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The Art of Changing the Art World: An Investigation into Contemporary Institutional Critique through Craft-Based, Political Art

Sophie Alexandra Cox

Statement
This volume is presented as a record of the work undertaken for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney.
This research was supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program (RTP) Scholarship.

This is to certify that the content of this thesis is my own work. This thesis has not been submitted for any other degree or purpose.

I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work, and that all assistance received in preparing this thesis and all sources have been acknowledged.

Generative AI was not used in the creation of this paper.

“I try all the time

In this institution

And I pray

Oh my God, do I pray

I pray every single day

For revolution”

From the song “What’s Up” by 4 Non-Blondes

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Table of Contents

List of Illustrations

Fig. 8. Anna Tsouhlarakis, *Native Guide*, 2023, Materials and dimensions variable, https://wexarts.org/exhibitions/anna-tsouhlarakis-native-guide-project-columbus

Fig. 9. Sophie Cox, *Succumb to the Sale*, 2024, acrylic paint on wood, 25 x19.5cm, photo by Ian Hobbs Media

Fig.10. Sophie Cox, *Post-Fordist Productivity,* 2023-25, wool and steel clothes rack, dimensions variable, photo by Ian Hobbs Media

Fig.11. Sophie Cox, detail of 'Change Rooms', 2023-25, fabric and embroidery thread on calico, PVC pipe frame, 1.1 (w) x 1.4 (h) x 1.1 (d), photo by Ian Hobbs Media

Fig.12. Sophie Cox, detail of *Capitalist Cushions*, 2024, found cushion cover and embroidery thread, two 50x 40cm, photo by Ian Hobbs Media

Fig.13 Sophie Cox, detail of *AGNSW cushion*, 2025, found velvet cushion cover, fabric, thread, wooden beads, 30x30cm, photo by Ian Hobbs Media

Fig.14 Sophie Cox, detail from Curated Photographs, 2023-25, printed Polaroid-style photographs in a paper album, 42 (w) x 29.7 (h) x 4 (d) cm, photo by Ian Hobbs Media

Fig. 15. Althouse and Geiger, *Federated Society of Boilermakers, Iron & Steel Shipbuilders of Australia - [Union Banner],* c.1913-1919. Canvas and silk banner, approximately 295cmx 295cm https://archival.sl.nsw.gov.au/Details/archive/110321639

Fig.17. Sophie Cox, detail from *Change Rooms*, 2023-25, fabric and embroidery thread on calico, 1.1 (w) x 1.4 (h) x 1.1 (d)m, photo by Ian Hobbs Media

Fig.18. Sophie Cox, Detail from Change Rooms, 2023-25, fabric and embroidery thread on calico, PVC pipe frame, 1.1 (w) x 1.4 (h) x 1.1 (d)m, photo by Ian Hobbs Media

Fig.19. Sophie Cox, detail from Change Rooms, 2023–25, fabric and embroidery thread on calico, PVC pipe frame, 1.1 (w) x 1.4 (h) x 1.1 (d)m, photo by Ian Hobbs Media

Fig.20. Sophie Cox, detail AGNSW cushion, 2025, found velvet cushion, fabric, thread and wooden beads, 30x30cm, photo by Ian Hobbs Media

Fig.21. Sophie Cox, detail of *Capitalist Cushions*, 2024, found cushion, embroidery thread, two 50 x 40cm, photo by Ian Hobbs media

Fig.22 Sophie Cox, *Post-Fordist Productivity*, 2023–25, wool, steel clothes rack dimensions variable, photo by Ian Hobbs media

Abstract

This research paper is the culmination of practice-led research into the structures of the art world. It results from an investigation into the institutions of the art world and their connection to the capitalist system in which we live. It asks if an art scene outside this consumerist system is possible through examples of artists and collectives trying to break out of capitalist control. In the art-making that forms the complementary exhibition, my work aims to emulate such art practices through recycled materials, political iconography and slow, crafts-based practices. Ultimately, the research findings were that such artists and collectives can provide hope for an art world that is less controlled by the systems of finance.

Introduction

The art world is a varied socioeconomic system. It ranges from the small child being brought art supplies from the local shopping centre to the elite jet-set flying from biennale to biennale.

In this paper, I look at what unites these seemingly disparate examples of the art world. From an economic perspective, one thing unites the art world: the capitalist system. Of course, the making of art is another uniting factor, and in this paper, I will explore both what it looks like to make art within this system and the artists trying to break out of it, to challenge it at the very least.

In this paper, artist and theorist, Gregory Sholette's expanded notion of the art world is referenced. As Sholette, writes in his book Dark Matter,

"Like its astronomical cousin, creative dark matter also makes up the bulk of the artistic activity produced in our post-industrial society. However, this type of dark matter is invisible primarily to those who lay claim to the management and interpretation of culture— the critics, art historians, collectors, dealers, museums, curators, and arts

administrators. It includes makeshift, amateur, informal, unofficial, autonomous, activist, non-institutional, self-organized practices— all work made and circulated in the shadows of the formal art world,' [1] This idea of the elite art world, with its museums and galleries, being supported by a more left-of-centre group of makers is one which I delve into in this paper through contemporary art examples.

The art made for this degree explores the systems about the world of art through the metaphor of a shop. The gallery is set up to emulate a retail store, with shelving, clothes racks and a counter. The economic systems that drive the art world are alluded to in this. The art is made counter-culturally, trying to move outside this capitalist system through slow, hand-made practices and found materials. Through this, I aim to reflect the two forces at play in political art: one where art is still firmly within the capitalist system and those who try to break free.

Chapter One investigates the institution's role in shaping the art scene and how artists have tried to question its' place through institutional critique. The consumerist bent of the art museum is a focus of this chapter. The interplay of politics and art is also introduced. The chapter foregrounds the idea of artists not taking the art world at face value and aiming to change it through their practices. It

[1] *Gregory, Sholette, Dark Matter : Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture. (London Pluto Press, 2011.): 1.*

reflects how this practice has been a feature of the art world for decades and primarily focuses on how this continues in the art world today.

Chapter Two looks further into politics and art by exploring how protest has become a feature of the art world through the making of politically charged art. This chapter introduces the idea that art can be an agent of change and connects it to artists trying to break out of the capitalist system and to create change in the world. It illustrates how this can happen by giving examples of artists who have been attempting, consciously or not, to allow for transformation in the world of art and more broadly.

Chapter Three is focused on the art I have made for my MFA. It raises questions about the place of capitalism in the art world through the exhibition for my MFA. This work, titled 'Succumb to the Sale,' presents consumerism in the art world through a series of works arranged as though they are stock in a shop. This chapter focuses on three banners made for the exhibition, inspired by controversial art institutions in Sydney. It also explores the accompanying artworks, introducing ideas of post-Fordism and how this can connect with knitting, as well as how photography has changed arts institutions and the place of poetry in change-making.

Ultimately, this paper explores the role of change in the art world within the context of how artists make art, and how institutions display it. It gives primacy to artists who work at the margins of the mainstream, highlighting their work

which is often depicted as ‘protest art’. My own practice is influenced by a critique of the capitalist system and as such may also be considered within this domain of protest art.

CHAPTER 1: The Art of the Institution

Introduction

My relationship with art institutions such as museums and galleries, is ambivalent. There is a sense of reverent respect for these spaces and a sense of unease about aspects of their cultural practices. I find myself being cynical about some of the people they choose to celebrate and those who are historically and contemporaneously excluded. Of course, arts institutions have improved since the 1960s when some artists first began to create work under the banner of institutional critique, by more of the work by artists of varied backgrounds being exhibited, but in some ways, past problems have morphed into new ones. Instead of a lack of representation, now a significant issue is the overall, seemingly inescapable, commercialisation of these spaces, with galleries and museums essentially becoming consumer spaces. In this chapter, I will focus on contemporary institutional critique through the lenses of consumerism, architecture, politics and New Museology to reflect on their roles in shaping art institutions today.

It is important to foreground, as the beginning of this paper that the past half-century has seen conceptual artists, those who make art around ideas, form two main camps in the art world. The first is those who look at the notion of art as a continually relevant concept, and those who explore the

socio- political notions of institutional critique. This paper will primarily focus upon the second group.

1. Contemporary Institutional Critique

The First Wave of institutional critique, which lasted from the 1960s to the 1970s, dealt with society's changing values and how these affected the art world. The Second Wave, which lasted from the 1980s to the 1990s, focused on the artist's world in general. [2]

The institutional critique we see today has changed considerably, as institutions have shifted and metamorphosed at the beginning of the new millennium. The contemporary wave of institutional critique differs from previous iterations in that it is not only critical of the institutions of the art world, but also of the social and political institutions of our society. As academic Veronica Tello writes in the article 'What is Contemporary about Institutional Critique?',

> 'If earlier waves of institutional critique catalysed immanent interrogations and critiques of artworld institutions – museums, galleries and the art market – this emergent mode of institutional critique is, as Raunig notes, transversal and extra-disciplinary. It

[2] The first wave of institutional critique began, not coincidentally, in the period of social upheaval that characterised the 1960s and 70s. Within a time of questioning of societal values, came an examination of the values of the art world. Artists such as Marcel Broodthaers, Mierle Laderman Ukeles and Robert Smithson, began to question the role of the institution in art practice and production. This was followed by the 1980s and 1990s, with artists such as Andrea Fraser, who began to question the role of the artist in the art world.

