



Social Identities

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713445719>

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Online Publication Date: 01 May 2009

To cite this Article Rogers, Kenneth(2009)'Capital implications: the function of labor in the video art of Juan Devis and Yoshua Okón',*Social Identities*, 15:3,331 — 349

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13504630902899093>

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Capital implications: the function of labor in the video art of Juan Devis and Yoshua Okón

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(Received 30 August 2007; final form 15 December 2008)

It is increasingly evident that advanced forms of speculative value that have become the driving engine behind the inflated global art market are nonetheless inextricably bound to and dependent upon more informal market systems that operate through the spontaneous organization of exploitable, precarious, marginalized, and ultimately undervalued forms of labor. This fact makes labor a pivotal site where the linkages between these two purportedly independent markets (and their respective systems of value and exchange) come into focus and can be more tangibly assessed and critiqued. This paper will follow this current by first contextualizing the function of labor within two contrasting historical traditions/tendencies of art and cultural production that explicitly reference labor as an essential structuring condition of the work. It will then develop a detailed case study of a recent exchange between two contemporary media/video artists in Los Angeles that demonstrates the complexities of how the market value of art is implicated within a precarious trans-national wage labor system in the neoliberalist global economy.

Keywords: neoliberalism; media; video art; contemporary art; labor; biopolitics; Latin America

In a surprising stylistic departure for an artist committed to grassroots aesthetics, a recent video by media activist Juan Devis is a high-end television pilot produced for mainstream broadcast or satellite distribution. *Inter-State: Video on the Go* (2004) is a sleek hybrid format somewhere between reality television and behind-the-scenes documentary that follows three separate Los Angeles-based studio artists each through the production of a single work of art, from conception to realization. Although the piece works through themes and issues common to Devis' media activist, theater, and experimental film background, the format stands in dramatic contrast to these earlier efforts by featuring markedly more commercial conventions: rapid editing, sensational visuals, a polished soundtrack and score, traditional narrative arc, youth culture appeal, and brief digestible segments conveniently divided for commercial interruption – in short, the requisite ingredients necessary for transforming the social document into entertainment. This stands in contrast to nearly all of Devis' earlier work: an avant-garde adaptation of a short story by Clarice Lispector, *The Petty Curse of Having this Body* (1993); an austere testimonial video documentary on the politics of AIDS in his native Colombia, *Hielo* (1996); a

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found-footage meditation on populist leader Jorge Gaitán's early political speeches in the Plaza Bolívar in Bogotá, *La Calle del Pecado Mortal* (1998); a myriad of non-profit, community-based youth media projects, *Face-In* (2000), *The Belmont Tunnel* (2002), *Tropical America* (2003); and a documentary involving five families' organizational struggle in the development of a migrant workers' union, *The Digital Migrant* (in progress).

But the choice of format does not passively conform to the demands of market forces; it also tactically inserts an alternative sensibility into this mainstream format. The video first premiered at the Redcat Theater in November 2004 as part of LA Freewaves, a biennial, a non-profit independent media festival and a major venue for the exhibition and distribution of alternative film and video in Los Angeles. More importantly, the video was the first work ever funded and produced by Freewaves, and stands as a kind of showcase of a new way for the non-profit to connect to a broader cultural sphere beyond the art-going cognoscenti of Southern California. Thus *Inter-State* signals a shift that is not only relevant to the *oeuvre* of a single artist, but also signals a new approach to alternative media distribution that no longer adheres to the clean dichotomy between dominant commercial production and its alternatives by constantly exploring ways of bringing one sphere of media praxis to bear on the other. In what might arguably appear as a problematic acquiescence to the imperatives of the market, there exists a buried critique of the political economy of commercial television by subtly implicating it within a much broader array of social practices, cultures, and economies that are customarily excluded from reference within that system, or if they do appear, are appropriated into a palliative form of mass consumption – a form that does not endanger the hegemony of neoliberalist, free-market interests. So despite its commercial appeal, one still finds in *Inter-State* all the same themes, which deal with issues of class and power, threaded throughout so much of Devis' activist work; the culture of the automobile; Latin American identity politics; issues of migration, trans-nationalism, and diaspora experience; Border Art and Southland culture; and political economy and labor politics. *Inter-State* is a curious experiment, pushing a more progressive and activist agenda into a commercial container to discover if its local community advocacy can still resonate within a mainstream cultural economy.

This marriage between activism and commerce, however, is not always a happy one, and it brings numerous internal contradictions and tensions to the surface of the work, primarily the problem of whether the video has compromised its ability to deliver real agency to the expanded community it seeks. In addressing a mainstream audience through a mainstream format, the question becomes whether or not *Inter-State* achieves an adequate retention of an activist sensibility or slides into a state of complicity with a mode of production and distribution that is inimical to its own ethos by implicating itself within a form of dominant media grounded in free-market capitalism. Just as it inserts moments of resistance into this dominant cultural form, the piece also struggles in its ability to open a truly participatory, non-hierarchical, and interactive space and often reverts to a voice that speaks for rather than from the groups and subjects who are institutionally excluded from access to these forms of culture. At the same time, it also critiques a certain grassroots naiveté invested in the possibility of any truly participatory, non-hierarchical form of culture not conscripted by power relationships and defined by global capital. In this sense, *Inter-State* is a complex and self-contradictory video. Suspended between competing

institutional demands and deeply ambivalent in its mode of address, it is a work that demonstrates the polysemy of its title in a composite tension between its social aesthetic and its mode of production.

