



The digital touch: Craft-work as immaterial labour and ontological accumulation

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abstract

While much of autonomist theory privileges the most developed sector of capitalism (the digital online media and communication industries), this paper asks us to turn our attention to a revived ‘pre-capitalist’ form of cultural production. This article analyzes the recent resurgence of DIY craft culture around the following themes: 1) immaterial and affective labour; 2) gender and the home; 3) time and capitalism’s historicity. It challenges the periodisation of immateriality by highlighting the informational and communicative practices embedded in craft culture. In so doing, we can rethink the temporality of capitalism by teasing out a labour thread that passes through capitalism without being reduced to its purview. The gendered dimension of digital labour displays affective and immaterial qualities that have persisted resiliently before, during, and, in time, after capitalism. Craft as power (the capacity to act) is an ontological accumulation of species-being that pushes us to rethink the ‘organizing’ of subjects. Craft, tied to what Nick Dyer-Witheford calls species-being resurgent, provides a key example of the ontological development of subjective powers, ones that become ever more resonant in the crisis and ruins of capitalism.

Introduction

What is a paper on the resurgence of handicrafts doing in a special journal issue on digital labour? How could this most manual, pre-industrial form of labours be elucidated within a theoretical framework (autonomist Marxism) that begins with the pervasiveness of immaterial labour? What does the pre-capitalist practice of craft-work have to do with late capitalism, even post-capitalism?

We can begin to answer these questions by playing with a few linguistic tricks. Digital, as we know, refers not only to the informational, virtual realm of ones and zeros but also to the fingers – those physical manual extensions that apprehend the world. As Heidegger reminds us, many of our metaphors for understanding (grasping, comprehending) depend on a hand with its digits (Derrida, 1987: 172-3). A treatment of media technologies as ‘extensions’ belong among them; where the digits end, the digits begin, from counting on fingers to abstract computation. In turn, our names for the digital realm carry crafty connotations: the Web, the Net, the network, the node (derived from knot). Cyberculture titles like Tim Berners-Lee’s *Weaving the Web* and tactical media theorist Geert Lovink’s *Dark Fiber* make these links explicit. Interestingly, even the concept of trickery has a craft origin. Trick’s roots are in the

Latin *tricae*, meaning ‘trifles, nonsense, a tangle of difficulties’, out of which the French language gets *tricoter*, to knot (Online Etymology Dictionary). Out of this artifice (once defined as skill or cunning via craft-making, now associated with deceit and trickery), this trifling intrigue (etymologically linked to both trickery and entanglement), we might shed some light on contemporary issues surrounding digital labour. Here, I explore the virtuality of digital craft-work, in Pierre Levy’s sense of cracking open an initial actuality to reveal a ‘knot of tendencies or forces that accompanies a situation, event, object, or entity’ (1998: 24). In the intricate history of digital craft, especially its new mutation into online digital spheres, we can see virtuals unfolding.

This article examines craft-work around the following themes: 1) immaterial and affective labour; 2) gender and the home; 3) time and capitalism’s historicity. Doing so complicates the immaterial labour thesis of autonomism in the following ways: it challenges the apparent newness of the digital and of immateriality by highlighting the informational and communicative practices embedded in traditional craft culture. In this way, we can rethink the temporality of capitalism, namely, by teasing out a labour thread that passes through capitalism without being reduced to its purview. This history of technics and craft-work also foregrounds the gendered dimension of digital labour. Taken together, these lines of questioning unsettle the autonomist political investment in the hegemonic sector of class formation. I will argue that we need to look at the digital labour whose affective and immaterial qualities have persisted resiliently before, during, and, in time, after capitalism. Craft-work can be tied to what Nick Dyer-Witheford (2004) calls species-being resurgent and provides a key example of the ontological development of subjective powers – powers that become ever more resonant in the crisis and ruins of capitalism.

The popularity of craft culture

Elsewhere Heidi Brush and I (2006) have analyzed the increasing popularity of what we call fabriculture and craft-work. We refer to a range of ‘domestic arts’: knitting, crocheting, scrapbooking, quilting, embroidery, sewing, doll-making. This popularity inhabits the spheres of marketplace commodification (e.g. Martha Stewart, the DIY cable channel), peer-to-peer exchanges (Etsy, knitty, Craftster), documentaries (Woman’s Work), and anti-capitalist and anti-authoritarian craftivist projects (Cast Off, Craftivism, Anarchist Knitting Circle, MicroRevolt, Anarchist Knitting Mob, Revolutionary Knitting Circle). This revival can be found in a variety of online and offline spaces, from blogs to back rooms of independent shops, from street protests to virtual knitting circles. A phenomenon this popular cannot, we argue, be reduced to any one of these realms; its virtuals clearly need to be teased out.¹

