

Towards Models and Strategies for Post-capitalist Art Making

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Master of Fine Art (MFA)

An exegesis submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Monash University, 2017

Faculty of Art, Design & Architecture

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Table of Contents

<i>Copyright Notice</i>	ii
<i>Abstract</i>	iii
<i>Declaration of Originality</i>	iv
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	v
Introduction	1
1. Thresholds of a Post-capitalist Art Making World	5
2. No Avant-garde	13
3. No Excess	31
4. Contemporary Art and Popular Music	39
5. <i>Whatever</i> : A Post-capitalist Making Strategy (John Lennon's Tuba)	51
6. Painting, Songwriting and Post-punk Flow	65
7. Functions of the Poetic in Art Making	77
Conclusion	91
<i>Bibliography</i>	103
<i>Glossary of Terms</i>	109
<i>Appendix</i>	115

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Abstract

A post-capitalist art making methodology would position art making as something that intersects with multiple communities, taking place online as shared files and in the everyday online, modelling a relationship to multiple structures of power from language to state to the totality of Facebook. The particularities of the practices of songwriting and painting have in many ways determined the direction of this research and pushed it towards an analysis of the political and culturally responsive in art making.

My research pursues tactics and strategies for making art that aim to sidestep or position against delimiting realities of the capitalist contemporary. It both explores the historical threads of such resistances and proposes ways to produce, mediate and understand an art that is not in service to capitalism. It is a 'making' practice that comes from the belief that all art making is political, and that the political intention of works can be retrieved in the materiality of works.

Declaration of Originality

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or equivalent institution and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'C. Kennedy'.

Caroline Kennedy

August 2017

Acknowledgments

Much gratitude to the following for their support of this project:

Euan Heng, Michael Vale, Fiona MacDonald, Juan Davila, Peter McCracken, Dani Valent, Colin Mandy, Fiona Hile, Justin Clemens, Libby Angel, Rebecca Delange, Mick Turner, Peggy Frew, Anna White, Jim White, Charles Bickford, Anna Read, Steve Wilkinson, Martine Murray, Tony Dupe, Andy White, Jon Dale, and Helen Martin.

The musicians who recorded with me: Helen Johnstone, Paul Williams, Jessie Storm, Cody McCracken and Ian Wadley

My family: Virginia Kennedy, Gregor Kennedy, Caitlin Maher, James Kennedy, Sasha Barrow, my nieces and nephews Anna, Audrey, Dora, Finbar and Hamish and in particular my father, Douglas Kennedy, with whom I have been discussing art and its role in society for as long as I can remember, and who provided me with a key text for this research.

Love and thanks to my children – to Zadie, for her wisdom, ideas and conversation; and to Cody, for his thoughtful insights and musical dialogue, and to Ian Wadley, a collaborator par excellence, love and thanks.

Introduction

*Cleaning out my wisdom teeth
I found a diamond in my gums
Cleaning out the kitchen
Found a spoon that plays the drums*

Adam Green, 'Bluebirds'

The terms *contemporary art* and *popular music* can be understood as influential and paradigmatic terminologies of art making with strong connections to capitalist systems. They are not seen as neutral terms in my research, and for me they evoke worlds that have become stylistic havens in which creative artistic careerism and capitalist interests intersect. It is normative, in worlds that are dominated by capitalist interests, for voices to be thrown up that inundate art makers with notions of indeterminacy that hobble their efficacy as critical practitioners. In light of this, instead of *contemporary art* and *popular music* being seen as reasonable terms for art mediation now, the practices of songwriting and painting are considered in my research within a wider frame of historicity and politics in making. The postmodern lament that political positioning within contemporary art or popular music is impossible is scrutinised in the research and critiqued as an unreliable position.¹

I contend that all art is necessarily political. The idea that art has no political traction in the present day is criticised as a claim made characteristically by people caught for whatever reason within capitalist pathways, voiced only to shut down resistant practices. My research positions both the writing and the material art products within histories of

¹ Poststructuralist theory decentered the modern subject, and this new way of thinking after the 1970s led to the pluralism that defines the cultural theoretical terrain now and that characterised mediation in the early years of postmodern criticism. The pluralism that arises from a multiplicity of voices rightly raises questions around what a uniform political action could be, in life, community and art. The following Saul Ostrow essay addresses these concerns as a starting point: Ostrow, Saul. 2006. 'Consuming emancipation: ethics, culture and politics'. In *Ethics and the Visual Arts*, edited by King, Elaine A.; Levin, Gail. New York: Allworth Press: 37–47.

mediation, in order to critique them and shore up a space in which post-capitalist art can be understood to be possible. The exegetical writing works within mediation and aesthetic histories that explore the function of art and its cultural context, and I attempt to evaluate the ongoing implications of often taken-for-granted positions within mediation frames. These often-assumed positions are understood as impacting societal/cultural conceptions of art's potential for political efficacy and impact in society.

As a young music artist, I experienced directly the impact of the fraught relationship between artistic intention and commercial pathway when I was signed at the age of twenty-three to a major record label. The subsequent years negotiating the interplay between my production of original art (in the form of songs and performance identity) and the compromises that occurred as the product was pushed through a money-making system affected my views about the function of art and music in the world. These experiences happened in Australia in the 1990s, a time when postmodern thinking and critique were in full swing after the rise of poststructuralist thinking. The idea that art might no longer adequately function as a political or critical tool was well understood in university teaching and learning circles in Melbourne, where I had studied a Bachelor of Arts.² These twin experiences – being a commercial pop artist and living in a world in which political action via art had become problematised – led me to begin to think about the complexities of art making as a critical expression in relationship to society.

This research is the extension of many ideas that began then; it explores the potential to move art and music practice toward a model of post-capitalist art making and has led me to ask: is ethical art making possible in an advanced capitalist society?

² Some academics at the University of Melbourne in the literature department from around 1986, for example, departed from more standard Leavisite frames for teaching to a style of criticism and teaching influenced by French post-structuralists.

In my research, the term *art* is understood to include all forms and genres, including both painting and music making. Low-fi, modest approaches to scale and production, non-spectacular positioning, conventional formats and the use of ‘whatever’ as content are all explored as potential post-capitalist methodologies that can occur through both visual art and music. Capitalism is positioned as a confining cultural reality that could and should be worked around. Post-capitalist art making is explored as an idea that responds directly to a purely individual or imagined definition of an advanced capitalism that impacts art production and the function of art now. My research thus situates moves towards post-capitalist art making as a call to action in the present – to an art-making activity that resists the functions of capitalist contexts, and proposes a way of making that does not simply collapse into capitalist drives. These activities are characterised by mindful positioning of work as alternative to corporate pathways for art, and are proposed as an alternative to the handwringing of ‘art in crisis’, that can sometimes be found at the centre of capitalist avant-gardes.³

When considering the idea of post-capitalist art making, concepts of value are immediately evoked. Whether the exchange value of paintings as commodities in the Marxist sense, or the idea of alternative systems of value that transgress capitalist monetary value systems, like community art and music spaces, the idea of a ‘post-capitalist art making’ would for many evoke an alternative world, one that replaces the current (tarnished) system. Let me say at the outset that this research does not expressly propose any alternative world that needs to be prepared for.

³ The idea of art as having a critical function in society, and the way this idea becomes problematic through various modes of art practice, has been a concern for art criticism and aesthetics from Walter Benjamin to Boris Groys. A good initial discussion about this, as a place to begin to think about the idea of ‘art in crisis’ in this sense, is the author’s suffix conversation in: Foster, Hal; Krauss, Rosalind; Bois, Yve-Alain; Buchloh, Benjamin H.D.; Joselit, David. 2004. *Art Since 1900*. London: Thames & Hudson.

Even if that were part of the undertaking of this research, I would not propose that artists join some halcyon movement such as the revolutionary communities of earlier times. Preparations for revolutions in art now would not look like the revolutions of modernism (or post-modernism). They do not, in my view, need to be collectively organised under some agreed-upon banner; it became clear in the Occupy movement in the early part of the twenty- first century that a range of different anti-establishment positions can organise as a bloc without undermining their variety.⁴ I do not make the claim either that there is necessarily an alternative post-capitalist society that may yet come. I do, however, believe that the crisis in art's function mirrors the crisis of activism in culture more broadly, and this is used by the powerful to assert a reality that makes people, including artists, believe that they are powerless when they are not. In that sense, this research proposes some simple ways to move artistic activity away from the influential terrain of capitalist pathways and towards a sustaining and sustainable mode of critique and political efficacy in art practice.

⁴ The Occupy movement was a diffuse political action beginning in 2011 that saw a tent-city style protest in a number of international capital cities, generated initially out of the New York City/Wall Street financial district.

Thresholds of a Post-capitalist Art Making World

The democratising of information via the rise of the internet as a mode of communication may be considered by some now to have the appearance of a certain kind of wild justice that might be pressed into service for a post-capitalist agenda, in that anybody can retrieve and share information from a massive database. In a time when we can send information to ever-extending groups, when a picture of a work or file of a song can be sent to hundreds of people in a second, it is clear that the model for mass communication has changed forever, and with it the landscape of politics. For many, there is a sense that politics has been changed forever by the dominance of online culture and its bleed into our everyday lives. The online world has already been revealed as a place where multiple reckonings are enacted all the time, related to perceived injustices and the reactions that address them, outside the context of state, university, legal and even language conventions. Although the democracy of communication has changed forever, and while politics are played out online in particular ways, the mass sharing of information and the collectivity supported by this do not constitute a politic per se. Indeed, it is perhaps because we have such a tool to widely communicate our political views and address injustices to ever-expanding groups that we need, more than ever before in our histories as social people, a way to think through what might constitute ethical behaviour and constructs in communities – an ethical determination in our relationships. The idea of working toward a post-capitalist methodology of art making sits within this broader arena of enquiry into the efficacy of art as a tool by which to gain political purchase or with which to express political positions – and it sits within an emerging world where politics is expressed more intimately in potential post-capitalist arenas, as relationship.

In my research, the idea of relationship between maker and audience hinges upon the artwork as piece that communicates meaning via its material presence to an audience. This research takes as a foundational truth the idea that art can be anything if an artist designates it (a widely understood reality within art practice and mediation for decades).⁵ Proposals in this research apply to any art making, and this includes the contention that song-based musical works are also art. I consider song-based music to be more than the popular conception of it as a throwaway entertainment form for youth culture. My research views song as an ancient form of art practice much like painting. In this context it simply becomes one of many material choices artists can make within the expanded field of art making that has been underway for decades.

The particularities of the practices of songwriting and painting have in many ways determined the direction of this research, and pushed it towards an analysis of the political and culturally responsive in art making. This is because certain assumptions now tend to be made about the political efficacy of both songwriting and painting, given their conventional formats and the way these formats have been deeply embedded historically in capitalist worlds. For visual art, the idea of the loss of art as politically useful surfaces in essays such as ‘The Task of Mourning’ by Yve-Alain Bois,⁶ where painting is considered to be defunct as a critical form. Helen Johnson picks up these threads and engages with them in her PhD exegesis ‘Painting Is a Critical Form’,⁷ working specifically to raise painting as a functional critical contemporary form via a recuperation of elements of Kant’s aesthetics. My conceptions of the prospects for painting are in part influenced by her

⁵ For further reflection on this idea of *whatever* being art, see: De Duve, Thierry. 1996. *Kant after Duchamp*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

⁶ Bois, Yve-Alain. 1990. ‘Painting: the task of mourning’. In *Painting as Model*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

⁷ Johnson, Helen. 2015. *Painting Is a Critical Form*. Muckleford: 3-Ply, in association with Minerva, Sydney.

work around this. For underground song-based music, there is such a deep history of commerce operating as a meta-narrative over conceptions of the impact of music socially it can be problematic to speak of song as a critical artistic form. Motti Regev's definitions of 'pop-rock music' in his recent influential text of the same name necessarily link contemporary song-based music to conceptions of the commercial via the term *popular music*.⁸ The idea that all song-based music can be traced back to some aspiration of commerce has complicated the ways in which song-based music can foment change, or be perceived to be able to foment change, in the advanced capitalist society.

Working with these shifting ideas around the conventions of song and painting, this research explores the idea that post-capitalist art making can happen whenever an artist makes work. A space is proposed to imagine in the moment of making what it would be to make something that is not in service to problematic and unethical systems. These systems can be identified as large corporations and organisations in which the goal is to make money, yet where a façade of 'art for art's sake' is mobilised. Against those blocs of contemporary art networks, I work as a form of resistance against my imagined conception of a systemic capitalistic bias towards commercial outcomes. I imagine that acts of artistry unfolding in non-commercial environments might be experienced as powerful anti-capitalist statements. It might be felt that an alternative world opens up for the audience, as in Arte Povera,⁹ where the values of the work sidestep the values of the commercial capitalist art world. The research considers the idea that, at the moment of making, the political and critical positioning of the work can be mobilised in the material of the work, towards ends such as these.

⁸ Regev, Motti. 2013. *Pop-Rock Music: Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism in Late Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

⁹ Arte Povera was an art movement in the 1960s and 70s that aimed to disrupt corporate art; see Tate. 2018. 'Art term: Arte Povera'. [Internet]. Accessed 5 May 2018. Available from: <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/a/arte-povera>.

My work pursues an idea that openness in works might be politically useful in the intention to move towards post-capitalist work. When works are made to be open, there is not a clear meaning. Rather, they evoke and enable abstract feeling and emotion, even when they use words, as happens in song, for example. If openness becomes a central value of a work, the work has the potential to remain so. So whatever happens in capitalist terms – and we are all working within the ordinances of capitalism – something else happens too, based upon a set of terms that defy capitalist drives. The refusal of capitalist drives can be established through an experience of paintings and songs, where something other than monetary use-value is raised. Ultimately, I believe these open qualities of works – where the meaning of works folds out into multiple individuated meanings for audience – can be understood as standing values that cannot be exchanged: they are designed to be experienced in a way that is individuated and mutable. This is a quality that is hard to press into the service of capitalism as anything particular.

The idea of making something in which openness is enhanced is, of course, inevitably explored through process. This is an identifiable, positive value of a post-capitalist artwork – a work that is made to be open to interpretation, and that is mindfully maintained as such through the process of making, then has the potential to become this for its audience. An open work can be imprecise, abstracted and suggestive. While a work might have these qualities, it might also be directed, clear and formal, but importantly for the argument that it is made in service to potential modes of post-capitalist art making, it evokes rather than explains, it shows rather than tells, and it is mysterious while also having a distinct relationship to its world and context. These qualities of precision and imprecision are balanced in the works; for example, the use of the conventions of picture plane and song form ensures the works are not an ‘excess’ for capitalist cultures to recuperate, yet the

indeterminate and suggestive qualities of works – their openness – mean they cannot be organised under any label for a distinct purpose in a capitalist drive.

Further post-capitalist strategies are explored to attempt to make this type of work, and they are practical as well as conceptual. They include: intentionally making non-spectacular works by working on small-scale paper as a ground for painting, recording music with an iPhone, exploring low-fi techniques for making paintings and songs, keeping expenditure low when making work, and performing and exhibiting in ways that are not overtly capitalist, such as showing work online or in people's houses.

The negative or resistant part of post-capitalist art making is also crucial. What resistant activity does not attempt a negation of something else? Thus, undertaking work that is created to explore the idea of a mode of post-capitalist art making means the works end up not being a lot of things. The work is not a spectacle, it is not didactic, it is not self-important, it is not expensive to make (comparatively, in a world where many people do not have enough to eat or anywhere to live), it does not attempt to repurpose a slogan from revolutionary history in an ironic way. It is important to note that I do not intend in this research to create a binary between supposedly capitalist and post-capitalist work. I do, however, imagine the material of the works potentially activating a sense for the audience that there is a continuum upon which artworks might be situated in the future, where they are more or less aligned with a capitalist imaginary.

It must be noted that this research is not a deep enquiry into the nature of capitalism, advanced or otherwise. Capitalism is taken as a looming backdrop to studio work that is evidenced in a multiplicity of ways. Yet in some sense capitalism also remains an elusive dream, never really pinned down precisely in the research, and I make no attempts to do so. I consider the idea of a holistic view of capitalism now a virtual impossibility. This is because contemporary capitalism is many things: it has, through its rhizomic reach, found

many ways to grow after Marx's initial elucidations in *Capital*.¹⁰ These variations of capitalism fold out through all the different societal and cultural momentums with which they intersect. Instead of attempting to articulate a vast capitalism, I pursue in this research ways to practice a resistance to a capitalism that is largely imaginary, yet feels pervasive and directive. In its simplest totemic form, the imaginary capitalism was felt to have enforced coded responses from artists that signified compliance to certain monetary systems propped up by certain mediation, dealer/critic, music and art industry and global arts event forces. The research proposed its relationship to capitalism as resistant to an imaginary totemic force that brought pressure to bear on the ways that making happens, and that must be held at bay.

Whether or not these imaginaries of capitalist pathways, mediation practices and markets can be determined to be valid is another matter, and not of this enquiry. The contribution of this work is to position and assert methodologies for making that might operate at a remove from designated pathways of capital, whatever they may be, and that activate certain other sensibilities and values systems as a way to indicate a post-capitalist making future. A contribution of this research, then, is to propose some potential models.

The art and music that have been made through my research represent a particular type of practice, characterised by a range of ideas that attempt to mindfully eschew capitalist pathways, related to a developing theoretical positioning of potential post-capitalist practice, explicated through the writing. These movements towards modes of making that resist are not necessarily dramatic, and to some extent they need to be supported by thinking in another way about the frames through which we mediate the significance of art. It is not a dramatic event to create a low-fi sounding song with a catchy melody and a poetic set of lyrics, nor is it eminently notable to create a small-scale work

¹⁰ Marx, Karl. 1991 [1867]. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. London: Penguin.

on paper that shows an enjoyment of colour play and ambiguity of representation. Yet these subtle pleasures of composition have a strength and fortitude in their very subtlety, and they align with the idea of making distinct moves in art practice towards something sustainable that is not in service to commercial art worlds. This research indicates that art and music practice – and the mediation of them – must shift towards frames of value and critique that are not connected to money, if we are not to become artist drones forever in service to various capitalist systems and enterprises.

2.

No Avant-garde

'[S]ince the 1980s, any belief in the "revolutionary" potential imbued in the traditional high arts can no longer be a tenable critical position . . . Artists are neither a "proletariat" nor a "vanguard", and they do not make successful "revolutionaries".'

Christos Tsiolkas (2010)

'World exhibitions propagate the universe of commodities.'

Walter Benjamin (1935)

The values that drive our perceptions of value within the world of contemporary art and music are often pervasive, yet they are often not explicit. In order to move towards any art making methodology that resists capitalist drives, it is crucial to understand the environment of making and reception. The idea of the avant-garde, for example, is both an old idea and an idea in common use today within the worlds of contemporary art and music, even though conditions have altered dramatically since the coining of the term. Despite the 'churning' of art products within advanced capitalism and the breadth of admittance into the pantheon of contemporary art, the perception of the outmoded and the vanguard in culture persists stubbornly. It could easily be assumed by many that the idea of an avant-garde art practice is something that might have the best prospects for materially presenting an alternative to capitalist art making drives. It could easily be assumed as well that an avant-garde artwork will be recognisable by its outrageous material form, something that 'updates' a prior form. Culturally, we seem to be attached to the idea of improvement, and this can be seen as the very core of our capitalist values, where we imagine ourselves as able to transform our realities by thinking of new and amazing ways to do things. However, does the avant-garde artwork exist anymore? If it does, what would it look or sound like, and could this type of art or music in these days really be seen as critical of capitalism?

