

*THERE'S NO BUSINESS LIKE...*  
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The Stolbun Collection

If, despite the small chance of success, the profession of artist is so popular, it is because it offers the prospect of a labour that is apparently free of narrow specialization, allowing the artist, like heroes [and heroines] in the movies, to endow work and life with their own meanings.

—Julian Stallabrass, *Art Incorporated* (2004)

It was during these moments—though I was unaware of it at the time—that the surreal nature of my work made itself felt. With script in hand, I read lines of stunning banality. The more such scripts an actor read, the more he was considered a success. Thus the phrase “Show Business” took on an added significance. It was, indeed, a business, a busyness. But what was its meaning?

—Studs Terkel, *Working* (1974)

### **Etsy is the e-commerce home for unique, vintage, or handcrafted goods.**

Launched in 2005, the company became a benefit corporation—a for-profit company with socially inclined goals—in May 2012. This philosophical realignment was made on the following premises: “Etsy is a marketplace that fosters human connection by bringing together creative small business owners with buyers around the world looking for unique goods with a personal story.”<sup>1,2</sup> Among the site’s typical vendors selling hemp-knit hats, upcycled crocheted bracelets, rustic motivational signs, monogram stickers, customizable baby jumpers, and the like, there is a seemingly innocuous yet confounding shop: Joshua Citarella and Brad Troemel’s *Ultra Violet Production House* (UVph, or uvproductionhouse on Etsy). Among the 200-plus products for sale, we find a reusable dry-erase protest sign, a chain-link fence made of solidified incense powder, a bubble, a chessboard filled with only pawns and no empty spaces, and a business model for dealing art and drugs.

None of these products exist—at least not until they are purchased. They are exclusively concepts for sale signified through product images that are made by combining pre-existing imagery, a process Citarella and Troemel term “post-lens photography.” Thanks to shared professional standards and visual conventions across product photography—uniform lighting, backdrop, resolution, and composition—it’s relatively easy to fuse discrete stock photos together, with no need for additional advertising photography. Thus, product images simultaneously instantiate and advertise the concepts. The final “products” are posted on Etsy, and then are crossposted on Citarella’s and Troemel’s personal Instagram accounts.<sup>3</sup>

When a customer buys one of UVph’s products, the constituent pieces and necessary tools to build it are then sourced from retail giants like Amazon, Alibaba, or even eBay and sent directly to the purchaser along with a set of instructions for assembly, though nowhere is it stipulated that the object needs to be fabricated according to these instructions, if at all. Purchasers also receive a Certificate of Authenticity (CoA) from UVph, marking the digital concept as an art object and denoting an otherwise repeatable combination of materials as part of an edition—potentially limited,

1 Etsy, Certified B Corporations, <https://www.bcorporation.net/community/etsy>.

2 Recently, Etsy’s B Corp status has been at odds with shareholder interests. This could lead to a sale of the company, or at least force it to find ways to take its “one-of-a-kind” DIY products and make them scale. See Maya Kosoff, “Etsy stock plummets as C.E.O. steps down under fire,” *Vanity Fair*, 3 May 2017, <http://www.vanityfair.com/news/2017/05/etsy-stock-plummets-as-ceo-steps-down-under-fire>; and Beth Jinks, “Etsy Targeted by Black-and-White for Review Including a Sale,” *Bloomberg*, 2 May 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-05-02/etsy-targeted-by-black-and-white-for-review-including-a-sale-j27lc17g>.

3 This technique borrows from marketing techniques used to promote conceptual art and trends in tech company marketing. Seth Siegelau’s deployment of mass media formats like the “Xerox book” project would, in theory, enable wider audiences to encounter contemporary art. However, the book was too expensive to be Xeroxed and was made with letter-press instead, existing as a Xerox book in name alone. At the same time, UVph’s technique is not unlike “profit-driven marketing,” a digital marketing technique that claims to recognize value, target outcomes, and capture demand. See Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity* (Cambridge; London: The MIT Press, 2004), 136; Hans Ulrich Obrist and Asad Raza, *Ways of Curating* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016), 53; Hans Ulrich Obrist and Seth Siegelau, “Conversation between Seth Siegelau and Hans Ulrich Obrist,” *TRANS* #6, 51-63; and Google, “Profit-Driven Marketing,” <https://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/collections/profit-driven-marketing.html>.

depending on the availability of its components or the number of customers that buy a given product—uniquely built (or not) by the owner. Though the products are purely digital concepts at the outset, purchasing one results in a physical, handmade object, just like you’d get from any other Etsy vendor. As the artist’s hand is eradicated, the customer experience instead instills the object with a new form of value vis-à-vis its build-it-yourself ethos and social media sharing—think Ikea furniture fabrication meets haul video.

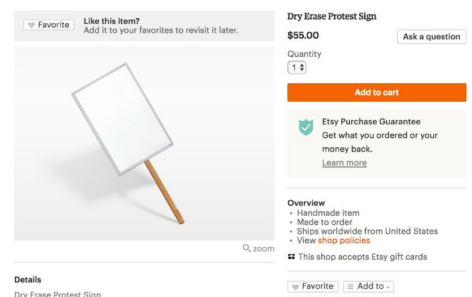
From the artists’ perspective, the UVph model at once outsources and “automates” art production. Overhead costs are nearly eliminated since the artists need only an internet-connected computer with Photoshop. UVph relies on the infrastructure and logistics expertise of retail giants that by extension furnish their company with massive storage facilities, international shipping departments, and customer service representatives. Meanwhile, Citarella and Troemel are left to freewheel with ideas. But they aren’t trying to profiteer off these monopolistic tech and retail giants—the two artists are just trying to survive.<sup>4</sup> UVph is borne out of the necessity to cut down on the exorbitant costs artists incur with or without gallery representation—studio space and studio assistants, materials and materials testing, fabrication, equipment, time—while eliminating the risk of making expensive things before knowing if they can be sold. Art was already an expensive and risky business; now, with an increasingly saturated market of artists—not to mention the recent upswing in dealers working with artists estates rather than living, practicing artists—and giant conglomerates inside and outside of the art world edging out “the little guy,” it seems more urgent than ever for artists to come up with ways to manage risk.<sup>5,6</sup>

UVph is both a rejoinder to and a performance of being an artist under neoliberalism—a commentary on the conditions of contemporary art—and a preamble on what’s to come, should these conditions persist. Neoliberalism posits artists as exemplars of (and alibis for) the “creative freedom” and flexibility demanded from all workers. Indeed, the very cultural history of 20th-century neoliberalism coincides with the equating of two mythologies: artist as embodiment of creative freedom and innovation, and the

4 For a carefully considered socioeconomic examination from an artist’s perspective as to why so many artists earn so little, see Hans Abbing, *Why Are Artists Poor?: The Exceptional Economy of the Arts* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2002).

5 The most notable recent example of a dealer choosing to work with an estate over represented, living artists being when Andrea Rosen announced the closure of her Chelsea gallery to work exclusively with the estate of Felix Gonzalez-Torres. See Andrea Rosen, “Andrea Rosen Gallery Press Release,” press release, 22 February 2017, [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1XL9NI-1TWpgDoEB-uKSTfsXGNFwIDZMr6nA\\_Qy1990s/edit](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1XL9NI-1TWpgDoEB-uKSTfsXGNFwIDZMr6nA_Qy1990s/edit).

6 Whereas previously dealers would have been the foremost managers of risk. Additionally, for an overview of the growing disparity between large and small- to mid-sized galleries, forcing many stalwarts of the scene to close in recent months, see Robin Pogrebin, “Art Gallery Closures Grow for Small and Midsize Dealers,” *New York Times*, 25 June 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/25/arts/design/art-gallery-closures-grow-for-small-and-midsize-dealers.html>.



Ultra Violet Production House, *Dry Erase Protest Sign* [screenshot from Etsy.com], 2017.



free market granting personal freedom.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the phenomenon of taking up artists as accidental ideologues is not unique to the neoliberalism of global capitalism. However, in today's economic climate, it is a violent act to fall prey to this myth while the disparity between socioeconomic groups is increasing and workers are laboring harder for less wages and protections. An artistic critique of neoliberalism must be both a critique of the subject position of the artist, and the wider socioeconomic and cultural implications that promote the ideal of free self-expression while silencing the majority. The myth of the autonomous artist persists—like the myth of the small-business owner or the start-up entrepreneur of today—because it authorizes the (false) freedom through individual agency that neoliberalism promises. At the same time, it provides a convenient alibi for the withdrawal of the social safety net and corporate responsibility for the welfare of workers.

For artists, this inevitably feeds back into art practice and who gets to pursue one in the first place. How does one maintain a practice without the constant worry of debt or consigning to work with disreputable collectors, institutions, and corporations?<sup>8</sup> For those attempting to participate in the art market, can one achieve financial independence without playing into and uncritically reproducing neoliberal subjectivity in a system that rewards this disposition? And, if artists have to hustle to make their work and lives viable, then how could their work be anything but an extension thereof?

Citarella and Troemel's Esty shop is a practical and conceptual accommodation of the economic conditions (and restraints) of being an artist, given the structure of the art market. It is an art practice as future-looking business model, one that parodies the artist's contemporary working conditions while performing within them. This parodying is not a comment on neoliberal subjectivity but an essential aspect of it, wherever and by whomever it is practiced. To inhabit a neoliberal subject position is to be in a state of self-conscious parody, a position where one stands in semi-ironic distance from the self-promotional practices one must enact perpetually to remain economically viable. Any "neoliberal entrepreneur," artist or not, operates in a highly self-aware, hyper-promotional, kitsch-meets-camp hybrid position of bad faith.