The relationship between handicrafts and cybertechnology has been discussed in numerous texts by cyberfeminists and others. As Reece Steinberg’s Craft/Technology website (2004) points out, technology and craft are deeply intertwined. In addition to the linguistic entwinements mentioned above, historical connections abound. The first

1 For excellent overviews of the activist, feminist dimensions of this resurgence, see Minahan and Cox, 2007; Pentney, 2008; and Robertson, 2007.

attempt to automate processes was based on the Jacquard Loom, as Sadie Plant (1997) reminds us. Plant even suggests that the binary code 1/0 that underpins computer programming was derived from knit/purl. She also points out a networking component to weaving:

Weaving was already multimedia: singing, chanting, telling stories, dancing and playing games as they work, spinsters, weavers and needleworkers were literally networkers as well...: the textures of a woven cloth functioned as the means of communication and information storage long before anything was written down. (Plant: 4)

Kirsty Robertson (2006) argues that information technology is less about hardware than software and that code-based programming is akin to knitting.

Mainstream cultural outlets make sense of the resurgence of crafting through these connections. Time reviewed the fabricultural site Craftster and called it ‘open-source crafting...’ (Craftster, 2006). Some key individuals involved in fabriculture have a foot in both worlds. Leah Kramer, founder of Craftster, is a computer programmer, while Jenna Adorno (a writer on knitty.com) works in the software industry. Not surprisingly, these crafters generally maintain an online presence for their handicrafts. Another technical example is knitPro, a web application that translates digital images into knit, crochet, needlepoint and cross-stitch patterns.

Undoubtedly, the resurgence of fabriculture has occurred alongside of digital, virtual culture but has it done so as complement, opposition, or antagonist? Perhaps, fabriculture is all three at different moments, as it has been throughout its entangled history. This enmeshing sets the stage for the next, which involves material/immaterial dimensions.

Craft as immaterial labour

The notion of immaterial labour is a controversial one.² Rather than entering into an academic assessment of its analytical and descriptive value, I instead want to experiment on its virtuals by expanding the concept to include atypical practices. Rather than limit immaterial labour to newer occupations comprised of digital information services (computer workers, advertisers, symbolic analysts), it is useful to understand the immaterial as a dimension of many forms of labour. Let us take Maurizio Lazzarato’s (1995) descriptions as our guide.

First, immaterial labour refers to the activity ‘that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity’ (Lazzarato, 1995: 133). For Lazzarato, this involves both increases in computer activity (informational), and the creation of tastes, opinions, and concepts (cultural). Nevertheless, if we take his thesis seriously as a description of dimensions of labour as such, rather than as a particular concrete manifestation (a

2 For an excellent discussion, critique, and response to the concept, see the special issue of *ephemera* (Dowling, Nunes, and Trott, 2007).

‘stage’ of capitalism), we can apply it to the most material of labors and products. What might comprise the informational and cultural content of handicraft?³

To be sure, crafters often embedded meanings into their final products. Quilting, especially, is renowned for its implementation of codes and signs. Hidden maps and ciphers were employed to convey escape routes in the Underground Railroad, for example. Una Kimokeo-Goes (2007) examines Hawaiian appropriations and subversions of missionary-delivered quilting practices, focusing on how this crafting preserved identity and passed values across generations. The textual in the textile also can be found in family crests, Native American quilt-narratives, espionage messages, and encrypted love notes. Sometimes, as in the technique of ikat, a series of dyes in the weft and woof are used such that pictures might appear afterwards. Rather than an intended meaning, ikat is a ritual that allows the fabric itself to speak. But immaterial practices do not only take the form of images. The Navajo spirit path involves weaving an incongruent line into the fabric, one that goes to the edge of the rug. This intentional irregularity opens the object to its exterior, allowing the weaver to escape becoming trapped in the object and to continue weaving. It has even been said that the original Harris Tweed was a fisherman’s protective fabric; wives would sing safeguarding songs into the weave as they made it.

A slew of museum exhibitions and art projects have revived the element of immaterial meaning within the material, with titles like *Radical Lace & Subversive Knitting* and *Gestures of Resistance*. One exhibition, *Crying the Blues*, used quilting to convey seniors’ ‘stories, ideas, and concerns’ (including health care, education for their grandchildren, wage cuts and job loss) (Clover, 2005: 635). More than a series of representations, this material imaginary was then re-circulated as a pedagogical tool. The final ‘product’, therefore, embodied, both, a set of symbols and a set of connective material practices that formed a provisional community. Indeed, craft-work has historically been performed as a gift-giving practice and as a form of care for others (kin, children, spouses, friends). The material object is produced out of, and for, community relationships. In this way craft-work is saturated with use-values.

