Right - artists may not visibly invoke the logic of what has been called "critical capitalism," but we are all in the midst of absorbing and processing its discursive and material effects.

When we speak of artists engaging with the economy, we might immediately think of artists, dealers and art collectors buying and selling works of art. Yves Klein's Zones of Immaterial Pictorial Sensibility (1968) presents an important provocation by pointing out that traditional art theory's emphasis on the concept of a "work of art" has been undermined by the development of capitalist relations of distribution. I suppose the most interesting question of what I call "conceptual art" is what happens when artists are not only passive recipients of art but also active producers of it. Here it's clear that such a relationship creates flows, or currents. But money is only the customary form in which we conceive of flow; currency is not its essential...
T.O.C.

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In February 2012, Toronto-based artist Luis Jacob and I met in Antwerp, Belgium, as part of an event hosted by the art space Extra City Kunsthall. At Extra City, Luis presented his book *Commerce by Artists*, published by Art Metropole in 2011, a brilliantly conceived compilation of artists in the 20th and 21st centuries whose practices involve rethinking questions of economics and systems of distribution. I spoke about the emergence of what I call “occupational realism,” when artists perform waged work as art. Given our shared interest in artistic labor, we had an engaging conversation about the production of art beyond commodities, the manufacturing of effort, and the business of selling affect. Because our time in Antwerp was all too short, and I wanted to continue our dialogue in another form, we conducted this interview by email.

—Julia Bryan-Wilson, associate professor of modern and contemporary art, University of California, Berkeley
Julia Bryan-Wilson: How did you become interested in the subject of artists who engage with the economy, which is the primary focus of your book *Commerce by Artists*? How do you see this project as linked to, or perhaps distinct from, your own artistic process?

Luis Jacob: When we speak of artists engaging with the economy, we might immediately think of artists, dealers and art collectors buying and selling works of art. Yves Klein’s “Zones of Immaterial Pictorial Sensibility” (1958) is a relevant example here. Or we might be reminded of art projects that take the form of retail operations, such as Ben Kinmont’s “Sometimes a Nicer Sculpture Is to Be Able To Provide A Living For Your Family” (begun in 1998). But the inclusion of the majority of projects in the book relies on a broader definition of “commerce.” In general terms, I understand commerce as any relationship between entities that causes things to flow. In a retail exchange, money and goods trade hands; here it’s clear that such a relationship creates flows, or currents. But money—currency—is only the customary form in which we conceive of flow; currency is not its essential form. *Commerce by Artists* is an attempt to engage with this expanded definition of commerce.

JB-W: This makes me think of the idea, too, of the “charge”—both as a kind of electrical current, as well as a monetary fee or a price exacted. These words signify interestingly in numerous directions; the currencies you talk about have a charge, in several senses of that term. And of course flow and currency are not necessarily monetized; they can also refer to currents or waves of feeling—that is, affective coursings.

IJ: Yes, many different types of flow are possible. In friendly discourse, for instance, ideas flow between friends and this flow can create an intense synergy such that, sometimes, I cannot decide whether my friend or I came up with a certain idea during our conversation.

The friendship is a medium in which ideas are generated, and through which ideas circulate between individuals. It strikes me, then, that a friendship is a form of commerce.

Living organisms, to provide another instance, are in constant relationship with various entities in order to ensure their survival. Each of us must find access to organisms that, as food, will provide us with nutrition; we struggle against other organisms that, as parasites, threaten our health, and we expel those materials that, as excreta, are toxic inside our bodies. And so—to consider only the human entities with which we sustain commerce in order to survive—we depend on farmers to cultivate food, on doctors to help during an illness, and on sewage workers and civic engineers to properly channel what we flush down the toilet. In these various ways, commerce creates a “world,” which refers to the unity of entities connected by various flows.

With *Commerce by Artists* I wanted to look at the ways artists engage with the world they live in, from the perspective of these flows of commerce. Artworks are not merely inert objects that hang on walls or sit on pedestals. In fact, artworks are active players in a rather complex web of relationships—players that allow some things to flow while blocking others, players that transform their world and are transformed in turn. If this insight is a true one, then we may conceive that all artists are engaged in “commerce by artists.”

JB-W: As you state, you are not so much interested in artists who “represent commercial transactions” but rather those who “enact them”? How do you make that distinction? Can you give some examples?

IJ: I define commerce as an interaction that causes things to flow. The artworks documented in *Commerce by Artists* take the form of such transactions, rather than represent these transactions using artistic means. I first became interested in this distinction between representation and enactment during the 1990s, when I noticed, in the work of artists as diverse as Lygia Clark and Hans Haacke, a shift from artworks that employ fictive artistic means, towards artworks that engage with reality in an actual and direct manner.