> critiques and concerns itself with things in excess of aesthetics, spilling out to heteronomous fields – migration, economics, policy, governance, environment and education.'[3]

Here, the notion of art in the 'expanded field' comes into play, art outside the traditional modes of painting and sculpture. Within the gallery the definitions of what could be displayed as art have expanded, but so has contemporary institutional critique come physically out of the institution to, 'construct new institutions and infrastructures.'[4] Related art expresses the somewhat utopian aim of creating change outside the art scene to 'extend its reach towards other social systems and structures and their deficiencies.'[5]

The next section of this chapter will investigate four aspects of this contemporary institutional critique: the role of consumerism, architecture, political action and the place of New Museology.

2. Consumerism and the Museum

One prominent contemporary critique of the institution addresses the connection between consumerism and the museum. Cultural institutions have in many senses become multinational businesses, where sales and numbers are held up as more important than less commodifiable, though core,

[3]Veronica Tello, "What is Contemporary about Institutional Critique? Or, Instituting the Contemporary: A Study of The Silent University." *Third text,* 34 no. 6, (2020): 636
[4] Tello, *What is Contemporary about Institutional Critique,* 636–637.
[5] Ibid.

outputs, such as viewer experience. As Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago write in their introduction to 'What are museums for?' in *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum,* for them it is 'often difficult to distinguish museum practices from entertainment, tourist, and heritage industries; department stores and shopping malls; the art market; and even artistic practices.'[6]

This connection between museums and department stores has a history as old as museums themselves, as the modern sense of the museum developed at the same time as the birth of department stores. Each has borrowed from the other using vitrines, display windows, and lighting effects. Initially, the connection between museums and department stores was related principally to the mode of display. 'The connection between museums and the department store stems from Walter Benjamin's influential and unfinished text 'The Arcade Project'which argued that the change from the small shop to the arcade coincided with the growth of capitalism and the love of consumption. The arcade became a precursor to the department store, which of course still exists but also is the precursor to the shopping centre.'

However, the connection is more evident in the relationship between product and consumer. Previously, museum goers were seen as the audience contemplating the objects before

[6] Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago, "General Introduction: What are Museums For?" in *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum,* edited by Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago, (England, Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2004), 2.

them. The dominant, but often unspoken view today is that visitors are 'customers', always ready to consume art, spend at the gift shop and purchase lunch at the café. This focus on the marketisation of the functions of the art institution can thus lead to primary focus shifting to the number of people one can get through the door and estimations of how much they will spend.

Not only have large institutions become more market-driven, but as Kirsi Eräranta, Johanna Moisander, and Visa Penttilä write, this has trickled down to the makers themselves, as 'artists compete and manage themselves in the market as brands.'[7] In the same way, 'art collectors increasingly consider their artworks to be investment assets, expecting rates of return similar to yields from stocks and other financial assets.'[8] This overwhelming consumerist bent has altered the entire art world.

Anarchist anthropologist David Graeber mentions the capitalist values[9] inherent in many areas of art[10] and writing, 'In political economy terms, of course, the art world has become largely an appendage to finance capital.'[11] Although the art world often considers itself and aligns itself with anti-capitalist and revolutionary ideals, more

[7] Ekstrom, *Museum Marketization*, 19.
[8] Kirsi Eräranta, Johanna Moisander, and Visa Penttilä in *Museum Marketization* edited by Karin. M. Ekstrom (London, Routledge, 2019), 20.
[9] To define capitalism, I turn to the wisdom of economist Richard Wolff, in his video series *Democracy at Work,* which defines capitalism as a method of controlling the making and issuing of products.

[11] David Graeber, *Revolutions in reverse*, (London, Minor Compositions, 2011),

often than not, as Graeber notes, it is made up of people who may purport to have these values but who in reality, essentially promote exactly the systems they claim to be against. This, says Graeber is because,

> 'at least since the '20s the art world has been in a kind of permanent institutionalised crisis. One could even say that what we call "the art world" has become the ongoing management of this crisis'[12]

For the past one hundred years, this crisis of the art world has often revolved around politics, be it politics in an overt sense or the more covert financial and socio-political structures of the art world.

i. The Place of Capitalism in the Art World

The effect of capitalism on our time is reflected in Carl Honoré's book *In Praise of Slow: How a Worldwide Movement is Challenging the Cult of Speed.* Honoré connects our time to the economy, writing, 'then there is the human cost of turbo-capitalism. These days, we exist to serve the economy, rather than the other way round'[13] He then revisits historical times, writing,

> 'In the nineteenth century, people resisted the pressure to accelerate in ways familiar to us today.

[12] Graeber, Revolutions, 93.
[13] Carl Honoré, Gregory Tillett, and Brendan French, *In praise of slow*, (London: Orion Books, 2004), 5.

> Unions pushed for more leisure time. Stressed-out urbanites sought refuge and restoration in the countryside. Painters and poets, writers and craftsmen looked for ways to preserve the aesthetics of slowness in the machine age.[14]

Honoré does not advocate an end to capitalism, writing, 'nor is the Slow Movement inimical to capitalism. On the contrary, it offers it a lifeline. In its current form, global capitalism forces us to manufacture faster, work faster, consume faster, and live faster, no matter what the cost. By treating people and the environment as valuable assets rather than disposable inputs, a Slow alternative could make the economy work for us, rather than vice versa.'[15]

To return directly to the art world, artist Grayson Perry, writes that,

> 'creative rebels often like to think they offer an alternative to 'The Man', the Capitalist System, like one of the Occupy protestors.[17] But of course, what they don't realise is that by being all inventive and creative they're actually playing into capitalism's hands, because the lifeblood of capitalism is new ideas.

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[14] Honoré, Tillett, and French *in praise of slow*, London: Orion Books, 2004), 14.
[15] Honoré, Tillett, and French *in praise of slow*, London: Orion Books, 2004), 278.
[17] Occupy Wall St, and the ensuing Occupying of other spaces, occurred in 2011. For further information on the intersection with Occupy and art see Yates McKee's book, *Strike Art.*

> Contemporary art is like a R&D department for capitalism.' [18]

To him, art and capitalism are symbiotic, each needing the other. I have tried to fight against this in my own art, to make art that tries to break free of this symbiosis. Perry's writing gave me pause, making me question whether I was subconsciously supporting the capitalist system.

Ultimately, for a contemporary artist such as myself, it is impossible to be entirely outside our capitalist system. However, it is possible to critique capitalism through contemporary art. Unlike the debate around whether institutional critique is possible from within the institution, capitalism can be effectively critiqued from within. In both cases, it is often the only way to critique it.

ii. Architecture and the Museum

To return to institutional critique, which in the 21st Century has provoked the creation of radically different artworks, in intention and effect from much of what had been seen previously. But what has happened to the museums and galleries themselves? Many theorists and critics have delved into this question. Firstly, art critic Jerry Saltz writes about the change to arts institutions in his 2022 book *Art Is Life.* Saltz decries that museums have become more

[18] Perry, Playing to the Gallery, 87.

about spectacle and superficial styles and less about substance or 'content' writing that by the 21st century,

> 'the big museums knew they needed to change, but not yet how. Many chose quantity over quality. Size mattered, not programming. Museums worldwide turned themselves into Modernist theme parks and 'architectural destinations'. [19]

This idea of museums as being more about appearances than what is within the museums themselves is one that I return to in Chapter Three with an analysis of the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

iii. Political Action and the Museum

In the following chapter I will go into more detail about so-called 'protest art' and the place it has in contemporary arts institutions. Here I will focus primarily on one aspect of this trend by considering the activities of the Indonesian arts collective, Taring Padi, as it illustrates well issues of critique that arise from so-called 'protest art.'

Taring Padi is an art collective from Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The collective formed in 1998 which was a time of protest and riots and the beginning of the Indonesian Reformation era. In 2022, the collective featured in Documenta 15, Kassel, a

[19] Jerry Saltz, *Art is Life: Icons and Iconoclasts, Visionaries and Vigilantes and Flashes of Hope in the Night* (New York Riverhead Books, 2022), 11.

major periodical German art exhibition, which focused that year on collectives and community-based art. The group's name translates to 'fangs of rice' referring to the staple food of Indonesians (and most of Southeast Asia). It also refers, according to the Documenta 15 Handbook, to how 'rice fangs, which can prick the careless fingers of harvesters, are constant reminders to sharpen one's mind.'[20] The group's 'three core principles – organise, educate and agitate'[21] are lived out through their workshops with communities and within the collective itself. They create posters, banners and *wayang kardus* (cardboard puppets) (see fig.1, which are used in street protests and performances.

Fig. 1. Taring Padi, *Tanah Merdeka*, 2023, cardboard, tape and paint, dimensions variable, https://www.innerwest.nsw.gov.au/live/living-arts/community-arts/current-projects/cultural-connections/cultural-connections-2023-24/bersama-refugee-art-project-taring-padi
photo credit: Maarten Nauw

[20] Documenta Fifteen Handbook. (Ostfildern, Hatje Cantz, 2022), 193.
[21] Ibid.

Taring Padi is notable for the manifesto–like statement that conditions the collective called the 'Five Evils of Culture.' These 'Five Evils' are a good example of contemporary institutional critique, a politically charged questioning of the conditions of art making and the current art world. The second 'Evil of Culture', which decries that 'governments/leaders, via departments that manage art and culture, that support the status quo and seek to shape Indonesian culture only to be sold for its exoticness in the interest of economy and power,' appears specific to Indonesia. Yet this is a factor evident in many countries, particularly where there is a strong First Nations art tradition. One could see Australian Indigenous art being substituted into this statement quite easily.

