

**An unpublished interview between Adam Bobbette and Ben Schaafsma
October 2008**

BS: Growing up in the United States, particularly among the factories and production lines of the Midwest, I was always told that the American way of life was the best. Success was measured by financial prestige, which is achieved by working hard. Does any of this ring true for you, growing up in a similar situation in small town Ontario?

AB: Well, sort of. In my family it wasn't necessarily financial success that determined success. My family has this interesting commitment to "happiness". 'Figure out what you want to do and do it' kind of approach, which is great, in a sense. But this was always contradicted by an equal commitment to hard work even if that work was what you hated. So there was this problem because what I wanted to do was never work because work always sucked. What made me happy was precisely not working. This layed the ground for some conflict. But more generally in the town where I grew up there was this kind of resignation to work. 'You just gotta work because you gotta pay the bills and eventually it will all pay off when you retire.'

I am curious about your own relationship to work.

BS: It's interesting that you brought up your familial context right away, rather than attempting to follow my leading question by giving a "Canadian" answer. I will try my best to avoid being overly programmatic, but I think this conversation has the potential to unpack some of the curious aspects of Americans relationships to work and capital compared a Canadian context.

I grew up in Michigan. You grew up in Ontario. Neighbors. There are thousands of similarities, but there is one major difference. I am interested in how this major difference has manifested in our own work and research interests.

I come from a family that upholds work above anything else. The true Protestant work ethic. Working hard was not a choice, but an obligation. This is something that I was very frustrated with growing up. I've had a job since the age of 14 and despite my attempts at rejecting this work ethic, it has become engrained in my own personal disposition. Hard work was not performed with the intention of financial success in my own familial context, but as a way of acknowledging the 'grace of God'.

I haven't really thought about this before. But so many of the creative projects or creative work I have done in the past relies so much on working without being financially compensated. I've never had any qualms with this, but others I have invited to work on projects with me have complained about feeling 'exploited'.

AB: What do you think that major difference is?

I understand completely your commitment to acknowledging the "grace of god"! Or of working without the need for financial compensation, or at least it not being in the forefront of why we do the things we do. But I have always despised the protestant work ethic which has always seemed like willfully submitting ones self to exploitation and so I have refused to work and been fired for many a job in my life. But I totally love working

when it is work that makes sense, or that is passionate, or allows other people to do what they care about.

And so this underlies a lot of projects I have been involved in, from making stickers with Forays that make it easier for people to spot dumpsterable food so that they can spend less money on food and hence work a little less at something they hate. A lot of the work is concerned with providing tools that allow people to be less tied to work, or unsatisfying work and free up some space for experimentation.

Which I think is very consistent with InCUBATE.

BS: First of all, don't confuse my familial commitments with my personal ones! But I agree with you, working for works' sake become very problematic.

It might be helpful to provide a particular definition of the word. What does work mean to you?

AB: Well that's a good question and sorry if I confuse things here but I would separate work from labour. What I used to call work I now call labour, and I probably think about it in a pretty classic Marxist sense as the submission of our own abilities to a system of exchange for the sake of getting by. Whereas work is basically driven by something else though it is not always separate, I do get paid for shows and I do get paid to teach, etc.. all things that I consider my 'work', but not really labour, as I have tried pretty hard to not do anything I don't want to.

But, where are you heading with this. You are after a distinction here? What it is?

BS: Yes, I am definitely after a distinction. I agree that there is a difference between work and labor. I appreciate your distinction and it seems to make particular sense when we begin to look at the difference between what artists do to make money and what artists do in order produce their work or create an ephemeral object or situation.

Would you agree that we are interested in attempting to conflate these actions? Is it possible to re-combine work and labor through a creative practice?

AB: Interested? Yes. Is it possible? Sometimes.

BS: What do you see as a potential role for artists with a looming financial crisis? Gleaners? Survivors? Do you take this opportunity to build our own welfare state!??!

AB: A few things come to mind. First, what happens to an art market during a time of financial crisis. The last few years have been special for artists, so many have been able to live quite well from making art. Will this change significantly in the next few years? Will the market shrivel? And will this have an impact on what compels people to work? Will there be less of a concern to "make it". Maybe a little less ambition could be really healthy. But this is also way more a reality in the US from what I have

experienced. There isn't much of an art market in Canada. Which is not to say it's better, it's just a slightly different set up that includes the government a lot more.