<sup>7</sup> A well-known example from recent history is the CIA's covert backing of modern art as a convenient narrative of free expression to stand in stark contrast to Cold War communism. See Erika Lee Doss, *Looking at Life Magazine* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001); and *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism: From regionalism to abstract expressionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). Another is when Conceptual art gained support from corporate sponsors in the 1960s alongside the growth of managerial-style workplaces and the seedlings of Silicon Valley in Palo Alto, drawing parallels between artistic and commercial "innovation." This was most clearly articulated in the 1969 exhibition *When Attitude Becomes Form*, sponsored by Phillip Morris. See Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity*, 2. For an historical analysis of the growing gallery scene in New York, the increase in people identifying as artists, and government and corporate funding of the arts from 1940-1985, see Diana Crane, *The Transformation of the Avant-Garde: The New York Art World, 1940-1985* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985). Especially relevant to this point is Crane's discussion of federal and corporate spending deployed to promote social well-being, exhibit social responsibility, or, as Hans Haacke has argued, to influence liberal middle class culture.

<sup>8</sup> A timely example can be found in Brian Boucher, "What to Do If Your Patron Is a Far-Right Firebrand? Red Bull Artists Respond," artnet, 2 May 2017, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/red-bull-artists-respond-ceo-far-right-943517>.

For the exhibition of actualized UVph products presented at Detroit's Bahamas Biennale this May through July, The Stolbun Collection provided funds for the materials (as well as this essay); otherwise the Etsy store allows the artists to function without outside cash infusions.<sup>9</sup> We can think of UVph as a possible "exit" from contemporary art.<sup>10</sup> It perhaps seems counterintuitive that a project that so embraces neoliberal ideology could represent an escape from it. The fact that it is a functional business model, offering artists more autonomy from the gallery system and the art market at large, does not make it any less a warning sign. That this frankly parodic imagining of what could be already works in the present may be its sternest warning of all.

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**Sociologists Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval argue that the tenets of**

neoliberalism are based on reduction: cutting funding to "superfluous" public services, like education and health care; deregulating markets, businesses, and institutions; eliminating protection of rights and a basic sense of public service for the greater good. But neoliberalism could not reproduce itself if it were entirely negative or reductive. Neoliberalism structures "*the form of our existence*" in the way it "aligns social relations with the model of the market; it promotes the justification of greater inequalities; it even transforms the individual, now called on to conceive and conduct him or herself as an enterprise."<sup>11</sup> But to make this transformation of the individual palatable to the populations being reshaped, it presents this self-as-enterprise as the liberty of being one's own boss and having the creative freedom to improve one's human capital in what-ever way one sees fit. It posits an equivalence between being an entrepreneur and being an artist, with the mutual reinforcement of these conceptions serving to distract subjects from their growing economic precariousness.

Consider Citarella's triptych *SWIM A Few Years From Now* (2017), a jam-packed scene in which he presents himself in a future-outfitted version of his current SoHo

<sup>9</sup> Since the writing of this essay, Citarella and Troemel have shifted UVph's business model to be more focused on Instagram posts, which can be supported through Patreon, a membership platform offering subscription models for "creators" to charge consumers, or "patrons."

<sup>10</sup> Suhail Malik, "On the Necessity of Art's Exit from Contemporary Art," talk series at Artists Space: Books & Talks, New York, NY, 3 May, 17 May, 31 May, and 14 June 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society* (London; New York: Verso, 2013), 3. See also Wendy Brown's edited volume *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2015).

apartment-cum-studio in the year 2025. He is the contemporary neoliberal artist par excellence—what critic Scott Indrisek more nonchalantly describes as the “ultimate New York freelancer”—fending for himself under increasingly worsening conditions.<sup>12</sup>

12 Scott Indrisek, “Up and Coming: Joshua Citarella Is the Ultimate New York Freelancer,” *Artsy*, 25 February 2017, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-joshua-citarella-ultimate-new-york-freelancer>.



Doran, Kerry. “There’s No Business Like...” *The Stolbun Collection*, October 2017.



Contemplative and melancholic in an ergonomic office chair, he is surrounded by seemingly improvised and efficient space-saving survivalist objects: Mason-jar meals fill the refrigerator beneath his desk; the under-desk keyboard shelf doubles as a hot plate; a loft bed has thermal heat blankets for linens (which, in case of emergency, could be stashed into the bug-out bag mounted on the wall); a rainwater collection and filtration system above the shower provides clean drinking water. Jaunty annotations and diagrams on the surface of the scene elucidate not only the potential function of what's pictured but the constructedness of the image itself, with Citarella deploying Photoshop tools and attributes, like layering, as painterly gestures. Everything in the piece points to an all-encompassing blending of life and work, public and private, from the *mise-en-scène* itself to the reflexive compositional process to the emphasis on basic domestic survival. The total work of art has become living, or working itself, and living has become surviving.

Though the effects of neoliberalism are felt in all industries, the art world is especially susceptible with the way it already blurs boundaries between work and play, labor and leisure. Within the contemporary art market—which follows the logic of the market at large seeking to profit from logistics, service, and market dominance rather than through margins on material commodities—artists are risk-bearing exemplars of free labor markets but are represented as unfettered champions of free expression, hiding art's fundamental complicity with the neoliberal restructuring of society.<sup>13</sup> Collectors seek to buy into the myth of the artist who appears to transcend the demands and restrictions of corporate capitalism,<sup>14</sup> and aspiring artists often expect to embody this myth, motivating themselves with hopes of escaping the doldrums of conventional careerist future, a surefire fate of being underemployed and overworked. The growth of art schools and MFA programs is indicative of this trend: Enrollment has surged even as such programs have become more expensive. Rather than produce artists as experimental free thinkers, art schools and MFA programs produce a crowd of indebted art workers driven to compete furiously for the few opportunities the art world supplies.<sup>15</sup>

13 See Stallabrass, *Art Incorporated* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1-10; and Ben Davis, *9.5 theses on art and class* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013).

14 Stallabrass, *Art Incorporated*, 4-9.

15 This is not unique to present-day art education and has its roots with the restructuring of art education in the 1960s. See Howard Singerman, *Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University* (Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999).

Social media has only exacerbated the demands of this highly competitive market. These media provide aspiring artists platforms that function as a constantly streaming CVs, disclosing their existing social capital and their future market potential. Faves, followers, and bottom-line visibility incentivize self-commodification and enable the cult of the personality; a cohesive brand is more recognizable than a critical practice (not unlike an art fair). Artworks themselves, when presented on such platforms, are less significant than the illusion of work that a series of posts can convey. Works are not valued so much as artists are, in terms of their stream of productivity, for their always-on, on demand, just-in-time service potential. And when you are always producing, you are always valuable. Further, aspirants become demonstrably flexible, which, like productivity, is central to neoliberal subjectivity.<sup>16</sup> The hybrid artist-curator-editor-writer-poet-performance-artist is a highly marketable jack-of-all-trades, something like a diversified investment portfolio—a way to manage risk. Demand for specialists dwindles when “content is king.” But “content” is more akin to a stream of branded experience, participation in a person’s objectified life as marketing event, than to any given discrete post or object.

Troemel hit this nerve when the idea of social media as social currency and market capital was still relatively new, first with *On The Make* (2008–09), a hyperbolic, performative blog chronicling all of the artist’s social maneuvering, equating how much one did and saw with success itself.<sup>17</sup> This early example of self-commodification as performance shifted to content production with *Jogging* (2009–14), on which Citarella was also a collaborator. This art collective of sorts was conducted through a submission-based Tumblr.<sup>18</sup> It established a mode of art practice that enabled participants to keep pace with the rapidity of e-flux and Contemporary Art Daily (CAD), as well as content production at large, without necessitating the same revenue streams and institutional build-out as their “competitors”—other artists and “creative professionals” alike. To achieve this, the blog’s members staged photos and employed what Citarella and Troemel now define as post-lens photography, where parts of found imagery were pieced together to form a wholly new image. The group conceptualized these images as sculptures or installations in form and concept, combining Tumblr-esque visual

<sup>16</sup> See Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2005), 57–103; and Dardot and Laval, *The New Way of the World*, 101–120.

<sup>17</sup> For perspective, Instagram launched on October 6, 2010

<sup>18</sup> The group’s members included, along with Citarella and Troemel, Lauren Christiansen, Spencer Longo, Haley Mellin, Rachael Milton, Jesse Stecklow, Artie Vierkant, and Andrew Norman Wilson.



Baguette Koozie from *Jogging*, 2012.



culture with the white-cube aesthetic of contemporary art, particularly its installation images. The latter was a tongue-in-cheek response to the newly forming reality that exhibitions would primarily be experienced through their documentation: Why make an object for the sake of being photographed when the tools exist to fake it?<sup>19</sup>

Jogging essentially fashioned an art practice that emulated the dominant modes of content production online—namely, meme-making through a slapdash appropriation of stock images, news media, and whatever other zeitgeist-y images could be combined via Adobe digital production tools, making content tailored for social media feeds, news and culture websites, and content aggregators—to parody that form of “creativity” that artists are increasingly forced to contend with.<sup>20</sup> The images were topically humorous and relatable, and while they could be perplexing in meaning or intent, they shared a particular aesthetic, blending tropes of art world installation imagery and the burgeoning Post-Internet aesthetic with online image culture: A fried egg in an ejected disc-reader slot. A MacBook submerged in tub. A baguette-cum-beer koozie. Posts could circulate online through dispersed social networks, existing out-side the institutional framework of the art world—in part, the curated content of CAD—while still playing into its logic. This was most evident in how the posts were formatted, following standard gallery labeling conventions: italicized title, date, and medium.<sup>21</sup> The images demonstrated the participants’ keen awareness of the internet’s idiosyncratic visual discourse, and the distributive potential of microblogging to reach an audience beyond circles of peers or institutionalized eyes.

