**Paradoxical Values of Running Code**

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**Values**

There is value and there are values: the measure of wealth as well as associated ideas and customs. So how do we attribute value/s to something deeply immaterial like art – for art has always been problematic in its relation to the capitalist market and the production of meaning? If much experimental art (especially performance and conceptualism) sought to reject its commodification by capital, then how does it do this under conditions where value outside of monetization has become commonplace – where all production is more like art? Indeed to some commentators (such as Benjamin Noys) the artist has become the paradigmatic worker demonstrating the required attributes of precarity and flexibility, and revealing the paradox of valorisation:

“This paradox is simply stated: on the one hand, the artist is the most capitalist subject, the one who subjects themselves to value extraction willingly and creatively, who prefigures the dominant trend lines of contemporary capitalism […] on the other hand, the artist is the least capitalist subject, the one who resists value extraction through an alternative and excessive self-valorisation that can never be contained by capitalism.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

The most capitalist subject is the least capitalist subject at the same time, as of course Marx once argued for the worker in general. Can we argue that this is even more pronounced for the artist working with software (software artist)? I say this, as surely, software is similarly the most and least paradigm for contemporary capitalist production. It typifies the ideological prescriptions of scores, scripts, and programs, and the ways that the core values of software associated with sharing, modification and further use have been incorporated into best practices – such as in the case of open source software development and network services that have merged into centralised server-based platforms (run by the monopolies of Amazon and Google and the like). If running code has become incorporated into the mechanisms of domination, especially in the case of service-based platforms where there is no longer (free, open) code to share (as with Apps, for instance), then what new strategies are required to refuse market values in the service of art and freedom of expression? Whilst clearly running code can be regarded as one of the most capitalist valorisation processes, is it still possible to lay claim to alternative possibilities too?

Important for this discussion of value is that traditional economic theories are regarded as inadequate because of the difficulty in calculating working time related to informational production – as opposed the relative ease of calculating working time against making traditional objects. The production of software typifies the point. In addition value no longer relates to traditional organization and production methods and labour time as such but to other social situations in general (through processes of subsumption by which relations of production are distributed to the wider social realm). In other words we are now working all the time, and processes of valorisation can be applied more broadly to experiences, relationships, attention, and applied to further abstractions such as data (as we know from social media enterprise).

The so-called ‘crisis of value’ can thus be understood as a struggle for control over the forces that wish to extract surplus from processes of valorization no longer so reliant on traditional concepts such as work-time or even to the monetized economy. Alternative currencies such as Bitcoin seem to illustrate the point.[[2]](#footnote-2) Using open source peer-to-peer networks to circumvent the control of centralised ownership or banks, bitcoin transactions are collectively managed to allow for a range of alternative services. For instance, and notoriously, Silk Road is an online black market in the ‘deep web’, where illegal goods (such as drugs) are traded securely without detection by authorities.[[3]](#footnote-3) Thus a double sense of value is invoked, described by Geert Lovink and Nathaniel Tkacz in this way:

“In order to come to terms with Bitcoin, we must account for its value, but also its ‘values’ as is the domain of economic sociologists and anthropologists. In fact, these two notions need to be reunited. What are the values that underpin the design of Bitcoin to give it value?”[[4]](#footnote-4)

The creation and transfer of bitcoins reveals a clear paradox: on the one hand, it offers the freedom to trade without detection but does so through a private marketplace and thereby undermines publicness more broadly (eg. how taxation provides for public services, already under pressure under neoliberalism). It exposes the ideologies associated with free and open software as paradoxical.

[image: Bitcoin logo]

The way open source produces value in this way neatly captures the changes in the way the market has developed under informational capitalism. It represents both a belief in open standards and neoliberal business practices that capitalise on free labour. Often conflated, Christopher Kelty explains how the two terms – free software and open source – correspond to two parallel narratives in the late 1990s: free software referring back to the 1980s when software freedom in resistance to proprietary software was promoted; and open source emanating from the dotcom boom and free market thinking that free software offered economic benefit. In other words public domain and free enterprise co-exist, underpinned at a more general level by the sharing of source code but with competing values: free software describing a social movement whereas open source a development methodology.[[5]](#footnote-5) Releasing source code therefore represents a number of ambiguities relating to trust, cost, liberty, making free but making money too.