It is in and around the issue of labor politics that *Inter-State* explicitly plays out the internal tension between its alternative, grassroots aspirations and the political economy of mainstream television. The struggle over the depiction of labor becomes absolutely central to both the video's content and, more importantly, its relations of production. *Inter-State* documents three Latino, Southern Californian artists whose work straddles both the upper stratum of the contemporary art world and informal, less institutionalized cultures and economies external to that world. The first is devoted to Rubén Ortiz-Torres' *La Zamba del Chevy* (2000), in which Ortiz-Torres collaborates with car artist Tony Ortiz to convert a replica of Che Guevara's 1960 Chevy Biscayne into a low-rider for a 3-D film and dancing car performance at the Getty Center; the second documents the evolution of Rubén Ochoa's *Class: C* (ongoing), a mobile art gallery created from a hand-me-down van formerly used as a tortilla delivery vehicle by his father; and the final segment documents the production of Yoshua Okón's *Shoot* (2004) a re-enactment of a generic Hollywood shootout made by hiring day-laborers as actors that debuted at The Project, Los Angeles in October 2004. In terms of content, all three segments depict artists whose work extends beyond the white walls of the museum and gallery system to the broader context of class struggle and labor relations in Southern California, but it is only within the final segment – a complex exchange between Okón and Devis – that this depiction turns structurally inward to confront the dilemma of how to indicate the function of labor within the productive forces of the video itself. In much the same way the video walks a line between grassroots and commercial aesthetics, the Okón segment develops a manner of performing the labor of cultural production so as to make a limited, local intervention against the advancement of capital while remaining implicated within capital, rather than aspiring to the unattainable task of standing outside it. I believe this exchange to be exemplary of the challenges and the new possibilities of bringing the issue of labor to the surface of cultural production at a moment when the social, material, political, and economic conditions that constitute what labor is, where it occurs, and how it produces value have been undergoing an epistemological transformation within the biopolitical context.

The Devis/Okón segment of *Inter-State* grapples with what I view as two contrasting traditions of the representation of labor in socially engaged art. So before delving further into the details of their co-production, it is crucial to first place their work within this context. The first and most straightforward way in which labor comes to the surface of the work is in the figuration of the laboring body – a practice that has its own place in the history of the plastic arts, but also in photography, literature, performance, radio, cinema, etc. In this simple form of bringing labor forward, a particular instance of labor is depicted by the work, and the work stands in for, refers to, and frames a specific historical condition of labor that is external to the work itself, often with the ethical intent of raising political consciousness about the inequitable conditions of that labor by making those conditions visible. This form of bringing labor to the surface of the work might be referred to as the *representational axis* of labor, in that the work points to or serves as an expression of labor that presumably exists in a world that is external to that work.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the representational depiction of industrial labor in realist painting was taken up by a new form of social documentary that migrated to the medium of photography due to technological advancements and the rising evidentiary import of the photograph as an arbiter of truth, both of which were connected to the growing bureaucratic and disciplinary needs of the state (Sekula, 1992; Tagg, 1993). Jacob Riis' 1890 social critique of the New York tenements, *How the Other Half Lives*, was pivotal in establishing this new photographic genre, perhaps most notably taken up two decades later in Lewis Hine's iconic photo essays on child labor made between 1908–12, which were accompanied by photo captions stressing social justice for the brutal exploitation of the immigrant underclass. After Hine, the photojournalistic tradition has held a privileged place in the representation of labor throughout twentieth century visual culture; however, in the terms I have put forward the representational axis is a category that cuts across historical periods, genre, and medium. Thus works as diverse as the Social Realist murals of Orozco or Rivera, Luchino Visconti's *la terra trema*, Barbara Kopple's *Harlan County*, and Sebastião Salgado's workers series might all be considered works that reference labor along the representational axis.

But there is a second, more indirect way in which labor comes to the surface of the work. It can also appear through the infolding of systems and procedures in and around the work that reveal how labor manifests as a precondition of that work's place within a broader economy. In this more complex form, the visible depiction of labor is secondary to its presence in the work as a kind of placeholder, abstraction, and potentiality. Labor is primarily referenced as an essential mechanism that posits art and culture's *potential* circulation as exchange value; and it often does so with the intent of demystifying the complex constructions upon which that value is based. This second form might be called the *functional axis* of labor, in that the work reflexively indicates its own function within a larger system of relations, a system that is entirely dependent upon the abstract potential of empty labor for it to operate.

