

# Hyper-Production and the Value of Exquisite Corps on the Web

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## Abstract

The real and the virtual worlds around us are becoming louder while generating change at an unprecedented rate. The great volume and pervasiveness of information, products and experiences distributed throughout multiple media creates a need for faster response times and greater production volume. In this atmosphere, an individual finds him/herself under pressures to deliver in a similar manner. In order to perform in the heightened economy, the production, taking place on the Internet, is expected to grow while its value drops. Throughout the history of the Western world we have seen different permutations of the phenomenon of labor. Today, we are finding ourselves addressing the old questions in the new electronic medium. An artistic intervention provides a potent background for a discussion of labor and play in the virtual spaces.

## Keywords

Internet, Social Media, Production, Invisible Labor, Leisure

## 1. Introduction

As the demand for faster and more expansive production on the web increases, the labor performed is marginalized and often reclassified as a leisure activity. This state of affairs inspires a reflection on possible outcomes of this trajectory. Often, individuals express their desire to clone themselves, figuratively speaking, in order to meet the demands for productivity. Fortunately, personal production can be magnified through the increase in the result of one's actions. The Hyper-Generator is an art piece creating an environment conducive to such production. The result is an agglomeration of data arranged according to a

principal, which creates an aesthetic specific to the digital world.

The genesis of the project comes from a reflection on the intensity of the world surrounding us. The sheer volume and pervasiveness of information repeated throughout many platforms creates a sense of pressure for an individual. The sensory stimuli available to us either through entertainment, transportation or by simply living in the world provides intensity previously unmatched by life. Our environment has grown louder and more aggressive in demanding our attention. In an effort to meet the challenge coming from the outside, we amplify and distribute ourselves as well. The Hyper-Generator is a project that facilitates self-amplification through multiplication of the effects a single person has in the world.

This intensification finds its reflection in a number of human endeavors such as work, play, economic and social currency and modes of expression. In this paper, I will first examine the state of labor and production relationships in the amplified economy. Then, I will formulate the essential issues addressed by Hyper-Generator as they relate to the amplified economy. I will conclude with a possible direction to approach expression in the digital world.

## 2. Hyper-Labor

Throughout the history of the Western world we have seen different theoretical approaches to the phenomenon of labor. The term initially coined by Marx in the context of class struggle stood for commodity that can be bought and sold. "Labor does not only produce commodities; it produces itself and the laborer as a commodity and that to the extent to which it produces commodities in general." (Marx, 1977) Further,

Marx explains how such conceived production escapes the original worker and becomes alienated. “What this fact expresses is merely this: the object that labor produces, its product, confronts it as an alien being, as a power independent of the producer.” (Marx, 1977) The alienation of the product from the producer leads to a schizophrenic situation, in which the maker is not entitled to fruits of his/her efforts nor the work itself. In this gesture the relationship between the worker and the product is distorted such that work does not appear to originate from the worker.

This line of thought has been taken a step further by Second-wave Feminist thinkers. They adopted the Marxist rhetoric to talk about the invisible labor of women and minorities in order to expose the social bias against work performed by those groups. The work done at home and at menial jobs was and some would argue still is not rewarded with pay or high social reputation despite the skill and dedication it requires. A woman cannot be even alienated from her domestic work because the work is not acknowledged as real. “The more successfully women perform this concrete work (...), the more invisible does their work become to men. Men who are relieved of the need to maintain their own bodies and the local places where they exist can now see as real only what corresponds to their abstracted mental world.” (Harding, 1996) Thus, the domestic labor fails to be conceptualized as an activity that generates value. I believe that there are parallels between the labor performed on the web and the invisible labor as defined by Second-wave Feminism.

Today, the economy of labor is undergoing another shift. The majority of the population in the developed countries lives immersed to a different extent in the virtual world provided by the Internet. Similarly to regular life, the virtual medium requires work in order to develop, function and thrive. Simultaneously, the virtual world subtly infuses every aspect of our lives. Through our constant use and reliance on the medium, we often forget its complexity and are only snapped back to reality by an annoying error message or dysfunctional user interface. The workforce ensuring the smooth operation,

variety and usefulness of the content remains hidden behind the screen.