Other statements are more universal such as the fourth 'Evil of Culture', 'a system that destroys art workers' morality through working only for individual interests without thought of community interests, even exploiting the suffering of the people for the sake of individual profit.'[22] This 'evil' is directly counteracted by Taring Padi, as they work collectively and with the community. It is demonstrated by how their political action is executed in a way that is not 'exploiting the suffering of the people.' [23]

Political art, as it is routinely framed, can frequently result in creating more issues than it solves by simply

[22] Taring Padi. "About Taring Padi." https://www.taringpadi.com/?lang=en. Accessed 10 November 2023.
[23] Taring Padi. "About Taring Padi."

illustrating afflictions experienced around the world. This can arguably be seen in the art of Ai Weiwei, who has focused much of his art on asylum seeker experience. In one particular work I regard as especially tone-deaf, Weiwei substituted himself for the in/famous photographic image of a young boy washed up and drowned on a Mediterranean beach, (see fig. 2), an innocent who never even made the status of refugee. Instead of any political action, any real solidarity with the asylum seeker people, Weiwei effectively created a self-absorbed and, I would argue, immoral artwork. Taring Padi, by contrast, are deeply involved in the communities they make art about and use their art collectively for direct public protest.

Fig. 2. Ai Weiwei, India Art Fair Project, 2016, photograph of a performance work.
https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13527258.2024.2315240#d1e668
photo credit: Rohit Chawla

This connects to the most explicit institutionally critical aspect evident in the 'Five Evils of Culture,' namely,

'Institutes of culture that enable institutions as legitimators of artists and artwork and determine the direction of development in art.' Taring Padi also pushes back against this by creating art outside the common institutions of art like museums and galleries. However, Gregory Sholette emphasised in his book *Dark Matter* that it is somewhat impossible to escape the institution altogether. Taring Padi's involvement in Documenta 15 and in a recent show I visited titled Bersama, a collaboration between Taring Padi and the Refugee Art Project at Chrissie Cotter Gallery in Sydney's Inner West, are cases in point. However, Taring Padi always manages to make sure that this is done in a way that does not allow the institution to overtake their autonomy as a collective.

iv. New Museology

I will close this chapter with a consideration of the term New Museology and how this impacts the museum today. According to long-time museologist Nick Merriman, New Museology dates to 1989. He notes, '1989 does usefully mark the beginning of a paradigm shift in museology, from a practical vocational discipline to a thoroughly academic, critical discipline.'[24]

Andrea Witcomb writes in the book *Re-imagining the Museum: Beyond the Mausoleum,* 'New Museologists question a

[24] Nick Merriman, "30 Years after the New Museology: What's Changed?" 2020, *Zeszyty naukowe Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego. Prace etnograficzne* 48, no. 2, (2020), 174.

museology that focuses on museum processes and instead focus on the political dimensions of museum work'[25] adding that, 'quite often, this political dimension is encapsulated in a call for a greater focus on the relationship between museums and communities.'[26] According to Merriman, throughout the past thirty-odd years since New Museology began to call museum practices into question, much has changed.

Merriman highlights one particular area that is also the focus of my own institutional critique. This is that 'one of the great remaining challenges is how to make museums actually properly inclusive; how to bring about mass participation from wider audiences.'[27] My own investigation of institutional critique came about through a conversation into this issue. I was at an opening night for a community art exhibition. My art was part of the exhibition and a friend of mine had been asked to give the welcome speech. Before she spoke the friend told me, somewhat nervously, that this was the first time she had felt comfortable in an art space and that usually she did not visit galleries or museums, feeling that she did not belong there. This was a middle-aged, educated, white woman generally regarded statistically as the main audience for many of our galleries and museums.

The fact that museums are often seen as sites for the wealthy and the educated is not a new concept. In 1857 the

[25] Andrea Witcomb_*Re-imagining the Museum: Beyond the Mausoleum*, (New York, Routledge, 2003), 79.
[26] Witcomb, Re-imagining the Museum, 79.
[27] Witcomb, Re-imagining the Museum, 176.

Art Treasures Exhibition opened in Manchester, UK, the writer, Charles Dickens, wrote a review, noting that there was a diversity of visitors but that he 'believed that, on balance, the exhibition had failed to capture the interest and imagination of working-class visitors who lacked the knowledge to decipher and appreciate any but the most naturalistic works of art.'[28]

This view was upheld by other reviews of the exhibition such as the 'Art Journal' report that related that another group of factory workers had spent a couple of hours wandering around the *Art Treasures* palace 'with puzzled anxiety. Then, eagerly and with a mixture of apprehension and weariness, they inquire, 'when the exhibition would begin.''[29]

I refer to these examples from two hundred years ago, because the underlying elitism they question is unfortunately still a determining feature of museums today.

In connection to New Museology, Merriman speaks of how this approach has led to museums being more aware of their ability to enact change. I quote him at length:

> 'Now, my next problem is one that I think is not confronted squarely enough, which is one of our sense of proportion. In our conferences and in our writings, museologists and museum workers can have a tendency

[28] Helen Rees Leahy ""Walking for Pleasure'? Bodies of display at the Manchester Art-Treasures Exhibition in 1857" in *Spectacle and Display* edited by Deborah Cherry and Fintan Cullen, (United Kingdom: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 75.
[29]Rees Leahy, "Walking for Pleasure", 83.

> to overclaim the impact of our work, convincing ourselves that what we are doing is going to save the world. There are of course some marvellous programmes that engage and empower hard to reach audiences like recent refugees or differently abled people, and they undoubtedly make a real difference to participants' lives. However, if we are honest with ourselves, the participants in these projects are actually a tiny proportion of the museum's overall audience. The vast majority of our visitors come not to have their lives changed but as part of an enjoyable outing with family and friends within a context of learning something new and perhaps being inspired.'[30]

This sense of the possibility of 'changing the world' through exhibiting and museum practices is what initially propelled my master's study. I used to be an outright advocate for art's ability to change the world, to improve situtations and create politcal change. Now, after much more reading and consideration, I am more inclined to question the transparency of this capacity, to see the way in which it is true, but also the ways in which this idea can be exploited. This will be my focus for Chapter Two, which focuses on protest art and how it can enact change and how it is simultaneously, inevitably limited in its effect.

[30] Merriman, "30 years after New Museology," 182, 183

Conclusion

This chapter has briefly charted the role of institutional critique in the art world. The following chapter will build on this focus by investigating the impact of protest art's more in-depth changes to the contemporary artistic landscape. While this chapter has explicitly focused on the history of institutional critique and how it plays out in contemporary arts institutions, it has also reflected on the vital role of institutional critique in modern modes of thought surrounding art and exhibition.

Through this chapter, I have shown how those within it can critique the art scene as well as what I believe needs to be critiqued in the contemporary realm. By citing examples such as how the art world has become more consumer-based while more artists are aiming to work outside these parameters, I hope to have shown how the art world can begin, and has already begun, to change.

Crucially, this chapter has focused on capitalism, its intersection with art world systems, and its critique through practices in art and the wider world. I have tried to give a necessarily concise sense of the capitalist system's intimate relationship with art and other socio-political systems.

Finally, this chapter has foregrounded the issues that will be further explored in the rest of this paper, namely the systems that uphold the art world and what it means to be an artist who critiques such systems through so-called

‘protest art’ or other overtly or covertly ‘political’ methods.

CHAPTER 2: The Art of Protest

Introduction

This chapter charts the historical and contemporary issues surrounding art and traces how we have come to the current moment where protest art is a significant part of the art world. This chapter also questions the role of protest art in the contemporary era through the example of other artists' work and the theoretical writing underpinning the protest art movement. Beginning with a brief history of protest, the chapter then moves to the history of the art that emerged from the protest movement. This is followed by a discussion as to whether art can create change and the role of propaganda in art. The chapter concludes with an investigation into contemporary protest art through the work of Raquel Ormella and other contemporary artists who employ signs and systems from protest, such as text and banners.

1. Protest

In her book *A Brief History of Protest Art,* Aindrea Emelife writes, 'We are living in the age of protest.'[31] Written in 2022, Emelife's words speak to the profoundly broken nature of our world and the need for change. One could argue that this 'age of protest' began as the Industrial Revolution drew to a close in Britain in 1830.[32]

[31] Aindrea Emelife, *A Brief History of Protest Art* (London: Tate Publishing 2022), 7.

[32] The notion of modern activism coming from this period is backed up by contemporary writers on the topic. As Justin Healy writes in his book on

Since then, protest has been a feature of society, from the Suffragette protests around the turn of the 20th century to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, followed closely by anti-Vietnam War demonstrations. In recent times, there have been Iraq War protests, the Arab Spring, Greek anti-austerity protests, and contemporary pro-Palestinian rallies.

i. Protest Art and the Institution

The institution has always held a tenuous yet important place regarding protest art. In 1972, during Second Wave Feminism, Austrian artist Valie Export wrote a poetic and furious manifesto on the importance of women's art. The manifesto begins; 'THE POSITION OF ART IN THE WOMEN'S LIBERATION MOVEMENT IS THE POSITION OF WOMAN IN THE ART'S MOVEMENT. THE HISTORY OF WOMAN IS THE HISTORY OF MAN.'[33] From this, Export champions art's role in changing women's position in society; 'the arts can be understood as a medium of our self-definition adding new values to the arts. These values, transmitted via the cultural sign-process, will alter

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contemporary activism, 'the roots of this kind [protests, demonstrations] lie in the late 18th and early 19th centuries with the emergence of the anti-slavery movement, the temperance movement, and movements for working class rights, the first modern social movements'. Justin Healy, *Activism and Protest* (New South Wales: Spinney Press. 2020), 3.) This is seconded by the academics Sarah Maddison and Sean Scalmer, who write of the term 'social movement' issuing from the late 19th Century mostly focused on labour and socialism. (Maddison Sarah and Sean Scalmer, *Activist Wisdom: Practical Knowledge and Creative Tension in Social Movements* (Sydney: UNSW Press. 2006), 47.)