The functional axis of labor became ever more prevalent during the 1960s when a global paradigm shift in art practice turned to duration, performance, dematerialization, the blurring of art/life dichotomies, and institutional critiques as multi-layered strategies for disrupting the commodification of art (Rorimer, 2001; Sekula, 1978; Wall, 1995). Of the many the tactics indicating the function of labor, such as the use of timetables and graphs, indexical references to the context of exhibition and circulation, and documents or plans that refer to process and construction, the most common to the United States context were found in the many works in which artists used their own bodies and actions as a way of demonstrating the intersection of art labor with that of other economies. Bonnie Sherk's performance piece *Act V, Andy's Donuts*, when she took a job as a short order cook for the overnight shift in a San Francisco diner between June 1973 and May 1974, and Mierle Ukeles performance *Washing Tracks Maintenance* (1973), in which she attended to the daily upkeep of the Wadsworth museum by sweeping, cleaning, and scrubbing the exhibition space for the duration of a group show are two such examples of work that indicates the complex function of exchange value by oppositionally overlaying one economic system of evaluation with another, in which privileged artist labor is equated with undervalued wage labor (see Figure 1). Similarly, in one of his five one-year endurance performances made between 1978–86, *Time Clock*, Tehching Hsieh punched a time clock in his studio every hour on the hour, 24 hours a day, seven



Figure 1. Mierle Laderman Ukeles *Washing, Tracks, Maintenance*, Wadsworth Museum (1973). Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

days a week, for the duration of one year (Foley, 1981). Through the extended duration of the piece, this consuming performance strips bare the naked brutality of the workweek and the imprint and adjustments endured by the modern subject who must synchronize with the indifferent rhythms of capital. But the functional axis is present in scores of other artworks where the actions of an artist's body become the work (or substrate for the work) and deliver a more implicit critique by impeding institutional criteria accustomed to reading artist labor as a material quality in objects, legible as form and style. In the performance works of Eleanor Antin, Bruce Nauman, Chris Burden, Joan Jonas, Vito Acconci, Carolee Schneemann, et al., the immaterial, durational actions of their bodies, not the physical traces that remain, become the work (O'Dell, 2000). In this way, much of the art of this period is not only about its own labor, but is actually biopolitically undifferentiated from the labor expended to produce it, irregardless of the material residue it leaves behind.

It can be said that there is an important variant on the functional axis of labor that is common within, but not exclusive to Latin American Conceptual Art. Although similarly directed at issues of exploitation and the inequitable distribution of wealth, the tendency of the social critique of labor in US Conceptual Art, performance, etc. was to emphasize the individual body of the artist or performer as

labor rather than engage with labor in those exploited communities. In the US and Western European context, the politics of labor was often individuated; the travail of the artist was his or her own but little more than a metaphor vis-à-vis the broader social field. By contrast, the tendency in Latin American more often avoids the individualist approach preferring more direct contact with the laborer in the broader social field. In what still stands as the most emblematic example of this approach, in 1968 Argentinian artist Oscar Bony paid a working family double their customary wages to sit atop a podium on display for the duration of an exhibition. Bony made his comment on labor's unremarked function in art not through a performance of his own, but through the remuneration of others hired to perform the labor that is later attributed to him. In doing so he references the disengagement and hypocrisy of institutional systems blind to external economic conditions and class disparity. The haunting objectification of the working family also betrays a formal system of property rights, as the ownership a work produced by wage labor is attributed to Bony's namesake. The piece is also an indictment against the inherent violence imbedded in any claim to representational authenticity by implying that the representational axis always objectifies and consumes the lives of those it claims to present. Here the labor of the artist is not a kind of functional poetics that devalues the currency of art, but the artist's class privilege is placed firmly on the table for contemplation, along with the racial codifications that reinforce such a disparity (Ramírez, 1999).

This approach toward the functional axis remained operative in the 1990s when Spanish artist Santiago Sierra, working in Mexico, Peru, Cuba, and Brazil, made a series of remuneration pieces in the tradition of Bony, in which he hired local workers to perform actions that would become art. Sierra is a brazenly extreme case study of this later tradition and from the 1990s forward he has hired individuals from the deprived underclasses to engage in menial, demeaning, and exploitative actions to produce his work. Hiring migrant workers, the unemployed, sex workers and day-laborers at wages slightly above market rate, he has produced numerous remuneration pieces. In Mexico City, he remunerated workers to detach and manually maintain support of a gallery wall at a 60-degree angle for the duration of the piece; paid a worker to remain in the trunk of a car for an extended period; paid Cuban sex workers to be covered by wooden boxes used as benches for an art opening; and paid a shoe shine boy to clean the shoes of privileged patrons attending an art opening. He has also paid subjects to mark their bodies with tattoos or hair dye and has even seemingly put their health at risk by covering remunerated persons with plastic and spraying them with polyurethane (see Figure 2).

As might be expected, pointed criticisms of Sierra's works' undeniably exploitative dimension have been repeatedly voiced. For creating works that are worth exponentially more than the wages paid to produce them as well as for the inherently degrading and pointless nature of the performances themselves, he is often criticized for being an unrepentant opportunist leveraging neo-colonialist cultural and class privilege to secure a position as an international art star. The contrary position is that Sierra is simply making explicit reference to what most cultural producers disavow, suggesting that it is an artist's obligation to own up to that accountability. As Coco Fusco suggests, Sierra,



Figure 2. Santiago Sierra. *The Wall of a Gallery Pulled Out, Inclined 60 Degrees from the Ground and Sustained by 5 People*. Acceso A. Mexico City, Mexico. April 2000. Courtesy of the artist and Lisson Gallery.

foregrounds desperation and futility, the gap between rich and poor, the constant humiliation to which the needy are subjected, and the discretionary power of those with even a modicum of wealth. His performances suggest a view of contemporary Mexican society clinging to the hierarchies established under Spanish rule. (2001, p. 67)