To begin to answer these questions, we can look as an example to this statement made by Nicolas Bourriaud in 2009 concerning relational aesthetics: ‘We can only acknowledge that the great works of art today present themselves in the forms of trajectories or synopses.’¹¹

This statement reveals a persistent view from modernity about an art form that comprises a transformative energy intrinsically linked to a capitalist model of improvement, and suggests that, for some recent art mediators at least, ‘great contemporary artworks’ will be recognisable by their materials. As well as being intrinsically capitalist, this way of thinking of improvement as frontier or vanguard relegates much production of artwork to a state of irrelevance somehow, based upon material formats, although this is rarely overtly stated. The idea of the outmoded is the shadow of bright terms such as *innovation*, used from university to gallery in a way that seems natural. To some extent it is our naturalised subjection to capitalist logic that is at play when we accept these terminologies as normative. The idea of the outmoded and the vanguard is at play in the absences that speak volumes at universities and cultural institutions. Examples of art categories defined against a contemporary vanguard include so-called ‘Sunday painting’, ‘outsider art’ and ‘indigenous art’. Many of these categories are understood to function outside the sphere of contemporary art making, hence their alternative descriptors. They provide the examples that prove the rule that some art is framed as contemporary art and other art is not. This in turn reveals the foundational idea held within contemporary art of a progressive, politicised vanguard flagged by material changes as a discrete category, the notion of which is anchored firmly in an attachment to capital and its attendant pathways.

¹¹ Bourriaud, Nicolas. 2009. ‘Precarious Constructions. Answer to Jacques Rancière on Art and Politics. *Open: A Precarious Existence: Vulnerability in The Public Domain*. [Internet]. Accessed 12 August 2017. Available from: <https://www.onlineopen.org/download.php?id=240>.

Painting and song can be understood in the context of this sense of contemporary art to be highly conventional. They were very old forms before they were ever considered to be avant-garde. Their material forms – painting as marks of a drying liquid upon a flat material surface, and song as short-form musical composition with tropes of chorus and verse – do not materially carry any radical energy today. To understand the potential of these forms to any movement towards a post-capitalist methodology, it is important to address the relationship of these forms to contemporary notions of resistant, radical or progressive artworks: the idea of an avant-garde artwork. This is precisely because songs and paintings can be deemed to be lacking the disruptive energy that a disjunctive radical artwork would bring, and could therefore be less easy to identify as being in service to any radical idea or critique. Formalism in painting was once considered progressive, yet the example of formalist principles in painting, where painting was restricted in methodological and social terms to a discourse within the orbit of its own formal constraints, is typical of an arch-modernist rhetoric that saw painting removed from a critical role in society. Once painting was cordoned off within its own orbit, it was less likely to be considered in light of its contribution to sociopolitical matters. So-called popular music has its own problems in relation to its relevance as a critical form, being weighed down by conceptions of being a populist and therefore consumerist form, forever allocated to the marketplace, as Adorno posited in his critiques of popular music in the 1950s.¹²

Conversely, the avant-garde can be seen as the frontier push of art making that attempts to move away from a dominant mainstream of cultural activity, with the function to critique the world, enacting and materialising a difference from the dominant paradigm

¹² Adorno, Theodor W. 1997. 'Art, society, aesthetics'. In *Aesthetic Theory*. Translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor. Edited by Robert Hullot-Kentor; Gretel Adorno; Rolf Tiedemann. London: Continuum.

it critiques. This conception of the avant-garde has been explored as an idea and practice for more than 100 years, and over time the avant-garde has become like the ‘hip singing’ that everyone does. Clement Greenberg’s famous 1939 article about conceptions of alternative art production, ‘Avante Garde and Kitsch’, mentions Tin Pan Alley songs in its first paragraph, as mainstream fodder to be contrasted with T.S. Eliot’s ‘The Wasteland’, a work of great note.¹³ Although Greenberg later adjusted some of the views held in this seminal essay, the idea of ‘frontierism’ in art, and the idea of an art that challenges the mainstream, persisted in American culture. Benjamin Buchloh later explored avant-garde activity in art through a range of positions in his book *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry*, raising the idea of institutional critique and including conceptual art and minimalism under the banner of his title. These are still relatively recent continuations of the idea of an avant-garde inherited from the 1930s – the idea that, somewhere, someone is undertaking the important work of challenging the conventions of societies through their artworks, even if that activity cannot be recognised right now.

Criticisms of relational aesthetics and social practices, however, heralded particularly by Claire Bishop, can be made, perhaps exploring the hidden conventions and stolid conservatism of much supposedly avant-garde production in the world of art and music.¹⁴ From my own position working within the field of contemporary art and music making, it is difficult to come to the decision that Tin Pan Alley song craft is less radicalised than Eliot’s ‘The Wasteland’. In terms of the function of works in their context of culture, histories of avant-garde practice tend not to dwell so much upon the function of artworks in the world as upon their transformative materiality – the changing sense of what could be

¹³ Greenberg, Clement. 1939. ‘Avant-garde and kitsch’. *The Partisan Review* 6 (5): 34–49.

¹⁴ Bishop, Claire. 2012. *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. London: Verso Books.

considered art. Even the case of ‘Desolation Row’ by Bob Dylan, often compared to ‘The Wasteland’ is remarked upon as something that formally updates the poetic source from whence it sprang, notable as a material transformation of its originary source.

Nonetheless, in this expanded field of contemporary art making, and despite an attachment to the idea of mutable material and format as politic, artworks always have content. They are understood to be texts that have meaning and they can take any form – written texts, films, paintings, drawings, songs, performances, relational events and so on. Artworks now operate within their own self-determining, expanding scopes. Artists can in theory attempt to model a potentially infinite openness that admits the possibility of anything occurring in an artwork and anything being an artwork, if so named. This plurality and scope is understood well within art’s mediations and has been written about by many, including Thierry de Duve in his essay on the subject, ‘Do Whatever’.¹⁵ The potentially limitless plurality of material and concept seen in the field of art now is the very activity of difference. This difference can be understood broadly as an extension of ‘enlightenment’ views of diversity, and more specifically as an extension of the modern project of plurality, as has been described by Rosalind E. Krauss in her naming of the expanded field in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*.¹⁶ These multiplicities of material and approach that are always now admitted can be described as the ‘technologies’ that bring art products to life. Within the context of this material plurality, amidst the multiple making technologies, painting and songs are highly conventional in their material forms.

¹⁵ De Duve, Thierry. 1996. *Kant after Duchamp*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

¹⁶ Krauss, Rosalind E. 1985. *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

As early as 1934, Walter Benjamin thought that the material transformations provided by new technologies might be able to assert new art forms.¹⁷ He felt these new forms in art would aid new relationships between intellectuals and the disenfranchised (or ‘working class’), and that this had potential to give legs to a revolutionary Marxist project, or at least contribute to the demise of rising fascism. Yet even within Benjamin’s own time, Leni Riefenstahl’s incredible and progressive technical abilities within film came to be in service to fascism. Benjamin’s hopes for an avant-garde activity that destroyed fascism became complicated in that moment to the point of disarray, even as he was writing of their potential.

Nonetheless, the great recasting of forms was underway with modernism and Benjamin came to see changing forms within art as carrying a resistance to the conventions that he felt typically served fascism. These conventions of painting and composition were deconstructed subsequently in the years after the Second World War as part of modern avant-garde activity. Benjamin was in his way part of this push to question the status quo of art forms: their authority, and to whom or what they were in service. This included taking apart claims to the spiritual that were seen to inhere in some art forms, and the deconstruction that admitted a multiplicity of material technologies for making art, with new forms and formats. In a sense, art’s relationship to its own material conventions was never the same again. Through a line in German art from Joseph Beuys to the painter Anselm Kiefer, for example, it can be seen that a closer, more extended awareness of the material presence of artworks came into play after this time. Beuys expanded conceptions

¹⁷ Benjamin, Walter. 2008. ‘The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility’. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*. Edited by Jennings, Michael W.; Doherty, Brigid; Levin, Thomas Y. London: Belknap Harvard.

of what materials might be admissible to use in an artwork by, for example, using fat and felt in his works.

This politic of forging ahead to a new frontier in art with the aid of materials that could be seen as new to art was established as an idea by multiple artists at the early part of the twentieth century, including Picasso, Braque and Duchamp, and has been a trope of art practice that persists until today. It is still the psychic backdrop for art making in the advanced capitalist moment. Duchamp's most radical influence in this teleology of invention was to introduce the idea that what the artist thought was the most important thing. He introduced the idea of concept and questioned the primacy of technique, ideas which persist and were held in later artistic movements, such as punk music and conceptual art.

A contemporary example of this project of breaking down convention and redefining material forms in art as a way to express a new reality can be seen as being active as recently as the beginning of relational aesthetics and the dogma that surrounded it. Bourriaud's statement that opened this discussion suggests that even for some recent art mediation at least, 'great contemporary artworks' will be recognisable by their materials. This seems to be a popular view, given the big projects for Tino Seghal at MOMA or at the Tate Modern in 2012, which attest to the fact that we are in an age that has popularised the performative, relational and conceptual, the 'post-medium' in art making, and posited this work as somehow significant for the time, in a way that painting or song, for example, is not. Yet given that the material status of these artworks has not prevented them from becoming immensely populist and mainstream, it becomes unfeasible that they represent a vanguard, since by definition a *vanguard* is the front guard of something. MOMA cannot represent this front while simultaneously representing the established dominant centre of culture. Despite this being so obvious, the lingering cultural attachment to an idea of a

vanguard persists in capitalist culture(s), as Bourriaud's comments show. This seems true even when a vanguard would quickly become normative within the recuperative speed of advanced capitalism; it is as if we are attached in our capitalist culture to the notion of the avant-garde. Even though the context has shifted in a significant way since the first transgressions of artistic convention ushered in modernity, we remain comforted somehow by the idea of brand-new forms that will soon come.

Meanwhile, in reality, by the 1950s convention and disjunctive social change already went hand-in-hand through rock 'n' roll. Motti Regev argues in his recent book *Pop-Rock Music* that avant-garde activity has always been at the very centre of rock music's activity – it was never an 'edge', as such, within that movement.¹⁸ It can be argued that rock and pop music heralded an amendment to 1930s avant-garde thinking regarding material forms. Rock 'n' roll made it apparent that conventional forms – like the classical song form – could disrupt and oppose mainstream values. While Elvis Presley deployed song forms that had been in use for years, the details of his approach to the form, and the relationship of this to the social context, were what made his performances radical. The radicalism of Elvis's work in context was largely connected to racism in the United States, as the source of shock and awe in Elvis's use of conventional forms at that time was that he was a white man using primarily black tropes. The outrage that was felt was at least partly racist, in that his performance of song then was seen as overly sexualised and 'primal', these being racist critiques levelled at black music. Despite these and other complexities that plague our perceptions of rock 'n' roll in its societal context (and actually the erasure of pop and rock as serious art forms could be argued to be racist), it seems that the idea of avant-garde artistic activity was always notionally different within rock 'n' roll.

¹⁸ Regev, Motti. 2013. *Pop-Rock Music: Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism in Late Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Within rock music, interrogative, resistant and experimental practice could be deployed through the frames of conventional formats. This seemed to deny the idea of the avant-garde as crucially reliant upon material and formal change, at least in rock and pop music.

Although it seems clear now that rock 'n' roll in its forms characterised an amendment to earlier conceptions of avant-gardes by the 1950s, at this time Greenberg was still taking about the frontier of American painting being represented by a material change. He spoke of a pure art reduced to its material struts and paint, as if visual artists must travel along a line of improvement to some place of practice that was a purity or truth. Art and music practices were cordoned off from one another to a large degree at this time, and there was no spill. Even now, much art touted as the vanguard of art practice can seem to be an extension of this project of politicised remodelling that continued through the twentieth century, despite the lessons of rock 'n' roll that were right there to be seen.

It is crucial now that we question how radical an artwork can be when it becomes the very epitome of the approved museum context. We cannot assume that Tin Pan Alley songs have no disruptive function in culture if we also know that songs have changed the world at different times. This is not to say that anything can be concluded about the politics of new modes and materials in art now per se, or that material qualities in works do not matter. Arguably, the only way we will be able to test the relationship between an artwork and its capitalist context, and work towards a methodology of post-capitalist art making, will be through a consideration of all the qualities that make an artwork what it is, and a calculation of how it works within its setting. Therefore, the idea that the material remodeling of art forms is representative of a politicized vanguard in art should be questioned in the current advanced capitalist context, and when we consider any idea of movements towards making post-capitalist art.

There has to date been little criticism of Bourriaud's claims in the early twenty-first century of the political and aesthetic importance of participatory art as the ultimate political art. Although Claire Bishop has questioned the tacit authority proposed by what could be seen as an extended avant-garde or Modern project that has less and less to do with real functions of works in culture, the idea of a politicised vanguard model persists. The ongoing and deepening conundrum of a vanguard represented by changing material forms within the contemporary extended modernist project is revealing of contemporary art's political crisis.

For Artur Żmijewski, one of the curators at the seventh Berlin Biennale in 2012, this political crisis is to do with the ability of art to affect the world. In his view, art now 'doesn't act and doesn't work'.¹⁹ For him and for many, it is apparent that capitalism, as the still-lasting dominant function of modernity, can absorb any re-functioning that an avant-garde can throw up, in material ways. As a model, it does so by absorbing the expanding material and conceptual strategies into its own expanding narrative about capital. Thus Benjamin's idea of the politicised artwork that responds to the aestheticisation of fascism by expanding out from its conventional apparatus (for example, a painting being copied multiple times via the print process, or a painting becoming land art) is a dream that to some degree lies in disarray. It is scattered throughout the enormous field of art's material pluralities, endlessly absorbed and reabsorbed by capitalism's ravenous function.

So while there is in the global art world a perception of limitless admittance in one sense, there exist also tacit concerns to do with relevance, evidenced in ideas of vanguard and its other. In addition to this, it could be argued that there are further categories produced

¹⁹ Rafa, T. 2012. 'Art doesn't act and doesn't work, forget fear, the Seventh Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art'. [Internet]. Available from: <http://www.aestheticmagazine.com/art-doesnt-act-and-doesnt-work-forget-fear-the-7th-berlin-biennale-for-contemporary-art>.

discursively that include and exclude, founded on these views of progression rooted in modernity and signified by material and formal transformations. As these realities promote and protect the contemporary idea of the vanguard, any commentator, as well as any serious artist, must deal with the idea of a contemporary vanguard that is never fully acknowledged to exist, and that remains tied to an idea of politicization through the theme of progress, expressed in transforming material art forms. Within these conditions, the vanguard's constant swift absorption into the capitalist swirl tells the actual truth regarding the impact of a new materiality, of jarring newness, as a force in art making – this approach is now irrelevant per se as a way of showing transgression of the dominant culture(s) of art and society, or of the economic systems that support them. As a way to work transgressively in a capitalist context, it is outmoded, in the sense that material transgressions of convention do not of themselves carry any political impact. They are not an indication, for example, of a post-capitalist methodology for art making.

To illustrate this well-worn reality with an example: in 1967 Bruce Nauman made his neon work *Wall Sign*.²⁰ At the time, Nauman explained that he wanted to make something that did not quite look like art, a common desire for artists at that time. Even recently, Naumann reveals an attachment to the idea of art practice that advances art towards some destination: “I think there are still a few good painters around, but I don't think painting is very advanced” he was quoted as saying recently.²¹ Forty-four years after he made *Wall Sign*, Nauman's work is entrenched within museum and corporate art systems, and looks very much like art. The story of Nauman's hope for his work at its outset, his idea of progression in art towards some improved destination and the fate of his

²⁰ Kröller-Müller Museum. 2018. ‘BRUCE NAUMAN (1941), Window or Wall Sign, 1967’. [Internet]. Available from: <https://krollermuller.nl/en/bruce-nauman-window-or-wall-sign>.

²¹ Cutron, Ronnie. 2015. ‘New again: Bruce Nauman’. [Internet]. Available from: <https://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/new-again-bruce-nauman>.

work as avant-gardes became culturally normative, points to these general conditions that have been the context for the making of artwork for many years, certainly since the 1960s. The works of Vanessa Beecroft, Pierre Huyghe and Liam Gillick, despite Nicolas Bourriaud's hope for them at the outset of their production, all had the potential to pass through this same cycle and become the convention, and of course they have.

Ten years after the *Traffic* exhibition, in which the idea of relational aesthetics was introduced as a new way of forming ethical positions in art making, things have changed. It can now be seen that any attempt to introduce hierarchies in which one format or material supersedes another in its ability to transmit an ethical or critical position – is premised upon an old modern dream that has lost its potency in the sea of plural materials. Moves toward post-capitalist art making cannot simply deploy the process of the transforming politicised material art form as a methodology of political artistic practice, therefore. Thus, despite the distinct and long histories of both painting and songwriting, and despite their highly conventional apparatuses, their usefulness as formats for the making of art that can move beyond capitalism to be 'post-capitalist' is no longer in question. Josey Kidd Crowe's recent paintings depict the occasional cartoon character amongst fields of modernist-style loose geometries and expressionistic marks. His work is a case in point, as he explores the idea of resistance explicitly in the attendant writing for his exhibition at Neon Parc in Melbourne in 2015.²² That painting could be practiced as a critical resistant activity is not now a particularly contentious claim, but it is made despite the assertions of, for example, Yve-Alain Bois in his essay 'The Task of Mourning', where it is claimed that these forms

²² Neon Parc. 2018. Exhibitions: Josie Kidd Crowe. [Internet]. Available from: <https://neonparc.com.au/artists/josey-kidd-crowe>. Accessed 12 May 2018. The newsletter that Kidd Crowe made was photocopied and co-written with a friend. The pamphlet was not really endorsed by the gallery, and there are few copies of it available. It is not online.

are so functionally degraded as to not be useful as formats for resistant art.²³ Benjamin's concerns about the fascism inhering in convention could be said to have been superseded by another concern: how would we recognise a resistant or revolutionary artwork today within the expanded field of an art world dominated by capitalist pathways and ideologues?

Today it can seem that artists face serious difficulty when looking for a way to circumvent these conditions and find post-capitalist approaches to making work. The overriding conditions for making an art that moves towards a resistance of the functions of advanced capitalism can seem impossible. As a consequence, there is often a deep cynicism about the potential political function of art in contemporary art scenes, even to be found in the humorous names of galleries like Death Be Kind, the short-lived Melbourne contemporary art gallery. Given the conditions, finding a way to resist the dominant functions of capitalism in an artwork could seem a hopeless project. A desire for any revolution in this world is necessarily dulled, and many have commented bitterly on the prospects for art as a revolutionary practice as we head further into the twenty-first century.

Not knowing how a revolutionary artwork will reveal itself under the conditions of advanced capitalism can make it seem as if we truly have entered a post-ideological time, in terms of the meanings that can be attributed to artworks. It can seem that artworks have really become luxurious fripperies, almost invisible outmoded gestures, or the visions and sounds of opulent beauty that lead to horror. Indeed, these criticisms are regularly levelled at contemporary artworks: for example, the furore surrounding Damien Hirst's diamond-encrusted human skull, *For the Love of God*.²⁴ Overtaken by their own accelerating

²³ Bois, Yve-Alain. 1990. 'Painting: the task of mourning'. In *Painting as Model*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

²⁴ Damien Hirst's *For the Love of God* was a 2007 work that cost an extraordinary amount of money to make, given the hundreds of diamonds that were part of the work. The furore to which I refer was diffuse in the media and related to questions around this expenditure. See, for example, Kunzru, Hari. 2012. 'Damien Hirst and the great art

transforming materiality, artworks might be seen to have entered a kind of universe of exteriority – the kind of grand spectacle of exterior that Guy Debord envisaged in the 1960s in his society of the spectacle. It now seems that artworks perform our diverse values without having any clear impact upon us. Tsiolkas' and Żmijewski's statements regarding the revolutionary prospects for art (that open this chapter) reveal a common anxiety within contemporary art fields, but only where art is called upon to have a function in culture beyond eye or ear candy. This nihilist view contains its own demise. Holding the belief that there are no political prospects for art within advanced capitalist conditions constitutes a violence to spirit and potential that allows capitalism to extend its reach into our productions.

Yet while art is no longer a revolutionary practice, if it ever was, it does still have the potential to propose a world beyond or alternative to the dominant paradigm, which at present is the advanced capitalist environment. Art is no longer a revolutionary practice in the way that artists like Marcel Duchamp pursued their revolutions, where significations were thwarted and inverted, and jolts and shocks destabilised the bourgeois sense of the art product and of life. Resistant and critical art, post-capitalist art now, would not and could not necessarily look 'Duchampian' or sound 'Cagean', when so much of the capitalist mainstream does. So what would an art that resists capitalism look or sound like? Would it, or could it, look or sound like anything? Or would it be identifiable in another way?