In the case of Lygia Clark, this shift appears with extraordinary lucidity. In her Neo-Concretist paintings of the 1950s, a pictorial line on the surface of her abstract paintings would come in contact with a non-pictorial line produced at the gap between the painting and the passe-partout that is an element of the work. This non-pictorial line (which she called the “organic line”) possessed a different reality than the depicted line: it was made up of real space, not the fictive space of the depicted line. In the words of Brazilian poet and art critic Ferreira Gullar, the organic line “irrigated the surface of the painting with real space,” and gradually assumed an assertive role in Clark’s subsequent work. The organic line—a seam consisting of nothing but
empty space—expanded in the “Casulos (Cocoons)” of the late 50s, to become a pocket of space physically enveloped by the art object. In her celebrated “Bichos (Animals)” from the early 60s, this immaterial space full of potential was identified with the voluntary participation of the viewer who freely manipulated the object and activated it. What began as an abstract mark produced with fictive artistic means became, in Clark’s work, explicitly articulated as an actual subject/object relationship.

JB-W: One of the most compelling connections you are making here is about the economies of form; that is, how formal means can register ethical or political dimensions. Clark shifted her practice in reaction to the Brazilian dictatorship in the later 1960s, and then left the realm of art altogether to pursue her career as a therapist. Her earlier hands-on abstraction arguably pointed the way towards her more pointed participatory interventions, perhaps also in a way that Haacke’s did, as he moved from systems-based work to explicit institutional critique.

LJ: I completely agree. During the early 1960s Hans Haacke worked under the influence of the Zero group of artists. In his case also, abstract forms eventually became identified with actual natural and then social systems.

Here in Toronto, the Art Gallery of Ontario has in its permanent collection one of his early works, titled “Eisstab (Ice Stick)” (1966). This work resembles a minimalist sculpture, and contains a refrigeration system that causes ice to accumulate on a vertical pole. The quality of the ice at any given time—its thickness, its wetness—is the physical manifestation of the interaction between the object and the context where it is displayed. This context is constituted by several factors: natural weather conditions outdoors, the artificial transformation of these conditions by the museum’s climate-control system, the humid exhalations of viewers as they freeze and accumulate on the sculpture.

This stick of ice—which we might call, following Clark, an “organic form”—makes manifest the interaction between the forms of the object fabricated by the artist, and the actual, though invisible, conditions of the space around it that “irrigate” and sculpt its visible appearance. There is something very powerful about this way of producing works of art.

JB-W: You note that your research for this project begun just as the world economy entered a state of crisis. Can you expand on how you think the current shifts in production—as well as transactions and economies and commerce and markets—are borne out in artistic practices?

LJ: I recall a peculiar moment during the early stages of conducting research for this anthology. I happened to be in London on September 15th. The nervous uncertainty in the air in London at that time was palpable. In such a volatile context, it’s practically impossible for us to ignore the link between the financial crisis and the choice of artworks documented in the book.

JB-W: My work on occupational realism also took on a different tenor given the rise of the Occupy movement, which took hold in fall 2011 and was exceptionally active Oakland, California, which is where I live. I was thinking through “occupations” at a time when inequality, precarity, and the lack of job security were being made legible in new ways through sometimes aggressive street demonstrations. Occupy Oakland also raised questions about the criminalization of protest, and forced many to see how deep the crisis of injustice is in the U.S.

LJ: Economic crisis is endemic to capitalism. Such crises are not exceptional, but they haunt us as if by clockwork. At least since the time when I was born, in 1971, crisis has been a recurring condition: the stock market crash of 1973; the debt crisis in Latin America during the 1980s; Black
Monday in 1987; the 1989 Savings and Loan crisis in the U.S.; the Asian financial crisis of 1997; the bursting of the dot-com bubble in 2001; the global financial crisis that began in 2007; the European sovereign-debt crisis that remains unresolved today.

These are only the obvious instances of crisis. Even moments of prosperity, for some (for example, the rise of the technology sector in the U.S. during the 1990s boom, for example), are simultaneously catastrophic moments of crisis for others (outsourcing and the closing of factories in the manufacturing sector).

At the risk of making a too-broad claim, it seems to me that, in recent memory, the experience of economic crisis necessarily informs all artistic production. I suspect that some artists deal with this influence symptomatically, while some deal with it thematically as the very content of their work.

**JB-W:** Right—artists may not visibly invoke the logic of what has been called “crisis capitalism,” but we are all in the midst of absorbing and processing its discursive and material effects. I am really interested in this sentence, from your introduction to *Commerce by Artists:* “Flow transforms that which flows.” Can you say more about that? How are flux, change, and instability both transformative and also destructive?