[33] Valie Export, *Women's Art – A Manifesto,* from https://391.org/manifestos/1972-womens-art-a-manifesto-valie-export/, 1972.

reality towards an accommodation of female needs.'[34]This question, 'Can art change the world?' becomes the focus of the next section of my writing.

ii. Art Changing the World

The notion of art changing the world has been a focus for many contemporary artists and theorists. Lieven de Cauter, a contemporary Belgian philosopher and art historian, puts a caveat on art's ability to enact change, writing,

> 'Only when the artist or academic becomes a public intellectual and takes real action (via petitions, manifestations, organisations), speaks out in the newspapers against the state of affairs or protest and mobilises does their work (in the sphere of economics), their study or artistic practice (in the cultural sphere) become politics: action. The rest is self-delusion.'[35]

Inherent in this quote is the notion that an artist's art itself is not enough, that art must work with political action and activism systems to have any hope of creating concrete change. De Cauter challenges artists to remove themselves from the institutions that bind them and take art to public spaces, writing, 'the locus of subversive art is not the gallery or the museum but the space where decisions are made or negotiated. It can be the street, the (mass) media, or

[34] Export, Women's Art- A Manifesto, https://391.org/manifestos/1972-womens-art-a-manifesto-valie-export/
[35] Lieven De Cauter, Ruben De Roo, and Karel Vanhaesebrouck, *Art and Activism in the Age of Globalisation (*Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 2011),14.

religious spaces. It takes a cultural position in the first place, subverting the symbolic or real power where and when it is relevant to do so.'[36] To De Cauter, this cannot happen within the bounds of a gallery: the gallery holds little power to protest through art, as 'subversive art', or to enact identifiable change.

This raises the question what change we seek in art. Is it pursuing change to government policy in line with political protests? Is it changing relationships through community building? Is it a revolution in how our world is structured? Or is it something far less easily measured, a seemingly simple change to how the viewer sees our world, and through that, an effort to construct a world built on respect and mutual understanding?

One way to change the art world, and the world at large, would be to adopt a socialist perspective, which as The Socialist Party of Great Britain noted in 2004, 'in its original sense has never been tried' [37]This kind of change, is one that challenges the capitalist nature of our current society and the wider art world.

Academic John Molyneux, in his book, *The Dialectics of Art,* explores art's history and place through a Marxist lens. His view is that the relationship between politics and art is

[36] Cauter, De Roo and Vanhaesebrouck., *Art and Activism,* 312.
[37] The Socialist Party of Great Britain, *Socialism or your money back: articles from the Socialist Standard 1904–2004.* (United Kingdom The Socialist Party of Great Britain, 204), 11.

secondary to its social function, writing that, 'it is not really its directly political role that makes art important. Rather, what matters most is the ability of art to articulate the social consciousness of an age in a way that aids the development of the human personality and our collective awareness of our natural and social environment.'[38] Thus, for Molyneaux, art's reflection of the world allows it to affect us. Art can be an agent of change by making us aware and holding up a mirror to the world.

Molyneux goes on to later state what he believes 'good' art is, writing, 'works of art are good or great, insofar as and to the degree that they give powerful and insightful expression to social relation and, especially, to new and changing social relations[39] The term 'social relations' is broad, but it conveys the complex system of the art world and how one connects with art.

To illustrate this point, I take one artwork from the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) permanent collection that I believe is a 'good' artwork. This is Ken Unsworth's Suspended Stone Circle II (1974–77, 1988). (see Fig. 3) The work is a series of fifteen-kilogram river stones held by wires. The work has long captivated me, ever since as a small child I slid underneath it to view the rocks. The 'social relations' of this work are not overt. And yet, in watching how people interact with this work, I realised they are there.

[38]John Molyneux, *The Dialectics of Art*. (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2020), 1
[39] Molyneux, The Dialectics of Art, 71.

People are captivated by how the work is realised, the theatre of it, and if they are anything like I am, whenever they see shafts of light, they are reminded of this work. As the AGNSW website states, 'Unsworth is able to make you cry and laugh at the same time. He has lived and suffered as much as most of us so that his art is able to reflect our own deepest fears, joys and secrets. Art seldom delivers magic anymore, but Unsworth nearly always does.'[40] This sense of art bringing people together is part of what makes Unsworth's work great. It connects us to nature, to our world, to each other.

[40] The Art Gallery of New South Wales, "Suspended Stone Circle II" https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/356.1988.a-yyyy/#about, 2024.

Fig. 3, Ken Unsworth, Suspended Stone Circle II, 1974–1977, 1988, 103 river stones, wire, 4 metre diameter, https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/356.1988.a-yyyy/.

Vid Simoniti, in his book *Artists Remake the World: A Contemporary Art Manifesto,* suggests art's power lies in its aesthetics, as he writes about, 'what distinguishes mere political signalling from genuine attempts at worldmaking. One element of that difference, I would suggest, is aesthetic experience.'[41] It is the aesthetic that is often secondary or not found in political art. Simoniti says this makes the work no different from other more overtly activist practices. Therefore, the artist would be better off to 'just become a social worker, a human rights lawyer or a volunteer…just go on protests, organise, build a movement'[42] However, when art returns to the aesthetic, it can have power, according to Simoniti, as it allows the audience to be drawn in and captivated by the work. As Simoniti writes further,

> 'What is special about art is that it forms an exceptional space in which our rationalistic, impact-driven and value-abiding ideals of politics can partially break down. In art, we suddenly enter into fiction, whimsy, inconclusiveness, uselessness, humour, self-contradiction, darkness. And so, it is by focusing on such departures from the ordinary that we can make our difficult question more manageable. 'What can art contribute to politics?' is not a question we can answer

[41] Vid Simoniti, *Artists Remake the World: A Contemporary Art Manifesto*. (Great Britain: Yale University Press, 2023),
[42] Simoniti, *Artists Remake the World*, 71.

with a single sentence. We must, instead, capture whatever is distinct about art's otherworldly thinking in specific cases, and then ask what does that weird departure do, what can it allow us to think, that mainstream discourse is not yet able to articulate.'[43]

iii. Propaganda and Protest

It is also important to question our bias about notions of change. What the artist believes is positive change is unlikely to be universally accepted. In Diego Rivera's 1932 article 'The Revolutionary Spirit in Modern Life', the history of propaganda in art is explained in one sentence: 'every artist who has been worth anything in art has been such a propagandist.'[44] Contemporary artist and theorist Jonas Staal explores this notion in his book, *Propaganda Art in the 21st Century*, where he writes that, 'much of modern and contemporary art can be analysed in the context of propaganda art.'[45] Building on the words of Upton Sinclair, who wrote in his 1925 book *Mammonart* 'All art is propaganda.'[46] This idea of propaganda as an intrinsic part of art connects to art, and its ability to enact change, a not-so-subtle reminder of artistic and personal bias, and the notion that one artist's concept of positive change is not universal. However, Staal comes at it from another angle, saying instead that,

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[43] Simoniti, *Artists Remake the World*, 9.
[44] Diego Rivera, "The Revolutionary Spirit in Modern Art." The Modern Quarterly 6, no. 3 (1932):57.
[45] Jonas Staal, *Propaganda Art in the 21st Century.* (Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2019), 6.
[46] Staal, Propaganda Art, 7.

> ‘Today, we define art as that which is ambiguous, that which asks questions and holds up mirrors to the world. Art can challenge everything and break all taboos, except one: it cannot take an actual political position in the world with the aim of changing it. In that case, we declare the artwork dogmatic, one-dimensional, and pamphletic. We deem it propaganda. By this reasoning, propaganda is all that art is not. The artist is ordered to “shut up and be beautiful,” to question the world, but to leave world-- making to unknown others. Of course, this doctrine of artistic neutrality is itself a form of propaganda.’[47]

2. Contemporary Protest Art

In 2024, I visited London to see the exhibition ‘Unravel: The Power and Politics of Textiles in Art’ at the Barbican Centre. Initially, the exhibition interested me in how it displayed artworks from artists I had come to know and love: Tracey Emin, Faith Ringold. However, as I moved through the space, I found the exhibition itself to be housing a political statement within it. This was because many artworks had been removed by the artists from the show due to the artists disagreeing with the Barbican Centre’s decision to cancel a talk at their venue by Pankaj Mishra about Palestine through the London Review of Books. Thus, contemporary protest art

[47] Staal, Propaganda Art, 187.

is not just about the art itself, but also can be exercised through the artists' actions.

i. Boycotts in Art

Joanna Warsza, an art and architectural curator, has edited a volume titled *I Can't Work Like This: A Reader on Recent Boycotts and Contemporary Art,* which asks questions about the efficacy of boycotts in the arts. Defining boycotts as 'a political device for calling institutions, corporations, and the state to account'[48], she is sceptical about the impact of artists who boycott group exhibitions such as the Barbican exhibition in 2024. However, she is more hopeful about the effects of artists refusing to hold survey exhibitions, writing that they 'represent the first serious challenge to the rise of the curator and the corporate sponsor that have shaped the neoliberal art institution.'[49] This was seen in Nan Goldin and her group P.A.I.N's (Prescription Addiction Intervention Now) fight against the Sackler Family and Purdue Pharma's prescription drug industry, where the turning point in the fight was Goldin refusing a retrospective at the National Portrait Gallery in London.

ii. Recent Protest

There is the boycott, but there is also the protest within and outside the gallery. At first glance, Nicolas Bourriaud's

[48] Joanna Warsza in *I Can't Work Like This: A Reader On Recent Boycotts and Contemporary Art, edited by Joanna Warsza, (Berlin, Sternberg Press, 2017), 15.*
[49] Warsza in *I Can't Work Like This*, 19.

seminal writing *Relational Aesthetics* may not seem to have much to say on contemporary protest. However, this book contains commentary on collectivist notions and the material objects that make up protests. Bourriaud writes, 'flags, logos, icons, signs, all produce empathy and sharing, and all generate bond.'[50] Of course, all of these objects, these 'flags, logos, icons, signs,' are also tools of propaganda and nationalism. But for now, I will unpack the community created by such objects.