Beyond the meanings directly integrated into the material design and the immaterial affective purposes of the objects, we also need to take into account the communicative actions infusing the production process itself. Adam Arvidsson (2005), drawing from Paolo Virno, notes that,

3 There are some obvious departures here from Lazzarato’s restrictive use. The use value of the commodity does not reside in its informational/cultural content, though this semiotic quality is indispensable at times to the uses (as in secret codes) and more importantly to the process (the persistence of occulted knowledges through marginalized spaces and practices). While the value of the product, unlike Lazzarato’s version, might get used up in consumption, the fact that much of the historical process of crafting was outside of the commodity marketplace makes this characteristic less important. More important is Lazzarato’s remark that subjectivities are transformed via immaterial labour. Immaterial labour produces a social relation: ‘labour produces not only commodities, but first and foremost it produces the capital relation’. In the case of craft-work we might alter this to say it produces a ‘non- or post-capital relation’ (Lazzarato, 1995: 137).

[i]mmaterial labour works with language in the wide sense of the term. It utilizes a common ability to interact and socialize, and a common symbolic framework, a set of shared knowledges and competences, to produce a social relation. (Virno, 2004, in Arvidsson, 2005: 241)

This social context of production, according to Lazzarato, results in an ‘enlargement of productive cooperation that even includes the production and reproduction of communication and hence of its most important contents: subjectivity’ (1995: 140).

Thinking of craft-work as immaterial labour would mean taking seriously what Tiziana Terranova sees as forms of labour not usually associated with value: chatting, life-stories, amateur production and other ‘informational materialism’ (2004). We could consider this ‘peer to peer textiling’. The knitting circle or sewing circle is a key example here. Often considered women-only spaces where the production of physical objects and communication takes place, these temporary autonomous zones provide a different kind of subject-formation. These spaces function to allow women to swap skillful knowledge (*techné*), as well as stories, experiences, songs, and other life-strategies. The sewing circle, comprised of communication and information-transmission, can be seen as a historically persistent affinity circle; it is not only a coping mechanism, but a temporary resting point for future actions. Faith Wilding and Critical Art Ensemble put it succinctly: ‘The organizing cell for the first phase of feminism was the sewing circle, the quilting group, or the ladies’ charity organization’ (2006).

Craftivists develop values and practices like mentorship, community-building, connection with other DIY projects, and gender empowerment. The Revolutionary Knitting Circle, for instance, promotes discussion, skill-sharing, and relationships among people with different backgrounds. The S/he Collective works toward building a community that promotes women’s art and social change. The current resurgence of crafting has strong links to the anarchist milieu, especially as a politicized practice of resourcefulness, local knowledge, and nonhierarchical organizational forms. In sum, the manual production of a material object involves organizational forms infused with immateriality, from specialized technical knowledge about the work itself to the wisdom and emotional support of life advice.

The virtual knitting circle and the social home

The knitting circle meshes well with the World Wide Web. When these circles initially went online, the community-producing communicative aspect came along with them (Bratich and Brush, 2006). Virtual crafting continues to exchange advice, skills, jokes, and products in addition to being a commodity market.⁴ This communal quality is found in everything from the online blogs to public demonstrations, from small Stitch ‘n’ Bitch sessions in social centers to working academic groups at conferences like ‘Digital poetics and politics’ (Buiani, 2005). The most individualistic, personal craft narratives

4 The social networking of digital online media thus has a predecessor in the tactile media of craft-work. The familiar claim about the radical potential of the digital web – interconnection, collaboration, producing and reproducing relationships – has a long history in other kinds of networking.

very quickly become stories about connecting to communities and traditions (see Lydon's *The Knitting Sutra* [1997] for an excellent example). These on and off-line gatherings do not just bring people and ideas together to make and sell a product, they work to connect members' skills, competences and creativity, in other words, their labour.

The online component is just one version of the recent publicness of fabriculture. The popularization of what Jean Railla (2004) calls 'the new domesticity' is a moment where the domestic becomes public (e.g. it appears in popular culture, it's often done in public sites, it circulates via the social web). Here we can introduce a term, following the autonomist analysis of the different figures of 20th century labour: the social home.⁵ By this term I mean two things: 1) the domestic sphere's practices physically coming out into public view, and 2) the recognition that the home was always a site of convergence between social relationships and cultural economies.