With more and more participants contributing to the site’s content, postings coalesced into an aesthetic at once mutable and imitable. Landing a spot on the page and, later, receiving money based on the number of reblogs, or popularity, of a given post (thus encouraging viewers to be competitive with one another in the same way Jogging competed with “creatives” at large) required adhering to the “feel” of preceding posts. From the outset, images were enough for the founding members; what gave the images life was their changeable online context.

19 A similar conceit can be found in *Compression Artifacts* (2013), a work by Citarella, with contributions from Wyatt Niehaus, Kate Steciw, Artie Vierkant, and Troemel. An exhibition “built at an undisclosed location” began as a digitally constructed image of a gallery space, which Citarella then fabricated. The construction was photographed; the digital image was manipulated so that the scale of the gallery and its contents shifted across a series of images to demonstrate the flexibility and shortcomings of digital photography software, in the context of the editing and circulation of installation documentation. See Citarella, statement on *Compression Artifacts*, artist’s website, <http://joshuacitarella.com/artifacts.html>.

20 Or, the “creative class,” partially comprising “creative professionals,” who monetize creative production into creative services. See Richard L. Florida in *The Rise of the Creative Class: revisited* (New York: Basic Books, 2014).

21 Jogging is similar to Contemporary Art Daily in its standardized formatting and submission policy—though nearly every post submitted to Jogging was uploaded to the site. Jogging is distinct from CAD in that user submissions were anonymous. Users submitting to the site could choose a symbol or combination of symbols (≈, œ, Δ, †, \*, +, etc.) to represent their name, which optionally could be a clickthrough link to the user’s website of choice, often a personal artist website or Tumblr. Symbols, in lieu of a name, distanced the brand of the individual from the brand of the larger project. Thus, Jog-ging is also unlike CAD in the way in which Michael Sanchez likens the website to Marc Camille Chamowicz 2008 retrospective being framed as an “affinity network.” See Michael Sanchez, “Contemporary Art, Daily,” *The Composing Rooms*, [http://thecomposingrooms.com/research/reading/repeatpattern/Michael\\_Sanchez\\_Contemporary\\_Art\\_Daily.pdf](http://thecomposingrooms.com/research/reading/repeatpattern/Michael_Sanchez_Contemporary_Art_Daily.pdf).



Post from *Jogging*, 2013.

Largely informed by David Joselit’s conception of “buzz” in *After Art*, *Jogging* holds that the more widely disseminated an image is, the more saturated with significance it becomes. As Joselit argues, “the more points of contact an image is able to establish, the greater its power will be.”<sup>22</sup> For Joselit, buzz displaces Walter Benjamin’s longstanding notion of aura, in which the singularity of an art object imbues its materiality with mythic quality. A buzz instead “arises not from the agency of a single object or event but from the emergent behaviors of populations of actors (both organic and inorganic) when their discrete movements are sufficiently in phase to produce coordinated action.”<sup>23</sup> Artists who recognize the triumph of buzz over aura direct their practice toward instigating such coordination.

For UVph, like *Jogging*, these kinds of “athletic aesthetics”—a phrase coined by Troemel in an essay of the same name to define this mode of art practice in terms of achievement and endurance<sup>24</sup>—flex themselves in the virality of the images (and of course, the name “jogging” is itself a reference to athletic activity). Both projects are a performance of athletic aesthetics, rather than an outright alignment with neoliberal content production or its ideology. Speaking on the relationship between museums and social media at the Whitney Museum in 2014, Troemel sped through his allotted seven minutes with increasing intensity and alacrity, breaking a sweat, huffing and puffing, and eliciting laughs from the audience (behavior one might expect from a class clown or a steroid-pumping jock more than an artist).<sup>25</sup> It was a parodic embodiment of the accelerationist ethos that both *Jogging* and UVph critique. For UVph, there are added influences from clickbait culture and meme-making and sharing, both optimized for buzz. UVph products and their names are inspired by listicles, Pinterest pins, and other online content that accumulates attention and demands circulation. The content is designed to startle and be shared: *Steal This Look: How To Budget Your Self Aggrandizing Patron Portraiture To Exceed The Yearly Income Of Artists Whose Work You’re Posing With*; *20 Mood Enhancing Windshield Crystals You Can’t Drive With-out*; *What Your Phone’s Cracked Screen’s Palm Reading Can Tell You About The Next Four Years’ Federal Interest Rate*.

22 David Joselit, *After Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), XVI.

23 *Ibid.*, 16-18.

24 Brad Troemel, “Athletic Aesthetics,” *The New Inquiry*, 10 May 2013, <https://thenewinquiry.com/athletic-aesthetics/>.

25 Brad Troemel, “Shared Spaces: Social Media and Museum Structures,” micro-lecture at the Shared Spaces Symposium, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY, 14 January 2014, [http://whitney.org/WatchAndListen?play\\_id=914](http://whitney.org/WatchAndListen?play_id=914).



Post from *Jogging*, 2013.

At the project's outset, UVph's inventory consisted of products that were not always physically feasible for more than a few seconds. *A bubble* (self-explanatory) or *ice necklace* (which exists as the object pictured only for as long as an ice cube stays solid) are indicative of this. Ostensibly, they can be constructed, but products like these have a sensibility more aligned with Jogging posts, where the images alone served as the art object and the audience of the work is conceived as being wherever the image landed on the internet.

Now, Citarella and Troemel want the products to be physically viable, in part, to differentiate the impulse of the work from Jogging. There has also been pushback from Etsy (the pair has received cease and desist letters from the company over products whose "handcrafted" status is held to be disputable), and for the exhibition at Bahamas Biennale, the artists aimed to deal with the material challenges of their conceptual propositions—almost as a "proof of concept for the UV model."<sup>26,27</sup> Therein lies an irony that plays against the original conceit of Jogging: The digitally represented products are made into physical objects only to end up as installation images that will circulate beyond whomever could make the trip to Detroit. Beyond the necessity of making the works and showing them to a broad audience, there is a conceptual motivation, too, since an object affords the owner of the product with a portion of the value through ownership, which stands in contrast to cloud-based services and third-party companies administering content for a premium. "Own nothing, have everything" only works if you can pay-to-play.

The political motivations of the project have also become more pronounced than previous works of similar ilk. Many of the store's products hyperbolize "folk political" strategies, which Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams define in *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* as individual-level political acts addressed toward global-scale problems.<sup>28</sup> (UVph's *Demand Full Automation of the Teenage Workforce NOW*—a product in which a dog hooked to a lawnmower theoretically saves a teen from a summer job—is a direct nod to their work.) Srnicek and Williams argue that the scale of problems produced by the combination of globalization, international

26 Citarella and Troemel also received a letter from Restoration Hardware in response to the *crust COUCH*, the image of which came from the store's website, and apparently was not modified enough to be considered different from the original.

27 Troemel, quoted in Margaret Carrigan, "UV Production House Makes a New Market Model," *BLOUIN ARTINFO*, 24 May 2017, <http://www.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/2232277/uv-production-house-makes-a-new-market-model>.

28 Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* (London; New York: Verso, 2015), 9-13.



TOP: Ultra Violet Production House, *Demand Full Automation of the Teenage Workforce NOW*, 2017.

BOTTOM DETAIL: *Demand Full Automation of the Teenage Workforce NOW*



politics, and climate change has exacerbated folk political tendencies. By attempting to bring “politics down to the ‘human scale,’” folk politics emphasizes “temporal, spatial, and conceptual immediacy” in lieu of efficacy.<sup>29</sup> Being recognized as well-intentioned serves as compensation for impotence and a substitute for the work of political organizing at a scale that could be effective. At its most extreme, folk politics makes the smallest or most banal gestures appear to be politically loaded. Sporting a reusable, branded tote becomes a form of political engagement. But it becomes a feedback loop: In trying to assuage the guilt brought on by a consumption-centric lifestyle, individuals compel themselves to consume more.<sup>30</sup>

In their critique of the folk political, Citarella and Troemel, like Srnicek and Williams, do not take individuals to task. Instead, the products offered by UVph critique contemporary neoliberal working conditions, which in turn have engendered and sustained folk politics, including ethical consumerism, localism, survivalism, and other brands of -isms that center on individual responsibility rather than a strategy that could be globally scaled. Its parody of neoliberalist solutions reproduces their contradictions and high-lights their inevitable systemic failures without falling prey to unknowingly re-enacting their underlying logic.

A number of UVph products critique individualized folk political gestures. For instance, *farm to table table* takes its name from the fashionable, if problematic, farm-to-table movement, a localist strategy designating restaurants that source ingredients from local farms. Rather than being a true social movement, though, it was first adopted by high-end restaurateurs; to participate in such politics requires being of a certain class and willingness, or ability, to pay a premium for food. UVph addresses this by bringing farm-to-table politics into your home. Following the product description, the *farm to table table* “literally brings the farm to your table. What could be more local than eating right from the table itself?” A conventional round, wooden dining room table is pictured, topped with grass and a sapling tree; a teacup sits atop the little lawn as though nothing is out of the ordinary. The problem of increasing “food miles”—the distance food travels en route to being consumed—or more resources being expended

29 Ibid., 11.

30 This is not to say that consumers are unaware of the “ethical” marketing tactics, which can dissuade them from purchasing products. Boltanski and Chiapello make this case in their discussion of eco-products. Consumers quickly became disillusioned with ecological marketing and “commodification was enough to cast doubt on the reality and value of eco-products. From the early 1990s, there followed a decline in the percentage of purchasers inclined to travel or pay more for green products.” See *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, 447-449.