One answer to this question is the idea that art production has a standing potential that can persist through time, and that this can disrupt the status quo of a society by carrying disruptive and progressive values in its material presence. For those who believe in the prospect of art to fulfil a function in culture, art has always contained the potential to carry

market heist'. *The Guardian*. [Internet]. 17 March 2012. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2012/mar/16/damien-hirst-art-market>.

the trace of the individual while simultaneously speaking to a powerful abstracted commonality. This can be understood as an inherently formidable political capacity within art and music production. This is the capacity Plato recognised when he feared art's function.²⁵ To manage the conflict of these views of art, it is useful to ask what the point of a lot of art activity is. Why make a painting or a song? When considering, for example, the revolutionary prospects for art and music under the capitalist homogenising of art materials as signs of change, we can ask the question: where is the original structure of the work of art that is revealed by contemporary art's political crisis?

Walter Benjamin's essay 'The Author as Producer', written in 1934, explored the idea that literature can be understood to have various functions within its conditions of production. His assertion that literary quality is always contained within the political – that 'a work that exhibits the correct (political) tendency must of necessity have every other quality' – constitutes a rejection of the idea of the bourgeois writer who experiences 'freedom' and writes from a position of individual autonomy.²⁶ The political crisis of art never happens in this conception of original activity because the production of writing (or art) is never premised upon an idea of freedom of expression. In the place of that writer, Benjamin describes an alternative writer for the new age, one who decides, given the present social situation, in whose service he is to place his activity. In 'The Author as Producer' he asks specifically: 'Before I ask what is a work's position vis a vis the production relations of its time, I should like to ask what is its position within them?'²⁷

²⁵ Plato famously did not include artists as members of his ideal society. Giorgio Agamben takes this as a point of consideration in the following text: Agamben, Giorgio. 1999. *The Man Without Content*. Translated by Albert, Georgia. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

²⁶ Benjamin, Walter. 2008. 'The author as producer'. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*. Edited by Jennings, Michael W.; Doherty, Brigid; Levin, Thomas Y. London: Belknap Harvard.

²⁷ Benjamin, Walter. 2008. 'The author as producer'. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*. Edited by Jennings,

This is a model that can be used when we consider how to undertake an art making that moves its focus towards a post-capitalist art making. That is, when looking for the signs of post-capitalist art making, we can ascertain through the way works are made, and through a work's relationship to its context, how it functions in relation to capitalism.

What Benjamin elucidates about that process of making art is this: a participant in the world of art making will generally come to understand that all gestures into that world constitute a position within, and attachments to, lengthy politicised histories. Thus, for participants in art making, the question arises of how the positioning of work will be made and understood. For the modernist avant-garde and all its extensions into the present advanced capitalist moment, politicised art making has been indicated by a subversion of the normative qualities of bourgeois art production, represented by material changes. The eventual effect of this paradigm as we understand it in the present is that what art is, is no longer a question. It must be anything if an artist says so. Yet if an artist wishes their work to perform a critical, resistant or even truthful function in the world of advanced capitalism, or to move towards becoming post-capitalist, material changes are not going to produce the effect they once did.

It is in this moment of realisation that we can still look to Benjamin's model in order to assess how an artwork that enacts a resistance to advanced capitalism might be defined. His assertion remains true, despite the changing conditions. It is still true that the decisions that artists make as to the relationship they will have to the organising powers within their context remain as crucial as they ever were, and speak as loudly as they ever did. All artworks take part in this relationship with dominant cultural forces, and all can be understood through this dynamic. Either artists attempt these decisions themselves

Michael W.; Doherty, Brigid; Levin, Thomas Y. London: Belknap Harvard; or Benjamin, Walter. 1998. 'The author as producer'. In *Understanding Brecht*. Translated by Bostock, Anna. London & New York: Verso Books, 85–103.

regarding their work, or the work comes to be positioned in the field. Although these codes of asserting new methodologies evolve differently through time and through different scenes of art and music (for example, the turning of 1960s musical exploration into elevator music and radio fodder), the process is the same. In new works that resist dominant capitalist paradigms the artist always presents the resistance in the material of the work and through its sited-ness, somehow, whatever kind of artist they may be.

Multiple material avenues have opened up to art making since the beginning of the twentieth century, and artists use these in their quest to make things, for whatever reason, as they should. However, it has become entirely apparent that by the twenty-first century that these expanding new materialities are not an avant-garde, nor a sign for an avant-garde, nor do they function as the avant-garde may have done so before. Indeed, artists working after the time of the original's lost aura can be seen to potentially be condemned to the task of endlessly representing the difficulty of transmitting meaning that has been created by conceptions of art as multiple advancing fronts, where it is believed that those fronts hold or represent political change or resistance to capitalism. When it becomes apparent that capitalism absorbs and refunctions those artistic fronts very easily and repositions them in service to capitalism, a political stasis emerges for artists who wish to resist mainstream capitalist values. We have the chance now to see this clearly as the anxiety of the contemporary art moment. It speaks as a loss or void; the loss of a materiality that shines newly in the darkness of our imaginations, the loss of that frontier with its beacon which once drew its audience to it, the loss of a certain kind of progress. Martin Heidegger wrote that 'in technology's essence grows concealed that which may redeem us from it'²⁸ and for Benjamin as well this was a way to begin to consider the potential of the situation regarding

²⁸ Heidegger, Martin. 1977. 'The question concerning technology'. In *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. Translated by Lovitt, William. New York & London: Garland Publishing.

art products, their expanding materials and technologies and their political crisis. As techniques and materials expand to overwhelm the original function of the work of art, the question is revealed of art's multiple technologies: they multiply to perform what?

The answer to this is that the ubiquity of the multiple materials of art forms reveals their original project. All art has been made by artists gathering their resources to ensure that artworks perform their function. Whatever this is, it is the thing that moves from form to form, from material to material and that can move when forms collapse. It can pass from drawing to song to concept. It is what shifts through different spaces and mediums in the trajectory of an artist's work, and it is whatever. Within the scope of our advanced capitalist world, however, those fronts of self-reflexivity and transformed materiality do not indicate a vanguard or a resistance to capitalism.

Conventional forms such as painting and song, therefore, have begun at this stage to contain the same potential as any other material forms, and perhaps because of their historical nature they may contain a further potential, as their conventionality connects them to pre-avant-garde histories of resistance and social potency. Post-capitalist artworks could use the idea that convention is a potential. Like other artworks within the expanded terrain of contemporary artistic creativity, paintings and songs contain that potential of convention, and are also always in service to something. The radical energy of an artwork in this time of advanced capitalism is no longer indicated per se by its material. The radical positioning of an art product is indicated now by an assessment of what the work is in service to.

3.

No Excess

'I know all too well the absurdity of denying that today, those objects that Duchamp chose as readymades are art.'

Thierry de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp*

Once it is established that the radical energy of an artwork is only achieved by an assessment of what it is in service to within the production relations of its time, the terrain of contemporary art and music starts to open out to a new way of thinking about the function of artworks. Once the handwringing of 'art in crisis' that is the very centre of avant-garde activity abates, we can come to see a vista filled with art and music products, all fulfilling some function in our culture of advanced capitalism. In order to start to approach the question of how art products characteristically function in our world, it is important to look at the context within which much of this work takes place: the context of contemporary art. Contemporary art can be understood as nominally different from modernity or 'the modern', as is designated by the different term *contemporary*.

The dominant quality of making that can be broadly recognised through contemporary art and music scenes is characterised, more than anything else, by the idea of an explicit freedom in making. Benjamin described this as 'the autonomy of the poet'.²⁹ This autonomy within the domain of the contemporary (and this could be understood to be a Western contemporary) tends to mean simply that artists understand that ultimately they can make whatever they please. This is true in even the most ill-considered or kitsch of artistic gestures. The reality of an individuated freedom in making is enhanced now by the

²⁹ Benjamin, Walter. 2008. 'The author as producer'. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*. Edited by Jennings, Michael W.; Doherty, Brigid; Levin, Thomas Y. London: Belknap Harvard, 79.

particular freedoms of a free-market, advanced capitalist context. Even within the practices of artists such as Sol LeWitt, Yoko Ono and Jeff Koons, where the idea of the hand of the artist is problematized, there is still the unique outcome of work inextricably bound to the artist's individual vision. Sol LeWitt's work is strongly stylistic and recognisable even when made by the hand of others. Compared to the communal or religious function of art in the deeper past, for example, the individual as maker in control of the art project now remains at the heart of art making as never before, to the degree that this notion is reified in the domain of contemporary art making.

Sometimes it can seem that this has happened in the Western art world as a simple extension of modernist ideas of freedom and individuality that are now called 'contemporary'. Sometimes it seems this reification of individual expression is a beloved mirage of freedom, while capital seeks its next function in service to the accumulation of money. It can be seen as true capitalist making, and within this view, even the freedom of the artist is merely the confidence trick of art's relationship to capitalism. For whatever reason, the inalienable right of artists to make whatever they want is a driving theme in contemporary art making, more significantly than ever before. And this reality has implications. This very 'freedom in making', the individuated logic of practice, could also be the central feature of art and music making that adheres to the logics of capitalism. How, therefore, can a sense of freedom in making ever be put in service to the idea of post-capitalist art making?

The freedom that artists have to make whatever they please provides an ever-present material for the machine of contemporary capital to absorb as excess. This is in order to show what must be included for the presentation of the avant-garde frontier to exist. Although the constant admittance of excess in contemporary art can appear as a sphere of consumption that moves towards balance and openness, I think this is likely an illusion.

Admittances of ‘everything’ into the sphere of the contemporary cannot constitute movements towards more ethical art making or towards post-capitalist art making at all. While it can seem like an equation of moderation, balance and justice, the cycle of excess and take-up in contemporary art is exactly how capitalism functions to hobble art practices as voices of refusal of capitalist pathways. At the heart of such a world, a world that admits or appears to admit anything – that can ‘do whatever’, as Thierry de Duve puts it – but that is also subject to capital’s dominant logic wherever one turns, there is the conundrum of freedom being a capitalist illusion. The problem of an art world that can in theory admit everything is that it leads to the discomfort of excess in contemporary art, of which Boris Groys writes in *Art Power*, where there are inevitable ‘equal aesthetic rights’.³⁰ While there is a dominant notion of excess in this contemporary art world, there are always unacceptable works that must still be admitted to the pantheon. The excess must always be eliminated by admittance, in order to bring contemporary art back to its provision of balance. But it is possible to conceive of this as nothing more or less than a function of the market.

Actions in our art making that move closer to a post-capitalist practice could seek to reveal this excess as such, by making works that do not by their material presence as excess need to be included or repurposed. Their conventional qualities mean they are already included, and this affords those types of cultural products a particular quality. The works are not excess, and they are also not a part of a contemporary spectacle. The fact that the works can do this can contribute to their political positioning. It is the very conventionality of the works that ensures a potential for the works to be transgress dominant capitalist systems, to potentially be closer to being post-capitalist. In order to

³⁰ Groys, Boris. 2008. ‘Equal aesthetic rights’. In *Art Power*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 14–21.

enact this political positioning, painting and song-based music making are useful material choices for an artist

in the advanced capitalist environment. When we understand that critiques of capitalism will not be found in an adherence to the cycle of excess and absorption, we can establish that the relationship of the work to its context, and the material and poetic realities of a work, can provide an answer to its political positioning against or for capitalism. Given this, it is not relevant whether a work is large or small or materially transformative or spectacular or humble. It only matters what relationship it has to its capitalist context.

When Benjamin spoke of world exhibitions as propagators of commodities, he was talking about a relationship that was developing rapidly in capitalist art worlds and that is now well developed. This is the relationship between the art product as commodity and capitalist art world systems set up to understand, promote and reveal the new artwork. This new artwork is often connoted by its material transformations from the past, and is often received into its capitalist art system as a token of a politicised avant-garde of art. Advanced capitalism seeks an outcome that relates to money, simply as a function of its organization. Quite understandably, logics of cultural production flow from this fact. So it follows that the idea that a biennale shows work that is relevant to society is a premising foundation of biennales. However, 'world shows', as Benjamin noted in his work, can also be seen as self-serving narratives of capitalism. It is a fantasy that new artworks at a biennale are important and progressive, that these works should be fed into gallery systems because they are significant culturally, and that collectors of 'significant work' are buying into dialogues of political significance. Perhaps conversely, this process could always have been understood as a story of capital and commodity. When the processes for the analysis of artworks are critiqued so profoundly, when even our systems of mediation of art and music

products seem terminally blighted by their connection to capitalist systems, how do we assess the relationship of an artwork to its cultural context?

One answer might be to undertake making that sits outside these functions of capitalism, recuperating functional modes for art, of authentic expression or subversive expression. However, when the conventional forms of painting and songwriting are used as the main conduits for ideas in the context of a capitalist culture, how difficult is it for those forms to look or sound as if they were undermining capitalism in any obvious way? Within art worlds we have become used to transgressive forms signalling a critique of a dominant authority. Conventional forms such as songs or painted pictures are the last things to really look, in the first instance, like they could be materially transgressive; rather, they tend to look materially historical. Given this, how could these be used to make art that resists paradigms of capitalist activity?

The critique of a dominating culture through art is outlined as a potential in Walter Benjamin's 'The Author as Producer'.³¹ In this essay he spoke explicitly about art products always being in service to something. His view that a work of art is always necessarily functioning in some way in culture gives art practitioners and mediators a way to think about the social function of an artwork or piece of music. We can say that a contemporary artwork is either in service to its context of dominant advanced capitalism and its constituent logics or it is not, or perhaps we could say that there are degrees of relationship to capitalism that art products reveal in their complex and subtle relationship to capitalist systems. Once we understand this, it is clear that art production can be plotted along a continuum, where artworks are less or more supportive of the dominant logics of

³¹ Benjamin, Walter. 2008. 'The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility'. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*. Edited by Jennings, Michael W.; Doherty, Brigid; Levin, Thomas Y. London: Belknap Harvard.

capitalism, and that this is subject to a discourse that is framed by the ideas of resistance or subservience like the one proposed by Benjamin (and more recently by Groys, Saul Ostrow and Claire Bishop). This relationship of the artwork to its dominant cultural system can always be analysed. After a work is made, a work's relationship to capitalism can be something that is established via critique, and as well the decisions made by the artist constitute a critique through making. Because there is no overt accord within our mainstream communities yet that capitalism is something to be undermined, we cannot rely on the broad discipline of critique relating to art and music to enfold a capitalist critique, but these critiques can of course be undertaken by individuals, and by artists in making.

Thus, the logic of making that is dominant now in the contemporary – that an artist can conceivably do whatever they want in the global capitalist market, that in a way artists are utterly free to do as they please – is pulled into focus by understanding Benjamin's critical frame. Making, as a moment of choice, is identified as something of real significance within the vast possibilities of contemporary practice, and as something that is potentially under-examined in the great phantasmagoria of contemporary art systems and their mediations. The choice of being in service or not to a dominant function of capitalism can be understood to be a moment of potential. Further, the contemporary cycle of individuated freedom in making, excess and subsequent absorption – as a dominant model situated in capitalism – can be said to have led to art's loss of critical function within the field of contemporary art. A reclamation of the political prospects for art making therefore lies in the potential artists have to take a position against the network of intersecting capitalist interests in contemporary art by not playing the game of providing excess for absorption. In addition to proposing that an artwork is either in service or not to a dominant capitalist system, it is understood also that artworks can be assessed in relation to their capitalist context, via the presentation of materials – the way they are made. The way an

artwork is made shows up in its material outcome as a politic (not a meta-politic that encompasses all the works made within the duration of the research, but an individuated politic unto each work), and this politic can reveal to what the artwork functions in service. Making paintings and songs can therefore be a process that explores what paintings and songs have the power to reveal about their culture.

A closer examination of the antecedents of these ideas of creative responsibility can be traced to ‘The Author as Producer’, written as a talk by Walter Benjamin in 1934. The talk takes as its subject the ethics of writing, and in particular journalistic writing. The text can be understood more broadly now as a clear and direct call to producers of any type, addressing as it does the potentially fraught relationship of production to its dominating context for making. Benjamin’s significant claims in this regard are pertinent to the contemporary context, and the message is simple: how your work is made (its ‘tendency’, as Benjamin calls it) will reveal what the work supports. In undertaking a resistance to capitalism now through making songs and paintings, the question can always be posed: ‘what is this work in service to?’ Maintaining an awareness of and resistance to the capitalist contemporary environment while making work constitutes a contemporary piece in historical resistances to capitalism. This type of art making as resistance connects to earlier social resistances through art and music – for example, the *chansonnier* movement in Montmartre, the work of Guy Debord and the Situationists in post-1968 Paris, and Australian post-punk art and music practices. Actions in art making that move practice towards the post-capitalist could be understood to produce works that can be said to be in service to values that are exterior to capitalist concerns.

Working in this way does not equate to an exposé of all of the ways in which capitalism is an authority or logic. It does not drill down into multiple definitions of capitalism nor seek to become an authority on all of its tendencies and interactions with art

worlds and then reproduce these understandings in works. Making work that holds a sense of relationship to capitalism does not constitute a reaffirmation of specific materialist analyses of art worlds, and nor is this making a pure Marxian project. However, by examining the ways in which making happens, by undertaking a process that occurs mindfully in its context, I seek to activate that making as a space away from the dominance of capital's logic. This is in order to mobilise and assert those elements of practice and material that will not be in service to capitalist cultures, but will rather be in service to other things. This making seeks to realise as outcomes processes of making that intersect with love, memory, touch, subtlety, intuition, individuality, pleasure, immediacy, openness and connectedness to histories – all deployed as separate notions but also fused in the indeterminate, individuated meaning of expressive gesture that we can call 'whatever', or that might be named as *poiesis*.

It can be seen that the way an artist will define the presence of their work in the world can be controlled to some extent through the way the work is made, and to some extent through the way the work is presented. Not everything can be controlled about the way an artwork is received, but the tendencies in making are apparent in the material presence of works. It has become possible now to examine the relationship of paintings and songs to their advanced capitalist context, and to calibrate the making of work with this relationship in mind. This approach does not result in an outcome where artworks can never take part in their context of capitalism. Rather, the relationship of these artworks to their advanced capitalist context is evident in the works, and they form a resistance. They are always a result of the way they are made, and they are an offering, not an excess.

Contemporary Art and Popular Music

Conceptions of the cultural positioning of art and music products, and therefore the extent to which they are able to function as critical forces in culture, are to some degree indicated by the terms that are commonly used to refer to them. *Contemporary art* and *popular music* are terms that are often used in both academic and informal contexts to describe painting and songwriting, and they are two very different things. The former is the broad and contested term for art making of import in the present (although the term itself is contentious; it's not entirely clear when contemporary art began, what it is or whether it is still going). The latter is the umbrella term under which song-based composition sits, particularly when considered in academic contexts. The reason these terms are being written about together here is because the practicum outcomes of this research are in these two areas of practice. For me, they are subsets of one broader practice of art making, yet they are also undertaken as distinct fields of endeavour, where ideas from songwriting resonate in painting and are usable and where creative strategies in painting can be applied to songwriting. It is also notable and relevant to this enquiry that the conventional and commercial histories of song and painting see them intertwining and intersecting often enough, when they are considered in mediation narratives, to make them appear as twin practices.

The terms that are used to contain (or exclude) songwriting and painting are also important to analyse when considering the idea of moving towards a model of post-capitalist practice. *Painting* may or may not be contemporary art. *Song-based composition* may or may not be popular music. Yet these are commonly accepted terms that refer to the formats of song and painting. As a consequence of this sequence of realities, it can be seen

that *painting* and *song-based composition* have similarly particular and troubled relationships to the terms that are supposed to define or hold them. Painting is well understood to be a way to make artwork within the terrain of contemporary art. Popular music is generally descriptive of the song-based composition that we hear all around us now. If we are to consider painting and songwriting as formats that can be used to make relevant art now, and certainly if we are to consider them as part of a potential practice of post-capitalist art making, it seems important to unpack the distinct and notably similar stresses that govern the relationships between the art forms and the terms they are commonly acknowledged to be connected to.