Although they should not be compared in any deterministic way or as an absolute correlation, the contrast between representational and functional axes might be said to loosely correspond to Marx's distinction between uncanceled craft labor and capitalized abstract labor: between labor that has not yet entered into a condition of absolute exchangeability because its value is the value of a particular task and labor that has been rendered as potential for capital exploitation because of its interchangeability. When capital asserts itself as an arbiter between all particular forms of labor, it converts that particularity into abstract use value for capital known as labor-power. Marx writes:

[L]abour is of course in each single case a specific labour, but capital can come into relation with every *specific* labour; it confronts the *totality* of all labours [potentiality], and the particular one it confronts at a given time is an accidental matter. On the other side, the worker himself is absolutely indifferent to the specificity of his labour; it has no interest for him as such, but only in as much as it is in fact *labour* and, as such, a use value for capital. It is therefore his economic character that he is the carrier of labour as such – i.e. of labour as *use value* for capital; he is a worker, in opposition to the capitalist. This is not the character of the craftsmen and guild-members. (1973, pp. 296–97)

It seems to me that even the most naked representation of industrial labor along the representational axis corresponds to Marx's nostalgic conception of pre-capitalized craft labor because the epistemology of its aesthetic base is grounded in the specificity of that representation. Alternatively, works that emphasize the functional axis loosely correspond to capitalized labor in that they don't represent,

but rather perform the abstract condition that makes that exploitation possible: the intercession of capital. So although I observe Marx's distinction of labor in my construction of these two terms, I also try to show how the representational and the functional are less fixed in absolute opposition and always interpenetrate to some degree. In addition, it is important to allow the two terms to relate simultaneously to Marx's more orthodox view of value in the political economy (i.e., value measured by the extraction of surplus value by capital) and simultaneously open a space to account for the realm of biopolitical production and the new forms of value endemic to it (i.e., value immanent to the social field), forms that facilitate the movement between asset capital and cultural capital, political economy and social economy, money and/as art.

That said, it becomes important to note that the functional axis does not exclude the representational, as it is most often the case that the terms always correlate. The reference to the functional axis of labor is often achieved through a delicate balance of interdependent relationships, such as social context, site, history, mode of exhibition and distribution, etc. Because many of these contingencies include representational aspects, reference to the function of labor is always an unstable proposition, often making it a merely temporary intervention that is forever on the verge of collapse back onto the representational axis. Likewise, every representational work potentially contains a functional aspect that might be revealed through a process of strategic re-contextualization, like placing the classical work on an epistemological auction block (Sherri Levine's *After Walker Evans* (1981) series comes to mind as an example of such re-contextualization). Furthermore, it is often the forces of institutional re-appropriation that convert the functional back into the representational, because it is a common reflex for cultural institutions to efface their own implication in the economy made visible by the functional axis, or to at least territorialize it within the boundary of 'subversive' culture – thus dada becomes 'Dada' and the durational labor of Ukeles' *Washing, Tracks, Maintenance* performance becomes an exhibition one-liner synecdochally condensed into a single photograph. This is all to suggest that these two terms do not sit in absolute opposition but often coexist, work in tandem, form offshoots of one another, and constantly work to transform each other. This process is ongoing but also asymmetrical, as it is usually the case that the functional axis depends upon or branches out of the representational, but that the representational axis seeks to negate, disavow, or reabsorb the functional as it has difficultly coexisting peaceably alongside of it.

By the time Sierra was working in Mexico City it was within an entirely different economic paradigm from that of Bony. The global art market that found representations of labor so fashionable – along with the late-capitalist museum (Krauss, 1990) that now collect and exhibit them – emerged out of neoliberalist reforms that mark the Reaganite and Thatcherite revolutions of the 1980s. This wave of reform began profoundly to reshape global trade through policies and institutions that fostered both national and international deregulation. From the privatization of everything from public works to prison systems, the measured excision of state oversight and control has been conjoined with a systematic rollback of expenditure for social services. A myriad of major multilateral and bilateral trade agreements were then established: NAFTA (1994) and MAI (1995–1998) have reduced tariffs and facilitated the unchecked flow of capital across national borders; GATT's

formation of the WTO in 1994 has since made it the dominant supranational institution that dictates global economic policy; and the last vestiges of Keynesianism have been squeezed out of the IMF and the World Bank, which have now become the global strong-arm to convert the world's poorer national economies to the neoliberalist agenda. Overall, this wave of neoliberalist reform has meant a diminishment of state sovereignty. Seeking to open new channels for the flow of capital that were previously limited by nationalist protectionism, the state has become an agent of multinational corporations, as one can easily glean from the ominously sequestered G8 summits. All this is happening under the ambiguous, divisive designation known as globalization (Harvey, 2005; Hardt & Negri, 2004).

But there is perhaps no greater material effect of globalization than its impact upon labor worldwide. Relinquished of their responsibilities to national trade unions, multinational corporations have been transferring manufacturing and outsourcing the service sector to the exploited and vulnerable labor forces of China and India. The 'free' trade of NAFTA has devastated the Mexican working class, particularly agricultural workers, who have crossed the US border to work as migrant farmers, day-laborers, and in sweatshops. With the influx of inexpensive goods from China to the US economy and the fragmentation of trade unions, better-paying skilled manufacturing jobs have been transferred to the low-wage, precarious service sector, where franchise box stores like Walmart and Home Depot flood the market with discounted bulk goods that crush local retailers.