TOP: Ultra Violet Production House, *farm to table table*, 2017.

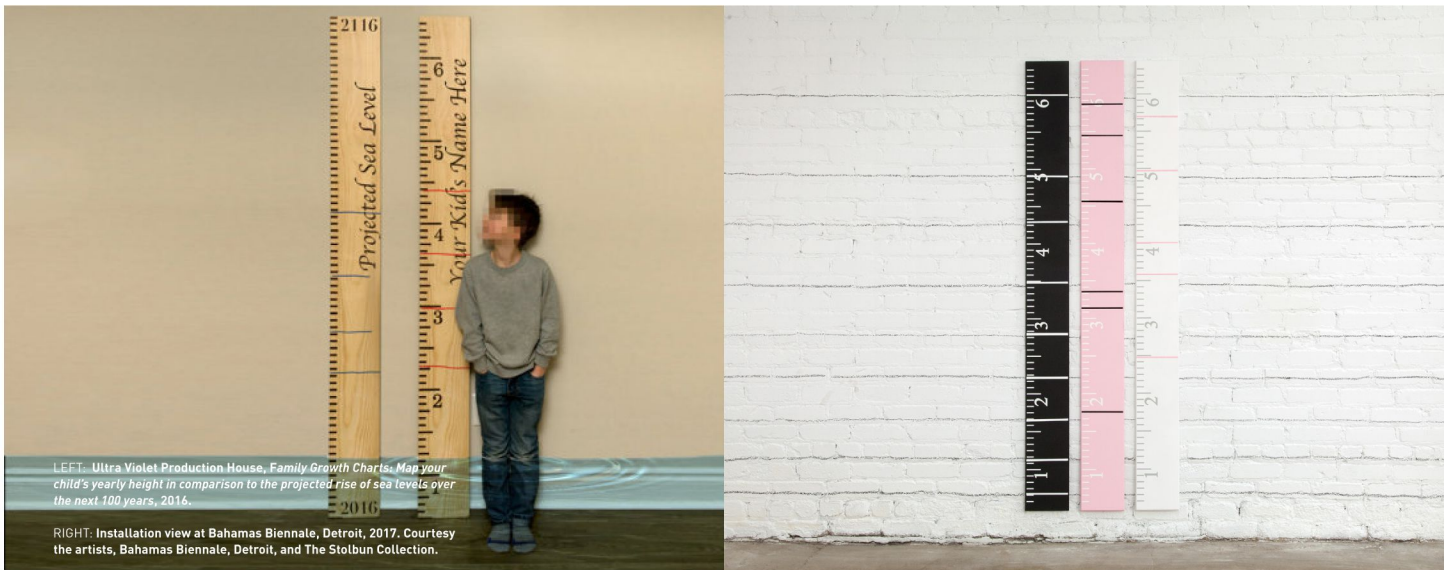
BOTTOM DETAIL: *farm to table table*

to produce a food locally rather than import the crop from a region more suitable to its growing is snidely solved in one fell swoop by adding a *farm to table table* to your home, the most “local” place of all.<sup>31</sup>

Survivalism is another folk political strategy critiqued among UVph products, as with Citarella’s *SWIM*. Pinterest, while on the surface may seem like an unlikely source of survivalist inspiration for the duo, exemplifies fend-for-yourself, folk political tactics, whether it’s DIY or “prepper” culture. Repurposing mason jars and reading up on post-apocalyptic foraging strategies tell the same story: Impending political and ecological uncertainty demands increasing self-sufficiency. Meanwhile, products like *Double Growth Charts: Map your child’s yearly height in comparison to the projected rise of sea levels over the next 100 years?* propose an insufficient consumerist response to global crises, underscoring the inadequacy of product-driven political tactics.<sup>32</sup>

31 Alison Smith, Paul Watkiss, Geoff Tweddle, Alan McKinnon, Mike Browne, Alistair Hunt, Colin Treleven, Chris Nash, Sam Cross, “The Validity of Food Miles as an Indicator of Sustainable Development,” Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs, July 2005, [http://library.uniteddiversity.coop/Food/DEFRA\\_Food\\_Miles\\_Report.pdf](http://library.uniteddiversity.coop/Food/DEFRA_Food_Miles_Report.pdf), cited in Srnicek and Williams, *Inventing the Future*, 42-43.

32 UVph products referencing climate change include *rising sea level diagram in 5 year increments*; *Small Business Opportunity* (6. Insurance Claim Funded Gallery Owner) *build a coastal gallery below sea levels to encourage flooding*; *Small Business Opportunity* (7. Seasteading Gallery Owner) *FLOATING pavillion [sic] for sinking Biennial cities*; *Aspire and In-spire: A Custom Painting of You as A Soldier Returning Home to Your Kids As a Storm Shelter Window Cover*; and *fun Tornado Shelter*.





A stranger breed of localism-meets-survivalism is found in the family urine drink fountain (*LIFESTRAW self cleaning urinate into the bottom and watch as the water is purified and made drinkable in Time*). LifeStraw, a branded water-filtration product popular with outdoor enthusiasts and survivalists alike, is refashioned to apparently purify urine into drinking water, serving the dual purpose of lawn or garden decoration. Is the family trying to reduce water consumption or is there no more water to be consumed? Which dystopia do you prefer? At once hyper-contemporary and pseudo-futuristic, UVph's products, especially of the survivalist variety, occupy an uncanny valley between feasible consumer goods and our unfolding neoliberal nightmare.

Neoliberal ideology and subjectivity is most stark in Silicon Valley, which celebrates the entrepreneurial work ethic in its startup culture and embraces a mythological belief in the life- and world-saving potential of technology. All of our problems can be solved with the push of a button, including ones we didn't even know we had. The often circuitous logic of pseudo-innovation is found in UVph products like *Transform Your Ceiling Leak Into An Off-Grid Purification Water Source For Pets*, which combines three upside-down umbrellas, containing coarse gravel, charcoal, and fine sand, to create a pet fountain à la SkyMall or The Sharper Image. Silicon Valley's prototypical working conditions are also parodied in UVph products. Tech companies champion laissez-faire, fend-for-yourself holacracy under the guise of employee well-being. Standing desks, endless beer, energy drinks, and snacks are staples in the office environment where employees are encouraged to ideate, hack, hang out, and cultivate individual interests.<sup>33</sup> This approach to "destressing" the workforce, however, is all in service of the company as employees end up working longer and invest more effort in "personal" projects that ultimately belong to their employers. UVph mimics these approaches in products like the *coltan zen garden desktop stress reliever*, a desk-sized (literally) Zen garden with Coltan sand,<sup>34</sup> or *Small Business Opportunity (5. Salon Manager): in-office nibble fish farming and exfoliating relaxation massage amenity*, which lets you transform your office desk into a personal spa retreat by placing it directly into a tank with nibble fish (a trendy pedicure procedure in which fish nibble the dead skin off one's feet). With simple, Zen-inducing solutions like these, employees will no longer have to choose between success and wellness. Doesn't success equal well-being after all?

33 Michael Schrage, "Just How Valuable Is Google's "20% Time"?", *Harvard Business Review*, 20 August 2013, <https://hbr.org/2013/08/just-how-valuable-is-googles-2-1>.

34 Coltan also features in Citarella's *Multiplied Coltan* series (2016-ongoing), which makes the conflict-causing material found in nearly all of our consumer electronics its formal and material subject matter. For background on conflicts and lack of protections around Coltan mining, see Ewan Sutherland, "Coltan, the Congo and your cell phone: The connection between your mobile phone and human rights abuses in Africa," 11 April 2011, doi: 10.2139/ssrn.1752822.

Silicon Valley’s work ethos is prevalent beyond its office culture, in part because the office of the 20th century is disappearing. Consultants, contractors, freelancers, or part-timers make up the “gig economy,” a mode of employment facilitated by the on-demand apps tech companies promulgate. Just as deregulation has been sold as protecting rather than undermining our civil liberties (less government and state-sponsored infrastructure, more freedom), so the prospect of “being your own boss” is represented as economic freedom rather than debilitating precarity.<sup>35</sup> In both cases, the individual is less systemically insured despite taking on more risk and responsibility.<sup>36</sup> Being your own boss in practice comes to mean that you are always working. This is underscored in UVph’s *Take Your Child to Work Day for Freelancers: Redefine your home desk by altering the lighting source from tungsten (home) to daylight (work)*. First observed in 1992,

35 Even Diane Mulcahy, author of *The Gig Economy* and proponent of “gigging” (the subtitle of her book is “The Complete Guide to Getting Better Work, Taking More Time Off, and Financing the Life You Want”), understands that the gig economy is a Band-Aid on an economy where there is little to no systemic support. See Nathan Heller’s “The Gig Is Up,” *The New Yorker*, 15 May 2017, 61.

36 Even if freelancing provides a steady income, employee protections—pensions, healthcare, vacations, holidays, and sick leave—are dwindling or nonexistent for much of the workforce. See Jacob S. Hacker, *The Great Risk Shift: The New Economic Insecurity and the Decline of the American Dream* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).



Ultra Violet Production House, *Take Your Child to Work Day for Freelancers: Redefine your home desk by altering the lighting source from tungsten (home) to daylight (work)*, 2017

“Take Our Daughters and Sons to Work Day” quickly becomes more of anachronism as freelancers come to predominate the total workforce.<sup>37</sup> In the UVph product that seeks to emulate this family friendly annual event in spite of our changing economic landscape, the same scene is depicted twice: a dad sitting with a toddler on his lap and a blanket around his neck, with a turquoise iMac G3 and a scanner in the foreground. The only difference between the two images is the white balance. On the left, the image has a warm, tungsten glow, while the same image on the right has a blue hued fluorescence, reminiscent of an office environment. UVph’s product, when purchased, provides two different light bulbs, for transforming a den into an office at the flick of a switch. If only giving up your employee protections was so easy.

