

# Stefanos Tsivopoulos and the Fiscal Unconscious

*Gregory Sholette, March 30 2013*

Think of capital's endless mutability. Fixed machinery, cost-saving technologies, credit card accounts, immaterial financial instruments, hyper-fast digital trades, commodities that are useful, useless, or ridiculous, even productive labor itself is according to Marx a type of commodity and therefore capital, but what really comes to mind first when we try to visualize this frustratingly abstract yet inescapable thing? No doubt all that is solid capitalism melts into air, and yet our image of capital itself always starts with a fixation on cold, hard cash. Call it bread, bucks, dough, Benjamins, lettuce, greenbacks, smackers, loot, loonies, leptons, quids, coppers, silvers, Massari, moola, or pineapples, the money-form of capital generates more lexical permutations, more absurd monikers than it could ever possess as a medium of financial investment. Paradoxically, many street names for commonplace currency invoke a state of triviality, baseness, or an absence of intrinsic value. The Russians call a thousand rubles shtuka (штука), which means a unit or "thing," in Latin America Lana can mean both money and a peasant, the word cash for Germans is synonymous with mice or coal (die Mäuse, die kohle). Lucre is usually preceded by the adjective filthy. Slid "under the table," stashed in "slush funds," or used to facilitate the type of monetary arrangements better kept out of sight, money is treated with a mixture of fascination and embarrassment.

Money may indeed be dirty, but it does not prevent us from endowing it with a magical, Faustian agency. Sex, drugs, guns, contraband, even "friends" are attainable through its agency. In the right quantity it can be used to save a life, or to end one. But money as a form in itself has vulnerabilities. Coins exposed to human sweat handily tarnish, dent, eventually actually losing their face (though not their value). Bills are scribbled upon, folded over, torn, stained by food, drink, and bodily fluids. They eventually disintegrate as a consequence of human contact. Human time is directly encoded on the surface of money. A bank note's barely readable inscription exudes traces of history with a small "h." We wonder, who signed this? Under what circumstances? And from where is its value drawn? Cash is the ultimate archive. By contrast capital appears disconnected from human desire and indifferent to social memory. It is unsoiled. And yet everything cash can do capital accomplishes just as well, and in fact more effectively, on a vaster, more combustible scale. Ponzi schemes, toxic mortgages, credit default swaps, economic blockades, money laundering rackets, even coup d'états and the mass destruction of people and property are financed by intangible investment assets. The economic stability of entire countries now depends on gaining control over capital's circuitous fungibility made all the more evasive by its digitized essence (no wonder cyber warfare has replaced terrorism as the number one threat facing the nation-state). But just as everyday life becomes more saturated by this grammar of finance, so too our existence *visa vie* the political economy appears progressively more baffling and mysterious.

Enter "History Zero," a new video work by Stefanos Tsivopoulos. Part documentary, part narrative film "History Zero" begins with a parable about forgetfulness and wealth before ultimately focusing on the ongoing financial catastrophe in the artist's birth country of Greece. Selected by curator Syrago Tsiara to represent his nation for the 55<sup>th</sup> Venice

Biennale Tsivopoulos addresses capital's paradoxical identity as both tangible artifact and immaterial overlord, but does so without preaching or lecturing. Tsivopoulos's story is like a sailor's knot in which relations between a young, an old, and a middle-aged character are entangled by accident through the disposal of a specific quantity of Origami flowers made out of paper money. The video opens with a wealthy art collector suffering from Alzheimer's disease disinterestedly tossing "wilted" paper blooms made out of Euros into a trash bag. The video cuts and we see a precarious African immigrant gleaning scraps off the streets of Athens who recovers the bag full of cash-blossoms. Cut to act three as a ruminating middle-aged artist (perhaps it is Tsivopoulos himself?) actualizes the mysterious link between art and money when he manages to sell a pile of urban refuse to the wealthy demented collector as a significant work of contemporary art. Are we witnessing the death, rebirth, and final demise of art as it is transformed from fantasy into medium of exchange, and then back into a privileged object of useless contemplation?

Or is this the story of the life, death, the rebirth of art as a realm of fantasy beyond the reach of commodification?

Today, capital's contradictions materialize fully unconcealed within the world of contemporary art. Theorist John Roberts argues artistic production is being subsumed directly into capital's "new cognitive relations of production." Artists have become handlers of a sophisticated cultural apparatus that does not so much produce objects of fine art, but instead generates networks, exposes social relations, and embraces the redundancy of artistic labor itself. But in a dialectical flip Roberts points out that "the capital-labor relation has become a transformative and experimental space of opportunity for the new art."<sup>1</sup> In a sense, by no longer obscuring the bond between capital and culture—a link that has long been held as either nonexistent or simply distasteful—contemporary art opens up a singular space of self-critique. This is not a question of choice. Art cannot help but reveal its internal relationship to the ongoing global financial crisis and the precarious conditions of labor today, conditions brought about by thirty years of neoliberal economic deregulation. Perhaps this explains why the mainstream art world is now infatuated with practices rooted in collective production and social relations, even as its aggregate financial value that reaches into the billions of Euros is increasingly concentrated into fewer and fewer bank accounts?

Stefanos Tsivopoulos addresses these developments almost as if reinterpreting Marx's famous formula M-C-M (money-commodity-money) as M-M-M (memory-money-memory). The three episodes of "History Zero" do not resolve the artist's inquiry into art and capital, but rather keep it in suspension. And there is an encore. The final section of the video offers a visual archive of evidence about survival not from within political economy, but below, besides, and apart from its uncompromising discipline. We find images of metal coins reworked as portraits by homeless unemployed men or "hobos" in the United States during the Great Depression of the 1930s; informal systems of cash transfer using pre-paid mobile phone minutes that are evolving in parts of Africa; and assorted "local currency" systems haunting "History Zero's" archive. It's a theme Tsivopoulos has explored before. In his 2012 installation "I Rebel Therefore We Are" the artist activated more than just paper documents by arranging manufactured products,

workers' uniforms, even unspent rocket ammunition as an homage to French writer Albert Camus, the fallen Catholic intellectual who once acknowledged that "a work of art is an act of confession." Tsivopoulos seemed intent on finding divine intervention within overlooked and everyday objects. Glistening glass tubes filled with raw industrial materials. Slabs of cast cement turned into projection screens. Archival photographs borrowed from a local trade union digitized—their pigments, silver and gelatin, replaced with invisible strings of ones and zeros. In Tsivopoulos's art light illuminates matter as much as matter in turn reanimates memory. It is a world in which things rule, not people. And things nowadays appear to be taking up arms.

"I Rebel Therefore We Are" and "History Zero" are as much vows of intent as they are reports about the political archive and the transmutation of capital. For coiled-up within the artist's sprawling accumulations of inert matter and archives of discarded assets something that we once described as the truth lies in wait. It is always about to strike. But this neither intoxicates the artist, nor does it stop him. He goes on sifting for clues, his amateur archeology intent on revealing moments of sentimentality, nostalgia, melancholy, as well as memory, resentment, and resistance. And then he moves on.

1

John Roberts cited in Sholette and Ressler, *It's The Political Economy, Stupid*, Pluto Press, 2013, p 66.