I am skeptical though that a financial meltdown can guarantee anything. I would resist being naively optimistic about it mainly because I don't know what the hell is going on. I don't know what kind of opportunity for capitalism is emerging, how it might signal an even more nefarious re-alignment but also what kind of opportunities are opening up. I think we would typically want to say that if we look at history these moments of crisis tend to re-enforce infrastructures of mutual aid (the 1970's in New York, for instance) but at the same time) and maybe that's true, but that seems a little easy to me.

I know other examples for the 1970's and 80's around the oil crisis that moments which at first appeared to signal exciting shifts towards local farming initiatives and plugging out of the factory farming system, or towards energy independence and all sorts of experimental architectural design projects, that these projects were countered by equally radical design experiments that sought to maintain middle class suburban life at all costs. Like building a suburban house underground, for instance. People were doing what ever they could in order to avoid actually changing their lives.

BS: Your own practice is obviously influenced by these experimental approaches attempting to maintain, yet revolutionize the quotidian, as well as by artists working during this time period such as Robert Smithson and Gordon Matta-Clark. The projects you've done with Forays, such as Forays into Cocoons where you've created a template for Cocoon like structures that can be used as temporary beds hanging in unused urban spaces, or Forays into Steam, which considers the excess of urban infrastructures, in this case using steam that escapes into the streets from manhole covers as a heat source for cooking - are both imaginative and simultaneously utilitarian. I am genuinely interested in the ways that creative and critical practices, such as yours, can simultaneously escape being historicized, as well as escape falling into the marginalization of the everyday.

It seems, when one makes this paradigm shift, the art market becomes irrelevant. Maybe the problem here again is language. Do we continue to call critical practices, such as yours, art - or do we need to begin to create a new vocabulary that allows us to begin to overcome marginalization?

AB: You know, sometimes marginalization has it's advantages. It can allow a certain amount of freedom even if it means you may not have that much support, like big shows, glossy magazines, etc.

Jerry and I have been thinking about calling oneself an artist as a tactic more than a apt definition of what we do. Calling one self an artist has particular pragmatic effects that can be helpful in getting something done. It can allow you a certain amount of leverage in sticky situations like being interrogated by the cops for doing something in public. Artists are allowed to be weird and do things that aren't immediately comprehensible in our culture, which is a freedom that can be manipulated.

But yes, you are right, when I think about my own practice I think of it more as an experimental method, as a form of knowledge production, as a way to experiment with life or creating conditions for experimentation more than anything like representation or objects or communication. And though it may sound cliché or kind of empty I want to be able to have a practice that makes me think differently and can push what I am even capable of thinking.

BS: If you do decide to continue calling yourself an artist, do you submit to a perpetually flexible lifestyle?

This is my question.

At what point can critical practitioners begin to solidify an infrastructure that supports their own mechanisms of meaning? Recently, Nato Thompson spoke as part of the OTHER OPTIONS exhibition at Eyebeam about the creation of new forms of distribution and venues of interaction, which no longer mimic the art world - but create new spaces of meaning production. Your work doesn't make sense in a gallery (we know this from attempting to put it in one) or the pages of Art Forum or October. The infrastructure and venues that supports artistic production contextualizes it so much that it reduces critical practices to the Art & Leisure pages of the New York Times, between a wicked recipe for Swiss Chard and a review of a Broadway show (a.k.a. the "desert section" according to Thompson).

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AB: At what point? We are doing this. And we have been. If I can be so rude and audacious to claim a 'we'. We don't need to rely on some economic collapse nor some hope for an 'after the collapse'.

I am also not sure if we need someone to tell us that we need to create non-institutional spaces or venues for interaction. I hate to be naive about this but it either seems like you do or you don't, it would be weird to ever make an imperative out of it. Imperatives make fashions. Either you use the art world and the particularities of its structures for

your own ends or not. If you can bend its flexibilities to allow you, the people you care about and their friends, to create some space of freedom then it seems fair game. But it seems to me that this only comes from necessity never from imperatives. Don't we mostly seek for more room to maneuver? If this were ever turned into the logic, aim, or new thing in the art world it would be kind of fucked.

And as simple as it may seem, what comes to mind here is the practice of ripping off Kinkos. When people were making zines (way more than they do now) and Kinkos came, people cracked their copying system not because they thought it was something that should be done for art, or what needs to happen for art, but because it was an opening in an infrastructure. Suddenly by hacking this infrastructure the mass distribution of hand made media was far more accessible.

So, I don't know that anyone needs to tell the art world to do more of that or if we just do it. I don't know why anyone should try to convince the art world to do anything or if we should spend more time sharing tactics and tools. And I am not interested in tactics and tools that reproduce our own stuff but just some helpful hints of how to get along with your own stuff for your own communities (like how to crack the kinkos code, for instance).