As I write this thesis, the events are unfolding in the invasion of Palestine by Israeli forces. This essay cannot and will not delve into the situation behind this invasion, but I mention it here because of the flag. At protests and rallies for both Palestine and Israel, the flag represents communality; it is the connector. The flags themselves became almost art objects in these events, waving slowly over crowds of protestors. The simple yet powerful images of hundreds of flags collected in various parts of the world as people united were able and continue to be able to 'produce empathy and sharing.'[51]

iii. For Example: Raquel Ormella

One artist who has appropriated the material objects found in protests is Raquel Ormella. The banner and the protest

[50] Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, (France, Les presses du reel, 2002, 15.
[51] Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 15

sign are transformed in Ormella's art to create commentary on Australian society.

One such piece of Ormella's work is the banner titled, *I'm worried I'm not political enough* (1999–2009) (see fig. 4). The words are taken from an environmental activist, named Julie referenced in the Art Gallery of New South Wales website as having 'lived for 2 years in a 300-year-old redwood tree to stop it from being chopped down'[52]. Through this uncertain, questioning statement, the viewer is led to consider their stance within the political realm.

[52] The Art Gallery of NSW, 'Raquel Ormella', https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/352.2015.a-c/#about, 2024.

Fig. 4. Raquel Ormella, *I'm worried I'm not political enough,* 1999–2009, banner, sewn wool and felt, 128.0 x 202.0cm
https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/352.2015.a–c/

Ormella has also appropriated the Australian flag specifically in a series titled *Poetic Possibility* (2012–13) (see fig. 5). In these, she has burned or cut away sections of the flag to symbolically represent the changes she believes are required in Australian society.

Fig. 5. Raquel Ormella, *New Constellation #1* from the series *Poetic Possibility*, 2013, nylon and brass, 245.5 x 360cm, https://www.mca.com.au/collection/artworks/2019.7/

iv. Protest Art and Text

The use of text in my artworks is inspired by protest banners. Therefore, this chapter section will explore the nexus between political art and text.

The first widespread use of text in visual art occurred in the Cubist Movement in the early Twentieth Century. Whilst I acknowledge this history and that of the Pop Art Movement of the middle of last century, my focus on text in art will centre on its contemporary usage. In particular, my focus is on socially engaged artists and collectives who use text.

Text is used for a variety of reasons in visual art. One art movement in which it is used in an activist sense is 'The Craftivist Collective' (see fig.6). Mostly made up of members from Britain, the collective aims, according to their founder Sarah Corbett, to 'use craft (mostly hand-embroidery and paper craft) as a powerful tool to create slow, quiet, thoughtful and compassionate activism as a catalyst for long term positive change in our world and ourselves. We believe craft, if done wisely, can be a powerful, change-making instrument to add to the toolbox of activism.' [53] Text here is used like a slogan on a protest sign to grab attention and to proclaim a message. However, unlike a hurriedly scrawled cardboard sign, the work is methodically stitched, thereby encouraging the viewer to consider the text more carefully.

[53] Sarah, Corbett, "Proudly presenting: A Craftivist's Manifesto in seven languages so far…." from https://craftivist-collective.com/blog/2018/10/presenting-our-a-craftivists-manifesto/ 2023.

Fig. 6. Sarah Corbett, *Installation view of Craftivist Collective artwork,* 2019, fabric and embroidery thread, 10cm x 15cm, https://makingstitchespodcast.com/2021/05/14/episode-25-the-art-of-gentle-protest-with-sarah-corbett-from-the-craftivist-collective, photo by Jonathan Cherry

Similarly, in North America, 'The Tiny Pricks Project' (see fig.7), started in protest against the Trump Administration, calls on people around the world to sew short phrases from the mouths of political figures. In the process of sewing and observing these short, sharp pieces of text, politics is intimately considered. The juxtaposition of the sweet, somewhat kitsch embroidery, with the powerful and often angry statements, creates work that leaves the viewer to ponder and consider the words in a new light.

Fig. 7. Diana Weymar, Installation view of Tiny Pricks Project Exhibition, 2020, dimensions variable, https://www.tinypricksproject.com/the-project/

Another artist who employs text in her artmaking is Anna Tsouhlarakis. A Native American artist, Tsouhlarakis uses the simple, bold text most often employed in advertising to create billboards and online banners. In her *Native Guide Project* (2023) (see fig. 8) artworks were placed in such sites as beside highways and on the sections of websites where advertising is found, exploiting the exposure that such sites have in our capitalist world. Instead of advertising slogans, Tsouhlarakis uses humorous, sarcastic statements about the place of Native Americans in contemporary North American society. Words in attention-grabbing capital letters, spell phrases like, "I LIKE HOW YOU SEE NATIVE AMERICANS AS YOUR

INTELLECTUAL EQUAL." Left without context in these spaces most would expect to find advertising, Tsouhlarakis questions the treatment of First Nations people in the United States.

Fig. 8. Anna Tsouhlarakis, *Native Guide*, 2023, Materials and dimensions variable, https://wexarts.org/exhibitions/anna-tsouhlarakis-native-guide-project-columbus

Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has explored the some of protest's historiographical and contemporary role in art history. By investigating how protest has featured in art and continues to do so, the question was raised about whether change can be achieved through art. Propaganda and its correlation with such art were also discussed.

Through a series of examples of art that aims to create change in the viewer and the broader socio-political context in which they exist, this chapter has shown how artists have moved outside of the traditional art world models in which to do so, namely working collectively, using techniques and text borrowed from protest, and creating art that is less about sales and more about impact.

The artists' discussed in this chapter have influenced my artwork, which accompanies this paper. The following chapter will explore this further.

CHAPTER 3: The Art of Sophie Cox

Introduction

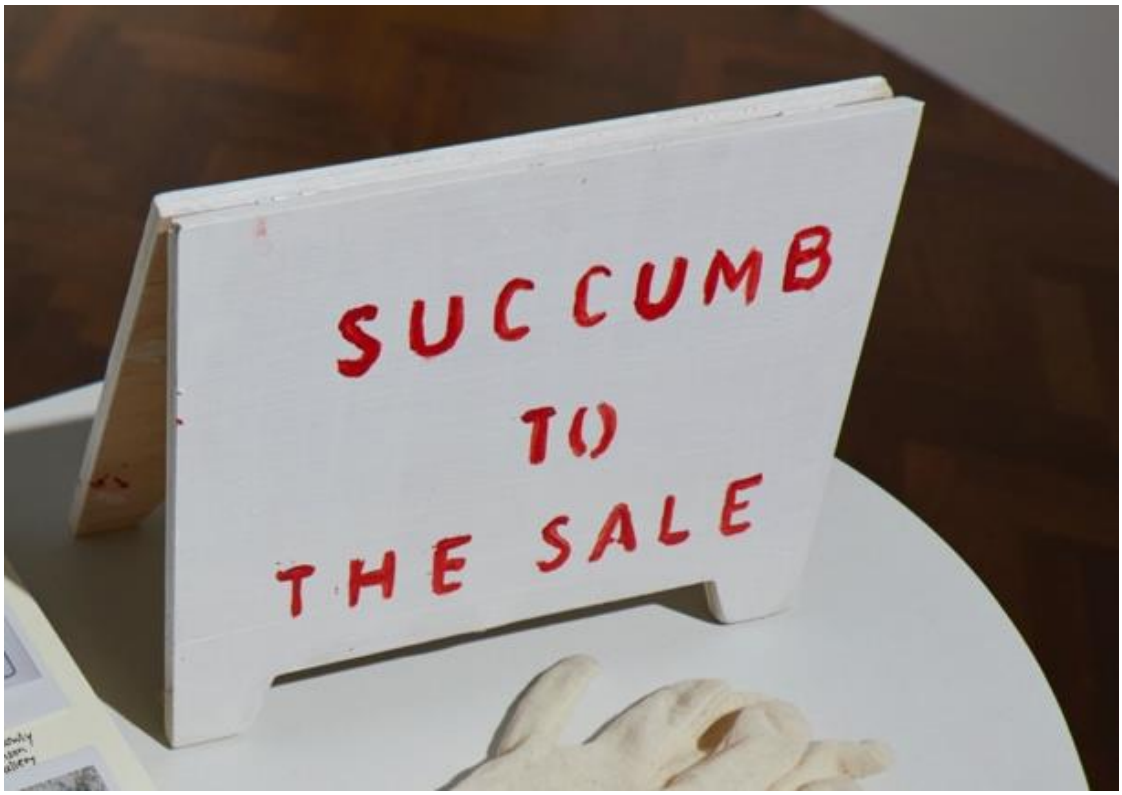
This chapter primarily focuses on the artworks produced for my MFA. It begins with describing the artworks in the exhibition 'Succumb to the Sale.' The following section begins with a historical background of the banners that form the exhibition's centrepiece. This is followed by exploring the subject matter of the banners, namely 'controversial' art spaces in Sydney, Australia. The chapter then discusses the cushions created as part of my MFA exhibition. This section looks at the use of maps in art and the negotiation of art spaces. The chapter explores the scarf created as part of my MFA exhibition, focusing on post-Fordism and notions of potlach and the gift economy. The chapter finishes with an exploration of my photographic album, which looks at the place of documentation in art.