Contemporary art, firstly, is the term that most often refers to the `broad terrain of art practice in our current time. Literally, *contemporary* means *now*, yet when we consider the work of the well-known contemporary artist Martin Creed, we understand that some of his work was made many years ago yet would still be referred to as contemporary art. *Contemporary art* as a term is plagued by difficulty in this way. It is a term that supposedly refers to the present, yet the present keeps slipping into the past. It is a term that may have been intended to be inclusive, yet it is understood that it cannot absorb all the art making practices in the present. Contemporary art would not for the most part include the paintings of children at school, or even, often enough, the sketches of autodidacts. So to a large degree contemporary art happens as a particular zone of artistic activity within the greater world of advanced capitalism, and it is signposted in certain ways within that context. The art school, the art school-connected ARI, the university gallery, the designated and state-funded contemporary art space, the art grant and the museum are key signposts that the art connected to these might be identified as contemporary art. Yet it is difficult to define the characteristics of contemporary art explicitly, even as it functions as a cultural bloc and has

great import and presence in our advanced capitalist community. Even *Art Since 1940*,³² the slightly modernist-style survey text that covers a world of contemporaneity in art practice, does not really approach a precise definition of *contemporary art*, such is the difficulty of a term where the future keeps unfolding before us and where we are always in the present.

It is possible that *contemporary art* as a term may be so useful that it will continue to describe all future art forever, but this seems unlikely. When considering a model for a critical practice of post-capitalist art making, the term *contemporary art* is problematic because of its intense and defining connections to the corporate flags that attend the designation of contemporary art: the fee-charging university, the gallery businesses, the funding machinations of state and federal governments, and the money-saturated and nationalistic biennales. It is almost as if *contemporary art* as a term came into being as a way to designate a separate, updated art making practice from modernism, yet in so far as *contemporary art* is a term defined as something that is ‘not something’ (‘not modernism’), it may not have defining characteristics beyond what can be seen as a sort of self-serving connection to its own (capitalist) conditions of production.

Within this domain, painting is a practice of image making that has a particular relationship to conceptions of contemporary art. It is fairly certain that painting as a format for making art is not the central practice within contemporary art, and nor should it be. It is not clear if there is a central practice within contemporary art, yet it can be noted that performance, installation, moving image and relational practices have now ascended to a position within the terrain of contemporary art where they are considered notable in a museum context, if one is to consider recent shows at ACCA or the Tate Modern in London.

³² Foster, Hal; Krauss, Rosalind; Bois, Yve-Alain; Buchloh, Benjamin H.D.; Joselit, David. 2004. *Art Since 1900*. London: Thames & Hudson.

Although this is the case, painting still has its place within contemporary art making, yet it is also clear that painting is a rather fraught art-making format when considered specifically within ideals of what particularly contemporary art may be, and more so than other forms. If it were not the case that painting was somewhat on the sidelines of mainstream contemporary art practice, at least in the imagination of contemporary curators, biennales would show a higher percentage of paintings than they currently do. This is in direct contrast to the art fairs that commodify the excess flow of painting practices, where paintings more often function as decorative objects outside the ordinance of more academic contemporary art circuits. Also, if painting were more central in our conceptions of contemporary art practice broadly, painting would not be referred to as often as it is as a somehow contentious form for inventive or impactful or relevant art practice today.

An example of this fraught status of painting, when considered in the context of contemporary art, is the 2016 Melbourne survey exhibition *Painting. More Painting* at ACCA, which housed about 100 paintings in a mass hang so that audiences of contemporary art could consider the relevance of multiple painting practices simultaneously, or so that these could be asserted as psychically important to contemporary art in Australia. If it were the case that there was even a remote possibility for another medium-specific show to be held at ACCA – perhaps *Installation. More Installation* – then painting as a practice would not so clearly be seen as having a constrained or ‘special’ relationship to notions of the contemporary. However, that is not likely, and so what we find is that, in the realm of contemporary art in Australia, there can be the tendency, at least within gallery and museum systems, either to mourn the loss of painting’s value as a practice of inventive power, or to assert its potential to be such, seemingly as if against the odds.

So painting is somehow held within the field of contemporary art, yet also has a fraught or complex relationship with the various ways that people imagine what the world of contemporary art is, or what is self-evidently notable as contemporary art, given recent practices in its name. Somewhat understandably, when contemporary art is envisaged as a space for conceptions of frontier and futuristic practitioners, inventing ever newer avant-garde material practices and conceptual posturings, painting is somehow not in that game. In that world now, where relational aesthetics, film events or mega installs may monopolise, painting has a quaint air, largely because of how long painting has been going on. However, even when contemporary art is simply seen as a pluralist field of ‘present art making’, painting is understood as divided up into the painting that is either in this realm of relevance of ‘present art making’, or not. Only some painting would be admitted to this realm, so terms such as *conceptual painting*³³ are coined to attempt to establish what type of painting it is that would be admitted to the discrete area of contemporary art. Tomma Abts would be, but artists selling their wares at Sunday street markets would not, for the most part. Yet it is all painting. In the post-medium condition described by Rosalind Krauss in *A Voyage on the North Sea*,³⁴ the opening up of art to multiple ways to practice opens up as well a potential loss of art as politically or critically impactful. A type of pure meaning in art can no longer be sought by artists in the way that they did in the time of Greenberg’s ideal of a pure art. Painting is a vexed pursuit in the fallout of these critical-mediation knowledges, but only as it relates to evident conceptions of *contemporary art*.

These complexities do not necessarily apply only to painting; they could apply across many areas of contemporary art and its different formats and contexts for art making.

³³ Frieze Foundation. 2006. ‘Frieze talks: conceptual painting’. Frieze Foundation. 14 October 2006. [Internet]. Accessed 8 August 17. Available from: www.friezefoundation.org/talks/detail/conceptual_painting.

³⁴ Krauss, Rosalind. 2000. *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the age of the post-medium condition*. London: Thames & Hudson.

Yet it is painting in particular where these polarities and difficulties of determination and definition are most embedded and instated. Within this world that is understood as contemporary art, the idea of painting potentially being centralised in a post-capitalist art practice seems slightly outrageous, at least because the idea of painting as a practice being contemporary is rather absurd. One might assume that moves towards a post-capitalist art making practice would likely occur in the broader context of contemporary art, where painting is clearly ancient as a practice. So despite its popularity still as a way to make art in the present, there is nothing new about painting as a methodology for making art now, as it fits so awkwardly into conceptions of contemporary art.

Furthermore, painting has multiple histories as an expression of power for royalty, as a status symbol for the wealthy and as something to be traded in the capitalist markets. This makes the idea of painting taking part as a spearhead of some new political art movement like post-capitalist art making seem somewhat ridiculous. When we focus, as interlocutors and mediators, on the potential of art forms to hold progressive or politicised narratives, painting has some issues in relation to the term *contemporary*, as we have seen. However, because painting must always be potentially admitted into the scope of what is called *contemporary art* (no one has entirely been able simply to get rid of painting) a conundrum is revealed that cannot be resolved while contemporary art is the title under which all art making occurs in the present.

It is this very situation that seems to precisely provide the critique of *contemporary art* as a useful term under capitalism. It is not that painting is wrong as a methodological approach for post-capitalist art making; rather, it is that the idea of contemporary art is wrong, for it does not seem to easily allow a post-capitalist methodology into its imaginary. Painting does change and respond to the political demands of the present situation, but contemporary art as a notion is bound entirely to capitalist systems. The very diffuseness

of its meaning – the precise lack of its defining characteristics, other than that it happens in the present – is the crack into which the seed of capitalism falls and then flowers. I believe that mediators and artists focusing on the critical efficacy of painting and song (or not) within contemporary art are simply focused upon the wrong thing. What we need to reconsider is whether we need terms like *contemporary art* at all. If that terminology were abandoned, we would be able to see more clearly the ways in which art functions in its advanced capitalist world.

Popular music as a term is even more overtly connected to capitalism. This is because, from its inception, rock 'n' roll has been commodified. From the 1950s onwards, when blues musicians were encouraged by fans and money to leave their bars and lounge rooms to perform for radio and make recordings for a white audience, song-based musical works have had an air of commerce and exploitation. Rock and pop music per se is largely a history of the consumption of black American music and its fusions (or not) with folk-song forms from European cultures. The complex histories behind the idea of a contemporary song-based work have, since the 1950s, been grounded in explicit attempts to find audience markets. Much song-based musical production has been forged in an atmosphere of commerce. This can be seen in the explicit links that happen in the song-based music world between changing technologies, style and social movements. An example of this is hip-hop's inception as a ghetto-based black protest music generated by a high school student fiddling about with mixers he found on a dumper, and then its global domination as a genre used extensively by white people.

This history is indicated in the term *popular music*, but it is in some sense at least a denigrating term because it denies both the seriousness of the foundational forms and their artistry, and the prospect for these forms to develop in service to agendas external to commercial pathways. The fact that the term *popular music* is still deployed as a catch-all

term in universities when referring to song-based musical works is quite astonishing. These choices of terminology sideline the black history of rock and pop in a way that is almost racist, because if an idea of popular song must sit alongside broader terms such as *composition*, it affirms a kind of rhetoric of Western musical composition that has been dominated by white people, where histories of rock and pop are undeniably at least largely black. Even given the influence and import of European folk musics and musicals to the song form, the impact of jazz and blues on the conception of the contemporary song form – expressed through the prism of rock 'n' roll – is so extensive that to cordon off that area of enterprise as something called *popular music* is somewhat debasing. The idea of the classical or contemporary classical composition is largely a European history, and song forms have extensive, entrenched black histories, so this division within conceptions of the broad area of composition must, in my view, be considered at least a little suspect.

As well as this, the term *popular music* is troubling because it ascribes to song-based composition the unenviable prospect of always being 'popular', as if that is somehow possible, and also as if that is ever the case. The reality of the practice of song-based composition is that much song-based work, and one could even posit most seminal song-based work, has not been 'popular' at all. The term denies as well the important work that is done all the time by songwriters, uncovering the practices of lesser-known artists and bringing them to light as influencers. Classic examples of this include The Velvet Underground and Big Star, two bands who deeply influence the outcomes in this research practice. Neither band had much commercial success in the times they were actually attempting to find audiences. This is despite their connections to commercial artistry: Lou Reed's career songwriter status, and Alex Chilton's wary, increasingly embittered attempts to create a hit notwithstanding, these artists, despite their best attempts, did not create

‘popular’ music at the time they released it.³⁵ They were nonetheless subject to the strange trap of the terminology that *popular music* evokes, where there is an imaginary of the artistic production of song-based work as always understood explicitly in relation to capitalism. It has been the fate of rock and pop composition thus far to have this practice of artistry and commerce inextricably woven together as if it were inevitable; but it is not inevitable, it is simply timing. Song-based composition is not per se a capitalist form, it is simply that these musical forms rose to prominence in an era and in such a way that this twinning of commerce and song production happened at the outset of the idea of rock ‘n’ roll. This determined how song came to be understood in the twentieth century, and this understanding became entrenched in the popular imagination, through the terminological frame of *popular music*. It is time for that terminology to change so that the prospects and potential of song-based composition as artistry can be raised as they are needed, and certainly now if an artist would like to attempt to propose models of post-capitalist music making. The term *popular music* might be deployed to signify any music that had found its way to popular appeal, whether it be a minimalist art music composition or radio fodder. Song-based work itself does not constitute popular music; indeed, to say that popular music and song-based work are one and the same is to deny the legitimacy and potential of song-based work as an art form.

So conceptions of song and painting as perpetually in crisis as critical forms, or as significantly hobbled as activities that enfold critique, do not necessarily have any basis in the reality of practice. Songs and paintings can enfold critical resistances to dominant

³⁵ The Velvet Underground were not a very well-known band initially, and were still a cult band even after Andy Warhol’s involvement with them. Much has been written about the VU, and a good place to start is perhaps this Thirty-Three and a Third volume: Harvard, Joe. 2004. *The Velvet Underground And Nico*. London: Continuum. For more about Big Star, see Jovanovic, Rob. 2010. *Big Star: The story of rock’s forgotten band*. New York: HarperCollins.

orthodoxies, and indeed these movements toward post-capitalist critiques embedded in making practices can deploy strategies for making that are consistent through both material practices. Recording a song on an iPhone with friends and then releasing it to an audience online has much in common with making a painting on a piece of found cotton paper and photographing and uploading the image to share with others via social media platforms. These are inexpensive ways to be an artist; there is a modesty in these approaches that is attractive simply because being tied to a commercial outcome can influence practice, and spending large amounts of money on creating works might be considered slightly tenuous ethically in a world where many struggle to find food or shelter.

I recognise that this can seem a somewhat pious or killjoy attitude to the making of art. In the Western context we are attached to an idea of total freedom in artistic expression, and the importance of artistic statements for the health of our community and culture. Nonetheless, I see these positionings as mindful choices along a continuum, where all artists choose a relationship to the trail of money that is buried in their work, and the relationship of those monies to the wider context of social and political life. I do not claim that all artists must move their work towards these practices of frugality and modesty, but personally I enjoy the lighter footprint of a work that manages to be made without great expenditure and with a lighter spatial and monetary footprint. Russian communist artists made minute paintings and constructions in matchboxes or held secret apartment exhibitions as a response to their requirement as artists to make communist state works. For those artists these approaches were necessitated by the conditions. For me the conditions are different but no less stressed, and the practice of mindfully engaging with the political conditions and creating works that place art within a particular context is one thing I can do as an artist to resist the advanced capitalist pressures in the world in which I find myself.

There are advantages as well in being able to reach an audience quickly and efficiently, without having to manage a fraught relationship with a commercial pathway. The freedom I experience in this way of making flows in part at least from being freed from the binds and responsibilities of commercial pathways. Experimentation as a practice can open up significantly when ultimately there is no need for works to have the potential to be of service in a commercial context. The works function directly to their audiences without that pressure. In addition, there is a satisfaction in allowing works to develop without the need for them to be attached to some predetermined pitch, register or key that might be assumed as necessary in a commercial context. Paintings are small, they are humble, they are not overly laboured, and they bear strong relationships to sketches, reproductions or book illustrations. Songs are similarly lightly dealt with: instrumentation unfolds in a delicate exploratory way, simple chords are conventions that express particularity of nuance and tone, and the rambling, improvised nature of the music distils discovery in making, and disallows preciousness. This approach is also used when making paintings: the convention of the picture plane is a wonderland of prospects, where searching through indices of imagined potential marks, marks made and covered or redeployed and re-expressed in process is an improvisation in painting. None of these approaches or their outcomes is produced with any real alignment to *contemporary art* or *popular music* – these practices of making simply don't have realistic relationships to these terminologies. They can, however, be described as *art*, and they can be considered to be moving towards models of practice that disallow the commercial and instead have as their social function other meaning outcomes, such as explorations in process, love touch, relationship, delicacy and ephemerality, and a distinct relationship to ethics and a responsiveness to historical context.

I believe it is time for painting and song-based composition to be released from the terms that have held them captive to a capitalist imaginary. *Contemporary art* and *popular*

music, as terms, limit the prospects now for painting and song-based composition, and nor do these terms reflect the realities of the practices to which they are supposed to refer. They are not useful terms when considering the function of paintings and songs as they arise in the present moment. They are capitalist terms, designed to hobble the social and political efficacy of potentially radical art practices.

Whatever: A Post-Capitalist
Making Strategy (John Lennon's Tuba)

'I'm an artist and if you give me a tuba I'll bring you something out of it.'

John Lennon (1976)

Once we have dispensed with the idea that, as artists, we have to provide an excess for a recuperative capitalist field of contemporary art, strike a material pose in the avant-garde tradition or be subject to the implications of being involved in 'contemporary art' or 'popular music', we are freer to encounter art and music products as they function in their situation of the advanced capitalist moment, and to make choices regarding the way we make work. One choice for artists is to drive towards an enhanced '*whatever*' capacity in their work – the whatever capacity that leads inevitably to individuated interpretation. *Whatever* is a way to describe the nuanced, the particular and the indeterminate in the reception of artistic products. We do not always know what precisely moves us in a song or a painting, but we know that we have been affected (or not). The intention to enhance affect has a potential for radicalism as a form of post-capitalist methodology to enhance the political impact of a poetic approach to making, to pursue the incalculable. As Jacques Rancière noted in *The Emancipated Spectator*,³⁶ the audience for artworks do not passively receive them; rather, they are active participants in the making of meaning. Likewise, the idea of the artist who crafts a work in full control of the work's reception is a fantasy; artists at once make and receive their own works in process, in the discovery of making.

As *whatever* is the activated and indeterminate in making and reception, the quality, shape, colour, tone and context of a mark of paint or moment of sound create impact for an

³⁶ Rancière, Jacques. 2009. *The Emancipated Spectator*. London: Verso.

audience, yet the meaning at reception remains imprecise. The fact is that there is no precision that relates to people's perceptions and experiences of art and music, beyond certain considerations along the lines of 'this is blue' or 'that seems jazzy'. Yet despite this indeterminacy, *whatever* is a fact that sits within our perception of art as a crucial part of our experience of songs and paintings. Simultaneously it is a reality that we cannot be precise about. It remains the disordered and intuitive element of artistic reception, the moment where the spectator is emancipated, as Jacques Rancière would describe it.

The question of this *whatever* – its character, its function – is a complex one, because, as Giorgio Agamben points out in his essay of the same name, there is no heading or flag under which *whatever* can be grouped, despite its specific and unique characteristics.³⁷ Thierry de Duve has read this indeterminacy as a loss of meaning, where art becomes a kind of conduit for the a meaningless freedom and it is true that, like Agamben's loved one, the art product is whatever it may be; the conglomeration of its procedures, events and presences make it whatever it is. De Duve read this as being slightly problematic for art's function, but it can be seen as a useful return to a long-held notion that Plato first articulated: that art can be dangerous to the state when we do not know what it really is, or precisely how it fits within a world of defining labels.³⁸

Whateverness is also the thesis that John Lennon raises in his famous statement about being able to bring something from a tuba as an artist. The 'thing' that is brought forward for an audience is *whatever*. There are striking features within the historical procedures of making *whatever*, and these can be considered in relation to the production of meaning. Firstly, it is necessary to consider the qualities of Lennon's process that can

³⁷ Agamben, Giorgio. 1993. 'Whatever'. In *The Coming Community*. Translated by Hardt, Michael. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

³⁸ De Duve, Thierry. 1996. *Kant after Duchamp*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

raise something from a tuba. As Lennon has thought to undertake the project of ‘bringing something’, the thing raised from a tuba is a conceptual thing, firstly; it is an idea, of potential, of future practice and of future worth. But in order to expand upon this, it must be considered what the conceptual is, within the parameters of art’s historical narratives.

Historically, conceptual art has been a particular thing – an idea espoused and then brought to life through a materiality (or a lack of material), which serves then as the outcome or example of an idea. This process typifies how conceptual art can be understood as an art where language is dominant. As Jasper Johns wrote in 1960: ‘With Duchamp, language has primacy.’³⁹ The implication of Duchamp’s oeuvre and work was that, after Duchamp, language became a dominant bedrock of production in contemporary art making. It was the well from which concepts were drawn and then illustrated as material (or dematerialised) outcomes.

The moment of conceptualising *whatever* is not conceptual in the way that ‘conceptual art’ has been conventionally understood, however. There are historical methodologies in art and music practice that work outside that particular model. In an alternate model of the conceptual, potential is conceptualised within a conventional form, like the song- based form or picture plane. A process is imagined, and subsequently undertaken, as if the tuba is an inert site that can be used to raise *whatever*. This practice is connected to the ancient Greek idea of *poiesis*, and we can call this idea of making *poetic*, and the outcomes *poetry*.