**LJ:** I'll give an example. One of the chapters of *Commerce by Artists* deals with economies of identity. Martha Wilson's project, titled “Posturing: Dng” (1972), is a photograph that features the artist posing as a man who is posing as a woman.

About this work, Wilson said that “form determines feeling, so that if I pose in a role I can experience a foreign emotion.” For the artist, the work transformed her emotional state, as Wilson attempted to embody what a man feels while posing as a woman. As a viewer, I find myself entangled by the work as I try to make sense of my readings of her gender cues. Is that softly raised eyebrow a man's facial expression or a woman's? Are the arms, folded in a gesture of relaxed self-protection, those of a woman posing as a man, or of a man posing as a woman? Are the fingers, which are as delicately poised as a fashion model's, those of a woman's interpretation of a man's image of a woman, or truly those of a man's interpretation of a woman's hands? Are the cheeks, which I judge to be too round to be attractive, the signal of a woman's failure to embody social norms, or the signal of a man's inability to “pass” as a real woman? What is the difference in appearance between a woman posing as a man posing as a woman—and a woman, tout court?

In my commerce with the work of art, I become entangled with it. I experience a slippage between what I see and what I understand about a person's gender. My self-presence is transformed in this way, as I recognize that my own “solitary” act of viewing is inhabited (we might say, “irrigated”) by all the magazines I have read, all the television I have watched, all the bodily gestures I have incorporated, all the people I have met and desired—active agents that haunt my perception of others, and that I scarcely comprehend.

**JB-W:** It is interesting that as you become implicated as a viewer and subject in some of these works, the flow touches you. With the Wilson piece, you speak of a gendered relationship to the work, but there is also a sexuality component—as a viewer, you are hailed queerly. Your book also
notably includes several artists who raise issues of identity vis-à-vis migration and exile. Given that you were born in Peru but raised in Canada, can you speak more about this?

LJ: Commerce says, “Everything flows.” Which is another way of saying that we, as viewers of an instance of commerce-by-artists are already enveloped or absorbed by the commerce we are witnessing.

Another chapter in the book focuses on the goods that flow in commercial relations. Edward Poitras’s “Offensive/Defensive” (1988) deals with those goods called “land.” Rights to the land is a central unresolved issue in Canada, as it is in the rest of the Americas, particularly when it comes to Native land rights. Poitras’s “Offensive/Defensive” was made by exchanging a rectangular strip of lawn from the Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon with a rectangular strip of prairie topsoil from the grounds of the Gordon Indian Reserve near Fort Qu’Appelle.

Grafted into each other’s location, the two strips looked somewhat like Robert Smithson’s forlorn non-sites, or like the lines on the earth that Richard Long made by walking. Two pieces of living earth traded places, and thus connected various entities: soils, species of plant life, as well as cultures—Native, Métis and settler—united on contested ground. As each strip of living soil took root in its new location, the commerce enacted between these various entities became a question of life and death. In this way the work addressed the history of forced removal of Native and Métis people, and the ongoing processes of cultural assimilation, with all its destructiveness and creativity. As it turned out, the Prairie grass eventually survived and blended with the other plant species in its new location on the museum’s grounds, while the gallery’s patch of lawn, unable to adapt, withered and died on the reserve. Lead ingots were buried beneath each strip of land, bearing the words “OFFENSIVE” and “DEFENSIVE.” These linguistic bullets memorialize the 1885 North-West Rebellion, and serve as hidden catalysts for future resistance to assimilation—a lead cache buried in the land itself, archaeological proof for a time to come. Various plant species, different cultures, the past and the future, are all woven together in Poitras’s work, creating a complex web of relationships. As a viewer, I find myself entangled here, too, as I catch glimpse of my inheritance as an immigrant citizen on Canadian soil, an unwitting settler on Native land.

JB-W: Your process really foregrounds how these issues end up speaking to each other—that is, queerness and alternative masculinities and immigration and labor are not distinct, but placed in relation to each other, and to the production of culture. This results in a richly textured understanding of how work is one fundamental aspect of what Hannah Arendt called world-making.

LJ: All the artworks we have been discussing enact various forms of commerce between entities that might otherwise be thought of as existing separately. In this way the work of art renders manifest the “world” as something shared. As viewers, we are directly implicated and become entangled with the work because we recognize we share the same world with it.

Our commerce with the work displaces us from our habitual sense of self and, as you pointed out, there is something both transformative as well as destructive in this. Is this transformation experienced as liberating or as threatening? Is it accepted as a challenge to one’s self-identity or as an enrichment of one’s sense of place in the world with others?