1. 'Succumb to the Sale'

Émile Zola, in his 1883 novel *Au Bonheur des Dames (The Ladies' Delight),* writes of the department store as a synecdoche for the capitalist system. As Zola writes, 'woman was what the shops were fighting over when they competed, it was woman whom they ensnared with the constant trap of their bargains, after stunning her with their displays. They had aroused new desires in her flesh, they were a huge

temptation to which she must fatally succumb.' [54] This idea of succumbing to the tempting wiles of capitalism is one that still exists today.

'Succumb to the Sale' is an installation of four parts that combine to resemble a shop. Upon entering the exhibition, the viewer is greeted by a sign with the words 'Succumb to the Sale' written on it (see. Fig.9) I noticed these four words in a department store in London in the United Kingdom, and they seemed a perfect encapsulation of the capitalist system and an indicator of how this has infiltrated the art market. On the back of the sign is an overheard phrase from White Rabbit Gallery: 'I'm not an art person.'



[54] Émile Zola, *Au Bonheur Des Dames (the Ladies' Delight),* London Penguin, 1883, 75

Fig.9 Sophie Cox, *Succumb to the Sale*, 2024, acrylic paint on wood, 25 x19.5cm, photo by Ian Hobbs Media

I include this because this sentiment was influential in my research. Much of my interest in the art institution comes from a curiosity about who feels comfortable in these spaces and who considers themselves part of the art world. The sign's design resembles the kind of signs found throughout shopping centres and department stores. They are the first signifiers of the commercial. Within the exhibition, further symbols of the commercial world are displayed. The first consists of a clothes rack including a scarf draped over coat hangers (see fig.10). The meaning of this scarf will be explored later in this chapter, but here, I note its display method. The clothes rack becomes a shorthand for the consumerist landscape, a nod to the ubiquitous mass textile industry I am rallying against in producing my work.

Fig.10. Sophie Cox, *Post-Fordist Productivity,* 2023-25, wool and steel clothes rack, dimensions variable.
photo credit: Ian Hobbs Media

With this in mind, each artwork includes recycled or found materials. Everything is second-hand. Much of the fabric of the banners was sourced from my old clothing. This is a deliberate choice, a political statement. In Barbara Burman's book *The Point of the Needle: Why Sewing Matters,* the author details the impact of the textile industry on our environment, writing, 'the manufacturing of textiles and

clothing constitutes one of the world's largest industries with the fourth heaviest environmental impact.'[55]

There is also a social impact aimed at reducing the fabric we consume, particularly clothing. Burman further notes, 'it is estimated that between 60 and 75 million people are employed internationally sewing our clothes, mostly females, forming one of the world's biggest, but least protected labour forces.'[56]

Matthew Crawford, in his book *The Case for Working with Your Hands Or Why Office Work is Bad for Us and Fixing Things Feels Good,* connects this impulse to make with the structures of capitalism, as he writes, 'We want to feel that our world is intelligible, so we can be responsible for it. This seems to require that the provenance of our things be brought closer to home. Many people are trying to recover a field of vision that is basically human in scale and extricate themselves from dependence on the obscure forces of a global economy.' [57] This desire for understanding and tactility in a world that can often feel out of our control and consumer-driven is something that I relate to and forms part of my impetus for creating the artwork in my MFA.

[55] Barbara Burman, *The Point of the Needle: Why Sewing Matters* (Great Britain, Reaktion Books Ltd, 2023), 7.
[56] Burman, *The Point of the Needle*, 7.
[57] Matthew Crawford, *The Case for Working with Your Hands or Why Office Work is Bad for Us and Fixing Things Feels Good*, (United Kingdom, Viking, 2010), 13.

The next aspect of 'Succumb to the Sale' is the change rooms (see fig.11), which are formed from banners I have sewn. The subject matter of these banners is detailed in the following section of this chapter, but it is the symbolism of the change rooms about the use of these banners that I will write about here. Turning these banners into change rooms hinges on the word 'change.' The banners themselves are about making changes in art institutions. These rooms, therefore, are 'change' rooms in both senses of the word.

Fig.11. Sophie Cox, detail of 'Change Rooms', 2023–25, fabric and embroidery thread on calico, PVC pipe frame, 1.1 (w) x 1.4 (h) x 1.1 (d), photo credit: Ian Hobbs Media

Sitting on a shelf beside the change rooms are a series of cushions. (see fig.12 and fig.13). These are lined up to resemble how they would be displayed in a shop. These suggest the growing commercialisation of the art world and the blurred boundaries – particularly about craft–based art – between the commercial and the artistic.

Fig.12. Sophie Cox, detail of *Capitalist Cushions*, 2024, found cushion cover and embroidery thread, two 50x 40cm.
photo credit: Ian Hobbs Media

Fig.13 Sophie Cox, detail of *AGNSW cushion*, 2025, found velvet cushion cover, fabric, thread, wooden beads, 30x30cm.
photo credit: Ian Hobbs Media

At the 'counter' of the 'shop' is a book (see Fig.14). Within the book is a series of photographs that visually echo the aesthetic of a stocktake, but these photographs are not of the 'stock' of the shop, but alternatively of artworks that have inspired my MFA. This book's meaning is extrapolated further in this chapter, but I note that this point changes the shop. Therefore, a connection is made with the broader art scene and how this is where the financial focus must be; this small 'shop' is a miniature simulacrum for a larger existing world.

Fig.14 Sophie Cox, detail from Curated Photographs, 2023–25, printed Polaroid–style photographs in a paper album, 42 (w) x 29.7 (h) x 4 (d) cm. photo credit: Ian Hobbs Media

2. A Word on Slow Stitching

In creating the artworks in 'Succumb to the Sale', I used slow practices: hand sewing, knitting, and beadwork. It was not until halfway through my candidature that I stumbled upon Slow Stitching and realised that what I was doing was part of a broader movement. The Slow Movement, with its roots in Italy in the 1980s, began with food production, returning to the local and taking time to prepare and source food from the local area. In the subsequent forty years, these notions of locality, time on task, and balanced living have spread to other areas of life. One of these is stitching, where my

interest in the movement came in. The Slow Cloth Movement is based around the return to the handmade, the handsewn. The aim is for work to be made using slower processes and local, more environmentally–sound materials.

3. Trade Union Banners: A History

Banners have long been symbols of power, from their earliest days in Biblical battles to their place in modern–day protests. This section will explore banners' role in art, specifically trade union banners. Trade union banners are arguably first and foremost aesthetic objects (see Fig. 15). Their arresting beauty and craftsmanship are as intense as their political purpose. This is partly because, in Australia, artists often make them. Emerging painters would be paid to depict union messages in highly detailed paintings, which would be sewn into banners. In the 19th Century, when this tradition began in Australia, these banners were made of silk or calico. By the 20th Century, the material of choice was canvas. On this fabric would be images connected to the union itself, depictions of workers, coats of arms and female figures as allegories of the Muses, now associated with union values and activity.

The aesthetic appeal of these objects may have been what first drew me to study them. However, their ideal of collectivism keeps me engaged with these pieces. Groups often made banners of artists; one working to paint, the second to sew, the third to embroider. This collective notion of artistic production is influential in my work. To work collaboratively is to question the value of single

authorship, to ponder the idea of idealistic individuality and the ideal of individualism. These banners are a testament to these collective values in terms of how they were made and used.

Fig. 15. Althouse and Geiger, *Federated Society of Boilermakers, Iron & Steel Shipbuilders of Australia – [Union Banner],* c.1913–1919. Canvas and silk banner, approximately 295cmx 295cm
https://archival.sl.nsw.gov.au/Details/archive/110321639

In 2024, I visited the City of Manchester, England, and the collection of banners at the People's History Museum. Beginning with the oldest trade union banner, the Liverpool Tin workers Banner, made in 1821, the exhibition charted the following two hundred years of banner making in Britain.

Represented were various banners and makers, from groups fighting for refugee rights to climate change protest banners. As the banner-making progressed through the years, they shifted from hand-painted realist scenes with heavy symbolism and elaborately painted slogans to sewn and appliquéd with blocks of text against simple coloured backgrounds. Each bore signs of wear, in the fading fabric and the cracking paint.

These banners exemplified the history of the banner in a modern sense: collective, powerful, and based on the unity of image and text. Therefore, it is no surprise that banners appeared in modern and contemporary art through artists exploring similar themes.