Okón is working in the same tradition as artists like Bony, Sierra, and Alÿs, and was a contemporary of Sierra and Alÿs in the post-NAFTA period of Mexican Contemporary art. Co-founder of La Panadería (1994–2002), a non-profit, artist-run international exhibition space and cultural center in Mexico City, Okón began his career at a moment when the deregulated flow of capital and labor across the Mexican border forced a downward wage pressure that began to erode locally-based industry. Symbolically occupying the shell of a former bakery in La Condesa, a gentrifying neighborhood within Mexico City, La Panadería became the epicenter of experimental art and performance that was critically engaged with the cultural and economic transformations of the new global trade policies and paradigms that were reshaping Mexican culture and commerce. Okón's own works from this period approach the functional axis through monetary transactions between himself and a participant that reveal socially and economically-determined power relationships. In works like *A Propósito* (1997), an installation that includes a gross of black market car stereos alongside a video of an accomplished thief ransacking cars to acquire them, and *Orillese a la Orilla* (1999–2000), a nine-part video series in which the artist solicits performances from the Mexican police – often with bribes – that compromise their authority and at times their dignity, one can see the influence of the experimental Panadería years upon his more recent work. These transactions often reveal unanticipated moral ambiguities. In the fifth tableau of *Orillese a la Orilla* (1999–2000), for example, Okón pays a police officer to do a square dance, a piece that inevitably elicits mixed responses. By one measure, Okón's piece raises the issue of the officer's subordinated position within Mexican class and racial hierarchies and how these inequities permit a perceived exploitation of the officer by Okón himself. From another side however, the piece confers a kind of suspicion upon the potential corruption of representatives of state power, making the social critique that, for the right price, any authority might be bought or sold, made to dance to any tune. Still

another reading is that Okón's gesture is not at all exploitative but opens a space of performative transgression for an individual unwillingly caught in the stricture of a particular social role. Gesturing toward moral ambiguities such as these is typical of Okón's projects (Debroise, 2006; Dorfsman, 2005).

Okón, now based in Los Angeles, is producing work that is similar in tactics but relevant to the very different social and political landscape of the California Southland, and it was in this different environment that the collaboration with Devis took place. The Devis/Okón project¹ perpetually seeks and approaches the functional axis of labor by producing within itself a complex kind of auto-referential economy that mirrors and parallels but also literally connects to other economies external to it. It not only represents labor, but also refers to labor as an abstract precondition of its own value, a value that determines the project's superfluidity within various institutional and cultural circuits. In this sense, their project maintains continuity with the increased skepticism toward the representational axis that appeared in the late-1960s, but, alternatively, it underscores the difficulty in making a sustained critique of labor in this way, as it is a project that does not exempt itself from the way in which a reference to labor's function works in complicity with structures that re-appropriate the functional back into the representational. In the analysis that follows, I wish to examine the place between *Inter-State* and *Shoot* where this tension, in all of its permutations, is most fraught and therefore most visible in the work.

To better unpack the complexities of how the collaboration between Devis and Okón works toward the functional representation of labor, it is necessary to work forward from Okón's installation into the multiple levels of auto-referentiality and intertextual exchange that make *Shoot* and *Inter-State* indistinguishable from one another. The armature for this exchange is structured out of Okón's video installation *Shoot*, which explores the foggy boundary between cinematic fiction and documentary fact, and how the two categories are ceaselessly regenerating one another, an issue especially pertinent to the cultural media nexus of Los Angeles. He structured his own piece out of the intertextual exchange around a violent, live-broadcast news event, a bank robbery in 1997 known as the North Hollywood shootout. An event in which two masked gunmen with automatic weapons robbed a bank and shot indiscriminately at bystanders and police, the North Hollywood shootout was already a copycat crime of a fictional event, as it was later discovered the bank robbery scene in Michael Mann's *Heat* (1995) inspired the gunmen. Upon discovering that the 'real' robbery had then subsequently inspired yet another fictional Hollywood production, *44 Minutes: The North Hollywood Shootout* (2003), Okón sought his own continuation of the intertextual relay and produced a low-budget, guerilla-style rendition of the scene. After acquiring a demolished police car from a junkyard, he cast the roles of seven police officers by auditioning migrant day-laborers outside of a Home Depot, where undocumented workers in Southern California customarily hustle for day jobs. Once the casting selections had been made, the actors, without costumes or stage props other than the police car, pantomimed a scene of their being assailed and massacred by two gunmen who metaphorically occupied the place of the two cameras documenting the performance (one of which was operated by Devis). The final gallery presentation consisted of a synchronized, two-channel video projection above the police car that sat vacant beneath like an artifact from the scene of a crime (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Yoshua Okón. *Shoot*. Los Angeles, 2004. Courtesy of the artist and The Project, NY.