The social home acknowledges the oppressive conditions for women in domesticated situations, like gender domination and the exploitative reproduction of labour. Spaces of enclosure and marginalization now spread throughout the socius. At the same time, it is important to note along with Glenna Matthews (1989) and others, that the home is not simply a space of capture but a site of subject-production irreducible to mechanical reproduction. The home is composed of affective spaces, involving not only emotional or sentimental qualities but also the power to act. These spaces can work to increase subjective capacities via interaction. These counter hierarchical circles and circuits across and between women have been examined most famously and controversially by Carroll Smith-Rosenberg (1975) and more recently by Franklin et al (2005). Craft-work, as part of this social home, now brings with it all the histories of affinity circles and powers activated and suppressed within the domestic sphere.

These affinity circles traditionally existed in the margins (sometimes literally as corners and backrooms of homes). It is no wonder that these tightly knit groups were ridiculed as gossip circles and otherwise semiotically denigrated (Stoller, 2003). Seen as idle time and unproductive activity from the perspective of capital and masculinized value, these forms of craft-work didn't get integrated into profit-making systems but were marginalized as, at best, use-value objects or cost-cutting measures. But, it is precisely in this diminution of productive experience as 'only' affective – read as trivial and trifling – that new figures and possibilities arise.

I want to argue that what is most important about craft-work is the fact that it is produced through affective labour (a component of immaterial labour, according to Hardt and Negri (2000: 293)). Affective labour includes care-giving work, unwaged women's work (especially household labour) and media entertainment (Dalla Costa and James, 1972; Del Re, 1996; Federici, 2004). Labour finds its value in affect, defined primarily as the power to act (Negri, 1999; Hardt, 1999; Lazzarato, 1995). Rather than think of capital as the maker of value through the extraction of maximum labour power from others, Antonio Negri (1999) argues for a value analysis from below, or the base

5 This follows from the autonomist notion of the 'social factory', in which the procedures and mechanisms of factory discipline begin to permeate everyday life.

of life. Affect refers to processes like 1) small scale circulation (gifting gestures); 2) cooperation as a kind of surplus; and 3) 'historical and moral values' (1999: 80). For Michael Hardt (1999), affective labour 'is itself and directly the constitution of communities and collective subjectivities' (1999: 89).

Craft-work as affective production allows us to think about value differently. Untied from capitalist valorization, craft-work produces communities and subjectivity laterally and contains an autonomous circuit of meaning and relationships. We have noted above how community and affinities are produced through craft circles in both their historical and contemporary virtual forms. The fact that products often circulate within a gift economy (in and out of capitalism) resonates with this affective quality of small-scale circulation. The recent revival of this gift economy via handicraft encodes a desire for the pre-capitalist form of production, for the 'personal touch'. Pre-capitalist associations are, of course, a way of marketing commodities with global/local authenticity (Gajjala, 2006), but they also raise the issue of what, exactly, is being revived in this moment. In order to do this, we need to address temporality directly.

Temporality 1: Revivals and pre-capitalism

Capitalism emerged via the transmutation of craft. Textiles were one of the first major industries. Craft-work moved from guild to factory, from artisan work to industrial labour, from use-value to exchange-value. However, the 'handicraft' product wasn't the only thing to get systematized, and eventually automated, with the loom. The craft circles, creating community through production and distribution of the object (within the family, as gift, as public sign), were also captured by capital. This labour transformation was, obviously, thoroughly gendered. Mechanization disaggregated the cottage industry of weaving; it intensified the forms of production, and installed male spinners as textile machine operators (even while their wives and children often toiled for these piecemeal labourers). The gender struggles in craft-work, however, existed in antiquity, and the preconditions of capitalist gender hierarchies can be found in the professional guilds, even those who afforded more room for women's agency (Federici, 2004; Bratich and Brush, 2006).

The resurgence of craft-work and fabriculture is a revival of this initial mutation. In a telling parallel, fabriculture's recent popularity arose alongside the exposure and scrutiny of global sweatshop practices in the 1990s. Craft culture is even regarded as a direct response to this pervasive and oppressive form of craft-work (MicroRevolt, 2006; Campbell, 2005). The emphasis on slow production as opposed to rapid output, on personal expression against repetitive and specialized tasks, and on the gift exchange versus mass production, all comprise this parallel craft. And this is not new. As Glenna Matthews notes, 'from time to time there has been an outcropping of this kind of rebellion against everything being machine made' (Sabella, 2006).⁶

6 Interestingly enough, industrial looms were primary targets for Luddite sabotage. Informational forms of sabotage like viruses also find their way into fabriculture (Buiani, 2005).

Revivals are a mixed bag. One angle sees this resurgence as merely an ideological nostalgia for an idealized past. Another sees it as a way of creating value-added authenticity for commodities in an increasingly ethereal marketplace. But what if we were to think of a revival not as a return to the past, but as an affirmation and reversion within a fabric that was never lost? In other words, crafting never died: it simply spun out into multiple spaces via diverse forms.