In poetic making, the sensory nature of the materials and the open qualities of the conventions of practice are predetermined as intrinsically unfixed, in and of themselves. As an example, the conventional forms of painting and song carry the potential of unfixed

³⁹ Foster, Hal; Krauss, Rosalind; Bois, Yve-Alain; Buchloh, Benjamin H.D.; Joselit, David. 2004. *Art Since 1900*. London: Thames & Hudson, 496.

openness; the very conventions allow a kind of openness when considered as a starting point for making work. The unfixed qualities of paint and sound that are to come in an as-yet-unmade painting or song will have a certain material presence, but the material qualities of paint and sound will never have any particular fixed meanings ascribed to them, because their historical complexities will always – as a starting point of reception – be experienced as intrinsically open to interpretation. This knowledge can be incorporated by the artist as a conceptualised ‘space’ in which to begin to enact gesture, which may in itself start as open, unfixed and not in any way predetermined. The openness of the materials, the way they lack fixed meaning and the convention of the forms are exploited by the artist as a conceptual beginning.

For example, Bernard Frize’s work uses paint to allow the viewer to enter a space of questioning in relation to paint and painting itself. One wonders when looking at these works how they have been made technically; one is lost in the abstract quality of paint itself. Then one wonders where the works are positioned in relation to their histories also, given their designs and the embeddedness of their procedures. That these paintings intersect with painting history is undeniable. The ambivalence and open qualities of paint itself are employed by Frize to pose these and other questions regarding painting’s historicity and its function in culture, placing the undeniable lushness of paint in its abstract materiality before us as an offering and as a question. As a foil to Duchamp, Frize’s work does not play a language game with the viewer but rather denies the primacy of language within experience. Similarly, Elizabeth Peyton’s delicate application of paint is as much her subject as the rock stars she lovingly represents. The bedrock of these ideas, in this understanding of the conceptual, is not the pool of language, but rather the pool of language’s failure, and the potential of chaos, of those universal or natural orders that are

not and never can be entirely understood – the unfolding *whateverness* of experience in its vastness.

Within modernism, this sense of the poetry of making as a process was sometimes referred to as a spiritual process, and this is something that created negative baggage for poetic strategies for making after the onset of the modernist debunking of the spiritual in art. However, let us simply put this narrative of the spirit aside as a red herring, and consider the idea that poetic approaches to making employ the idea of *not knowing*. After all, as Benjamin once wrote, ‘the revolutionary struggle is not between capitalism and spirit, it is between capitalism and the proletariat’.

Peyton’s delicate application of paint holds an infinity of painterly inferences that intersect with the depicted subject, and something happens in the process that makes the *whateverness* of the paint in those dynamic intersections poignant, sensory and evocative. Likewise, Frize has a concept at play in paint, but it has no name: it hinges upon the individuated frisson between an individual and paint. That is the bedrock of these ideas of making, that unknowable, that is individuated. This approach to making differs from the strategy whereby there is an expectation that language can describe things, and that ideas can be articulated through material presences that are then explained by language.

It can seem, of course, that when Duchamp re-presented ordinary objects in a gallery, he proved once and for all the primacy of language in relation to the conceptual underpinning of the art object. At times, the artistic activities of Duchamp have been burdened with the task of undermining the idea of art practice as a mysterious inventory of nuances. It can seem that conceptual art, as we have conventionally understood it, has proven that art is likely always to be understood through the prism of language. Poetry, however, as an activity, works often as the refutation of language’s primacy. Perhaps

Duchamp even allowed the unknowable to enter his domain of language as a wildcard, when we consider his late and final return to the imagery of tableau.⁴⁰

Long before Duchamp, *poiesis* as an activity attracted such a strong reaction from Plato when he considered it in relation to his idea of a society that he denied it to be admitted into his ideal. The possibility of denying the primacy of language and admitting the primacy of other ways of understanding in the world is what Lennon's statement attempts to encompass. This is one quality that may have made art seem dangerous at different times, certainly for Plato. Lennon's offhand thesis asserts that the openness and the embedded histories of a tuba – the inherent *tuba-ness* of a tuba – is the thing that will be used as the centre for an art outcome, and as Lennon was interested in art having a political function in his community, he considered art practice a way to wake people up to what was right in front of them:

‘The thing about rock and roll, good rock and roll – whatever good means and all that shit – is that it's *real* and realism gets through to you despite yourself. You recognize something in it which is true, like all true art. Whatever art is, readers. OK. If it's real, it's simple usually, and if it's simple, it's true. Something like that.’⁴¹

For many who use sound and paint as ways to communicate, it is the imprecise yet affecting qualities of these materials that are mindfully put to use, not the way these materials have to be put into service for word-based descriptions of things. Frize and Peyton use paint to describe a connection to the unknowable experience of paint, but they could not do this without the convention of painting. Lennon's claim denies that the material of paint or sound – put into use in paintings and songs – can be understood through the hierarchy of language's dominance. His statement brings forth a denial of language's supreme logic as

⁴⁰ Duchamp, Marcel. *Étant donnés*. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Pennsylvania.

⁴¹ Wenner, Jann. 1971. ‘John Lennon: The Rolling Stone interview’. *Rolling Stone*, 21 January & 4 February 1971.

the salient concern of the politicised artist, and rejects the idea of language-based concepts, particularly as the primary resource of the politicised artist. His statement supports the idea of an active artwork in the world that can arise through a process of trust, knowledge and the conceptualising of potential as a premise, here understood as *whatever*. This imaginary artwork that is to come in this process is not a truth statement arrived at through logic, but rather an open statement achieved through openness. It is a simultaneous detachment from materiality as a specific thing, and an attachment to whatever material pathway is travelled, towards openness. The tuba matters both intensely (if it comes to be used in the artwork) and not at all, for any material may be used to make an artwork.

Using this framework of the poetic approach, it can be argued that John Nixon's adherence to his format and material is the sort of inverse, and equal, of an intense trans-disciplinarity.⁴² It is a practice that settles on the stretcher, paint and cross because it may as well, because although it matters very much in a way, it simultaneously does not matter at all. This is Lennon's tuba again, in another guise. It doesn't matter what Lennon finds before him, he will make art from it. This pursuit of poetry through forms that shift and change – or, in Nixon's case, that change little – is the pursuit tied to this initial concept of *potential*. This is the concept that arises before the poet acts, or plays chess or does whatever. It is the idea of the potential of poetry, and a faith in the idea of poetry as having the potential to affect cultural life, to matter. This is the way that the *whateverness* of poetic art making can be pressed into service for post-capitalist art making. Conventional forms such as painting and songwriting bring a particular potential as well to the advanced capitalist moment, supplying poetic practice with a particular forum that evokes a question: what is to occur within this convention? In this model of creative activity, artists do

⁴² Melbourne-based artist John Nixon – his painting practice includes repetitions of motifs.

whatever they want, whether a focused fidelity to one medium or a movement through multiple materials. This is a moment that has been reached now in any conception of art practice, as Thierry de Duve noted in his essay 'Do Whatever'.

Lennon's tuba – the recognition of the potential of anything to artists – is also of course deeply historical, because it is grounded in what artists have always done, which is to experiment with ideas for expression and make expressive marks, often using conventional forms such as the picture plane and the song. The *chansonnier* movement in Montmartre is an example of this sort of faith in the potential of materials to provide whatever meaning. When the resisters in Montmartre were told not to play piano and not to play particular songs – when these activities were outlawed – they took up guitars and wrote their own songs. The potential of the poetic practice the *chansonniers* and their artist friends positioned as a resistant activity in Paris was necessarily trans-disciplinary. The material outcomes for the poetry they performed and the resistances they enacted were able to change all the time. In Montmartre in the 1870s and 1880s, and particularly at Le Chat Noir, there could be found singers, songwriters, painters, cartoonists, actors, shadow puppeteers, poets and writers. Often these people also ran the businesses that served as the meeting places for these trans-disciplinary artists. And often the artists were at least sympathetic to the resistance Communard movement within the dominant politics of the day. Artists' resistances were enacted through these wide-ranging forms, and the works employed lightness of touch, humour and subversions of known convention as methodologies that can be traced.

For example, the *chansonnier* Jules Jouy wrote of the Communards' wall: 'Tomb without a cross or chapel or golden lilies or sky blue church windows, when people talk about it they call it the Wall.' This *chansonnier's* poem marked for the community, in terms that could not be attacked by the state, a place that was unmarked by the state, yet

significant to the people. Today it is still an attended monument, visited by hundreds. It serves as an example of what can be achieved by a poetry that cannot be incorporated into the dominant language of the state, but that can be understood by people, and particularly by people with a resistance to a dominant political reality in mind.⁴³

Today, conventional song and painting forms offer these historical frameworks as ongoing spaces to deploy *whatever* as a political stance and as a strategy for post-capitalist art making. In capitalist art and music worlds dominated by private gallery systems, biennales, festival events and spectacles, the idea of *noticeability* is crucial. Often the noticeability of an artwork in the capitalist sphere is related to the way it buys into the myth of avant-gardism. Post-capitalist art making, conversely, is a practice that operates at a remove from these imperatives. Creating small paper paintings that can be swapped with other painters for their works, and that are shown laid down on a table, or held in hands in homes, creates a space of intimacy and dialogue. Within the picture plane the narratives of the paintings assume all kinds of individuated meanings, because they are made to be small, physically modest, to be apprehended individually in the moments when they have an audience, and to be open to interpretation. Symbols and shapes appear as reference to histories of painting and art making more generally: expressionism, modernism, minimalism, illustration, folk art and many more histories converge in imagery and mark making. The depth of the historical referencing to some extent depends on the audience. The paintings are objects to be held that carry a certain weight and sensory load, and as well they operate as windows that open to a world of symbolism and reference. The compositional balance of the works is potentially a pleasure to the eye and mind, understood to be satisfactory to greater or lesser degrees for the audience. The narrative

⁴³ Ruddy, Seamus. 2018. 'The Communards' Wall'. [Internet]. Accessed 12 May 2018. Available from: http://seamusruddy.com/The_Communards_Wall.html.

force of painted works that are suggestive of representation but continue to collapse into abstraction is put to the viewer, held by the viewer and understood in a necessarily individuated way. I see this as a kind of sidestepping of the language placeholders and/or banners that often accompany big corporate/capitalist/museum art shows, but that also cordon off elements of experience to their reductive language terms. When there is no banner for a work (and these works are untitled), and no certainty regarding the symbolisms within a work, there is no use to which the works can be put, other than the work they do for the audiences who come to see them, and who use them as they see fit. The *whateverness* of the works as well as their size, the modesty with which they are made, their links to historical art making practices and resistances, their post-museum showing contexts, and their emotional deployment of colour and composition – can be seen to be methodologies operating at something of a remove from capitalist contemporary art systems.

In the late 1970s in the United Kingdom, the dominance of arena rock, aided by MTV, was resisted by a brief upsurge of punk music, which denied technique. In the current art context, these denials of technique and denials of the primacy of language can be understood as a denial of the logocentric, language-ordered hierarchy of art production as the widely accepted politicised model of contemporary art production. This denial constitutes support for poetic practices that have an intention to create openness where banner headings create a cordoned-off effect, or potentially present a closedness.

As well, these poetic strategies of modesty, community, convention and openness can move as values from one format to another, and it is not a coincidence that as capitalism accelerates to a point where living conditions are globally impacted, artists can respond with a poetic politic that moves through disciplines and communities. This idea as a politic was forecast in left-wing activist communities with the Occupy movement, where multiple

activisms converged under an abstract banner of ‘occupy’; in artistic terms it can be understood as trans-disciplinarity and outsiderliness.

Contemporary art words have thrown up their critics of the trans-disciplinary practice that moves concepts through multiple technologies and materialities, but these criticisms have tended to ail about or trail into indecision. A case in point is Jörg Heiser’s exploration of the relationship between painting and rock music in his essay ‘The Odd Couple’.⁴⁴

He theorises at one point that:

‘it is hard enough to develop a competence of context in one field of production, so that even a proper competence of craft in another field cannot make up for a lack of engagement in that other context’s discourse. Which makes the myth of a seamless crossover between the arts all the more questionable. As critics paint the picture of the lighthearted, light-handed, tongue in cheek young producers who move effortlessly among categories, which are all embraced within a common notion of good entertainment, the need to eagerly conjure up that sense of naturalness is precisely an indicator of its absence.’

Heiser rejects rock music and painting’s interrelatedness and in doing so denies a mysterious quality that passes through time to land in material as song or painting. Rather, he describes both mediums as second-hand formats continuously offered to the marketplace for reconsideration; like cousins who converse while they await their trial. Stuck in the binary of considering the ultimate value of works outside their *whatever* nature, Heiser fails to recognise that rock music and painting, and by extension all art activities and materiality, are simultaneously second-hand formats in the marketplace and conduits for an essence of intention that both unites them and makes them distinct – the *whateverness* of the art products.

⁴⁴ Heiser, Jörg. 2006. ‘The odd couple’. *Frieze*, 1 October 2006. [Internet]. Available from: <https://frieze.com/article/odd-couple>.

In attempting to invalidate the artist's strategic model of inter-disciplinarity, Heiser makes fun of Paul McCartney's paintings, decries the attempts of Damien Hirst on *Top of the Pops* and undertakes a critique of paintings made by Don Van Vliet (Captain Beefheart). Basically, he recommends these as examples of 'bad art', yet like many who claim to understand what constitutes good and bad art, he does not commit to giving the reader parameters by which to judge what is good or bad; we're supposed to just fall in line with his views as an arbiter of taste. Despite all this, Heiser goes on to note that, as 'Hans Eisler once put it, "If you know only about music, you know nothing about music."' With this, Heiser leaves his argument open. Such critiques of trans-disciplinarity are muddled and somehow nostalgic. They reveal a desire for a stringent practitioner through a material, a material expert, a practitioner par excellence, such as Vermeer. The suggestion seems to be that this is what is denied with the rise of trans-disciplinarity. Yet understanding the *whateverness* of artistic practice is not a denial of technique necessarily. *Whateverness* does not care for technique per se, but technical excellence is not denied either; rather, it is a methodology that may be used (or not), but always in service to ideas/concepts, and always with the understanding that the ideas take part in the politics of culture. Having the intention to move one's art making towards a post-capitalist art methodology absorbs these realities of the strength of trans-disciplinary practices for artists now. Even as other practices have an impact and are awe-inspiring, there is a place within our time for the art and music making that does not cost a lot to make, that quietly asserts its modesty and value, and that can also function politically. These approaches also absorb and mobilise truths that were the spoils of the punk and *chansonnier* movements: namely that technique is just a mutable strategy put into service of an idea within art practice – the idea being the essence of *whateverness*. Technique is a tool put into service for ideas, yet without the cultural or

political positioning of the concept in a work, there is not much point in making work, in my opinion. An empty festival of the senses is just that.

If artistic and musical mediation in the twenty-first century is to be ethical at all, it will continue to absorb the specificities of artworks, while also absorbing their historicity. Mediation of art and music should no longer be reliant upon a big-picture criticism premised upon materiality and absorption of excess as an indicator of politics, as has been normative in the twentieth century. However, this is not to say that there should be no decisions made as to the significance of the material in an artwork. Absorbing the indeterminacy of *whatever* as a coded and political space, working out what artworks are made for, analysing how they work in their particular contexts, and making decisions as to what art can mean in ethical terms is the potential that Lennon saw in the tuba. It is the way that *whatever* has become a post-capitalist art making methodology.

In the time named ‘the contemporary’, and with the conditions of advanced capitalism pressing upon us as art makers, materiality in artwork is always the strut for a concept. Concepts always emerge as the foci of artworks and, as a consequence, artworks are always placed directly into the context of politics. Yet there is only one logic of admittance in the current art moment, and that is the logic that admits everything.

Painting, Songwriting and Post-punk Flow

I see the terrain of the three-minute pop song as sharing qualities with the landscape field in painting, and for me the opportunities that both formats represent is the idea of convention being a space of possibility, because the history represents an open-ended dialogue of sorts. A melody can be seen as a tumbleweed that makes its way along the causeway of a song's typical procedure – it is already set up as this. Likewise, a blank piece of paper can be seen as ground you have traversed before, filled with the histories of a million prior marks and the potential of further gestures into that index of mark making. As the picture plane has been seen that way so often before, it is already prefigured. Using those forms, there is always a strong sense of the historical, of that potential to intersect with whatever histories as well as the prospect of responding immediately to the current environment, whatever that may be, including the fraught context of the advanced capitalist environment. The prior events contained within conceptions of the three- or four-minute song or ideas of the landscape of the painting field are the partly known terrains of the gesture to come, and they are also absorbed into the gesture as mark as part of the life of a work.

The prevalence of painting and song as dominant forms within the field of 'post-punk' art making is noticeable, and one way to account for this is that painting and song share the characteristic of being intrinsically connected to an ancient regime of expression via their distinct forms, and are thus always considered to be inescapably historical. The historical and conventional can offer much to a practice that welcomes *whateverness*, and this is a key component of post-punk methodologies. Both painting and song will always be connected to much more than the post-punk context, and so these forms are subject to

frames of mediation within all the fields to which they are connected. Within the field of contemporary art, for example, the perception of painting and song being bound to tasks of relentless mourning, or to projects of constant recuperation and reassertion, hobbles any prospect of impactful composition and cordons off potential in both painting and song generally, because this way of looking at these forms constitutes a lingering challenge to the potential of the forms themselves. Post-punk practices do not, for the most part, share these anxieties of the contemporary. We understand this because we can see the use of the forms in post-punk flow.

Kim Gordon, from the US band Sonic Youth, often uses paint on paper and conventional song structure when making music. As well, Gordon has been substantially influenced in her practice of both song and painting by conceptual art practices in Los Angeles in the 1980s.⁴⁵ Like many post-punk practitioners, she has developed an individual politic in practice, mobilised through both song and painting, not as a nostalgic or anachronistic activity, but rather as a strategic political presence, responsive to the current moment.

My painting and songwriting has been influenced by a kind of abstract spirit that can be broadly referred to as ‘post-punk’. Some commentators believe post-punk to be an ephemeral historical moment in music; others conceive of it as a broad church of artistic approach. My own view is closer to the latter, in that I think of post-punk as a large and diffuse field of (often at least partly autodidactic) art and music making, grounded in principles organized initially in the punk movement in the United Kingdom, and now flowing on to be repurposed inter-generationally as an anti-mainstream approach to art and music.

⁴⁵ Kim Gordon went to art school in Los Angeles as an undergraduate and continued to create work with and engage with contemporary artists such as Dan Graham and Mike Kelley after she was in Sonic Youth.

It is impossible to consider post-punk strategies for making art and music without considering what punk was, and these are difficult things to define, punk and post-punk being very broad and contested fields. There is no single definition. People from different countries or cities, from within different scenes or even from within the same scene, will all have differing views about what punk or post-punk might be. There will be disagreement regarding when these so-called movements happened, their origins, what defined them and whether they can be said to be active still in some way. I do not seek to define either; rather, I will detail some significant attitudes and ways of making work that I have absorbed and that I think of as having an undeniable connection to what could be called a flow of post-punk tendencies within art making.

Although Dick Hebdige wrote about punk practically before it was even over in his seminal text *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*,⁴⁶ he nonetheless wrote a version of punk into contemporary consciousness. This was followed up more recently by Greil Marcus's writing about the connections between punk and the Situationists in 1960s Paris.⁴⁷ For the most part, these sociological texts are useful in taking a broad overview of punk as a historical cultural movement. Definitions from Hebdige and Marcus posit punk as being characterised by nihilism, boredom and attempts to find an aesthetic reality that was commensurate with experience, circa 1973. Groups of mostly young people sought new avenues of expression and identification, and we know from Hebdige about the version of this expression that was dominant in the United Kingdom and that has passed into the lexicon of mainstream Englishness: 'Although it was directly offensive (T-shirts covered

⁴⁶ Hebdige, Dick. 1979. *Subculture: The meaning of style*. London: Routledge.

⁴⁷ Marcus, Greil. 1989. *Lipstick Traces: A secret history of the twentieth century*. Boston: Harvard University Press, 1989.

in swear words) and threatening (terrorist/guerilla outfits) punk style was defined principally through the violence of its “cut ups”.⁴⁸

When we think about how music and painting can be understood in relation to Australian versions of post-punk, it is important to consider how different punk and post-punk were in the Australian context. There were versions of punk aesthetics in Australia, but they were not primarily defined as violently cut up. What perhaps can be seen now as aesthetic homogeneity in punk in the United Kingdom was certainly never homogenous in Australia. There was never really one punk or post-punk look in Australia, nor one approach to conceptions of post-punk art and music making. Indeed, the very lack of consistency through post-punk music scenes in Australia speaks to the idea that there was a politic that was afoot, that was not grounded in any particular aesthetic set of criteria, but rather was a loose conceptual approach underpinning artistic activity. What remained consistent were the ideas that were dominant in musical and artistic subcultures. These were and are broad subcultural concepts, and they are consistent, historical and ongoing, while responding to the indicators of their various contexts.