The functional axis is not fully revealed in either Devis or Okón's piece, but in the interstice between the two, which becomes visible when one reads the complex intertext between *Shoot* and *Inter-State* as a single project, a semi-autonomous realm that opens a spiral of co-implicated exchange. This exchange begins perhaps with Devis tactically inserting himself into the production of Okón's *Shoot*. Of the three segments in *Inter-State*, it is only within the Okón segment, subtitled *245 (d) 1: Assault with Firearm Upon a Police Officer*, that the presence of Devis as documentarian is outwardly textualized. It is the only segment in which Devis himself reflexively appears in the film behind the camera, in which his voice is audibly included when asking interviewees questions and giving directives, and in which he explicitly editorializes, critiques, and reshapes the artist's piece as it might otherwise stand alone in the gallery. All this is not to suggest that *245 (d) 1* is any less authentic than the Ortiz-Torres and Ochoa segments, but simply that it represents a marked shift in the video's mode of address by bringing forward its maker as a participant in the very thing he sets out to document. Linked to the highly reflexive nature of *Shoot* itself, Devis' reflexivity toward his own process replicates the power dynamic between Okón and his actors.

Much of this exchange orbits around to the issue of labor. By following *Shoot* from conception to exhibition, *245 (d) 1* is the only segment of the series that documents not just the work of art, but also the labor expended in the production of that work. It tracks the laboring artist as he selects a demolished police car, auditions and directs actors, prepares the set at The Project, and shoots *Shoot*. But what governs the causal progression of these scenes of physical labor is the construction of Okón as the orchestrator of the process. It is invariably a voice-over or talking-head interview of Okón elaborating on the motivations of his process, the conceptual and theoretical registers of the piece, and his general philosophy of art that animates the sequence that demonstrates their realization. By placing Okón at the elocutionary center of the segment, whose thoughts and words drive the shoot forward, Devis' *245 (d) 1* interrogates a system that places immaterial/intellectual labor in a supervising or managerial role over the subordinate material/physical labor. Yet as much as the documentary segment exposes Okón's labor as management, it equally esteems his labor as artist, having recourse to the myth of the expressive independence of artistic labor from the external interests of capital – the myth of art as an expressive form

that originates from the creative autonomy of the subject. This inconsistency in tone toward the notion of artistic labor references the differing economies in which that labor circulates (see Figure 4).

This is further complicated by the strategic ambiguity of Okón's performance, which appears to be consciously speaking to the various registers of potential value against which the outward projection of the artistic persona might be measured. In one sense, the role of artist in *245 (d) I* appears as a performance by Okón – every bit as staged as the actors he directs in *Shoot*. In his articulate explanatory statements, one can detect the refinement and savvy of a self-fashioned persona created for the realities of an art market increasingly dependent upon that persona as part of the commodity value of its work. In another sense, Okón's own performance cannot simplistically be written off as self-promotional; it also skillfully undermines *Inter-State*'s effort at putting documentary distance between it and the socio-economic milieu of the art world. Through performative hyperbole and artifice, Okón ironizes the convention of an authenticating 'artist statement,' and by so doing, disables *245 (d) I*'s irreproachability. The documentary can no longer stand apart from the function of artistic labor, but becomes entrenched within it, co-implicated through their conjoined efforts toward publicity. In a contemporary art world invested in a star system that is almost indistinguishable from the entertainment industry, *Inter-State* can gain no meaningful traction against it, and it becomes clear that the documentary has, in effect, opened a publicity channel through which the accumulation of artistic cultural capital can be fed back into that system, helping to increase the mystique, exposure, circulation, and monetary value of both pieces. Perhaps the most salient aperçu of this overlap of interests is revealed by the fact that



Figure 4. Auditions in the Home Depot parking lot. *Inter-state: Video on the Go*. 2004. Courtesy LA Freewaves, Los Angeles.

it is the camera crew of *Inter-State* that shoots Okón's *Shoot*. The two works are not just intermarried symbolically but also materially and economically; like the fictive and factual interplay of the North Hollywood Shootout, *Shoot* and *Inter-State* are both doubly articulated – once as art, a second time as commerce. Devis and Okón appear like business partners in a mutually beneficial relationship that moves through interrelated sectors of the biopolitical economy; each plays an essential role in the production of the other's work. The two economies work in tandem, and the two artists speak from the access afforded to them through their cultural capital and their class privilege, which helps widen the circuit of and exchange and increase the value of their respective projects (see Figures 5 and 6).

Thus the project perpetually approaches the functional axis of labor by producing within itself a complex kind of auto-referential economy that not only mirrors and parallels but also directly connects to other economies adjacent to it. In the sinuous, indeterminate space between *Shoot* and *245 (d) 1*, something about the labor of art production is forcefully and unremittingly called into question – something that would rapidly retreat from view if either piece were taken only on its own terms. Their collaboration indicates the manner by which monetary and cultural value are produced in tandem and operate in rather similar and interpenetrating ways. From this view, the very questionable category 'art' can only be understood as something issued from a very nuanced integration of cultural capital and asset capital. Or to put it another way, for the artist and his or her work, the specific accumulation of asset capital is totally coextensive with, perhaps even subordinate to, the super-fluid circulation of cultural capital among segments of the art economy; consequently, the market value of art of is completely detached from a



Figure 5. Devis (left) and Okón (right) direct actors at The Project. *Inter-state: Video on the Go*. 2004. Courtesy LA Freewaves, Los Angeles.



