

TAKING NOTICE:

by Elizabeth Shoby

We are *taking notice*. We question, consider, contemplate. Walking into graduate programs with great skepticism. Questioning if the debt is worth the decision. Questioning if our participation is worth the cost. We are buying into these environments at great risk. Risk with great uncertainty. “Adorno asserts that ‘the autonomy of art is inconceivable without the covering up of work.’”¹ We are taught that art is separate from work. But what would happen if art and work were not isolated entities? If art was recognized as work, would all artists be paid a living wage? Would we be of value? A 2003 study from the Urban Institute showed that “96% of Americans valued art in their lives, while only 27% valued artists.”² We are fed a belief that art should be done for art’s sake. We should be thankful for being given such degrees, from such accredited places.

Thank you Place. Thank you for allowing us to be indebted to you. In a debt that will last us years, if not a lifetime. A life, our life, given, handed over at will. As students we seek accreditation, credentials, we want to be of worth, of value. Society only begins to value artists after we have obtained such credit. Fred Moten and Stefano Harney write, “And credit can only expand by means of debt. But debt is social and credit is asocial. Debt is mutual. Credit runs only one way. But debt runs in every direction, scatters, escapes, seeks refuge. The debtor seeks refuge among other debtors, acquires debt from them, offers debt to them. The place of refuge is the place to which you can only owe more and more because there is no creditor, no payment possible.”³ We have accepted debt for credit. Credit that can now be of value, placed on a resume, handed to potential employers. We can now be counted and accounted for.

Debt might run in every direction, but we are its collateral. “With a secured loan, an object serves to guarantee the loan’s repayment: a car loan is indexed to a car, a mortgage to a house, and so on. But a student loan is indexed to an experience rather than an object. It is unsecured to anything other than the physical person of the debtor.”⁴ We hope that taking on such debt will bring reward. But we must hope this in secret because we are discouraged to speak of such hope out loud. While art and work are deemed separate and unrelated, we ward off such hope and desire. Rather we are encouraged to value the making, to put our wants before our needs. To put our desires into object form, objects of commodification. To give of ourselves, our time, our value. Let the object absorb all. We give everything to it, and it takes everything from us. We sit in our cubicles, which we are told to call studios. Voluntarily walking into these spaces day in and day out. We have forfeited a wage for Art. When did we so willingly become of service to Art? We are its living collateral, our identity now inextricably linked to that of Art.

¹ La Berge, Leigh Claire. *Wages Against Artwork: Decommodified Labor and the Claims of Socially Engaged Art*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2019, pg. 17.

² “Mission.” United States Artists. <https://www.unitedstatesartists.org/about/>

³ Harney, Stefano and Fred Moten. *Undercommons: fugitive planning and black studies*. Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2013, pg. 61.

⁴ La Berge, Leigh Claire. *Wages Against Artwork: Decommodified Labor and the Claims of Socially Engaged Art*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2019, pg. 45.

WE ARE HERE. Making, doing, thinking, performing. Here to empower ourselves, to learn, to be of value, to be thankful. Numerous narratives assigned to us, for us, by us. Yet, we must stop to think. Stop.

Take a step back.

Look. Really look and realize.

We are in debt but not indebted to Place.

Living by loans does not mean we gave up our right to a wage. Here on free will. A will that does not serve us. It serves Place. Place exists to profit from our making. We exist here, so they can exist. We are their energy, their source power. Without our making, Place could not sustain life. Place only tells us, feeds us, that we are here “because we were selected”, “because we matter”, “because we are special”, “because we are artists”. When did art ever need Place? When did Study depend on the validation of Place?

Remember we are here for Study. “But the student has a habit, a bad habit. She studies. She studies but she does not learn. If she learned they could measure her progress, establish her attributes, give her credit. But the student keeps studying, keeps planning to study, keeps running to study, keeps studying a plan, keeps elaborating a debt. The student does not intend to pay.”⁵ We are here because we believe in Study even if we do not believe in Place. Here for us, not for them, not for Place, not for Profit. We cannot sit here content. We should not be thanking Place. Place needs us, but we do not need them. We study because we seek change. “The closer to work the art dwells, the more radical is its longed-for critique of this divide.”⁶ As artists we need to stay close to work, to push up against it, run alongside it. We can no longer ignore work. Work and Art are intrinsically connected. To abide by such separation is to be complacent with Place and supportive of Credit. We may situate ourselves within Place but we are not in support of Place. We may take on Credit but we are not advocates for its existence. We are here.

⁵ Harney, Stefano and Fred Moten. *Undercommons: fugitive planning and black studies*. Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2013, pg. 62.

⁶ La Berge, Leigh Claire. *Wages Against Artwork: Decommodified Labor and the Claims of Socially Engaged Art*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2019, pg. 15.