Punk in the more historicised sense, and particularly in the English sense, quickly became a vision of entrepreneurial markets, and morphed into a consumer product typified by the fashion empire of Vivienne Westwood, becoming something that it had itself denigrated. For many, including for Hebdige, punk was a brief grass-roots English movement with a homogenous style reflective of a certain set of values that decried the strangling norms of English class systems. Yet in Australia at the same time, the attitudes of a socially critical subcultural self-expression did not play out in any aesthetic similarity of appearance, which perhaps tells a peculiarly Australian story. The awareness of counter-cultural attitudes that defied mainstream pursuits and avenues of capital developed strongly

⁴⁸ Hebdige, Dick. 1979. *Subculture: The meaning of style*. London: Routledge.

in Australia in the late 1970s and through to now, yet punk and post-punk in Australia defined itself primarily as a conceptual movement expressive of abstract countercultural positioning. In other words, in the absence of a defining aesthetic, Australian post-punk had a defining attitude. This attitude – a way to position against perceived mainstreams of culture – can be understood as influencing the work of subsequent musicians and artists in the wake of punk, in what has been referred to as new wave or post-punk in Australia, and what could even be understood by countercultural practitioners now as grunge or indie or simply subcultural music and art. I think of this as post-punk flow, because what punk was, in the historicised sense, quickly passed, yet this expanding field of practices relating to it continued exploring what punk had raised. This fragmented field with antecedents in punk procedures for creative practice is what might be described as the broad terrain of post-punk.

One thing that connects the Australian version of post-punk to contemporary art practice is a certain drive to composition that sits firmly outside the mainstream dogma of culture, yet that uses its conventional formats. This can be mobilised through *whatever* (whatever material, whatever form, whatever reason for doing so) as an anti-mainstream feel, a sense of the possibility of a self-directed, self-made world, a defiance of values that appear in culture as authorities, and a turning inside-out of the frames that are used to house cultural mores. These values in post-punk flow have no governing aesthetic necessarily, but rather can be recognised by a certain critical positioning in relation to all kinds of mainstream things. Indeed, one might absorb Walter Benjamin's arguments in 'The Author as Producer' and apply them to the examples of post-punk creativity and artistic practice from 1980s to 2000s Australian indie music and leftist painting practice, and read these as being in service to a critical positioning against multiple authoritative mainstreams.

Robert Forster (of the Australian band The Go-Betweens) became an antecedent of this type of cultural positioning by opposing a certain version of Australian masculinity in his presentations of self. For Kim Salmon and the Scientists, it was important to position themselves in relation to a lack in the mainstream, an absence they read in mainstream culture that thwarted self-expression. ‘Our fashion sense was a nostalgia for our teens even though we were not long out of our teens,’ says Kim Salmon. ‘We affected the look of tough guys. We wanted to be sleazy and nasty and punk but we wanted to do it our way.’⁴⁹ So post-punk in art practice may be to do with a range of subtle and yet important moves – moves relating to the presentation of the body, the particular sound of a voice when it sings, the sexual politics of a lyrical content that mines underrepresented aspects of experience, a commitment to painting when it is often understood to be ‘dead’ in mainstream mediation, and any other range of idiosyncratic and individualistic positionings. Post-punk attitudes in practice can be seen as assertive claims to individuation, to self-directed projects, even to autodidacticism and certainly to subculture. The lineage of these in Australia can be traced to early punk/post-punk artists such as Salmon and Forster.

However, punk and post-punk attributes were not themselves ever entirely new. Characteristics shared by the sorts of attitudes attributed to post-punk practice in this research can be traced back further than to the beginning of punk, and can indeed be found in attitudes to making art in many resistant cultural practices seen through multiple histories. Examples of these connections that can be seen as presaging punk or post-punk include the Situationists, the trans-disciplinary practice of David Bowie (widely understood to be a proto-punk practitioner and a composer and painter) and artistic practices that revolved around the Communard movement in Paris in the 1800s, typically at Le Chat Noir. The connections between the Situationists and English punk are well defined by Greil

⁴⁹ From a recorded conversation with Kim Salmon.

Marcus, and there is no question that the French radicals influenced the English in relation to politics and presentation of self. I also raise the example of Le Chat Noir to note that there were historical precursors to the multi-disciplinarity that came to be common through punk, and that this trans- and multi-disciplinary practice was connected to politics. For the French writers, song composers, painters, cartoonists and performers of the Communard resistance period in France, the politic of resistance to mainstream authorities had the potential to run through multiple material practices. This is exemplified by a song that can be expressed easily through different types of instrumentation and that does not need expert technicians to play it, and by concepts that are expressed simultaneously through song and painting, poetry and cartoons and that can move between all these material expressions. There are connections between punk, post-punk and movements such as Dadaism as well, as Greil Marcus has explored. Post-punk and punk before it also borrowed from conceptual art, in that the idea of a work being the placeholder for a concept of social significance has primacy in these movements.

Thee countercultural positioning of punk as a frame for making means that it can be defined as a movement that was looking forward and backward all the time: back to its mirrors in multiple prior artistic movements, and forward to its ripples in the broad and loosely defined era of post-punk. In Australia (but also, one can argue, in the United States, the United Kingdom and elsewhere where punk had its moment), post-punk as a wake of punk holds together an agency and everyday activism that it inherited from early punk makers. However, this has recalibrated as time has passed. This is not to say that the post-punk field can be characterised as a flabby or blown-out version of punk. Rather, it can be seen as a sort of opening out, where punk had been more nihilistic. The recalibrations of post-punk from punk put the broad range of activities of punk and post-punk back in line with deeper historical antecedents, so that now these fields of activity can be seen as part

of an ongoing flow that can be used to begin to define strategies for art making that resists advanced capitalist drives.

Despite differences between them, it seems clear that there is an unbroken line from punk through to post-punk, of the use of anti-institutional positioning, plays with gender, expressive performative values and recuperations of romantic gestures. All these influences can be seen as being subtly at play in my paintings and in my songs. Romantic vistas unfold and become surreal, complicating and disordering the conventions they deploy – either the romantic love song or the representative landscape hooks into its history, but the forms are subverted and played with in complex and unfolding ways. DIY strategies for practice and expressions of the everyday fold out in the paintings and songs as loose gestures, offhand yet delicate responses to material and place. The immediacy and simplicity of the works reveal an approach to making that has absorbed the idea that technique is a trap and that attempts can be made to express without formal training as long as one grasps the poetic possibility of material and form. These are art making practices that align well with Thierry de Duve's conceptions of *whatever*, yet these ideas align mostly to tactics of post-punk practice – the use of idiomatic and unfolding systems of reference that complicate and critique cultural norms. These tactics are explored in my paintings and songs as defining ways to frame practice and as ways to be guided in mark making, whether that be making a mark with coloured paint on a piece of paper, considering a way to approach lyrical content in a song, or defining ways to think about the voice that will be used when singing. Post-punk agency and its histories are active in the way that practice is developed, as a frame and as a guiding politic or principal of *whateverness*, of doing whatever. There is no doubt that this conception of 'do whatever', as it is alive in post-punk for me, connects clearly to de Duve's conception of 'do whatever', where the *whateverness* of making defies modernity and contemporaneity's conceptual endgames and asserts the intractable mystery

and agency of historical approaches to art practice – the ongoing power of *poiesis*. These plays of *whatever* are apparent in post-punk bands, from photographs people take of themselves in selfies and promo shots, tracing right back to Robert Forster staring critically into the lens. It is within that forum of performance of self and defiance against an imaginary bloc of control that a range of post-punk positioning was explored, mobilised and used. Post-punk rock bands absorbed those tactics for making, and over time they have become a history of potential in socially and historically responsive art that could be put into service for an art making that has aspirations to delimit the influence and pressure of capitalist drives.

When Kim Salmon ‘declared himself a god’ many times in the 1990s in the band Kim Salmon and The Surrealists, in his song ‘I’m Keeping You Alive’ irony and sincerity move into one declarative moment, and an audience perceived whatever it desired. This sense of the possibility within post-punk performance is one of its provocations and its potential, always contextual to the shared moment situated in the present, often knowingly folding out into various circuitous and open-ended histories and references. These strategies can be mobilised for a painter also. It is what is understood as a conceptual underpinning in post-punk flow. Salmon’s declaration about being a god is a guiding premise declared openly in the song, the idea of being the only authority of yourself. This is a concept of much significance within post-punk’s expanded terrain of practice.

There can be the tendency in some critical mediation of painting or songwriting to presume an overarching sense of what works of this type necessarily do or present when they use the conventional forms they use. However, art and musical works themselves are not always subordinate to this understanding of the convention of forms, and in post-punk flow, conventional formats such as posters, painting and songs are often deployed. It is almost the very conventionality of the forms that make them usable. In post-punk flow, it

is understood that works can have particular qualities despite and because of their conventional forms, and that these individuated expressions fold out into their own circuitous references and systems of value, the logics of which are referred to in the body of the works. We know what histories songs refer to by their instrumentation and the conventions they deploy. A song is partly written before it is completed by its potential in convention, and the argument about the state of the form will follow through the material of the song. In the same way, paintings always present an argument about paintings. The particularity of works present an audience with questions that fold out into histories that we know, and references to those elements of experience that we do not know.

When criticality is a goal for art making, being able to use the conventions of picture plane and three-minute song can be useful because the histories of the form add loaded social and historical resonance to every gesture. Experience of the convention becomes a method and a ground. Practice develops as an individuated set of tactics and responses, continually undertaken with the attenuated and shifting sense of perspective that Michel de Certeau writes of in ‘Walking in the City’.⁵⁰ Entering the pantheon of prior gestural histories via the arch-convention of picture plane or song form is a way to interact with all the historical, societal and art-critical nuances – the inventory of historical gestures – that are connoted by the forms. An example of these might be the way tone is used in a voice singing a melody, or the mutable meaning of a coloured square as it is imagined moving from folk art to minimalist painting histories. The pleasure of these equations in post-punk flow is the fusions of responses to histories in practice and the open propositions they form as they come together in compositions that involve the past and the present. Post-punk, envisaged in this way, is not a dead or simple approach to practice, and while it is highly

⁵⁰ De Certeau, Michel. 2011. ‘Walking in the city’. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 91–110.

conservative in a sense, that does not mean it is lacking criticality; in fact, it is a history and an alive and ongoing practice of criticality.

Approaches to making and ideas developed through post-punk musical performance can become a set of strategies for engagement with the world that proliferate anecdotally and experientially in the post-punk field, and that come to be used by cartoonists, painters, illustrators, writers and anybody who is attracted to the broad positioning of countercultural activity that post-punk flow represents. Thus, post-punk can be understood as something that occurs outside boundaries that have, to date, been devised for it within its dominant critiques or theorising (for example, views of punk as an English class movement). These qualities of practice that connect to post-punk flow problematise the tacit exclusions that abound regarding categories of making, based upon materiality, as in the fields of contemporary art and popular music. The cultural position of art products is determined neither by spirit nor by material; it is determined by a work's relationship to systems of authority and capital. This is defined quite well in post-punk practices, where Kim Salmon and Robert Forster are connected by an idea of anti-authoritarianism and complex gestures mounted against the Australian mainstream. These types of strategies found in post-punk flow are applicable to moves in practice that can be used toward post-capitalist art making.

Post-punk influence in songwriting and painting practice is mobilised in this research as an antidote to presuppositions about conditions for making that abound in ideas of contemporary art or popular song. Those more stressed conceptions of painting and song are not at play significantly in the sphere of post-punk art making, and they never have been. Song and painting have always been admissible in the context of the post-punk flow of ideas and strategies, and have always been used as forms that are alive with potential. Post-punk practice is raised as a relatively uncontrolled, generating and broad context,

capable of holding a multiplicity of narratives, gestures and materiality. Thinking as a painter or songwriter in the post-punk space is to think of painting and song as a world of possible tactics, moves and responses that can be seen as conceptual and relational, that proliferate anecdotally and experientially, and that have the potential to unfold in culture as critical forms.

Functions of the Poetic in Art Making

Whateverness in painting and songwriting practice uses ambiguity as a tool. The idea of the poetic gesture as unlimited and ambiguous opens up making as a potentially anti-authoritarian or critical event with potential. Plato described the poetic as ‘the most uncanny thing’.⁵¹ To knowingly deploy abstraction and ambiguity as an act of poetry can be seen as a way of making in the world that changes it. I am aware that, at times, and certainly for Plato’s ideal society, these practices of the poetic have been problematic for institution and state. That has always been because poetic works by their very presence potentially breach the logics of institutions and states by disrupting the premising values of organisational logic.

It is impossible to make a work that is open to multiple interpretations for its audience – to deploy abstraction in service to the poetic – if one does not have a conception of what a closed work would be. A poetic work keeps folding out with suggestiveness. A closed work addresses a concept specifically and illustrates it. A work’s politics or criticality can be understood through what it is, and how it is made. I work to clear a space in making that means works reflect specific values and critical positioning, through the way that they are made.

One way to reject and hold at bay the multiple systems at play in the contexts of capitalism’s expanding logics is to work through political positions relating to each work, imbuing works with layered ambiguities but also checking the systems of complex

⁵¹ Agamben, Giorgio. 1999. *The Man Without Content*. Translated by Albert, Gorgia. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1–4. Chapter 1, ‘The Most Uncanny Thing’, describes poetry as that uncanny thing and discusses Plato’s view of it.

references that always abound in these types of ambiguous poetic works. I use ambiguity as a key to establishing a poetic experience when making, but I am in a constant dialogue with myself when making regarding the ramifications of the multiple symbols, effects and subjects I am using. I am aware of intersections with prior histories of effects, symbols and subjects, and the contexts that these connect to. A web of intuitive gesturing and historical awareness unfolds as its own delicately calibrated and mindful politics in making, a *whateverness* act that forgets and simultaneously does not forget, that is framed in set ways and also 'becomes' in an ongoing, open way, reflecting both knowing and not knowing. Practice in this way becomes its own authority, interacting with its dominant context of capitalism in ways that are more or less oppositional. How oppositional a work becomes depends upon the conditions for making or the intuitive pathways of practice in the moment, the motifs, symbols and gestures used, and how these interact specifically with the designated pathways of capital. My ambient, ghostly paintings of banks, for example, are a direct reference to capital, whereas other motifs are more abstracted.

When writing songs or making paintings, it is possible to become aware of the potential of images, sounds and motifs to be loaded up with ambiguous references. As we know, the audience for artworks will also necessarily bring their own individuated sense to any painting or song, and yet this is an experience in poetic making that can be enhanced for the audience. Knowledge of the potential effects of the *whateverness* of materials and compositions gives artists the potential to use ambiguity as a powerful strategy in poetic art making.

There is something intrinsic to the way that painting and songwriting happen in making that holds the potential of this power. Colour as an abstract quality and the abstractly evocative quality of sound mean the practices of painting and songwriting hold radical potential before any express strategies are mobilised in the intentions of making.

This is because qualities of sound and colour are themselves redolently evocative, but their evocations and significations are inevitably individuated. This is the kind of inbuilt radical nature of material – it is evocative and affecting, yet it does not have specific meaning per se. This reality of material stands at odds with any authority under word-language headers that aims to cordon off experience into soundbites or finitude, as you would see, for example, in organisations under capitalism, or authorities under the state. When effects and openness are presented in society in the form of art products, there is the potential to model an alternative space to state-organised, capitalist-ordered authorities with finite, blunt and closed values aligned to them.

The radical thing that carries this potential of colour and sound as a potential politic in painting and music (and art generally) is the *gesture*. The gesture, firstly, is something in art that comes from the body, either the handmade or sung gesture – for example, the sound of a singing voice in a bed of chords, or the trace of paint dragged across a piece of paper. Yet even the machined gesture carries the weight of the thinking and the organised body behind it. Another gesture is the introduction of any art product into the world, the act of expression itself. When we think about art products in this way, we can always ask: for whom was this gesture made? How was this gesture made? And why was this gesture made? The first type of gesture is the effect of materials and their qualities in production. The second accounts for art making as a series of decisions that relate to the world, extrinsic to the qualities of the mark per se. It became apparent over the past 100 years, through modernism, that either of these types of gesture could be understood culturally by establishing their position within the contexts of the artwork's world and its attendant logics, and what qualities the art product brought to this situation, or how it was enacted as a presence, *in situ*, in its cultural context.

Ultimately, the gesture – that thing always found in even the most machined art product – is by its very quality loaded with indexical implications that are resolutely abstract. The abstraction to which I refer here is the material quality of paint or sound itself. However we use paint to create images, and however we deploy sound to form structured songs, the quality of paint and sound remain affecting in their material presence, regardless of how they have been moulded by the artist into expressive forms. This material presence of paint or sound is itself always somehow still abstract, in the sense that it remains undefined how paint per se or sound per se will affect an audience, alongside the more defined qualities of paint or sound’s use in works. This built-in abstraction of material is useful in attempts to mobilise ambiguity as a device in making, leading potentially to poetic outcomes whose meanings are open and fold out, intersecting with multiple references.

After modernism, this abstraction of the gesture is more than ever enhanced. It can operate as the trace of a person’s presence, and it is always a marker into the cultural library of preceding events. Jacques Rancière describes this feature of contemporary art worlds as the ‘regime of the aesthetic’, something different from conceptions of art in Plato’s time, where it was seen as something that needed to be appropriately directed for the purpose of the state, and different from the ‘representative regime’ in which mimesis is the salient feature of purposeful art practice.⁵²

This sometimes indexical and always abstract quality of gesture can now be seen as poetic, as speaking to the part of experience that is itself abstract and incalculable. The meaning of art products can never be totally resolved in any case, and never more so than in the post-medium age; they are now inevitably and intrinsically ambiguous. The panoply of technologies and materials in art worlds reflect the actual world, while the irresolvable

⁵² See Rancière, Jacques. 2013. *Aisthesis: Scenes from the aesthetic regime of art*. Translated by Zakir Paul. London & New York: Verso Books. Hal Foster’s critique of Rancière’s *Aisthesis* appears in *The London Review of Books*.

nature of the gestural mark can come to represent in painting or song the odyssey of lack of reason in the world, the infinity of un-logic, the edges of our knowledge as sentient creatures. In paintings and songs, this quality can be explored in the mark and through how the mark or gesture is sited against other motif references in the work. For example, the shape of a head on the stem of a neck filling the picture plane in a painting, with a landscape and horizon suggested 'behind', evokes a human head and a person in a spatial field. Yet if the head shape is filled with flecked marks of paint that refer to impressionistic light vistas, the poetics of the inferences start to merge and create larger implications for concepts, ideas and referencing within the work. The image may reference dreamscapes, the imprecise nature of experience, or the individuated and ephemeral quality of personhood. These abstractions that inhere in material, and abstractions that are formed in the construction of works, pose a question as they 'work' together in an image or song. These folding out poetic qualities in artworks can help to complicate the premising idea of logic that is required for ordered procedures of any type that become pervasively influential, including the dominating logic of capitalism. These acts of poetic action in artworks make works open, and this openness stands as a model of resistance to everything about advanced capitalist experience that is brutally ordered. Poetry complicates and disorders a regime self-convinced of its logical merit and practically ordered to enhance economic outcomes for a minority in authority. The specific order that is held by language as a system in service to capitalist procedures and logics is complicated by poetic experiences that can be made by artists when they make paintings and songs. Even if these disruptive experiences of art are subtle or minor, they are important because they stand as an alternative to logic-ordered language systems. The knowledge artists can have of an unlimited openness of gesture presents the possibility of a model of resistance to what is closed in the world of contemporary art or other capitalist models. This is particularly so in

the context of advanced capitalism, where most things are made to be understood through the prism of capital's function, or, if they are not, are quickly recuperated by the procedures of capitalism, to lose their potency as an alternative positioning. The potential of the ambiguous, poetic gesture can be mobilised through a range of intuitively made works that breach the pervasiveness of capitalism's influence simply by being unable to be in service to capitalism's logical function: they are too poetic to provide a finitude of meaning that can be resolved into a designated pathway for capital. More specifically, the works resist this fate in a range of ways that I am aware of, and in plenty of ways that I am unaware of, given the individuated quality that always characterises the audience (in the research, the viewer is always understood as somebody who will inevitably bring their own canon of references to looking and listening).