Figure 6. *Inter-state: Video on the Go*. 2004. Courtesy LA Freewaves, Los Angeles.

labor theory of value. The super-fluidity of Devis and Okón's own labor stands in stark contrast to other forms of undervalued labor necessary to their respective projects; their exchange obviates the mechanisms of cultural, class, and institutional privilege that enable artistic labor in becoming a speculative sign, capitalized far beyond the capacity of its material production. What is most fascinating about the Okón/Devis exchange is that despite this complicity with speculative value through an exchange that is available only to them, it seems that their co-production, intentionally or inadvertently, opens up spaces of new potentiality for the less fluid (and more exploitable) forms of labor that stand behind their co-production.

The post-industrial economy has occasioned a significant epistemological turn in the character of labor that recasts the very nature of what labor is, how it produces, how it is valued, how it enters subjectivity, and what it means and signifies. This way of understanding labor connects the juridical, political, and economic conditions of globalization to what Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt argue is a paradigm of biopolitical production, a purely productive form of power not based on the disciplinary repression of the subject, but rather on various forms of somatic production that are dispersed throughout, and immanent to the social body. All the spheres of art and culture, communication, welfare and care of the self, sexuality, language, information management, gender, the family, etc. are sites where biopolitics operates as a flexible form of internalized power that is more mercurial and adaptive than a disciplinary regime that maintains controls by means of coercion from within an institutional enclosure, such as a factory, a prison, or a school (Deleuze, 1992).

Without reproducing the complexities of their argument (a composite fusion of Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, and new trends in Italian Marxism), I simply want

to emphasize how they view biopolitical production as an essential way of accounting for two related aspects of immaterial labor: its modes of operation and a revised principle of exchange value extracted from that labor. In short, Hardt and Negri posit three primary modes of immaterial labor that are essential to the smooth functioning of the new global economic regime detailed above: communicative labor, interactive/symbolic labor, and affective labor. Their analysis attempts to rectify the tendency in the theories of immaterial labor singularly focused on its categorical lack of a material product. Their position shifts the emphasis from immateriality into the biopolitical context, that is, how labor itself performs the body and how it produces and reproduces itself. A second aspect related to immaterial labor is the way in which biopolitical production extends the superfluidity of monetary exchange into every element of social life. It is no longer enough to say that money has conquered the social sphere because it has become the measure of all things, but rather that money has conquered the social sphere because it has become indistinguishable from that sphere; money and the social body have become conjoined into a single undifferentiated field. Resonant of the Deleuzian desiring machine, biopolitical production has fully permeated the notion of value.

From here we can see a horizon of values and a machine of distribution, a mechanism of accumulation and a means of circulation, a power and a language. There is nothing, no 'naked life,' no external standpoint, that can be posed outside this field permeated by money; nothing escapes money . . . The great industrial and financial powers thus produce not only commodities but also subjectivities. They produce agentic subjectivities with the biopolitical context: they produce needs, social relations, bodies, and minds – which is to say, they produce producers. (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 32)

Day-laboring is often thought to epitomize a labor theory of value, in that the work of the laboring body has a direct correspondence to the mark of value in the form of wages. By all surface appearances, it seems to have a kind of self-evident quality about it: a laborer works for a fixed wage paid by the hour, job, or day, which are all in essence a correlative representation of the amount of productive force exerted by the laboring subject required to produce the commodity. But the misapplication of this common sense, neo-classical, Ricardian notion to a post-industrial global economy denies access of day-laboring to other productive circuits of value. Okón's *Shoot* invites a potential transvaluation of the delimitations of the labor theory of value by placing it into a new form of value based on biopolitical production, such as communicative labor or affective labor, the value of which has more fluidity in the global economy. Although Okón pays the laborers a fixed hourly rate, the laborers' task also becomes a site of affective, performative agency that expresses other forms of value that exceed that of the wage. Re-evaluating their activity according to communicative or affective measures of value opens that labor to entirely new circuits of exchange. The day-laborer hired as actor might potentially activate the same faculty used by the laborer in, say, a protest rally or another tactical disruption of established power.

Although the potential for this kind of agency is real, I want to also caution that such a claim is also contentious and problematic, nowhere more evident than in the divergent approaches by Devis and Okón toward the reference to the day-laborers' wage. What is concealed from the installation version of Okón's *Shoot* is uncomfortably reintroduced back into the economic circuit in the final sequence of 245 (d) 1. Here the video takes a step back from its own complicity and

polemically concludes by raising pointed ethical questions about exploitation that deliberately implicates the art world within an economic and cultural system that depends upon a vulnerable undervalued workforce in order to function (Neilson & Rossiter, 2005; Tari & Vanni, 2005). The sequence begins with a final voice-over narration of Okón making an artist's statement about the relationship of art and morality that accompanies a wide-angle, time-lapse dissolve of a trendy crowd inspecting the demolished police car at the opening of *Shoot*. In-between Okón's statements, Devis interjects several white on black intertitles that refer to the raw statistics and the economic conditions that are foundationally invisible to the chattering milieu of the art world sipping wine and networking at an opening where the travail of the labor that produced the piece has been effaced.

Intertitle: An estimated 8 to 12 million immigrants live in the US illegally

YO: I don't like representation or art that's moralistic in the sense that it has a very specific moral agenda.