37 Aaron Smith, “Shared, Collaborative and On Demand: The New Digital Economy,” *Pew Research Center*, 19 May 2016, <http://www.pewinternet.org/2016/05/19/the-new-digital-economy/>.



TOP: Ultra Violet Production House, *Small Business Opportunity (5. Salon Manager): in-office nibble fish farming and exfoliating relaxation massage amenity*, 2016.

BOTTOM DETAIL: *Small Business Opportunity (5. Salon Manager): in-office nibble fish farming and exfoliating relaxation massage amenity*

The artist, as Indrisek declared with regard to *SWIM*, is the “ultimate freelancer.” This was true before global neoliberalism was pervasive, and is now exacerbated as more artists are cobbling together teaching and freelancing gigs on top of a studio practice. Cultural capital doesn’t pay the bills. *Helpful Ways To Disguise You’re Living Out of Your Studio: This Bed Frame Serves as a Slatwall for Painting, a Couch for Studio Visits, a Pe*—the product name trails off, insinuating an endless host of possibilities for a simple set of slats—speaks to the balancing act of paying two rents in increasingly expensive cities and artistic centers like New York that become “trendy” and therefore more expensive in part because of the presence of developed cultural spheres. Romantic imaginings of working as an artist are taken to task. Like the freelancer working from home, work-life balance is nonexistent when you have to sleep in your studio. Also like the freelancer—who ideally, or at least necessarily, must already be flexible, healthy, and marginally wealthy—the artist must furnish his or her own support system and means of accumulating capital in the first place. Particular to the artist’s dilemma, though, is the necessity of translating “free expression” and creativity into capital in order to maintain said practice.

Many of UVph’s product offerings propose a double critique: attacking the long-tail logic of niche e-commerce and the fallacies of entrepreneurial bootstrapping wrought by start-up culture. Hence a number of UVph’s products fall into the “Small Business



Opportunity” category, like the nail salon above. All are priced at \$15,000. Here, UVph contributes to the startup marketplace at large, one of the last illusionistic strongholds of the American Dream.<sup>38</sup> Of all of UVph’s product offerings, the SBOs truly cater to the most niche of niche clients. There can only be one *Small Business Opportunity* (1. *The Blue Oyster Dealer*) *Plans for starting your own remote project Space while Growing Blue Oyster Mushrooms*, after which point any of the others purchased will become direct competitors and thus have to change the model slightly. If UVph has to compete with other businesses and artists, why shouldn’t their customers, too?

\* \* \*

**As we have seen, UVph’s product images double as marketing materials,** cutting down costs and ramping up efficiency. They are at once the “products” and memes, appropriating aspects of familiar cultural motifs and modifying them to facilitate its continued spread.<sup>39</sup> Products like the *crust COUCH*; *The NADA Spiders for Change Fund, donate 1 dollar to anonymously release six wolf spiders in the fair and a chance to donate 100 to research*; and *airBNB housing solution: remain on your Lower East Side apartments fire escape in a hanging tent while guests pay off your month’s rent* go beyond virality. All garnered attention from a number of blogs and clickbait websites, where authors and commenters not only believed what they saw, but added a layer of cultural interpretation to the content that either outraged, excited, or confused them because it absurdly yet justifiably articulated a relatable cultural truth. One author remarking on the *crust COUCH*: “I can’t decide if this is absurd and offensive or kind of cool, but I’m leaning towards offensive.” This could be said about most of UVph’s products. The best images strike a nerve, whether or not you’re “in” on the (art) joke or not. At best, this incites the casual viewer or recipient of the image/concept/product to make an interpretation in response, building into its memetic history and future memetic potential.

38 Hacker, *The Great Risk Shift*; Neil Patel, “90% Of Startups Fail: Here’s What You Need To Know About The 10%,” *Forbes*, 16 January 2015, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/neilpatel/2015/01/16/90-of-startups-will-fail-heres-what-you-need-to-know-about-the-10/#71cbc52455e1>.

39 Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene: 30th Anniversary Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 189-192. For a more recent, culturally attuned definition of memes and memetic culture, see Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2014), 20, in which she defines memes as follows: “I suggest defining an Internet meme as (a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance; (b) that were created with awareness of each other; and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users.” See also Ryan M. Milner, *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2016).

In these instances, and others, memes operate as political forces, “shap[ing] and reflect[ing] general social mindsets.”<sup>40</sup> The meme format adopted by Citarella and Troemel participates within a particular vernacular and mode of dissemination that relies on contributions from the collective and has real, transformative political potential. It requires the ability to diffuse between individuals while speaking to larger cultural mindsets. Institutionalized discourse on the distributive power of memetic imagery, language, or the combination thereof is limited, but growing. While meme making—which can be more broadly understood as collective culture building—has been written off by many as vapid, it is a mechanism by which underrepresented peoples or narratives can come into dominant cultural consciousness.<sup>41</sup> Operating within distributive networks of commerce and social media,

40 Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, 17.

41 Shifman recognizes and argues for the political potency of memes, writing that “political memes are about making a point—participating in a normative debate about how the world should look and the best way to get there;” citing Occupy, the Arab Spring, and other recent political uprisings that required collective meaning-making to occur by way of physical and digital proximity. See Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, 148-187.





UVph's content exists in publicly accessible domains; it only becomes meaningful when a public creates its meaning—or literally builds the product itself.<sup>42</sup> Meanwhile, Citarella and Troemel perform neoliberal subjectivity by conducting themselves as their own enterprise, competing within open marketplaces against fellow Etsy shop vendors—the satire of which resides both in the fact that Etsy is currently flailing (in part because the idea of B Corp is a liberal pipe dream in the first place) and that crafters and artisans of all varieties, with whom the two artists level themselves, are just as susceptible to precarity as anyone else in the gig economy. UVph's performance becomes its provocation.

The critique extends beyond the art institution into the cultural landscape at large. The motivation for this shift is clear: To talk about the neoliberal artist's dilemma—or about start-up culture, the gig economy, or whatever variety of economic structuring attempts to offload social responsibility onto individuals—is to talk about the systemic shortcomings of government.<sup>43</sup> Being your own boss or pulling yourself up by your bootstraps—the liberal and conservative responses to such failures—are touted as solutions by the mainstream media and politicians alike. A counter-hegemonic narrative that combats illogic with its own logic is what we find in UVph's parodic memes that elucidate flaws in thinking on both the right and the left.

This impulse is borne out of a desire to critique the liberal establishment—under which the art world operates—in the same vein as Srnicek and Williams's critique of individualist folk politics, the contemporary liberalism that offloads what were once government responsibilities onto individuals. Zeroing in on the art world, we find socially liberal posturing, discourse that seemingly promotes ideals like globalization, inclusivity, or whatever other International Art English—attuned euphemism you'd like to add to this list (not to mention the lack of discourse and biennial-circuit artwork that addresses climate change, because that would really burst everyone's jet-setting bubble) while assiduously maintaining an antiquated system that benefits the players at the top.<sup>44</sup> If such liberal ideals are promoted in press releases, exhibition catalogues, and institutional discourse as the gap between established elites and those attempting

42 This is not to say that the internet is publicly accessible in the same way as the commons. It is still digital sphere governed by corporations and advertisers, and having access to the internet and its supervenient technologies is largely determined by socioeconomic factors. See Monica Anderson and Andrew Perrin, "13% of Americans don't use the internet. Who are they?," *Pew Research Center*, 7 September 2016, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/09/07/some-americans-dont-use-the-internet-who-are-they/>; and Emma Luxton, "4 billion people still don't have internet access. Here's how to connect them," *World Economic Forum*, 11 May 2016, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/05/4-billion-people-still-don-t-have-internet-access-here-5-how-to-connect-them/>. See also, Astra Taylor, *The People's Platform* (New York: Picador, 2015).

43 James Wolcott, "Why the alt-left is a problem, too," *Vanity Fair*, March 2017, <http://www.vanityfair.com/news/2017/03/why-the-alt-left-is-a-problem>; "Rise of the Herbal Tea Party?" *The Economist*, Podcast audio, 27 January 2017, <http://www.economist.com/news/international/21715856-rise-herbal-tea-party>.

44 David Levine and Alix Rule, "International Art English," *Triple Canopy*, 2012, [https://www.canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/international\\_art\\_english.19](https://www.canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/international_art_english.19) A similar conceit can be found in *Compression Artifacts* (2013), a work by Citarella, with contributions from Wyatt Niehaus, Kate Steciw, Artie Vierkant, and Troemel. An exhibition "built at an undisclosed location" began as a digitally constructed image of a gallery space, which Citarella then fabricated. The construction was photographed; the digital image was manipulated so that the scale of the gallery and its contents shifted across a series of images to demonstrate the flexibility and shortcomings of digital photography software, in the context of the editing and circulation of installation documentation. See Citarella, statement on *Compression Artifacts*, artist's website, <http://joshuacitarella.com/artifacts.html>.

to break in is widening, we must conclude such rhetoric is meant to disguise inequality rather than redress it. Citarella and Troemel are not necessarily unheard voices—both are white males with gallery representation, media coverage, and whatever else you might deem as an indicator of art-world success. But they're not killing it, either. What might we infer then about the rest of the art world? Or rather, about what is left out of it? Within these labor conditions, our efforts to endow our work and life with meaning only makes us more and more complicit with neoliberalism. Only an art practice that adopts this as a starting point, rather than present it as a scandalizing conclusion, can hope to address those conditions, and maybe even change them for the better.