4. Controversial Spaces

In this section, I will detail the subject matter of my three banners contributing to the exhibition 'Succumb to the Sale', namely the art institutions depicted on them. While all Sydney art institutions have had controversy at some time, I have chosen three recent controversies in the art world, all connected to socioeconomic factors.. The first, The Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW), is perhaps the most well-known and recognisable with its Neoclassical façade (see Fig.17). The recent addition of the new gallery wing, 'Sydney Modern', has been a point of contention among the art scene, politicians and other figures in Sydney. Judith White, a long-time staffer at the AGNSW's Membership Society and its associated magazine, has written a book

titled 'Culture Heist: Art versus Money' charting the changes to the AGNSW. One key critic of the Sydney Modern project was ex–Prime Minister of Australia, Paul Keating who wrote on the 25 November 2015 in the Sydney Morning Herald under the headline, 'It's All About Money, Not Art'[58] ,that Sydney Modern was an extensive entertainment and special events complex masquerading as an art gallery.'[59]

The new Sydney Modern project is not the only change to the AGNSW in recent years, with White noting that in the period leading to her publishing *Culture Heist* in 2017, 'key Gallery staff were made redundant and volunteers were removed from duties…to be replaced by paid casual staff – despite a new round of budget cuts.'[60]This change to the Gallery bewildered many, especially as government funding was being systematically reduced, as White also notes, 'key organisations have become notoriously diminished as a result of political funding cuts.'[61]

To conclude this section on the Art Gallery of New South Wales, I include the following telling statement personally recorded by White, whereby 'a volunteer was approached near the café by a bewildered lady who asked, "Excuse me, but where is the art?'[62]

[58] Judith White, *Culture Heist: Art versus Money* (Blackheath, New South Wales, Brandl & Schlesinger,2017), 19.
[59] White, *Culture Heist,* 19.
[60] White, *Culture Heist*, 25.
[61] White, *Culture Heist*, 26.
[62] White, *Culture Heist*, 143.

Fig.17. Sophie Cox, detail from *Change Rooms*, 2023–25, fabric and embroidery thread on calico, 1.1 (w) x 1.4 (h) x 1.1 (d)m.
photo credit: Ian Hobbs Media

The second space I will mention is perhaps even more controversial, with the debate surrounding it becoming a political maelstrom. This is the controversy surrounding the Powerhouse Museum (see Fig. 18). Again, I turn to Judith White's text, *Culture Heist,* which charts the controversy surrounding this museum. The Powerhouse began its foray into the political arena in 2015 when the then Liberal state government decided that the site in Ultimo would be sold off and the museum moved to Western Sydney. At the time, the Director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, Elizabeth Ann MacGregor, was the Arts Ambassador for Western Sydney and, therefore, White notes, 'remained a big supporter of the Powerhouse move, and took a lot of criticism for it.'[63] Eventually, after multiple changes of government, the decision was made to retain the site in Ultimo, albeit with a significant renovation, and for a new site to be opened in Parramatta.

[63] White, *Culture Heist*, 160.

Fig.18. Sophie Cox, Detail from Change Rooms, 2023–25, fabric and embroidery thread on calico, PVC pipe frame, 1.1 (w) x 1.4 (h) x 1.1 (d)m, photo credit: Ian Hobbs Media

I chose the third site, White Rabbit Gallery, because of the controversy around cultural politics and the arts. The first aspect of the connection between cultural politics and the arts is apparent here in how the gallery is purely funded by the collection and the wealth of Judith Neilson, a collector of contemporary Chinese art since the late 1990s. David Bell in the article 'White Rabbit, Contemporary Chinese Arts and Soft Power in Sydney's Chippendale', notes the impact of being an independent cultural institution, in that such

independence allows for the space to 'offer audiences a glimpse into the mind of a collector unconstrained by public accountability [and] can reflect their director's character and interests, and take curatorial risks unavailable to national museums.'[64] This point is vital, and the White Rabbit has become known for its thought-provoking presentation of often politically charged artworks and exhibitions.

The effect of these works is not unnoticed by Bell, who writes about the 'soft power' inherent in these artworks. 'Soft Power', according to Joseph Nye's 1990 definition, is 'the possibility of obtaining a result through seduction and not coercion.'[65] The gallery becomes a site for the People's Republic of China (PRC) to portray Chinese culture and to influence Western audiences. Of course, this influence is limited by the works Neilson chooses to purchase and that the curators decide to display, which often do not portray the PRC's leadership in an entirely positive light.

Each of the three banners I have made depicts one of these arts institutions. The 'slogans' embroidered along the top of the banners is an overheard phrase I have collected from visitors to these sites. These form a subtle commentary on the spaces, with words such as 'Too Sanitised' and 'What's it

[64] David Bell, 'White Rabbit: Contemporary Chinese Arts and Soft Power in Sydney's Chippendale', in *China in Australasia*, edited by David Bell, Maria Galikowski, James Beattie and Richard Bullen, (United Kingdom, Routledge, 2019), 136.
[65] Bell, 'White Rabbit', 134.

Supposed to Be?' (see Fig.19) alongside 'That's Not Art.' The highlighted letters make up the words 'Hands Up.' This refers to the financial side of these spaces, inspired by my grandfather, who calls the local hardware store 'Hands up' because it is so expensive, akin to a 'highway robbery.' Therefore, the words 'hands up' in these banners call into question the finances of these institutions and the way money is spent and used in these spaces, namely for expensive and over-engineered buildings.

Fig.19. Sophie Cox, detail from Change Rooms, 2023–25, fabric and embroidery thread on calico, PVC pipe frame, 1.1 (w) x 1.4 (h) x 1.1 (d)m. photo credit: Ian Hobbs Media

The phrases themselves are often heard in art spaces; the policing of what art is and how it is made is related to the next section of this chapter.

5. Craft in Art

Craft has held a contested yet significant place in art history. As the art made for my MFA utilises craft techniques, I devote this section to exploring the place of craft in the art world. This also brings in discourses around labour and the economy. Art writer Nick Jaffe writes that craft began at the beginning of human history. He notes that both the divide and the bridging of the divide between art and craft started at this time, noting that, 'from the dawn of class society there has been both a synergy and tension between 'art' and 'craft.''[66]

This divide was to become stronger during the Renaissance. As Howard Risatti writes in the book *A Theory of Craft* that 'during the early part of the Renaissance, artists were seen as 'mere tradesmen'[67] and therefore it was the Renaissance artists who 'tried to disassociate themselves from the notion of workmanship as a strictly physical labour by stressing the intellectual elements that their art entailed'[68] and academies in the Renaissance served the 'purpose of liberating painters and sculptors from the restrictions of

[66] Jaffe, *Crafting Creativity*, 1.
[67] Howard Risatti, *A Theory of Craft,* (United States of America, University of North Carolina Press. 2007), 212.
[68] Risatti, *Theory of Craft*, 213.

the craft and trade guilds to which they had been bound by tradition.'[69]

The Industrial Revolution would further the schism between art and craft, Nick Jaffe noting that, 'Ruling classes were no longer content to simply possess the most rare, valuable and labour-intensive products of artisans; they began to elevate "non-functional" aesthetic expression to an exalted, even divine status. Just as technique and production methods in the crafts in many cultures and places were reaching unprecedented levels of refinement and complexity, the craftsperson was increasingly debased as 'less than an artist.'[70]

In the twentieth century the schism between art and craft grew wider, with long-lasting consequences. As Peter Dormer writes in *The Status of Craft*, 'The consequences of this split have been quite startling. It has led to the separation of 'having ideas' from 'making objects.' It has also led to the idea that there exists some sort of mental attribute known as 'creativity' that precedes or can be divorced from a knowledge of how to make things'[71]

6. Maps of Art Spaces

The exhibition 'Succumb to the Sale' includes a velvet cushion printed with an image of a gallery floor plan (see

[69] Risatti, *Theory of Craft*, 215.
[70] Jaffe, *Crafting Creativity*, 2.
[71] Peter Dormer in *Making is Connecting*, 23.

Fig. 20) displayed on a shelf reminiscent of one found in low-cost stores or supermarkets. These floor plans relate to the Art Gallery of New South Wales. At first glance, it could be a cushion found in a store like IKEA, a simple decorative piece for the couch at home. This is deliberate, with my intention being two-fold. Firstly, the intention is to explore the notion of what art can be. Initially, this does not appear to be an artwork, and yet there are art techniques used throughout its creation. The other intention is to explore how art spaces are negotiated.

Printed directly onto the cushion is a screenprint of an original Level One floor plan of the Art Gallery of NSW. Stitched onto the transparent fabric that covers the cushion is the Level One floor plan as the gallery stands today. I spent the morning in the gallery, surreptitiously drawing the floor plan. Whilst in the gallery, I drew a cross where people were standing to give a sense of where groups were congregated. My not-so-scientific findings are represented on the cushion by small wooden beads, one for each person. These were sewn carefully into position, allowing me to reflect on which sections of the gallery were being patronised. I found most people congregated in the colonial era paintings, and in the gift shop. Take what you will from this, but I found it interesting that the more contemporary works were almost devoid of visitors, whereas the more easily recognisable paintings and of course, the shop, were quite well patronised.

Fig.20. Sophie Cox, detail AGNSW cushion, 2025, found velvet cushion, fabric, thread and wooden beads, 30x30cm.
photo credit: Ian Hobbs Media

To give some context to why I used a floor plan in this work, it connects to notions of how art spaces are physically negotiated. A term which has entered the theoretical lexicon around discussions of this nature is 'psychogeography' defined by the author, Katharine Harmon, and strongly associated historically with the Situationist movement of the 60s, as a form of mapping which 'explores systems and relationships rather than imagery.'[72] This is what I am exploring here, the relationship between the physical space of the museum and audience interaction within it.