Intertitle: The unauthorized labor force in the US totals 5.3 million workers

YO: Morality is a very complex issue and morality keeps changing over time, so I'm not interested in slogans and I'm not interested in telling people how they should behave.

Intertitle: Yoshua paid his workers \$15 an hour for an 8 hour day

YO: I'm more interested in touching on aspects that move me and really interest me and that, most of the time, aspects that disturb me ... of the world ...

Intertitle: \$120 for a day of work

YO: ... in order to collectively be able to consider them and put them on the table because many times a lot of these issues are just being ignored.

Intertitle: *Shoot*: 245 (d) 1

Labor theorist Hernando de Soto argues that it is not the accumulation of wealth, but rather the manipulation of property rights, titles, deeds contracts, and copyrights, that cumulatively produces the effect of capital. It is these formally adjudicated systems of enumeration and inscription that provide the social contract that enables the use of assets by providing them with potentiality, mobility, and currency. De Soto argues that if one were to enumerate the informal property assets of the world's poor, you would have a global wealth that exceeds the world's rich and multinational corporations many times over. Although his solution to this problem is ultimately places faith in the free market, the diagnosis is no less instructive: he argues that because these economies are informal and subterranean, and as a consequence immeasurable, they therefore lack fluidity and transferability and become what de Soto names 'dead capital' – capital that exists, yet cannot be leveraged. In a related argument Joseph Childers and Stephen Cullenberg refer to 'unremarked labor' as that labor that stands behind and supplements yet is elided from the value of official wage labor, such as women's domestic labor, 'third world' labor, children's labor, etc. If one were to transpose the arguments of de Soto and Childers and Cullenberg into the register of the media image, we might begin to rethink the potential recuperation of dead capital not just as a problem political economy but also one of culture.

By referencing the raw economic transaction between Okón and his actors, Devis introduces back into the circuit of exchange the 'dead capital' or 'unremarked labor' that is effaced from the piece itself – labor that is absolutely foundational to the operations of the upper strata of the economic hierarchy yet summarily excluded from circulating within that strata, the idea of which is equally applicable to the

realm of cultural capital as it is to asset capital. It is exactly this reinscription of the unremarked that Devis introduces into what is otherwise effaced from *Shoot*. In a cadence of ironic counterpoint, Okón's remarks about raising pertinent social issues within a framework of moral relativism is directly contested by Devis' own reinscription of what is excluded from *Shoot*: the wages paid to the actors for their labor, the surplus value extracted from that labor through a complex system of publicity and exchange, and the unspoken collusion of the gallery system and the entertainment industry. Paradoxically, by completely insinuating itself into the production of Okón's *Shoot* and becoming complicit with the economic strata that benefits from the exploitation of the surplus labor of others, 245 (d) 1 is finally able to produce an oblique critique of its own project along the functional axis by pointing to the shared labor necessary to the co-production, a critique that subtly undermines the commercial format of the piece.

On the other hand, the moral emphasis on the financial transaction between Okón and his actors at the conclusion of *Inter-State* might be precisely the kind of critique that reverts the video's labor politics to the representational axis by playing into a romantic cliché of the sweat and toil of the poor, a cliché that *Shoot* is careful to avoid. From the auditions outside the Home Depot and the footage in Okón's installation, it seems evident that while at the same time *Shoot* is exploitative of its participants monetarily, it also opens a space (as do all forms of labor) for the improvised creativity of the worker to exceed the constraints of the system. But much of the improvisation, too, must undoubtedly come from each actor's deeply personal relationship to being an undocumented worker in the US, likely crossing the border to escape one form of the abuse of state power only to confront another. Here Okón's moral relativism might be essential in clearing a space for the actors to perform their fantasies about the demise of repressive state power – allegorized by the death of the police. Yet this emerges not, as Okón intimates, out of the construction of a kind of open or free space, but precisely because it is not free – precisely because the framework he sets up is itself part of a interwoven complex of social and economic power that no amount of critical distance and self-reflexive irony can overcome. In the final codicil of the film, Devis tempers this optimism by suggesting to the actors that perhaps he and Okón were collaborators in the scene of a crime. In an exit interview with one of the actors, Onoris Montiel, he interrogates her about her experience on the set of *Shoot* with her back up against the white wall of the gallery as if in a police line up (see Figure 7).

JD: Did you find it Strange that Yoshua hired you without having any acting experience?

OM: No, because this . . . is the country of opportunities and if he doesn't give us the chance, well he wouldn't have any actors.

With ambiguous optimism, Montiel draws upon a rehearsed but ironic platitude of the American dream as a way of producing her own power and agency over the scene. There is something in her statement – and her performance – that eludes both exploitation and social critique, the moral ambiguity of Okón and the sober realism of Devis, the artist and social documentarian, and points to an altogether different space of value that evades the sights of both gunmen, a value that is unremarked, self-defined, and invisible to the circuits of exchange, but is no less real.



Figure 7. Onoris Montiel is interviewed about the experience of acting in *Shoot. Inter-state: Video on the Go*. 2004. Courtesy LA Freewaves, Los Angeles.

Note

1. Although purportedly I am referring to two independent works here, I maintain that there is a level of inextricability that requires the Devis/Okón collaboration be interpreted as single project.

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