The cultural significance for Kelty is captured by the term “recursive public” to account for the ways in which the public is “vitally concerned with the material and practical maintenance and modification of the technical, legal, practical, and conceptual means of its own existence as a public.”[[6]](#footnote-6) His example are the self-organising actions of the Free Software movement that draws attention to its democratic and political significance and the limitations of our understanding of the public in the light of the restructuring of labour-power over networks. The intervention is to extend a definition of a public grounded in discourse – through speech, writing and assembly – extending Hannah Arendt’s definition of a public through speech and action to incorporate technical and legal infrastructures. Thus publicness is constituted not simply by speaking, writing, arguing and protesting but also through modification of the domain or platform through which these practices are enacted, making both technology and the law unstable. The argument is that free software is a special kind of collective speech act, able to modify the discourses and infrastructures through which it operates. As a consequence, a reconceptualization of political action is required that takes into account traditional forms of expression, such as freedom of speech, with freedom as it relates to coding cultures, encapsulated by the phrase “running code” to describe the relationship between what Kelty calls “argument-by-technology and argument-by-talk.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

**Running Code**

But there is a further paradox here: if running code has become incorporated into the mechanisms of power based on the server-client relation, in the case of service-based platforms there is no longer (free, open) code to share. The problem is exemplified by the Apple paradigm of software development with specially conceived proprietary Apps (for iPhones and iPads and iClouds) that close off users from the underlying code. With cloud computing and social media, software and network services merge into one platform, and value is produced by users and extracted (effectively stolen) by platform owners for their own profiteering.

[image: unCloud logo]

This is the starting point for the development of the *unCloud* software for instance (shown as part of WRO 2013): an application that enables anyone with a laptop to create an open wireless network and distribute their own information, and in so doing learn something about the machinations of network structures and network power.[[8]](#footnote-8) With *unCloud*, your laptop is easily turned into a server and thereby able to run its own ‘internet’ rather than someone else’s. Making a peer-to-peer network takes this further still of course and demonstrates the possibility of the relative independence of net-workers to control common productive assets and share the benefits.[[9]](#footnote-9) Furthermore, if one considers the politics of the ownership in open data initiatives – and recent revelations about data surveillance programs such as Prism[[10]](#footnote-10) – participation in the data cloud takes on an even more totalitarian character.

[image: Prism logo]

In “societies of control”, power is distributed relatively autonomously in horizontal organizational locales and at the same time into rigid vertical hierarchies or directed commands.[[11]](#footnote-11) Therefore to understand the dynamics of contemporary networks of power, Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker argue for “an approach to understanding networks that takes into account their ontological, technological, and political dimensions”.[[12]](#footnote-12) This requires rethinking power relations to take into account the human and nonhuman relations that constitute the network: the new “network-network symmetry” of power as they put it, where running code demonstrates agency in- and for-itself.

Given these conditions, it seems hardly surprising that artists have turned their attention in recent years to the politics of connectivity and the ongoing tensions between corporate-owned telecommunications infrastructures and community-owned networks. In addition to *unCloud* mentioned, I am thinking of interventions in local area networks and router hacking such as Linda Hilfling’s *A Public Domain* (2011) that parasites on existing network structures and filtering content accessed via the network as well as Julian Oliver and Danja Vasiliev’s *Newstweak* (2011) a device for manipulating the news stories read by other people on wireless hotspots.[[13]](#footnote-13) These projects provide socio-technical infrastructures for the public to actively participate (and perhaps become recursive) in the networks in quite different ways than current infrastructures dictate.

Once a metaphor for all that was outside of hardware and forces of capitalist commodification, nowadays the values associated with networks and free software seem to be ever more marketized (eg. Ubuntu). How do we continue to protect core values associated with the sharing of code, its modification and further use under free software ethics when these values have been effectively absorbed into commercial practices? These values, already derived from the ambiguous relation of open source development to the marketplace, are further corrupted by current developments in cloud computing. What new strategies are required to resist market values in the service of art and freedom of expression?