[72] Katharine Harmon, *The Map as Art: Contemporary Artist Explore Cartography, (*New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2009), 15.

7. Poetic cushions

On the shelf beside the floor plan cushion is another pair of cushions each embroidered with poems that I wrote about capitalism. (see Fig. 21). The words on one read: 'Capitalism crumbling/the sandstone bedrock/returning to grains/towed out on the tide' and the other: 'On Castlereagh St /the ad on the bus reads/ "The time for change/has already begun"/Coincidentally.'

Fig.21. Sophie Cox, detail of *Capitalist Cushions*, 2024, found cushion, embroidery thread, two 50 x 40cm.
photo credit: Ian Hobbs edia

The use of poetry was not an accident. It was inspired by contemporary Marxist theorist Franco Berardi's writing in *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance,* which speaks of the poetic as the force for change, as he writes 'the voice and poetry are two strategies for reactivation'[73]. Poetry for Berardi is able to take on capitalism, by bringing people

[73] Franco Berardi, *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance*, (Los Angeles, Semiotext(e), 2012), 20.

together and igniting change. As he writes, 'at the beginning of the second decade of the new century, as deregulated predatory capitalism is destroying the future of the planet and of social life, poetry is going to play a new game: the game of reactivating the social body.'[74]

Poetry has this power because it is language in itself and therefore in this connects with capitalism through the way that 'money and language have something is common: they are nothing and they move everything. They are nothing but symbols, conventions, flatus vocis, but they have the power of persuading human beings to act, to work, to transform physical things.'[75]

8. Post-Fordist Scarf

i. The Combining of Leisure and Work

Throughout the period of my Masters' Degree, I knitted a scarf titled *Post-Fordist Productivity* (see Fig. 22). This scarf began as a leisure project, something to fill time between study and sewing. After a few months, as my research developed, connections began to form between my reading material and the meaning of this scarf.

[74] Berardi, *The Uprising*, 36.
[75] Berardi, *The Uprising,* 134.

Fig.22 Sophie Cox, *Post-Fordist Productivity*, 2023-25, wool, steel clothes rack dimensions variable.
photo credit: Ian Hobbs media

First and foremost was the notion of post-Fordism and its effect on the distinction between work and leisure. With this came the advent of hobbies, which became ways to make leisure time into productive time as theorist Aleena Chia writes, 'Hobbies gained their meaning by buffering industrialization's cleavage of leisure time from work

activities. Hobbies have historically been valued for mimicking the productivity of industrial work but under more flexible, holistic and fulfilling circumstances.'[76]

On a personal level, I relate to this idea of a hobby becoming yet another way to be productive as an artist. Knitting is particularly good for this, as it is often portable, quiet and is socially acceptable to do during a conversation, for example. This is why it such a useful practice for the Knitting Nanna's who sit and knit at protests, sit-ins and rallies. As knitter and writer Jess Taylor notes in the book of essays, *Sharp Notions*: 'I've found a sneaky way to remain productive… Downtime in my room? I'm still making a sweater.'[77]

An aspect of why I continued to knit during this period was that it staved off that existential dread of time not spent working on my MFA. Surely a relatable feeling for anyone who has ever studied is the fear of not doing enough, that all and any available time should be devoted to the project. Knitting was, for me, a way to feel that I was still working even when I was ostensibly at leisure.

My scarf began as a hobby, but soon became another way to continue to make art. Instead of truly resting, my hands furiously knitted. The impact of this was two-fold. In one way it kept me from doing something truly 'unproductive'

[76] Chia. "Productive leisure in post-Fordist fandom." 49.
[77] Jess Taylor in *Sharp Notions- Essays from the Stitching Life*, edited by Marita Dachshel and Nancy Lee (Canada: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2023), 144.

such as watching television or taking a nap. This I expected: however, the other impact was more of a surprise: it prepared me for work, it kept me in that mindset of working and making – it stopped me from slipping out of a productive state. This was both a blessing and a curse. It was good to remain focused, but also was quite exhausting and eventually I decided to only work on the scarf during the hours I had allocated to my MFA.

ii) Potlatch and the Gift Economy

To continue the critique of my knitting practice, I would also mention the writing of French philosopher George Bataille, namely his seminal work, 'The Notion of Expenditure' (1933). Bataille's notion of exchange drew from anthropological theorist Marcel Mauss' co-opting of the term 'potlach.'. Potlatch, according to Mauss and Bataille is 'borrowed from the North-western American Indians who provided such a remarkable example of it.'[78] It is defined as an exchange in which a 'considerable gift of riches, offered openly and with the goal of humiliating, defying and obligating a rival'[79] is offered to the 'enemy'. 'The ideal, indicates Mauss, 'would be to give a potlatch and not have it returned.'[80] My own work can be considered a potlatch to the existing capitalist system, a gift given freely to attempt to reflect poorly on its dominant values. The university, it

[78] George Bataille. "The Notion of Expenditure." In *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-1939* edited by Allan Stoekl (USA: The University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 121.
[79] Bataille, 'The Notion of Expenditure', 121.
[80] Ibid.

must be noted, also sits within this capitalist system and therefore, I note that I am working within the system I purport to be critiquing.

9. Curated Photographs

In his essay 'Art of the Internet' in the book *In the Flow,* philosopher Boris Groys writes of the way in which viewers' experience art works has changed. He notes how the Internet has become the primary site for many to experience art, stating 'in recent decades the Internet has become the primary place for the production and distribution of writing, including literature; artistic practices; and, more generally, cultural archives.'[81]

The book of photographs I have created as part of my MFA exhibition is like a low-fi Instagram page, a curated account of my experiences with art and culture throughout the course of the project. The small square photographs echo the social media format. Taken on my iPhone and printed to echo the polaroid-style photograph, these photographs sit somewhere between the digital and analogue. They are also primarily of artworks from exhibitions at arts institutions, which calls into question Groys' analysis that 'many cultural workers experience this shift towards the Internet as liberating, because the Internet is not selective – or at

[81] Boris Groys, "Art on the Internet" in, *In the Flow,* (London: Verso, 2016), 171.

least it is much less selective than the museum or traditional publishing house.'[82]

Instead, here the photographs function as my own selections from a selection made by a curatorial team. They are my attempt to (re)curate the cultural experiences of visiting diverse galleries and museums over the past two years.

Art historian, David Joselit has written differently on the place of photography in contemporary museums in his book *Art's Properties.* He writes of the way museums have changed with the advent of digital, portable cameras. As he states,

> 'Museums are photo opportunities. Rather than merely housing art, they generate images: their galleries function as stage sets for the auto-performance of selfies, and their exhibitions furnish archives from which spectators select and capture artworks in cell-phone snaps. They facilitate a mode of production, in which pictures lead to more pictures to be stored in personal collections that need not conform to authoritative art histories.'[83]

The volume of photographs I have made reflects this, through the way in which it brings together images of artworks from a diverse range of places and artists, thus not

[82] Boris Groys, 'Art on the Internet', 171.
[83] David Joselit. (2023), *Art's Properties,* (New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2023), ix.

conforming with 'authoritative art histories.'[84] This book is not a definitive history of art or even of textile art, it is my own 'personal collection'[85] of imagery that I have been inspired by and which has proved productive to my project.

Conclusion

In this third and final chapter I have contextualised the artworks made for my MFA. The historical background of the banners and the political background of the scarf and cushions were outlined in each section. Each section further builds on the notion of the capitalist system inherent to the Australian and international world of art and the alternative of global socialism that sits as both a real possibility and motivator behind them. Through this chapter I have aimed to convey some of the possible readings of the artworks exhibited in *Succumb to the Sale,* by providing relevant frameworks for viewing them.

[84] Joselit, *Art's Properties*, ix.
[85] Ibid.

Conclusion

Beginning this study, I was largely naïve to the role of capitalism in the art world. I thought the world was the problem and the art world was a tool to fight these issues. However, as I read and talked to people, I began to realise the issues inherent in the art scene were entwined with those of society. There was inequality, greed, inflated egos and prices. I realised that the art world needed to change as well. This study, therefore, has been a reckoning with the forces of the world of art, with the financial systems inherent in it, and with the practices that try to fight against consumerist, and narrowly individualistic practices.

Art outside capitalism

It may be hard to imagine an art world without capitalism, but these past two years of study have shown me it is possible to work adjacent to it, perhaps not quite outside it, but not entirely within it either. From artist collectives like Taring Padi that operate outside the ordinary bounds of artistic practice, to practitioners like Sarah Corbett creating activist art through the Craftivist Collective, they are the ones that are poking holes in the capitalist control of the art scene.

An alternative to consumerism

In the process of writing this paper I have had my eyes opened to the wide-ranging system that is the art world. I have attempted to shine a light on one part of it, namely the

consumerist aspect including opposition to it. I have seen how the art world is so deeply shaped by money. But at the same time, I have seen an alternative, a glimpse into an art world that may not be so financially focused. This gives me hope, that perhaps the system is not quite as broken as I first thought, or perhaps that it is so broken that it needs to be completely rebuilt, and that this process has already begun.

The art world and change

This study has at times been difficult – to face up to the myriad of issues plaguing our society is not easy, but it has also given me hope. For every difficult situation in our world, from all sides of the political spectrum there is an artist making art about it. In this paper I have focused on but a few of them. As an artist I would encourage you to find out more, both from those already of your political bent and those who disagree with you. The art world is changing, perhaps not in the way I first thought. It is shifting most rapidly on a level largely beneath the gaze of the mainstream. There is change there, you just have to be willing to look for it and see.

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