The recent resurgence invokes the long history of craft-work. But it is not simply a return to the folk. There is a difference between noting a long-standing tradition, and relegating it to 'the past' (as pre-modern, as a previous stage in development, as pre-capitalist). What would it mean, for instance, to make the case that Tantra (meaning loom, continuity, tool for expansion or a weaving), which persists today, 'belongs' to the past? To conceptualize a resurgence or reversion⁷ means that we do not look to capitalism to provide the conditions for understanding its own historicity. From this point of view, fabriculture is a form of resurgence, or a reversion, of something that went dormant or took on other forms.

The emergence of capitalism was a moment where craft was transformed into industrial labour, the spaces of production were codified into private/public, and process was diminished in favor of product (commoditization). But crafting never disappeared; it persisted and proliferated in the cracks and interstices of capitalist culture. The commodified and industrialized forms never eliminated fabriculture, they only spatially organized it and ascribed value to certain iterations of it, while simultaneously devaluing the others. Its resurgence is neither solely new nor old; it is a way of reworking the old and of rethinking the capitalist industrialization moment along with the patriarchal division of space. This notion of time, appropriately enough, fits with some basic technical characteristics of craft-work (e.g. refusing to fetishize newness). Innovation itself changes—it can mean recrafting the material, unraveling a product to start again, or reworking the same material (differently); as it goes with fabric, so, too, with fabriculture.

Breaking history up into segmented eras and placing craft into one of them would simply cut up fabric into strips. Relegating fabriculture to a past folk or to a purely new phenomenon would diminish its critical powers, thus continuing the project of devaluing affective labour and disciplining gendered production. Instead, we can take the cycles of composition usually applied to class subjectivity, and bring them to bear on this neglected kind of labour. The resurgence may be understood as part of a recomposition of subjectivity, as well as a set of production dynamics. What we might be witnessing is the revival of the transition from commons to enclosures, from a variety of production processes to capitalism.

As Sylvia Federici (2004) argues, the rise of capitalism via primitive accumulation was not just an economic intervention into the commons made on the bodies of male workers (e.g. the spinners who were absorbed into the factories). Before this violence

7 As Peter Lamborn Wilson (1998) puts it, a reversion can have revolutionary qualities (a la the Zapatistas) if it means reviving and affirming latent traces of previous customs that warded off the accumulation of power (see especially pp. 89-91, 136).

could take place, another violence was enacted. This clearing for capitalism involved the dispersion, de-authorization and expropriation of women's skills and knowledges along with the destruction of many women's bodies, for example through the witch hunts. Female-to-female relationships—friendships and sexual intimacy—were seen as subversive (2004: 186). A wholesale transformation of the conception of the body took place. Skills related to birthing, healing, protection and nutrition, based on an extensive knowledge of plants and medicines, depended on a notion of the body as a 'receptacle of magical powers' (2004: 141). This occult body was redefined (through a long and bloody history) as a mechanical system, which paved the way for a mechanistic conceptualization of labour power. What remained of these female knowledges and practices was consigned to the domestic sphere as 'mere' reproduction.

What returns in craft-work's resurgence, then, is also this memory, all of the cunning crafts, which had been relegated to the cracks and margins. Crafting has not been 'incorporated' in the hegemonic sense, because it never emerged from an outside position (like a subculture). Craft-work is not simply folk culture, a use-value 'before' or 'outside' capital. Elements of it had been originally subsumed at capital's inception. Crafting was bifurcated, taking on new forms and spaces of concentration. Its real subsumption means there is nothing purely new here; just another point in the cycle that began with handicraft's integration into newly industrializing forms. Subsumption transforms the spaces and forms of production, and, thus, the new possibilities for politics. To understand this more, we need to return to our discussion of craft as affective production, now situated in another, ontological, temporality.

Temporality 2: Ontological accumulation and recomposition

The persistence of craft before, through, and in spite of capitalism has broader implications, linked to what Nick Dyer-Witheford calls 'the Return of Species-Being' or 'Species-Being Resurgent' (2004). Species being is 'humanity's capacity to co-operatively change the conditions of its collective existence' (2004: 3). This involves 'a combination of self-consciousness, material capacity, and collective organization' (2004: 5).

There is a recursive ontology here, as we find 'a species-being whose nature is to change its nature, and whose only essence is the capacity for transformation...[it is] a virtuality' (Dyer-Witheford, 2004: 6). Dyer-Witheford locates the contemporary conditions for species-being in a number of struggles and developments (ecological, gender, counterglobalization movements, biological contestation). I would like to add the particularly gendered practice of craft culture to this persistent and resilient ontological resurgence.