# Art in America

REVIEWS JAN. 30, 2015

## Brad Troemel

NEW YORK,  
at Tomorrow

View of Brad Troemel's  
exhibition  
"LIVE/WORK," 2014,  
at Tomorrow.



Brad Troemel's deceptively sparse installation at Tomorrow Gallery was awash in lurid color. On one wall were three novelty-size checks, each painted with a giant rose in a garish shade of yellow, red or pink. Across the narrow space hung a row of nine rectangular plexiglass ant farms, all suspended from the ceiling by wires. These clear boxes were filled with vitreous, crystalline goo, within which actual ant colonies were busily tunneling away. The goo was a nutritional substance originally developed by NASA and marketed as "Ant Chow" to hobbyists beginning in the 1990s. Troemel had dyed the stuff in a translucent patchwork of rainbow-sherbet colors.

Troemel's artistic career has been bolstered by a considerable Internet presence, which includes The Jogging, an influential Tumblr account that he helps oversee. Likewise, the New York-based artist's sculptures seem to reflect a Web-specific epistemology, as if they were designed less to inhabit real space and more as a pretext for generating images that can circulate online. He has previously crafted brash assemblages of perishable readymade commodities, such as a Taco Bell taco closed shut with a small lock. That and similar works, all vacuum-sealed in plastic packages, could theoretically be purchased directly from the artist through a now-defunct Etsy store. In practice, however, browsing Troemel's images in the online marketplace proved far preferable to owning a bag of rancid fast food.

Wallace, Ian Edward. "Brad Troemel." *Art in America*, January 2015.

At Tomorrow, Troemel highlighted the opaque sales mechanism of the brick-and-mortar gallery. There was money at stake in the exhibition, and not just for the artist and his gallery. Unbeknownst to the ants, each colony was competing with the others to dig the deepest and most numerous tunnels. The colony that won would route 10 percent of the exhibition's proceeds to one of three media and social justice nonprofits selected by the artist, including the Chelsea Manning Defense Fund and Teach for America.

The Ant Chow in each farm had been dyed with food coloring to match the logos of the organizations that its ants were playing for, giving the scurrying insects the mien of tiny NASCAR drivers. However, it was with this detail that Troemel treaded close to a trope associated with what has problematically been called "post-Internet art"—namely, this use of splashy color actually looked better on a computer's screen than it did in real life. The color-coding, which would have been indecipherable without its explanation in the show's press release, seemed to aim for a formalist appeal that conflicted with the real-life base materialism of the sculptures. The crisp, color-corrected installation shots on the gallery's website, which were also widely shared on Twitter and Tumblr, were devoid of the half-digested mounds of off-brown chow and the considerable number of dead insects inside each farm. The Bataillean affect of the in-person experience of the work seemed to oppose the show's online presentation of a neat conceptual framework.

All of the charities Troemel had selected also fit neatly into the art world's politically progressive sensibilities, purging from the exhibition much sense of risk, antagonism or critique. The paltry sums earmarked for each charity (a third of 10 percent of a small gallery's revenue) amounted to little more than a feel-good gesture for buyers, similar to the way big brands allocate nominal percentages of sales to a charity as part of a marketing strategy. The check paintings, with their kitschy embellishment, seemed to point self-consciously to the saccharine promise of the transaction.

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## Brad Troemel's ant farms are donating money to charity

October 16th, 2014 by [sleek team](#) & filed under [Showroom](#)

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"LIVE/WORK" by Brad Troemel at Tomorrow, New York. Courtesy of Tomorrow

For the previous 5+ years, the practice of post-internet artist Brad Troemel has largely remained online. For all intents and purposes, this makes sense, as post-internet art is a vein of contemporary discourse that is preeminently concerned with online culture and its all encompassing co-existence with the everyday. As Gene McHugh noted, art is "...responding to an existential condition...when the Internet is less a novelty and more a banality". We no longer go online, we simply are online, and it is within this contemporary shift that post-internet artists (most often having grown up online themselves) often make use of networked platforms to highlight a preoccupation with productivity, communication and a shifting globalised image ecology.

Throughout his practice, the New York based artist has developed an adept ability to zone in on these fundamental paradigms shifts through theory-based texts and internet focused projects. From his 2008 co-founding with Lauren Christiansen of The Jogging, a bare bones Tumblr that posts an ongoing stream of memetic (often altered) stock image-esque photos, to his 2012 launch of a personal Etsy store that sells similarly bizarre consumer goods, Troemel critiques via participation.

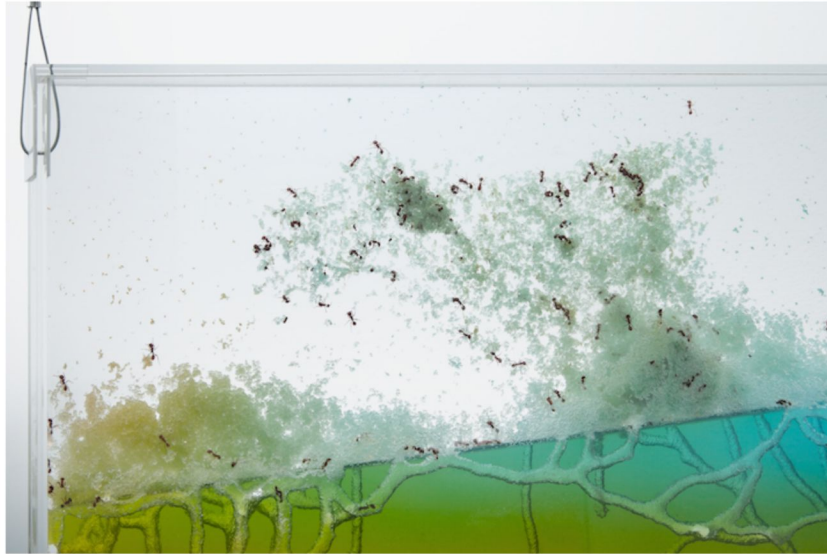




"LIVE/WORK" by Brad Troemel at Tomorrow in New York. Courtesy of Tomorrow

For his latest exhibition at Tomorrow gallery, Troemel works offline to create a sweeping metaphorical manifestation of our contemporary techno-social conditions. Speaking broadly, networked culture is a result (or cause of) post-Fordism, the social and economic result of our technologic advancement. Post-Fordism has produced, among other things, a blurring between life, labour and entertainment. To reference this, the artist has installed a series of mid-size acrylic cases, one after the next, hung perpendicularly to the wall. Titled "LIVE/WORK", these shiny, translucent plastic objects glow with a variety of candy-coloured hues, but are actually each small colonies of infertile female harvester worker ants, the small bugs chewing their way through a nutrient-laden gel to create randomised tunnels. These are ant farms. The pet store microcosm of the home/factory divide.

However, these ants are highly unproductive, or rather not optimally productive. Years of evolution has yielded zero cooperation amongst the species, who are performing their thankless task completely independent of each other. As such, Troemel assumes the position of technological mastermind asking, "If the ants have forsaken efficiency, then what incentive structures can I create to provide for maximum productivity?". Meanwhile, each differently-hued farm correlates to a corresponding selection of three not-for-profit logo colour schemes. In spite of their inefficient labour, the ants are in fact competing for a divine greater good: the colony to move the largest amount of plasma from the tunnels to the surface will have the profits of the exhibition donated to the three charities of their unwilling choice. As each piece is named accordingly, Troemel has pitted "Wikipedia/Stem Cell Network/PBS" against "Greenpeace/Drug Policy Alliance/ACLU" and others.



*"LIVE/WORK" by Brad Troemel at Tomorrow in New York. Courtesy of Tomorrow*

For an artist with an astute fascination and investment in “the system”, “LIVE/WORK” becomes a way to objectively observe and control said system – or at least a version of it. Both the concerted maximisation, the shiny docile happy colours and the farcical piety on the installation begs the question of our own self-awareness within the contemporary moment.

## Brad Troemel On Parsing The Accidental Audience

by WHITNEY KIMBALL on MARCH 21, 2013 · 5 COMMENTS **OPINION**



If you're consuming art on the Internet, then by now you've stumbled across art images like Marilyn Minter's high heels on a Tumblr about shoes, or a Baldessari polka dot presented on a design blog. It seems like the inevitable fate of art on the web, so you'll pay attention when net artist and scholar Brad Troemel sets out to tackle the issue.

In an essay titled "The Accidental Audience," Troemel describes followers of The Jogging, a Tumblr that hosts images mimicking filter-down advertising strategies and office memes. He dedicates the most time to those he describes as "The Accidental Audience", the type of people who would understand Aaron Graham's art photo HAIR STRAIGHTENER USED TO COOK AN INDIVIDUAL PIECE OF BACON as a "kludge," a meme based on crappy makeshift repairs. Once the image is reblogged on kludge blog ThereIFixedIt.com, Aaron Graham's art undergoes a contextual transformation. "This transformation (or context-deprived misreading)," Troemel writes, "is not adding new meaning to the work but returning it to its original contex[t.]"

But is it a misreading, to mistake a photo of bacon in a hair straightener for...a photo of bacon in a hair straightener? Jogging intentionally downplays authorship, as Troemel himself writes:

Jogging includes on all posts abstract symbols as links back to creators' websites. For most, these symbols are unobtrusive nonsense that goes unnoticed far more easily than a fully articulated authorial signature with a first and last name would. In this way Jogging encourages the disregard of authorship while allowing those who are curious about a creator a ubiquitous, if minor, point of entry.



Essentially, getting a correct reading of the project relies on knowledge that this photo was taken by an artist, not a normal person. The symbol, usually linking back to a CV or more traditional-looking artwork, only exists on the text in Jogging posts; the information disappears with the image.