Certain approaches to making can be seen as an antidote to the embedded ideologies and authorities that abound within advanced capitalism. The potential is to seek through a practice not a desirable or saleable outcome, but one that is arrived at through not knowing, an intrinsically political act within the rubrics of advanced capitalism, even though on a modest scale. It can be recognised that this position is problematic for any authority, because authorities require logic. This is the way in which it can reasonably be seen that the ambiguous unfolding outcomes arrived at in material research have their basis in a politic. The works play with the open nature of gesture's loading of meaning(s) now; they are ambiguous, and knowingly made to be so. Within the authoritative logics of advanced capitalist culture, where meaning and sense as well as a relationship to systems of capital's movement are dominant, these approaches to making provide alternative ways to frame practice and read art and music culturally. While these acts of poetic making may seem not particularly noticeable in the vast panoply of the senses that have accrued under advanced capitalism and in the world of contemporary art, there is a distinct and steady strength to

them. As well, while the idea of an infinitely abstract gesture is quite recent, the idea of poetry as a confusing, destabilising force in the word is very old. My research takes up the ambiguous gesture and moves towards making in a way that seeks poetic outcomes, seeking cues from a range of influences for poetic practice (many found commonly in post-punk practices).

It is possible to make both songs and paintings that are full of gestures that are abstract, even when the work may not be described in its wholeness as ‘abstract’ in the modern sense.⁵³ There are ways to amplify, enhance, and further this discovery of the potential of a poetic approach to making paintings and songs, and these are pursued through the material work. Some of these strategies in painting are:

- amplified colouration: the use of high-toned and tertiary colour combinations that intensify the experience of looking, and that make the eye of the viewer wander over colour in the first instance of looking, suspending the sensory moment before logic kicks in;
- the use of landscape formats to suggest spaces that never actually detail the view of any physical or real place;
- figures and grounds that merge back and forth into one another, figures that can be seen as abstract yet simultaneously maintain their sense of being figures; and

⁵³ *Abstraction* within the art-historical field of criticism would ordinarily be understood as simply non-representational, or the opposite of *mimetic*. These rather binary absolutes of representational/non-representational or abstract/figurative are categories that are deliberately complicated in my own painting work, and also in the work of painters such as Gerhard Richter. In songwriting, abstraction and narrative are often fused by lyricists such as Adam Green, who plays with abstracted motifs and language that nonetheless describes unfolding narratives in song form.

- impressionistic gestures that might seem to describe certain features of figure or ground but that ultimately fulfil the emotive presence of indexical gesture rather than any logic of representation.

Ways to amplify ambiguity as a strategic device in song are:

- inversions of conventional subject/speaker roles in lyric writing, enhancing the idea of the mysterious addressee in lyric writing;
- colourful, mournful and ambient melody choices;
- imaginary worlds and subjects in discourse;
- interchanges between collapsing and meditative patterns in instrumentation;
- confusing metaphors and destabilising narrative terrains; and
- ‘pop’ structures and low-fi recording procedures with literary/poetic word values.

These and other strategies help to enact a defiance of logic and assert the agency of poetic elements within works: lightness of touch, implicating gestures, colourful interplays, imaginative terrains, ambiguity, love and intimacy expressed through delicate connections of materials, histories and subjects. These propose another world available to the audience, something alternative to logic, and thus alternative to any logic of capital’s pathways – a world involving the poetics of pleasure, uncertainty, the sensory and openness . It can be said that as a result of paying attention to these amplifications of ambiguity, every context and material gesture within the work matters in the political context of capitalist procedures. So it is that my works became essentially modest for this project. The works are also full of the pleasure and ease that has been mindfully taken in making them; it becomes apparent that the way the works are made can be seen in their eventual materiality. The paintings are small and unspectacular, so they remind us by their presence of the range

of expensive, spectacular works that can routinely be seen in the contemporary art world.. The works do this by asserting what it is they are and are not, by having been made. They do not deny the right of spectacular works to exist, but they do assert the possibilities of modest, scaled-down versions of making, that check the politics of scale at the outset, asserting the potential of this way of making to affect an audience and create a space of difference to dominant context. As these specific tactics are deployed in practice, it becomes apparent that how things are made results in the tactics of making being embedded in material outcomes, and thus the works assert the politics of their making.

The resolve to anticipate the parameters of influence in the context for making and check it against one's own logic and one's own authority has become a political act in making. The process of making that challenges supplicatory engagement with the rules, intentions, parameters and predeterminations of pathways subject to advanced capitalism has come to be understood in my research as a critical position. The critical position is embedded in the works, both as a poetic way of making and as a reflection of particular procedures for making. From scale to colour use, imagery and themes in content, all the historical threads of influence codified to the present moment as components of the paintings and songs, coalesce to make the works what they are in culture. Given the look, feel and/or sound of the works, this reality of making eventually asserts a broad way to perceive the critical in art making, and certainly raises questions about conceptions of critical practice in contemporary art. There are no slogans or direct calls to any particular action in the bodies of work. However, these works have arisen as the result of the political positioning of the poetics of the work, and they are the outcome of it. The quietude and modesty mobilised in these works can provide a potential methodological antidote to the blown-out spectacle that can be seen as dominating the Western contemporary capitalist art system. The music and paintings I make can be part of play within the panoply of images

and mutating forms in capitalism's influential pathways – engaging with those realities but on re-described terms, extrinsic to them.

There is not really a robust framework of mediation around *poiesis* as it happens in the contemporary, and the idea of poetry in making can feel for some to be a bit old-fashioned. Indeed, what poetic activities are is an unknown thing for the most part, currently taking shape somewhere, being decided upon by practitioners, or being identified by some mediators. What we do know is that poetry, always deeply problematic to the society and thus valuable as a resistant activity, has been effectively delimited in the current Western context in how it is valued and understood. Poetic statements as an ideal in painting or song may be seen as romantic or folksy, if we consider how valued qualities in contemporary art works, such as logo-centric manifestations of theorised political positions can be seen to be, considering, for example, much in relational aesthetics, or work such as Tino Sehgal's. How has this undermining of the critical potential of poetic making happened? Has it really happened?

One response is that the poetic in the West can seem nostalgic, de-politicised and self-serving as an approach to art making, because as a strategy for making, poetry makes uncertainty primary. In contemporary art we are attached to nostalgic narratives of grand and good resistances to authorities; in comparison, the procedures and results of *poiesis* can appear to be detached from direct political positioning, as a result of their indeterminacy. As a consequence, *poiesis* could seem a highly mannered and indulgent activity, and no doubt there are countless examples of artists who do pursue their activities in self-serving or heedless ways, using the conventional modes of song and painting in unreconstructed ways, unprepared to consider what they are making and why. Yet at its best, the practice of poetry is a finely tuned and present activity, in which mindfulness, presence, forgetting and uncertainty converge. As a practice with these qualities, it has the potential to be resistant,

subversive and highly political. Yet works that have come into being through this process of the openly poetic are not always critiqued as one might reasonably expect. Perhaps some mediators within the field of art criticism believe poetry is a thing of the modern dream and thus cannot take part as a mode of critical function within the realm of politicised contemporary art. Or perhaps it is because some mediators or artists have incorrectly ascribed the poet/artist some sort of mystic quality, a conduit for outcomes for which they are only partly responsible, and which can never properly be understood, in the way that American pop stars are known to thank God for the work they did and the award they won, in their speeches on awards nights.

Yet mostly, the problematising of poetry as a politicised activity in the contemporary world has been aided by a binary divide between language-based art practitioners and their supporters in mediation, and those artists and mediators who have considered themselves opposed to language-based and conventional conceptual art practices (as they have become the convention) in the last 100 years, but particularly since the 1960s. Something has happened in these exchanges that has somewhat buried *poiesis* as a politicised art activity in our time.

One focus for this difficulty has, of course, been painting, because of the conventions it supports by its material and historical structure(s). Little has changed in terms of the mediation pressure that can come to bear on painting as an historical activity. The thinking that posits painting as a materially depoliticised activity is additionally burdened by reactionaries who spruik their toxic politics loudly. A recent example of the kind of confused thinking that has emerged in relation to this difficulty of poetry and its forms in convention is the Stuckists, a group of English practitioners founded in the late 1990s. As a group, these artists became deeply worried about painting and its impact on people's lives in the postmodern epoch, and presumably the impact and popularity (or not)

of their own work as painters. Their responses to what they saw as the political and social failure of the ongoing corporate avant-gardes (for them, characterised by artists from the YBA group)⁵⁴ were typically reactionary and often proposed an end to certain formal outcomes in art, such as the proposition that ‘running is not art. Scrunching up a sheet of paper into a ball is not art. Sticking blu-tack on the wall is not art. People who think it is need to get out more.’⁵⁵

This sort of positioning in relation to the range of contemporary ways of making art was widely discredited, and rightly so. In Australia, an equivalent perhaps was the Roar artists, ‘a group of anti-intellectual expressionist painters that became a focal point against the conceptualism (prevalent) at the time’⁵⁶ and who were easy to dismiss as commercial decorative painters, keen on making money and upholding masculinist dreams of romantic expressive (male) painters. The failure of these conservative movements to have real impact culturally over time has shown that nostalgic assessment of painting as it relates to other forms has proven utterly worthless as a way to think through the problems to do with conceptions of poetic approaches to art – and particularly as relates to painting – under late capitalism. Contemporary song has fared even worse in its reception as an art form where poetic approaches function as a critical stance culturally. It is registered as a death via rock ‘n’ roll even before it began in its contemporary forms, and is almost entirely left out of higher-education contexts as a subject that might be considered seriously. When it has been

⁵⁴ ‘YBA’ refers to Young British Artists, a group including Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin, Martin Creed and Rachel Whiteread that came to prominence in the 1990s, and whose diverse oeuvre incorporated elements of conceptual art as well as sculpture, drawing and painting.

⁵⁵ Danchev, Alex, ed. 2011. ‘The Founding, Manifesto and Rules of The Other Muswell Hill Stuckists (2009)’. In *100 Artists’ Manifestos From the Futurists to the Stuckists*. London: Penguin, 453.

⁵⁶ McColl, Gina. 2011. ‘Larrikin artist took modern art and made it roar’. *The Age*, 20 June 2011. [Internet]. Accessed 28 July 2017. Available from: <http://www.theage.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/larrikin-artist-took-modern-art-and-made-it-roar-20110619-1ga6k.html>.

included in a curriculum, it is as a lower-order populist form scarcely touched upon within the conservatorium context of more ‘serious’ musics such as ‘contemporary composition’, which takes part in the world as properly included in the corporate avant-gardes, where song cannot be.

Painting and songwriting have long conventional histories and processes attached to them, which have been passed as known forms from generation to generation, with *whatever* intact as a construct of the imagination, where *poiesis* is the central activity, and where that poetic approach to making constitutes a challenge to certain perceived authorities. While these approaches to making art have been lauded through time and have been often used and delighted in over centuries, these approaches to art and music have also been subject to a range of difficult conditions that have rendered these forms invisible in the contemporary, to some degree, as politicised activities. The function of the poetic has been covered over and lost as a politicised activity, as capitalism has progressed. The time is now to begin to see the poetic in making art as a modest and highly subversive activity, thoroughly resistant to the worlds outside its imaginings and intuitive procedures.

Conclusion

'Before I ask: what is a work's position vis-à-vis the production relations of its time, I should like to ask: what is its position within them?'

Walter Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer' (1934)

Models and strategies for post-capitalist art making have been approached in this research in two distinct ways. Firstly, an examination of various art-criticism tendencies and systemic models in contemporary art reveals some of the ways in which now we assess our cultural products. Secondly, a consideration of various approaches and tactics for making art now allows ways to create art that sidesteps capitalist contemporary art. Art products can be seen as material presences of values that are mobilised when they are made. An analysis of work as material and work in situ can reveal the critical intentions and affiliations at play in an artwork. Attempts to move art making towards a critically engaged relationship with its advanced capitalist environment is a practice of mindfully situating works within their conditions of production, as an important step in establishing a critical role for art. This model absorbs the idea that a work's relationship to its capitalist context can be established in the situating of the work itself and the way the work is made.

The idea of undertaking an art making that resists the drives of capitalism and that models a critique of capitalism is complex. Complications for any artist arise now from the fact that governing assumptions abound within certain mediation and exhibition worlds regarding the production of contemporary art, yet they are often not explicitly stated as truths. One is the expectation that there is value in artworks shown and 'consumed' at biennales, commercial galleries, government-funded museums, performance spaces and the like because the works being shown there prove they are important in some way. I accept that critiquing curators and organisers in this way when there are certainly important

artists being shown at biennales and so forth can potentially appear to bestow a sort of bitterness to dialogues of value. It is nonetheless not sensible, when considering such matters, to blindly accede to value systems that are so closely linked to capital, without frankly assessing the modes of generating value. Moreover, as well as the contextual placing of our art within sites of lesser or greater approved cultural significance, the critical importance of art is often considered to be inscribed through the material form of the art. This might be expressed through assumptions about the critical value of a new material for making an artwork (in terms that signal importance or separateness, such as ‘new media’), but it can also be the case that painting may be reinserted into these spaces of consumption to assert a new relevant value for painting per se (such as *Painting. More Painting*, ACCA, 2016). Song as an art form simply does not take part in these arenas of artistic importance, because song is broadly considered commercial fodder for radio or a lower-order populist form. These realities mean there is a hierarchy of art forms in the world of contemporary art making that is usually not explicitly stated, and that connects explicitly to capitalist pathways in contemporary art. Illustration, categories of painting that do not sit inside contemporary art, graphic novels, street art and many, many other art practices do not really fall within the auspices of contemporary art today.

This is at least partly because in many contemporary art contexts the material form of the artwork is tacitly understood to be suggestive of the relationship the art has to its context, and the hierarchical positioning within the contemporary cultural environment follows from this – some art works simply do not have formal/material qualities that easily allow their admittance to inner sanctums of contemporary art. Paintings and songs do not reasonably function anymore within a model that asserts the importance (or not) of particular artworks, based upon ideas of criticality being signalled by material form – if they ever did. Neither paintings nor songs can be considered particularly radical or

progressive in art worlds that have come to centralise relational aesthetics, moving image and mega- installations and a tacit idea of criticality through these material practices. As well, both painting and song are historically ubiquitous and completely conventional, with various commercial functions aligning to their histories.

Yet using these forms to model a particular resistance to capitalist drives in contemporary art and music offers a distinct potential. To articulate a space that would make these forms admissible as critical art, despite their historical and commercial antecedents, is to examine the dominant mythologies that govern our ideas around what is possible for art now. The complexities of the reception of painting and song now can be considered through an analysis of the nexus of mediation and contemporary art world tendencies. In this way, the implications of various institutional and paradigmatic ‘setups’ can surface as tacit agreements between institutions, curators and contributing artists, perpetuating the capitalist contemporary art system. These relations can and should be examined with regard to capitalism.

The tacit (and the express) acceptance of the term *avant-garde* and its effect upon contemporary art making is a key consideration when modelling a way to approach making art that sits beyond the boundaries of capitalist drives. Although the term *avant-garde* is not always expressly used in contemporary art worlds, the wake of its meaning is felt as a tremor of influence everywhere. Yet it is a very old term,⁵⁷ the value of which is part of art’s connectedness to dawning industrialisation and modernity. As a term and a set of values now, though, the idea of the *avant-garde* is completely outmoded as a way of thinking about art’s critical function in culture. Indeed, when we continue to think of *avant-garde* art making as critical, signaled as it always has been by the new, we actually limit

⁵⁷ Tate. 2018. ‘Art term: Avant garde’. [Internet]. Accessed 5 May 2018. Available from: <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/a/avant-garde>.

art's prospects to have a noticeable critical function in society. In short, maintaining the myth of an existing avant-garde curtails the potential of art to function as a critical practice. Where avant-gardes are either touted as real or implied to be real in our advanced capitalist society, there is usually an arch-capitalist back-story. Ultimately, the term *avant-garde* now is a capitalist term. The implications of this are significant. Imagining an art world where the term *avant-garde* is understood to be historical and outmoded immediately evokes a transformed capitalist contemporary terrain for art making. Many questions are raised in this post avant-garde imaginary, including: what constitutes the function of art products now? How do we approach the critical mediation of art products in the community now? If there are no precise frontiers in art, what is new art?

How we think of the term *avant-garde* in our cultural institutions, how we enact and model ideas around the outmoded and the visionary in art, and how we connect the idea of politicised or critical art practices to governmental and commercial support for art are all crucial questions for artists in the twenty-first century. The critique of the idea of an avant-garde world of art, or of a 'frontier' in art, strikes at the heart of much of our imagining about what contemporary art is, and yet our addiction to newness and material improvement is deeply problematic in many ways.

Particular *functions* of the idea of 'frontier art making' now, where 'excess' is pulled in as part of a model of inclusion, representing the absorption of change so as to signal a politic, are tendencies in art worlds that interrupt our knowledge of the historical flow of art as a critical practice. Paintings and songs can be made as critical forms, yet they are not excess. Rather, they are highly normative forms, and the conventionality of them does not signify any particular political position in a wider cultural sense one way or the other. The conventional/critical art form does not provide excess for consumption in a capitalist churning model, and so within capitalist culture these art products confront us

with the requirement for a nuanced approach to critique – one in which we can consider the details in the pictorial field or the short-form song and understand the meaning and purpose of works for ourselves. There is a subtle yet crucial difference between being the audience for an expensive funded installation made by an ‘art star’ and shown in a museum, where the weight of the context and the field of contemporary art reifies the experience, and the reception of images online or the experience of holding a small-scale painting in your hand, or streaming a song sent as a link.

Songs have a different relationship to this dynamic arrangement of insiders and outsiders in contemporary art systems. Theodor Adorno’s sense of the crassness of song and its debasement of Marxian dreams did not stop song from being culturally influential in major ways at times, and overtly through a capitalist system of exploitation and transparent money-making attempts. Despite these commercial and mass-influencing antecedents of song, the rise of DIY culture has seen a gulf extend between the money-making commercial music system and the making of music using song-based forms. There is now a world of music that is simply not commercial, and that does not see radio play or mainstream popularity, despite the major commercial histories of song in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

These disruptions to the idea of contemporary avant-garde practice, art as a cycle of excess and absorption, and songwriting as a commercial activity bring into focus a critique of the very terms that apply to making paintings and writing songs now: *contemporary art* and *popular music*. These terms limit painting and writing songs to capitalist agendas of production, thus constricting the potential of these classic vehicles of artistic expression and criticality to be noticeable as the critical forms they can be. It follows that there are fields of endeavour in artistic expression that fall outside the parameters of terms generally acknowledged to delineate them. This presents a problem when there are

so many painters and songwriters who are expressing ideas through these forms, yet who are not ‘in contemporary art’ or making ‘popular music’. This difficulty of terminology and practice indicates capitalism’s reach into our activities by making use of exclusionary terms that appear natural within its ordinances, in order to sideline them. Use of these terms is a pitfall to avoid within current art world and original music systems when modelling attempts to move towards post-capitalist art making.

Artists have always practiced art as a resistance to authorities of different types through various fraught historical moments. Our current, advanced capitalist environment presents its own difficulties as an authority that artists may wish to resist. Despite much insistence in culture that capitalism cannot ever be withstood, there are historical strategies that have significant application for artists who would like to make art outside the drives of the system. One is the use of *whatever* as a notional ‘preset’ when making art, a kind of conceptual underpinning for some art practices that undertakes an exploration of ‘not knowing’ in making. This can be contrasted against the idea of conceptual art as a language-based model, where language concepts are illustrated in materials, and where the spoils of these practices are quickly recuperated by capitalism’s function. ‘Not knowing’ as a methodology in art can be considered to be poetic, and the poetic in art making – Plato’s *poiesis* – has the potential to create a sense of open disorder for authorities who wish to impose any (closed) order upon community. The use of *whatever* can be perceived through a range of its mobilisations in historical art movements, including the artists of *Le Chat Noir* in Montmartre and the anti-authoritarian art practices that can be seen as connected to post-punk flow. These are all models that can contribute to thinking modes of making and understanding art, which aim to delimit or stay outside the influence of dominating capitalist ideologies. The idea of open and closed artworks bears further consideration in relation to conceptions of critical potential in art.