As we have seen, craft is a form of affective production. Here, we can point to another meaning of craft, the Old English *cræft*, originally meaning 'power, strength, might' (Online Etymology Dictionary). In German we see power as *kraft*, and in Italian as *abilità*. Power here is not equivalent to hierarchy and domination (*potere* in Italian; *pouvoir* in French) but is more like capacity, or ability (*potenza* and *pouissance*).

English versions of this meaning include terms like tradecraft, statecraft, spycraft, and witchcraft: all sets of skills and practices that have systematic effects in the world.

According to Negri there are four powers that comprise affective production and its ontological qualities (1999: 85-86): 1) the power to act (capacity agency, ability to produce effects); 2) the power of transformation (to combine activities, to connect an action to what is common – here we can locate the recursivity of species-being as a self valorization); 3) the power of appropriation (in which every obstacle overcome determines a greater force of action; actions absorb the conditions of their realization); and 4) expansive power (as appropriation persists in an omnilateral diffusion, the capacities to act themselves increase to the point of a transvaluation of their conditions). Affect is not only a type of labour, but a type of subjectivity—one with an ontological quality. Species-being encompasses all four powers; it is a series of virtues that persevere, even expand, over time. This formulation of species-being is tied to the capital/labour relationship. Negri (2005), like many autonomists, argues that capital, rather than being a structure that produces positions and agents, is itself an agent. Its relation to labour is precisely one between subjects. What kind of subject is capital? An interventionist one, acting through expropriation and exploitation. Alienation, according to Dyer-Witheford, refers to

‘who or what controls and limits the processes of ceaseless species self-development. Social systems that appropriate and sequester resources for particular strata or segments of species-beings block or reverse the circular access of social and individual powers that enables the common growth of species-being.’ (Dyer-Witheford, 2004: 7)

Capitalist production of subjectivity necessitates blocking the political expression of productive forces, specifically their communicative capacities, and especially with the socialization of productive forces found in immaterial labour (Negri, 2005: 132).

Accumulation thus belongs not only to capitalist regimes of value-production, but ‘from below, from the base of life’; it also involves ontological accumulation (Negri, 1999). Species-being, taking its own powers (crafts) as objects of will, consciousness, and practice has a development that encounters capital without being reduced to its interruptions and forms of violence. The concept of self-valorization refers, then, to how this value-generation of creative acts infuses the immanent needs and desires of the producing community and avoids being fully captured by capital (Negri, 1991; Dyer-Witheford, 2004; Cleaver, 1979; Virno and Hardt, 1996). For Negri, self-valorization means reviving the ‘world of solid values’ formed in historical struggles (2005: 138). It means defining

in this past a deep line, a concrete substratum which neither the conscience nor the memory attest, but only the continuity of struggles. And all the modifications, breaks and radical innovations gather around that constructed and re-found base, around that dynamic profile of a subjective ontology. (Negri, 2005: 138)

This subjective transformation requires self-consciousness, but it is an ‘already-known self-valorization – one which had perhaps never ceased’ (2005: 138). The persistence and resilience of this ontological development is located in ‘the thousand clandestine stories of a never-destroyed movement’ (2005: 139).

Negri, with his workerist legacy, foregrounds the waged labourer in this ontological development. These struggles involve resistance by (primarily male) workers. But, what happens if we take these claims about history, subjectivity, power, and ontology and extend them to craft-work, the social home, and the gendered spaces of reproduction/production? We can still find moments of struggle, but we can also locate other rhythms and accumulations: the interventions of severe and prolonged violence, the massive decomposition of women's knowledges and skills, the expropriation of powers and wisdom, the destruction of bodies, the marginalization and diminution of practices into trifling spheres. All of these were encountered by craft-work. And yet, persistence, the preservation of knowledge, the transmission of skills and wisdom across generations of affinity circles, the extension of craft into new spheres are all processes of subjectivity demonstrating an exemplary resilience central to any constitutive ontology. Craft-work withstands capitalism's founding violence, one that eventually subsumed some of craft into the factory while marginalizing others into domestic affinity circles.

While crafting is a paradigmatic case of capitalist subsumption, as power, capacity, and social value it is never eliminated or fully captured by capital. These shadow practices allow for an endurance that sets the stage for a *longue durée* of accumulation and self-valorization, one that can be examined as a site of value-production outside of the circuits of capitalist capture. Craft-work, that which pre-existed capitalism and persisted through marginalization, burnings, and commodification, now resurges as global and extensive. Its current popularity is a sign of its strength, not as incorporated into new modes of value-creation, but as an enduring practice in spite of capitalism and patriarchy. Its resurgence is a moment in a cycle, part of the warp and woof in the rich tapestry of species history.