Troemel suggests that this re-integration of art and life (i.e., reblogging on places like ThereIFixedIt.com) “fulfills the avant-garde ambition for art to be integrated with everyday life.” He identifies a real shift that will affect the way we interact with art, being able to once again see Duchamp’s shovel used as a shovel. But, there’s something off-putting about blanket statements that assume that New Inquiry readers implicitly agree with Troemel’s definition of avant-garde. Integrating art with life may neatly fit what Jogging does, but doesn’t signify everybody’s goals for art. At most, it simply reinforces The Jogging’s relationship to the Fluxus movement, which similarly sees art and life as one.

The underlying us-and-them relationships between viewer and artist might also have something to do with the angry reactions that Troemel later observes in his essay. The Jogging most often reappropriates from the kludge-rs, or blue collar America, and intentionally obscures information about the art context. Occasionally, accidentals will retrace the images back to the artist— “reveal[ing] a post as a work of fine art.”

This makes people angry and I don’t blame them. “The ability to see what is banal as something otherwise is rooted in privilege and class,” artist Ryder Ripps wisely points out in [his response](#) to this piece.” He writes that the entry point for these social differences needs to be humor, pointing out that “you and your arty friends having a dinner party in Taco Bell is not the same as a redneck family having their weekly Wednesday outing at Taco Bell.” Trying to dictate an art meaning once the image is beyond your control, he writes, is comparable to “taking from other cultures and refusing to let those same cultures consume your stolen bounty.” The informed art audience and producers, though, not only allow reblogging, they thrive on it. “At what point do artists using social media stop making art for the idealized art world audience they want and start embracing the new audience they have?” Troemel asks. It’s a good question, but one the Jogging isn’t seeking to answer.

## Bazaar and Beautiful

Brad Troemel

*interviewed by Kevin McGarry*

Brad Troemel's/The artist's (depending on formatting) brand of stream of consciousness mercantilism fits comfortably into nascent online economies while jamming conventional art discourse in the most choreographed albeit authentic ways. A mix of poetry and spam is belched from a fine assortment of ideas about money, language, and other universal controls.

Il marchio del flusso di coscienza commerciale di Brad Troemel/The artist (a seconda della formattazione) s'inserisce comodamente nelle nascenti economie online, intervenendo nella tradizionale teoria sull'arte in modi estremamente scenici, sebbene autentici. Una mescolanza di poesia e spam sgorga da una selezione di idee sul denaro, sul linguaggio, e su altri metodi di controllo universali.



Above - Brad Troemel with Jogging, *PH.I.S.H Pink Hydrographic Integrated Fish*, 2013.  
Courtesy: the artist and Tomorrow, Toronto / New York

Opposite - Vacuum sealed Christian Marazzi - "the VIOLENCE of financial capitalism" with 100 BITCOIN gold plated bar (2/5 tsa no fly list series), 2013.  
Courtesy: the artist and Tomorrow, Toronto / New York

**Kevin McGarry:** *How much money have you made on Etsy?*

*[Brad Troemel takes out Amazon.com receipt for 504 recently purchased Semiotext(e) books from left pocket, turns it over, pulls out a used SuperCut pen from his right pocket, writes down a FIVE FIGURE number, turns it back over receipt-side-up, slowly pushes the number across the table. Kevin peeks underneath.]*

**KM:** *My God... flabbergasted. After material costs, shipping, and paying an assistant, you must've paid off at least 3 student loan payments for your graduate education at NYU with that chunk of change. What would you describe as your most successful product? [Kevin asks with respect. Brad removes a sugar-free e-cigarette from his ear and lights it with a Mousse Magazine butane torch he received from his mother on his 21st birthday.]*

**KM:** *Where'd you get that lighter?*

**Brad Troemel:** My most successful product? Hmm... I take pride in providing some of the most significantly organic and inscrutably rare products on Etsy. Sometimes I re-use the same components and try to find different combinations that may be even more locally made or ergonomic. The same Hot Topic hair extension might be used in 3 separate installation images for different products. So when one item is purchased sometimes other listings' auctions have to end, because they all contained a common variable. When that happens there are technically 0 of those other products in existence. They're only ideas. Can you imagine how rare something is that doesn't even exist? I wish I could sell those products because they would be worth way more than the ones that do exist. I think they call that a "Catch 22". This is the first time an art magazine has paid attention to this project, or to me in general, so for that I thank *Mousse*. *[Brad fist bumps a nearby Italian person with respect.]* Early on most of the (often bewildered) attention paid to my Etsy store came via mainstream digital media sources like BuzzFeed, the Daily Dot, Gawker, etc. Most of the people aware of this project are not in the art world, and for a while about half of my buyers were not in the art world either. They were suburban moms, middle American office workers, rural college students. This meant that the people who were determining the course of my art production through their buying power (determining which products would be realized and which products would remain at the level of an image or conceptual potential) were not involved in the art world at all. The products I sold to suburban moms were my most successful ones.

**KM:** *[Responds cheerfully, with reverence] Those do sound remarkably successful, in the way you were able to find a price point, a fictional brand as maker, and a recurring set of material cues that would allow your work to create demand outside of the class-based confines of the art world, harnessing the Internet as a populist generator of attention for what is otherwise considered a debilitatingly Balkanized corner of the luxury economy. What are you working on now?*



**BT:** I'm currently making large-scale vacuum-sealed crypto-currency works for upcoming exhibitions with Untitled Gallery, Zach Feuer, Tomorrow Gallery, the Still House, and Room East. *[Royalties cash register goes off, Brad earns a TWO FIGURE welfare check via the Zach Feuer nanny state.]* These 40 x 60" clear vacuum seals often involve Semiotext(e) books, Bitcoins, Hot Topic clothing, original pieces made by Vivienne Westwood (via her 1974-1976 shop, Sex), taxidermied fish, Confederate currency from the Civil War, *Vice Magazine's* in-house guide for how employees should write for them, customized human hair dreadlocks I purchased from Etsy vendor Armoredgirl65.

**KM:** *[Flabbergasted] What are all of these wacky materials? What do they have to do with each other?*

**BT:** Well, let me explain these wacky things. First the crypto-currency. I always include physical Casascius Bitcoins and Lealana Litecoins in all of my works—they are a hedge for the value of my work. I'm interested in the point when currencies go from being units of exchange to being commodities or collectibles unto themselves. All of these works are priced based on a multiplier of the peak market value of the currency included in them. So a work that has \$2000 worth of physical crypto-currency probably goes for around \$6000-8000. When I seal a Bitcoin it makes this transition into being an art commodity, but that's not necessarily permanent. The value of my work is always racing against the value of the volatile investments the vacuum seal contains. When a collector buys my work there is the latent possibility that the value of the currency inside the piece will very quickly outpace the value of the artwork. That certainly was the case for the collector who bought a 25 Bitcoin piece from me for \$5000 over the summer. The face value of that piece rose to \$30,000 two months later. This means that they would have to destroy the vacuum seal in order to cash in on the piece, and maybe it would be wise for them to do so. It's a little bit For The Love of God-ish, except the value of diamonds isn't prone to a 10,000% increase in price over the course of a year—Bitcoins already have done that. The value of a blue chip artist's work on the secondary market isn't likely to rise 10,000% either, but an "emerging artist" can have those types of gains early in their career.

I use a lot of objects that are aestheticized forms of radicalism. Semiotext(e) books are a good example of that. Bitcoin holograms are too. *Vice* teaches its employees how to be badass in a 9-page PDF they circulate internally. Clothing from Westwood's Sex shop is arguably the start of both punk rock as a nameable thing and a commercial product, while clothing from Hot Topic is the end of that safety-pinned sentence. These products are funny things—they are consumable and passively customizable goods meant as a rallying cry against the mainstream, against consumer culture. I use things that have many color options and in doing so allow a degree of customization on the part of my collectors. Maybe reading the beautifully crimson "Theory of the Young-Girl" by Tiquun will match your nails better this week? *[Kevin thinks "The Coming Insurrection" by the Invisible Committee would look great with a new royal blue "DITCH DEITCH WE ARE THE 69%" t-shirt he just bought in LA.]* Maybe buying one of my 72-book Semiotext(e) grids that feature only black and white books will go better with your living room.