The common analogies of coding to speaking, free software to free speech, if not free market, and the many paradoxes that arise from these combinations reveal some important detail here.[[14]](#footnote-14) To the Free Software Foundation: “‘Free software’ is a matter of liberty, not price. To understand the concept, you should think of ‘free’ as in ‘free speech’, not as in free beer.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Yet the analogy to freedom of speech in itself provides other ambiguities in relation to its guarantee under international law through numerous human rights instruments (such as Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights). As we know the very notion of free speech is enshrined in hypocrisy: both serving to legitimate state power through allowing diverse voices to be heard and to promote the fantasy of freedom of choice as if things were not already chosen for us. And yet this logic continues to underwrite the logic of liberal democracies, with the idea that somehow the diversity of our voices can be accounted for through the ventriloquism of the representational process where individual voices are homogenized as one. Individuals must be enabled to voice their diverse opinions, both for and against the dominance, in order to legitimate underlying values.

Similarly, free speech on the Internet is subject to both state and market regulation, compromised by the increasing use of filtering software and surveillance practices (again what we now know for sure about the practices of the NSA and Prism exemplify the point). Current developments provide explicit examples of the commodification of social knowledge and technical expertise (what Marx called ‘general intellect’). As things stand, the human capacity to speak and act in the world remains relatively limited despite the proliferation of devices for communication and the wild claims of Twitter revolutions and the like – as clearly the supposed new tools for social action represent paradoxical forms of freedom inasmuch as they relate to the expansion of neoliberal markets. The problems with social media are well known by now: privacy issues, and that it along with other key players regularly shares information with government agencies like the NSA (National Security Agency). Further analysis provides new insights into emergent economic models that have developed new business techniques for value creation, but these are clearly also new techniques of control and exploitation, in what appears to be the growing economicization of the human condition by financial capitalism. Is it still possible under these conditions to imagine code running relatively freely?

Instead can we think of alternatives that explore the many paradoxes over open/closed forms that arise when code is invaded by economics – for it is the recognition that all language is inherently paradoxical that reveals the political realm. Paradox also serves to open up some of the conditions for transformation in the face of overpowering forces that wish to shut down and deny access to the source code of alternative possibilities for social organization: the most and least transformational power. If speaking and acting in the world is ever more prescribed in this way, then the challenge for those making program scripts that underscore these (most capitalist) procedures is to open up aesthetic and political possibilities of recombination and free the imagination for further use. This may not be pioneering but does represent values I would like to promote.

1. Benjamin Noys, “The Art of Capital: Artistic Identity and the Paradox of  Valorisation” (2011); available at http://www.academia.edu/689156/. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See http://bitcoin.org/. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Silk_Road_%28marketplace%29>. It is operated as a Tor hidden service, such that online users can browse it anonymously and securely without potential traffic monitoring (<https://www.torproject.org/>). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Geert Lovink and Nathaniel Tkacz, “Friends with Money”, in Tatiana Bazzichelli and Geoff Cox, eds., *Disrupting Business* (New York: Autonomedia, 2013), 183. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Christopher M. Kelty, *Two Bits: the Cultural Significance of Free Software* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. INTK’s *unCloud* (2012), http://www.intk.com/projects/uncloud. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This is what Dmytri Kleiner argues for in his *The Telekommunisten Manifesto* (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2010), developing analogies between technical and social systems of organization in a section called “Peer-to-Peer Communism vs The Client-Server Capitalist State”, pp. 10-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/PRISM\_%28surveillance\_program%29 and some suggested alternatives at https://prism-break.org/. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Gilles Deleuze “Postscript on Control Societies”, in *OCTOBER* 59, Winter (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 3-7. Available at http://www.n5m.org/n5m2/media/texts/deleuze.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker, *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See http://[www.skor.nl/eng/site/item/netartworks-linda-hilfling](http://www.skor.nl/eng/site/item/netartworks-linda-hilfling) and http://julianoliver.com/output/category/projects. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. For a longer elaboration of some of these connections, see Geoff Cox and Alex McLean, *Speaking Code: Coding as Aesthetic and Political Expression* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See http://www.gnu.org/gnu/manifesto.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)