Rethinking autonomist attachments

Defining craft-work as part of an ontological process of affective production tied to species-being pushes us to rethink some autonomist attachments when it comes to digital labour. There is a tendency among some analysts to focus on the most advanced capitalist sector (the hegemonic fraction of the labour force) to find the type of worker who best functions as a revolutionary subject. This informational worker, or digital labourer, moves from the physical factory (mass worker) to the social factory (socialized worker). But, if we operate with a notion of the social home, we do not simply trace a path from the factory outwards. Leopoldina Fortunati (2007) argues that the immaterialization of waged labour processes is actually the expansion of traditionally feminized domestic labour into the waged sphere. Once this key insight is taken seriously, there is no need to privilege an 'advanced' labour sector. Immaterialization does not come from capital as its innovation in the waged sphere, but from occulted labour and its history of preservation and struggle.

In addition to expanding the types of labouring subjects who 'count' as digital, craft-work complicates and enriches the notions of exodus, breaking, and defection from capital. The autonomist concept of exodus depends on a moment of auto-valorization characterized by a surplus: an accumulation of value, power, and social relationships

that no longer depends on capital to realize its virtues. This pertains quite well to high tech sectors (e.g. the skills of gaming software developers analyzed so thoroughly by Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter [2009]) but also needs to be applied to the immaterial digital labour of craft-workers, on and offline. Fortunati argues that the increase in immaterial labour in the domestic sphere, with all its ambivalences, still produces a 'strategic moment of self-valorization' (2007: 153).

When it comes to crafting, this self-valorization is not primarily a break from capitalist valorization; the more conventional sense of autonomy presumes an attachment and dependence on capitalism for value-production. But, as I have been arguing, craft-work was the target of a break by capital; it was split, interrupted, and bifurcated at capital's inception. Its ontological accumulation, its virtual development, then, was short-circuited, expropriated, segmented. Capitalism is an obstacle to the ontological process in this formulation through its disruptions and deprivations. As a result, it makes more sense to define exodus as the preservation and expansion of craft against breaks.

Creating the optimal conditions for the four powers of affect and the ontogenic process of species-being entails a kind of a popular security, what Paolo Virno calls a 'safeguarding' of rights and customs from capital and state' (2004: 42).⁸ When we locate craft's resurgence within cycles of composition, we might see more than cycles of struggle. The ontological process still involves antagonism (as long as capitalist exploitation continues) but a fuller notion of re-composition sees solidarity as communal, or as species-being whose expansion and transmutation needs to be acknowledged and cultivated as its own subjective process. Antagonism would take the form of preservation and popular security and would involve the defence and nurturing of emergent experiments and resurgent powers against forces that would decompose them.

Another autonomist attachment needs addressing here, namely the 'cycle of struggles' model and its concomitant mode of organizing around hegemonic subjective labour figures. Craft-work troubles and, therefore, enriches the compositional analysis based on subjective figures (professional worker, mass worker, socialized worker, knowledge worker, cognitariat). The 'cycles of struggle' model focuses on composition at a sweeping, molar level, teetering close to totality. If we examine composition from those occulted spaces in everyday life where craft persists, we need to revise our notions of cycles and temporality. The waves of composition, de-composition, and re-composition can be transferred to these other spheres, but only if they take on nuanced, micrological qualities. These cycles are accompanied by (perhaps grounded in or surrounded by) 'spirals of struggle' formed in these spaces (Shukaitis, 2009: 38, 105). This does not mean dispensing with the workerist model of the cycles, but it does mean situating them as the site of waged value production rather than the site of value production per se. As autonomist feminists bring to light, every cycle in the conventional compositional

8 Virno argues that what connects the current multitude with its seventeenth century predecessors is the 'right of resistance' (2004: 42). This *jus resistentiae* is defensive, by 'safeguarding forms of life which have already been affirmed as free-standing forms, thus protecting practices already rooted in society' (2004: 42).

analysis has its corollary mode of women's work; each subjective figure of waged labour depends on the care work and domestic labour of social (re)production.

We can see this gendered element within Marxism's own ambiguous use of the term 'craft'. Craft functions as both a de-valued, marginalized act (a residual activity that does not produce value) as well as a particular form of labour (the professional worker, with specialized knowledge). Craft refers to those skills and expert knowledges that create distinctions within industrial labour, namely skilled vs. unskilled. Spinning and weaving were among the first professional, skill-based work, based partially on the previous hierarchies of the guilds. In other words, the dual meaning of craft within Marxism runs along gender lines; the result is a gendered distinction between the amateur and the professional, which leaves affective qualities (the *amatus*) in the margins.

