the full and automatic subsumption of creative labour. In these practices, subsumption is acknowledged and foregrounded, and the absurdities of its contradictions are replayed, exposed and inhabited.

What emerges from this work, and other recent exhibitions at MOANA, is a certain anxiety over the prevailing conditions of cultural production in the post-Fordist milieu that Virno describes (of course these conditions are not universal but rather concentrated in wealthy countries).⁴ This type of art speaks to a crisis of the commodity that threatens the status of the creative labourer. This crisis manifests in a kind of feedback loop whereby the absurdity of commodifying an idea, a lifestyle, a thought, a look or a sound, or whatever immaterial commodity one produces—leaks back into the art work itself. Art works come to resemble that which they purport to critique.

If artistic production is inevitably situated within the violence of the globalised economy and the continued dominance of neo-liberal ideology—how can one continue to practice as if art is outside of these systems of exploitation? Of course many artists are aware of the realities of contemporary economy, and this begs another question—what other context is there? At this moment it is very difficult to imagine another context. One cannot simply step outside of the global economy. And so emerges what I am calling an *aesthetic of ambivalence*. A system of representation that tends to depict actually existing conditions, that re-enacts them in a detached fashion. Helper's work hovers in an ideologically suspended state of ambivalence, perhaps in anticipation of a shift in social relations that may or may not eventuate. Artists working with ambivalent aesthetics choose *not* to imagine reality to be otherwise. What results is an aesthetic practice that inhabits our neo-liberal reality in all its strangeness, that acknowledges its violent inequities, that submits to its aesthetic nihilism, and revels in its eerie disembodied connectedness.

¹ Haacke, H. (1986). *Hans Haacke, unfinished business*. Mit Press. P60

² See Adorno, T. W., & Horkheimer, M. (1997). *Dialectic of enlightenment* (Vol. 15). Verso. Chapter: The Culture Industries: Enlightenment as Mass Deception

³ See Virno, P. (2003). *A Grammar of the Multitude*. Los Angeles: Semiotext (e). These changes have been theorised in a variety of ways: Post-Fordism, Immaterial Labour, the Cognitariat, Cognitive Capitalism, Late Capitalism, among others. It is an ongoing debate as to whether these theories overstate the turn to the immaterial.

⁴ As alluded to earlier, the material aspects of production do not disappear but are merely moved offshore. Various commentators such as Steve Wright have written on this: <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/reality-check-are-we-living-immaterial-world>