**KM:** *[Flabbergasted] Interesting. I'm starting to understand how your inclusion of economically volatile currencies and culturally accelerationist consumer goods is itself a stand-in for your role as an upstart creator of necessarily radical and perpetually new content for art's luxury economy. By using passively customizable goods as the material basis for your work while allowing that work itself to be customized once purchased, it's as though your work both points to the conditions of the market while also implicating yourself within it.*

**BT:** *[Replies with respect and admiration] Ugh, stop, I get that all the time...*

**KM:** *Are your new pieces sold via Etsy too?*

*[A crowd of art dealers erupts in laughter. Brad turns around and gives them a thumbs-up. They cheer enthusiastically and full of emotion, with respect. Brad walks away from Kevin (still flabbergasted), runs past the chorus of art dealers giving them high fives. Someone respectfully blows an air horn, a new media artist in his early fifties attempts to assassinate Brad unsuccessfully using an iPhone firearms app. The man is apprehended and never allowed to make glitch art again, under the threat of capital punishment. As Brad grows older he sees how his mild hatred of interviews manifesting itself through fan fiction came off as dickish. Brad has a child who becomes a conservative abstract painter (despite Brad's insistence on a rigorously suburban upbringing like his own). Brad is still proud of his boring-ass daughter regardless of creative difference. Brad returns to the interview a little sweaty and out of breath.]*

**BT:** *Woof! No, those crypto-currency vacuum-seal works are sold through galleries now.*



**Kevin McGarry:** *Quanti soldi hai guadagnato con Etsy?*

*[Brad Troemel tira fuori dalla tasca sinistra la ricevuta di Amazon.com per 504 libri dell'editore Semiotext(e) appena comprati, la gira, prende dalla tasca destra una penna SuperCut usata, scrive un numero a QUATTRO ZERI, volta di nuovo la ricevuta, mettendola a faccia in su e la spinge lentamente sul tavolo. Kevin sbircia la cifra.]*

**KM:** *Santo Iddio... [sbalordito] Togliendo le spese per materiali, consegne e lo stipendio di un assistente, una cifra del genere equivale ad almeno 3 prestiti studenteschi per laurearsi alla New York University. Secondo te qual è il tuo prodotto di maggior successo? [Chiede Kevin cauto. Brad si sfila una sigaretta elettronica senza zucchero da dietro l'orecchio e l'accende con un accendino al butano con il logo di Mousse Magazine che la madre gli ha regalato per il suo ventunesimo compleanno.]*

**KM:** *Dove hai preso quell'accendino?*

**Brad Troemel:** Il mio prodotto di maggior successo? Hmm... Vado orgoglioso del fatto che i miei prodotti su Etsy sono tra i più naturali e indefinibili. A volte riutilizzo gli stessi componenti e cerco di creare nuove combinazioni così che risultino più artigianali e funzionali. Ad esempio l'extension per capelli Hot Topic trova applicazione in tre diverse immagini che pubblicizzano prodotti diversi tra loro. Quindi se viene acquistato un oggetto, a volte dobbiamo chiudere anche altre aste perché contenevano quell'elemento comune. Quando ciò accade, tecnicamente abbiamo zero disponibilità degli altri prodotti. Restano solo a livello teorico. Hai idea di quanto possa essere raro qualcosa che non esiste nemmeno? Vorrei poter vendere quei prodotti, perché varrebbero molto più di quelli che invece esistono. Credo che venga definito come un "Comma 22". È la prima volta che una rivista d'arte si interessa a questo progetto, o in generale a me, quindi sono molto grato a *Mousse*. *[Brad batte il pugno affettuosamente con uno che gli sta accanto, un italiano.]* All'inizio gran parte dell'interesse (spesso misto a sdegno) per il mio negozio su Etsy arrivava da media digitali del circuito commerciale, come Buzzfeed, Daily Dot, Gawker eccetera. La maggior parte delle persone che conoscono il progetto non fa parte del mondo dell'arte, e per un bel po' di tempo nemmeno la metà dei miei acquirenti proveniva da lì. Erano casalinghe, colletti bianchi americani, studenti universitari di provincia. Questo significa che a determinare il corso della mia produzione artistica attraverso il loro potere d'acquisto (decidendo quali prodotti dovevano essere realizzati e quali invece sarebbero rimasti solo immagini o concetti potenziali) erano persone che non avevano nulla a che fare con l'arte. I prodotti venduti alle casalinghe sono stati quelli di maggior successo.

**KM:** *[Sorridente, assentendo] E sembra davvero un bel risultato, visto il modo in cui sei riuscito a fissare un prezzo di vendita, un marchio di produzione fittizio e una serie ricorrente di materiali che consentirebbero al tuo lavoro di creare una domanda anche al di fuori dell'altolocatato mondo*

*dell'arte, sfruttando il passaparola di Internet come veicolo pubblicitario per un più vasto pubblico per quello che altrimenti resterebbe soltanto una nicchia debole e frammentata dell'economia di lusso. Su cosa stai lavorando al momento?*

**BT:** Sto realizzando, su vasta scala, opere in criptovaluta sotto vuoto per le prossime mostre da Untitled Gallery, Zach Feuer, Tomorrow Gallery, Still House e Room East. *[Alla chiusura degli incassi, Brad riceve una sostanziosa percentuale dalle generose tasche di Zach Feuer.]* I sotto vuoto, 100 x 150 cm, spesso comprendono libri della Semiotext(e), Bitcoins, abiti Hot Topic, oggetti originali prodotti da Vivienne Westwood (nel suo negozio Sex tra il 1974 e il 1976), pesci imbalsamati, monete della Confederazione dell'epoca della Guerra Civile, le norme redazionali per gli impiegati di *Vice Magazine*, dreadlock umani personalizzati che ho comprato su Etsy dalla venditrice *Armoregirl65*.

**KM:** *[Sorpreso] Come mai materiali così stravaganti? Che relazione hanno tra loro?*

**BT:** Allora, intanto vorrei spiegare i materiali stravaganti. Anzitutto la criptovaluta. Includo sempre i Casascius Bitcoins e i Lealana Litecoins in tutte le mie opere: costituiscono la base del valore dei miei lavori. Sono affascinato dal momento in cui il denaro smette di essere un'unità di scambio e si trasforma in beni o oggetti da collezione. Ciascuna opera ha un prezzo che si calcola moltiplicando per tre o quattro volte il massimo valore di mercato della valuta considerata. Quindi un lavoro stimato 2.000 dollari di criptovaluta costerà tra i 6.000 e gli 8.000 dollari correnti. Un Bitcoin, una volta sigillato, si trasforma in un oggetto d'arte, ma non è un processo necessariamente irreversibile. Il valore della mia opera è in costante competizione con il valore variabile contenuto nella confezione sotto vuoto. Quando un collezionista acquista un mio oggetto, esiste una possibilità latente che il valore della valuta inclusa in esso possa superare anche molto rapidamente quello dell'opera d'arte. È stato senza dubbio il caso capitato al collezionista che quest'estate ha comprato per 5.000 dollari un mio pezzo con dentro 25 Bitcoins. Il valore nominale della valuta salì a 30.000 dollari due mesi dopo. Questo significa che avrebbe dovuto distruggere la confezione sotto vuoto per incassare il denaro, e forse non sarebbe stata una cattiva idea. È del tutto aleatorio: mentre il valore dei diamanti non cresce certo del 10.000% nel giro di un anno - i Bitcoins l'hanno fatto. Neanche l'opera di un artista di punta sul mercato secondario può salire del 10.000%, mentre in questo caso un "artista emergente" ha la possibilità di arrivare a incrementi del genere già all'inizio della carriera.

Uso moltissimi oggetti che sono frutto dell'incontro fra radicalismo ed estetica. I libri di Semiotext(e) ne sono un buon esempio, come pure gli ologrammi dei Bitcoins. Con un documento in PDF di 9 pagine, *Vice* insegna ai suoi impiegati come diventare dei vincenti. L'abbigliamento del Sex, il negozio di Vivienne Westwood, è senza dubbio all'origine del punk rock in quanto articolo non certo trascurabile e insieme prodotto commerciale, mentre quello di Hot Topic è la fine di ogni

certezza assoluta. Questi prodotti sono oggetti divertenti: si tratta di beni di consumo e per così dire personalizzabili, concepiti per essere un incitamento alla ribellione contro ciò che è commerciale, contro la cultura del consumismo. Utilizzo cose che hanno una grande varietà di colori, e nel far questo consento un certo grado di personalizzazione ai miei collezionisti. Forse la lettura della Teoria della Jeune-Fille di Tiqqun con quella splendida copertina cremisi si sposerà con il colore delle vostre unghie questa settimana? *[Kevin pensa che "L'insurrezione" che viene del Comitato Invisibile starebbe benissimo con la nuova maglietta blu scuro con la scritta "DITCH DEITCH WE ARE THE 69%" che ha appena comprato a Los Angeles.]* Forse una delle mie composizioni a 72 libri della Semiotext(e), fatta solo con volumi dalle copertine bianche e nere gioverà all'aspetto del vostro soggiorno.

**KM:** *[Sempre più sbalordito] Interessante. Comincio a capire come l'inclusione di monete dal valore economico instabile e di beni di consumo culturalmente accelerazionisti sia ciò che più ti consacra come creatore innovativo di contenuti radicali necessari e perennemente nuovi per il mercato di lusso dell'arte. Utilizzare oggetti suscettibili di essere personalizzati come fondamento del tuo lavoro, e allo stesso tempo prevedere anche la personalizzazione dell'opera dopo l'acquisto, equivale all'idea che l'oggetto artistico si riferisca alle condizioni del mercato, ma al tempo stesso ti trascini dentro in prima persona.*

**BT:** *[Risponde piacevolmente sorpreso]* Dai, smettila, me lo dicono tutti in continuazione...

**KM:** *Vendi anche le tue ultime cose su Etsy?*

*[Una folla di mercanti d'arte scoppia a ridere. Brad si volta, li guarda e mostra i pollici all'insù. Gli astanti reagiscono con grida entusiaste ed emozionate di approvazione. Brad si allontana da Kevin (ancora più sbalordito) e corre in mezzo ai mercanti d'arte, battendo il cinque con loro. Qualcuno suona una tromba da stadio, e un artista di mezza età dei new media cerca senza successo di assassinare Brad usando un'applicazione per iPhone che simula armi da fuoco. L'uomo viene arrestato e non potrà mai più dedicarsi alla glitch art, o rischierà la pena capitale. Con gli anni Brad ha capito quanto la sua antipatia per le interviste all'epoca delle fan fiction fosse in realtà un atteggiamento un po' spocchioso. Brad ha una figlia interessata alla pittura astratta conservatrice (anche se lui avrebbe voluto che si fosse dedicata a una cultura più suburbana come la sua). Brad è comunque orgoglioso della sua noiosissima figlia nonostante le differenze artistiche. Brad torna a farsi intervistare un tantino sudato e col fiato corto.]*

**BT:** *[Ansimando]* No, ora le opere di criptovaluta sotto vuoto le vendono le gallerie d'arte.