Craft culture's modes of subjectivation demonstrate that new social compositions occur not just in the organization of advanced technologized labour, but also in the fabrication of affective craft-work. Crafting, for instance, also produces a general intellect, though less administrative and mechanical than the one found in Marx's 'Fragment on Machines' (1973). The social element of knowledge is not predicated on a split between the objective (machinery) and subjective (general intellect). From the perspective of crafting, tools, patterns, weavers, and products are connected in the transmission of skills, tips, history, family knowledge, cultural rituals, and other immaterial/material practices. It is capitalism that cuts into this fabric to split subjects from objects in order to professionalize and commodify them.

Moreover, the gendered character of primitive accumulation and of the precapitalist guilds, as argued above, also complicates the cycle of struggle. The decomposition of craft began before capitalism accelerated its de-structuration. Compositional analysis, therefore, would have to begin earlier and in another place than those imagined in these molar subjective figures that arrive with the capital/labour relation.⁹

The 'cycles of struggle' model produced relevant modes of organizing the hegemonic subjective figures within each cycle. Is the craft subject now the hegemonic one and, thus, a privileged revolutionary subject? This view would simply duplicate similar desires, such as those of liberal second wave feminists, to enter the capitalist work force. Rather than seek substitution, crafting questions this autonomist fixation on the most advanced sector itself. This position wards off the vestiges of vanguardism that attach to higher tech political figures (e.g. the hacker), and pushes us further into micrological spheres to look for composition. Once we stop privileging the waged producer of surplus value, the whole notion of a subjective figure is transformed. We have to be wary of unifying an expanse of networks and practices into something like the 'crafter'. Crafting is a dispersed practice that alters what we mean by 'organizing'.

9 And just as Federici and others in the Midnight Notes collective argue that primitive accumulation is an ongoing process with perpetually 'new enclosures', so, too, we can examine the revivals of these precapitalist decompositions in the contemporary moment. For instance, Etsy, the massive online crafter market community not only contains the ambivalence presented by commodification of craft mentioned earlier, but is also a gendered site insofar as the majority of producers and consumers who use it are women, while the site founders and owners are male (Mosle, 2009).

J.K. Gibson-Graham (2006) argues that the historical composition of feminism operated through spaces by 'link[ing] feminists emotionally and semiotically, not primarily organizationally' (2006: xxiii). Eschewing an external organizational mechanism (as in the traditional Leftist party or union), feminist politics and imaginaries took hold via an 'ontological substrate: a vast set of disarticulated 'places'—households, communities, ecosystems, workplaces, civic organizations, bodies, public arenas, urban spaces, diasporas, regions, government agencies, occupations—related analogically rather than organizationally and connected through webs of signification' (2006: xxiv). These affective relations create a transformation based on 'ubiquity rather than unity' (2006: xxiv).¹⁰

The collaborative authorship of Gibson-Graham invites us to rethink capitalism's existence as totality, opting instead to make it one set of practices among other co-existing economic ones. Thinking of a post-capitalist politics means seeing capitalism not as a monolithic system or structure (which is how capitalism's discourses, pro and con, see it). Rather, it asks us to shift our perspective regarding capitalism (our investment, representations, orientation). Gibson-Graham's emphasis on community economics projects wagers on a re-composition in which capitalism is no longer a structure/system but an agent and machine. Autonomists also see capital as one type of subject, and highlight it as a hostile and rapacious one. How does craft's resurgence fit within this view?

Gibson-Graham's book *A Postcapitalist Politics* (2006) was published near the end of one of capitalism's high points, involving especially the development of digital media and information technologies. Post-capitalism was more a matter of perspective, an invitation to see economics differently. But, like Marx waiting for the Paris commune, an event arose in history to concretize and reinvigorate this perspective, namely capitalism's crisis in late 2008. This ongoing crisis opens a crack where resurgences and re-compositions can take place. Experiments in community, in economies and value-production have begun to take root.¹¹ In this re-composition, perhaps, we can include a type of repetition: a refurbishing, a restoration, a renovation, among capitalism's ruins. Amidst these ruins, the old cracks begin to expand; the occulted circles reach out beyond the sewing room to weave their fabric again. This re-composition sees a return of those technics and knowledges that have comprised biopower, the power of life itself. But, this is a return of an 'already-known self-valorization – one which had perhaps never ceased' (Negri, 2005: 138). Speculations on futures, digital and otherwise, need to remember the ontological accumulation of affect and the persistence of the crafts despite the catastrophic decomposition called capitalism.

10 Organization means finding units of affinity from a purely political (polis as space of public and city) or economic one (oikos as household) to ethical (through affective connection, autovalorization, open-ended communities, or ethos). Before the factory the guild, before the guild, the wick.

11 For a contemporary analysis of these emergent forms of organization, see Van Meter, Hughes, and Peace (2010).

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