Understanding that paintings and songs are critical forms within the dominating context of advanced capitalism means ultimately that the terms *avant-garde*, *contemporary art* and *popular music* can all be understood to be capitalist terms. Freed from those bounds by an abolition of those terms, art practice takes on another quality. We can start to see how much art there is, we can begin to understand its function in our culture, and we can start to understand how to assess it in relation to its resistance (or not) to the capitalist systems that make living now so fraught for so many. An art practice that undertakes these moves towards post-capitalist art making may not have any immediate impact on the extensive and overarching capitalist world in which we live. However, if artists take up these modes of practice, it is possible that certain arch-capitalist paradigms within art systems will be shaken over time.

At the beginning of this research I posed the question: is ethical art making possible in an advanced capitalist society? What I have found is that I believe it is possible to make art in an ethical way. Furthermore, I have found making art in this way to be totally liberating. One of the most empowering things I discovered through this research was that I did not need to subscribe to the unspoken rules and cabals of an art system ordered within the terrain of capitalist drives. It was absolutely possible to make art in a way that operated largely outside that system, and to do so seemed to provide me with the opportunity to engage more completely in my life as a trans-disciplinary artist, engaging with my world on terms that I set, and that grew from dialogue and criticality that formed in music and art community, and that was not capitalist.

Thus, as my research emboldened me, I eschewed having a studio space, and I ceased considering submitting works to prizes and pondering which commercial galleries to show at in the future. As a result, I spent a lot of time painting in my kitchen, at the table and on the floor. I dried multiple paintings in process in different parts of the house, and

then returned to them each week until they were finished. I interspersed these activities with songwriting on an old Japanese nylon-stringed guitar that my brother had given me. I recorded half-completed works on my iPhone, and then edited and reworked material using notebooks and the iPhone. These processes of painting and songwriting began to mirror one another, and seemed often to be one practice of trans-disciplinary expression.

Of course, many of my themes across both formats were the same. I was interested in painting and singing about love, and about what it felt like simply being awake each day as the weather came in and touched my skin with heat or cold, and the complexity of every day unfolded. I was interested in capturing the fleeting nature of feelings and seeing what happened when these were expressed in abstract forms and lyrics. I wanted to play with composition: I sought an ordered and intuitive balance that had no essentialist or external logic but was felt. In this way, decisions I made were based upon feelings. This was very liberating and satisfying. I wanted to explore lightness of touch, delicacy and immediacy, and I wanted to make works – in both music and painting – that made no didactic claims to their audience but rather were suggestive. I wanted to communicate the abstract suggestions of shapes, colours, angles and mood in the world as I saw them all around me. I used colour and abstract shapes that morphed into representations and then returned to abstraction. This was something I was able to do across lyric writing, construction of music and painting.

In music I worked with others to create responses to the works I created, so in community we created a loop of responsiveness that we recorded with iPhones; these formed the music component of the research. In painting I referred to paintings of friends online, to the works of my partner and children who lived with me, to historical works I had prints of, and to the work my friends showed me when I visited them or when they visited me. I seemed able always to respond to my landscape immediately, as a starting point for a song-based work or a painted work; this included referencing the reality of the

capitalist world in cityscapes, crowded vistas, references to nature as utopian idyll; like Howard Hodgkin, I used abstract colour and shape sense to evoke the memory of feeling and view merging in abstraction. In song I established landscape through sounds created, chords as they progressed as pattern, and lyrics that evoked spaces and moods of place with reference to historical love songs where place and setting for the drama of love unfold. In painting, the landscape field was usually evoked by a land/sky division, which returned a sense of the physicality of the world to me as I painted, and simultaneously gave me the convention of the landscape in painting to work with as a historical reference point – one that could be played with and responded to through an imaginary of various art-historical references, from book illustration to minimalism to impressionism. In songwriting I played with the convention of the three-minute form, and with expectations of narrative drive in the love song, including expectations around character arcs and subjects. In final improvised versions of songs, time extended to well beyond the pop-song ‘radio’ format. Improvisation became a key to both the painting and songwriting, and became a premise of the activities, both a politic in making and a strategy for making.

The organisation for the final exhibition of this research inevitably meant I would literally come up against the walls of the institution that had supported and held my research. The research felt very self-directed and individual through its duration, an extension of a personal methodology and politic in making – and was those things. The final exhibition, however, was a formal intersection with the university and public. There was the imperative to show work as a part of being assessed, and that needed to be a one-stop place to reveal the work at one time conveniently, even though I felt quite ambivalent about showing these works in a gallery setting and had no way to show the music in a way that aligned with its normal conditions of consumption. I was aware that these were precisely the procedural issues that complicated engagement with the field of ‘fine art’ in

the academic sense, in a practice like mine, and thus I was in some ways faced with a problem at the exhibition moment. I needed to organise some way of creating an exhibit of both paintings and music that would not seem too mannered, and that was in keeping with the spirit of my research proposals. It was a moment to actually enact the principles that underpinned the research. At different times I had considered how the work would be displayed and shared in a formal setting, as opposed to the way the work would ordinarily be shown. Usually in the type of practice I had, the paintings would be shown occasionally and informally to friends and acquaintances and the music would be played live. The album would be available for a small fee at shows or shared online. I had to carefully consider the exhibiting space. I decided to simply give people the option to take away an album so they could hear the music. I decided as well then that I would make the offer to give paintings away as well. I brought in a table and chair from my domestic space and put the paintings and records on them so that they could be taken away. I felt this would be a powerful act in the context of what would ordinarily be expected in a gallery setting. In combination with the works being mostly unframed, with one exception, and with the table and chair evoking the individuated act of making, I felt these moves would activate the resonances of the type of making I was involved with, in the showing space. I decided not to curate heavily in any way, other than a salon hang of works so the audience could perceive the interrelationships of the painted works, which was a durational intention in the works. I decided as well to accept whatever space I was allocated at the university. It ended up being a plain project space with no natural light and harsh tube lighting. This was acceptable, though, and gave the show an air of what it was: an unpressured low-fi result that revealed an outcome of certain procedures that kept the actual works of paintings and songs as the centre of focus, instead of the event of their showing being some big moment. In situ, the paintings held the space well as separate works and as a collection, each small painted work

‘speaking’ to the others in the room and to the larger assemblage of cut and painted papers from books and newspapers also floating on the biggest wall as part of the conversation. On another wall, one painting was framed and others that were part of this series were unframed, showing the different effects of framing and unframing in terms of the valorising of paintings as objects. In keeping with the idea of the use of convention I stayed within to-be-expected approaches to showing the painted works and making the offering of the CD of music. I was happy for the paintings to create meaning for their audience without defining things via language, and the painted works were untitled. This is quite normative in the world of painting and seemed appropriately supportive of the idea that language was not intended or required as a guide for the experience of the painted works. On the other hand, the songs used language in lyric sets and thus were titled accordingly with titles that referred to the lyrical worlds evoked in each musical work. The exhibition of work for the research could have been awkward, given the ideas of value that were raised in the exegesis. Ultimately, however, the public presentation of work in the project space synthesised with the values of the writing, in that the show was modest, unspectacular and poetic in its unfolding, successfully asserting painting and songwriting as discrete categories of critical production.

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Glossary of Terms

Avant-garde

The term *avant-garde* is an art-historical term that has been broadly in use in art criticism since the 1930s. Literally from the French meaning ‘front’. The implications of the term within the contemporary environment are explored substantially in this writing.

Capitalist

The detailed early description of capitalism that Karl Marx’s *Capital* defines is how I broadly understand *capitalism*, as an economic system based upon the enhancing of profit under an organisation of markets, where there are workers and those for whom workers work.

Contemporary art

Contemporary art is seen as a bookend to modernism, as the field of artistic activity that is happening now, with some omissions of artistic activity, such as ‘outsider art’ and ‘Aboriginal art’.

Function

I talk about the *function* of art works a lot in this writing, and that is because I believe that art and music actually do have a function and aim to serve the communities where they are made, in some way. The term *use-value* could be allocated if this was a traditional Marxist paper, which clearly it is not. There is a tendency perhaps to think of the *function* of art as a straightforward thing – for example, ‘the function of this work is for decorative purposes’ or ‘this work seeks to overthrow the ruling elite’, but the function of art works is never so

precise and always more layered and complex. When I use the term *function* in relation to art works, I seek to begin a conversation about art and music mediation whereby art works are appraised for the ways they contribute meaning to the world, even (usually) in very subtle and modest ways. That the effects and function of art works in culture may be slight or modest, but this does not mean that it is not important to establish why and how art works function in their world, and what purpose they serve.

Historical

The term *historical* means of or concerning history or past events.

Mainstream

The term *mainstream* is used to connote the broadly accepted views of the majority in a large community. These views are not indisputable facts, but are expressed in social practices and activities as a broad spectrum of agreed upon values appearing as normative in culture, like the idea for example that it is good to have an education. Generally in the writing the term mainstream refers to the implicit cultural values that are inscribed in big institutions like galleries, biennales, museums and universities. The idea for example that contemporary art is important is inscribed into the edifice of the Tate Modern.

Material

Material in this research is the actual elements of a work, what it is made of and from.

Mediation

I consider *mediation* to be the term that refers to the critical reception of art products, with strong connections to the term aesthetics, and to histories of aesthetics.

Post-capitalist

The term *post-capitalist* is a very open, recent term that could be described as constantly under review in the current conditions. It is a term that to some degree is being explored, defined and contributed to in this research. Broadly, my sense of a post-capitalism is that it is an idea of a moment in time that starts as perceptions of capitalism as ethical begin to close down. Post-capitalism begins when it has become clear through an accruing of examples, community views and practices that we are in a phase of social life where capitalism has been undermined to a substantial degree as a system that we should all be ordered by.

Potential

Potential is a term that Giorgio Agamben uses in his writing, particularly in *The Man Without Meaning* and *The Coming Community*. These texts provided me with a sense of potential as a latent force in social and artistic situations, that needed to be mobilised as revolutionary conditions came into focus. Critique of Agamben and later Benjamin as they considered art and culture in this way is that the term *potential* is a Christian or Messianic device in these propositions, working with a model of a utopian world to come where the current mess will be cleaned up by the arrival of a saviour. I am myself unapologetic about those tones in the work, because whilst they may have a utopian or divisive feel, they are also just models and propositions with a certain strong flavour that to my mind is needed given the current conditions, which are very challenging to the function of art as a critical practice.

Political

The term *political* has a dictionary definition that places the term firmly in the world of state organisation, and generally I am comfortable with the idea of the political being reduced to this idea. My research here explores the potential of art works to function in a

political way. While paintings and songs do not contribute directly to the government or public affairs of a country or state or organisation, they do contribute a reality to balances and provisions of power obliquely, through their material presence in the world, and the contribution to thinking that they evoke for audiences. I have been much influenced in this work by a small essay in Giorgio Agamben's *The Coming Community*, 'Whatever', that explores the idea of how we organise ourselves in principle, under banners of meaning.

Agamben shows expertly that there is no banner under which we could all sit that can describe the individuated way we experience, and that in fact for societies to attempt to create this collectivity by enforcing it with banners is a kind of violence. His example of *whateverness* is the precise yet inexplicable qualities of the loved one, of those we love. This means that our cultures and political worlds must be ordered in ways that allow the *whateverness* of things to be allowed. It is this type of idea that is explored in philosophy – in aesthetics here – that connects art making to the world of civic politics, and indeed that makes art political in its presence. This is the way that I use the word *political* in this research. I believe that ideas are present in art and music, and that these ideas have ramifications for philosophy and then gain traction or are resolved in organisational civic politics.

Progressive

I tend to use the word *progressive* as a synonym of radical, but there is a slightly different sense in the term, an idea of social improvement, of an aspiration for a better world or a utopian sense of a progression of events towards better systems.

Resistant

Resistant simply means offering resistance to something or someone – being a resistant force against capitalism may mean standing in the way of a system to block it.

Radical

The term *radical* literally means a departure from the main branch of something, and in this research it is a word that appears in the text to describe certain activities that are at a remove, resistant to, or radial from accepted mainstream norms. The term is understood broadly as connected to senses of subcultural and revolutionary programs in art movements like the Situationists, and is conceived of as both a term that connotes activity away from the mainstream, and an activity that seeks an activist function against the mainstream. *Radical energy* and terms like this that I will occasionally use refer to specific programs of anti-capitalist activism like the writing of the Invisible Committee in France in 2007, who communally wrote *The Coming Insurrection*, a post-Marxist notebook about how to undertake a revolution in the context of advanced capitalism.

I consider this work to be radical and progressive, and think of it in the research as an example of a radical text.

Revolution

A revolutionary act is understood in this research to be a step towards a momentum that is sought towards the destruction or modification of an oppressive social order and/or system. *Revolution* is understood to be largely an historical term, and often when the word is used it relates to attempts of artistic movements in modernism to subvert or oppose fascism; usually I am thinking of 1930s Germany and later of student politics in 1968.

Society

Society is the aggregate of people living together in a more or less ordered community.

Appendix

Caroline Kennedy – works for PhD thesis

Music research outcome

<https://trashedonfoam.bandcamp.com/album/no-language>



Figure 1: *Untitled*, approximately 30 x 40cm, acrylic polymer on cotton paper



Figure 2: *Untitled*, approximately 30 x 40cm, acrylic polymer on cotton paper



Figure 3: *Untitled*, approximately 30 x 40cm, acrylic polymer on cotton paper



Figure 4: *Untitled*, approximately 30 x 40cm, acrylic polymer on cotton paper



Figure 5: *Untitled*, approximately 30 x 40cm, acrylic polymer on cotton paper



Figure 6: *Untitled*, approximately 30 x 40cm, acrylic polymer on cotton paper



Figure 7: *Untitled*, approximately 30 x 40cm, acrylic polymer on cotton paper



Figure 8: *Untitled*, approximately 30 x 30cm, acrylic polymer on cotton paper



Figure 9: *Untitled*, approximately 30 x 40cm, acrylic polymer on cotton paper



Figure 10: *Untitled*, approximately 30 x 40cm, acrylic polymer on cotton paper



Figure 11: *Untitled*, approximately 30 x 40cm, acrylic polymer on cotton paper



Figure 12: *Untitled*, approximately 30 x 40cm, acrylic polymer on cotton paper



Figure 13: *Untitled*, approximately 30 x 30cm, acrylic polymer on cotton paper



Figure 14: *Untitled*, approximately 30 x 30cm, acrylic polymer on cotton paper



Figure 15: *Untitled*, approximately 30 x 40cm, acrylic polymer on cotton paper



Figure 16: *Untitled*, approximately 30 x 40cm, acrylic polymer on cotton paper



Figure 17: *Untitled*, approximately 30 x 40cm, acrylic polymer on cotton paper



Figure 18: *Untitled*, approximately 30 x 40cm, acrylic polymer on cotton paper



Figure 19: *Untitled*, approximately 30 x 30cm, acrylic polymer on cotton paper



Figure 20: *Untitled*, approximately 30 x 30cm, acrylic polymer on cotton paper



Figure 21: *Untitled*, approximately 30 x 30cm, acrylic polymer on cotton paper



Figure 22: *Untitled*, approximately 30 x 30cm, acrylic polymer on cotton paper



Figure 23: *Untitled*, approximately 30 x 40cm, acrylic polymer on cotton paper



Figure 24: *Untitled*, approximately 30 x 40cm, acrylic polymer on cotton paper



Figure 25: *Untitled*, approximately 30 x 30cm, acrylic polymer on cotton paper



Figure 26: *Untitled*, approximately 30 x 40cm, acrylic polymer on cotton paper



Figure 27: *Untitled*, approximately 30 x 30cm, acrylic polymer on cotton paper



Figure 28: *Untitled*, approximately 30 x 40cm, acrylic polymer on cotton paper



Figure 29: *Untitled*, approximately 30 x 40cm, acrylic polymer on cotton paper



Figure 30: *Untitled*, approximately 30 x 30cm, acrylic polymer on cotton paper



Figure 31: *Untitled*, approximately 30 x 40cm, acrylic polymer on cotton paper



Figure 32: *Untitled*, approximately 30 x 40cm, acrylic polymer on cotton paper



Figure 33: *Untitled*, approximately 30 x 40cm, acrylic polymer on cotton paper



Figure 34: *Untitled*, approximately 30 x 40cm, acrylic polymer on cotton paper



Figure 35: *Untitled*, approximately 30 x 40cm, acrylic polymer on cotton paper



Figure 36: *Untitled*, approximately 60 x 60cm, acrylic polymer on cotton paper

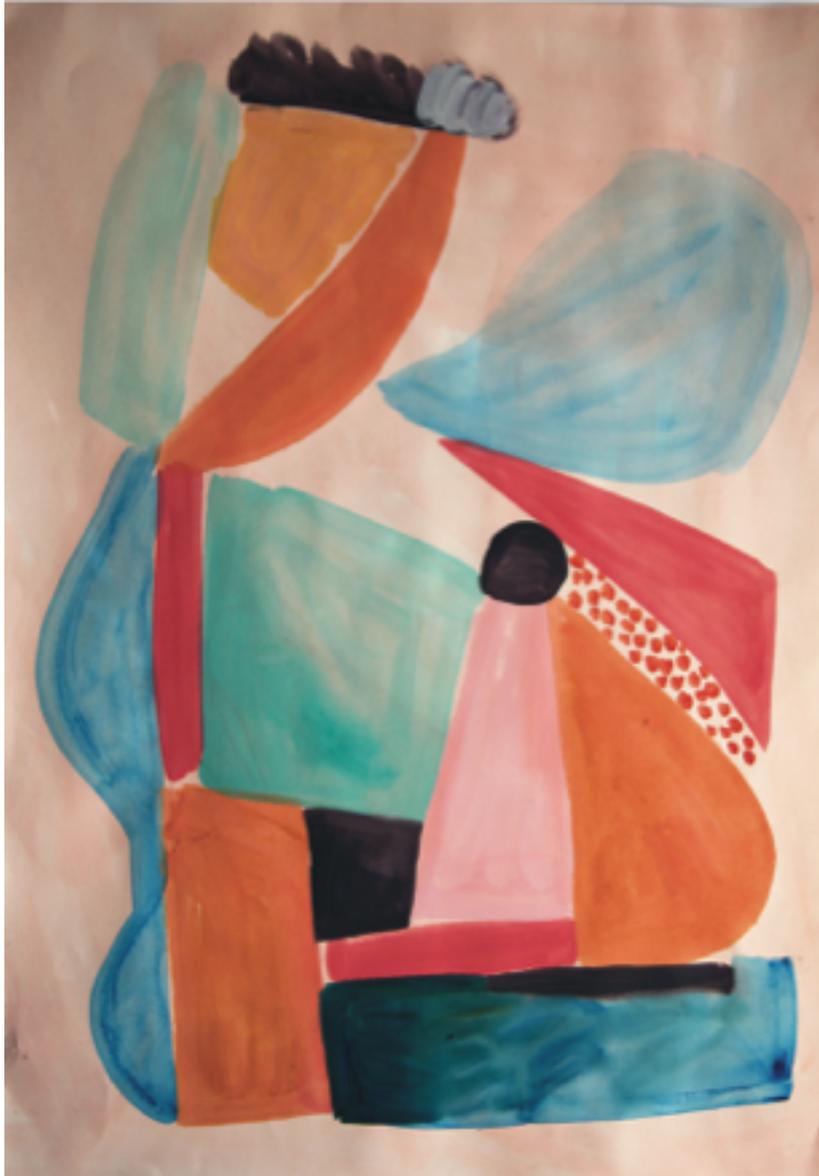


Figure 37: *Untitled*, approximately 30 x 40cm, acrylic polymer on cotton paper