Online work is organized along two major trajectories: the development of the infrastructures such as specific platforms and production of content. Because of the ephemeral nature of the medium, its lack of tactility and cryptic development process, the understanding of work required escapes most laymen. This leads to unrealistic expectations and the notion that only minimal work is required in designing, building and maintaining online structures. Somehow this misunderstanding is perpetuated and exaggerated to a point where the development process is expected to be economically minimized, if not rendered completely invisible.

In parallel, the production of content is increasingly performed by unpaid labor. This tendency reaches its peak in social networking sites, where personal information and content is handed over to the site’s proprietors by means of a contract. In effect, we are building complete demographic profiles of ourselves for the advertisers turning ourselves into a commodity as a worker and as a product. This is also the point where leisure becomes indistinguishable from work. While in keeping with the traditional approach, one is not being paid for their leisure activities, the proprietors of the content still capitalize on the products of those activities. The work is contextualized as play. Since there is no monetary value placed on the products of play, the process by which they come to exist becomes economically invisible.

The distinction between leisure and labor activates may not be a sufficiently complex conceptualization when it comes to online content production. The feminist theorists have been struggling with a similar delineation applied to housework. Sandra Harding talks about the example of time-budget studies “which regard housework as part leisure and part labor – a conceptualization based on men’s experience of wage labor for others vs. self-directed activity. But for wives and mothers, housework is neither wage labor nor self-directed activity.” (Harding, 1996) The distinction coming from the outside male

perspective fails to represent the experience of the person performing the activity.

Similarly, maintenance of multiple social profiles, as experienced by an average user (with the exclusion of advertising professionals), is neither leisure nor wage labor activity. There is a certain peer pressure to keep up with the production of fresh content, which feels like work, yet the activity is performed during the time when one is not working. This ambiguity allows for manipulation of what it means to produce content on the Internet. The final conceptualization is dictated by the pervasive power structure. In case of the feminist view, it was provided by the masculine perspective while in today's online economy, this judgment is passed by the owners of the digital platforms. In either case, the worker/producer has no say in the economic categorization of their own efforts.

It is additionally interesting to note that the sheer volume of online production undermines quality. In fact, quality becomes an obsolete concept no longer useful in a world of countless permutations. The reshuffling, re-contextualizing and reclaiming of the content already available is the new pass time or production. By the virtue of exercising one's taste, namely liking something, one brings an object into one's sphere and incorporates it into the personal collage. The act seems frivolous but is latent with rich economic meanings, which in turn become monetized. Of course, this activity retains its economic significance only as long as it's tied to a living, breathing and buying human being.

### **3. Hyper-Production**

With the advent of the invisible labor on the web and the recent economic meltdown came additional pressures to perform continuously at peak capacity. The web is viewed as a phenomenon that comes to be almost spontaneously and above all mostly for free. Yet in order for this perspective to hold true, legions of developers and content producers work around the clock and around the globe. In the mean time, the pace is only increasing and

demands are still becoming more ambitious. We are reaching the limits of human capacity in the final stretch for hyper-production.

In response to the high demands for volume, low price points and speed, one attempts to imagine the world capable of providing just that. The Hyper-Generator is an environment, which translates casual actions performed by a human in a course of going through one's day into online production. The result of one opening a refrigerator or turning on a water faucet is recorded on the web as a concrete action or number of actions, which amount to producing a profile on one or many of the social networking sites. This human enabled system arranges content without direct human intervention and produces assemblages shaped by the rules of the specific site. While the content is pulled randomly from the web, the action mimics user behavior, in which different pieces of content are sampled and liked becoming part of a single profile.

Beyond the increase in production volume, the Hyper-Generator also results in an increase in intensity of each action. In such system, each action having multiple results becomes more and louder than its original. The labor that serves as the catalyst is not only optimized but also amplified through the increased production. Additionally, actions become distributed across platforms and encrypted as results not reminiscent of the original. Therefore, the system accomplishes two tasks: increase in productivity while hiding the labor even further. I imagine this perverse exaggeration as a possible result of the trajectories, which we are already following as described above.

### **4. The Exquisite Corps**

The profile created by the Hyper-Generator unfolds in a manner similar to an exquisite corps. The random information from the web is pulled together into a common context. The silhouette of the profile serves as the unifying logic and suggests connections between the arbitrary parts. Thus created profile has the capacity to go through a multitude of permutations in a gesture that suggests

collaboration, which is not aware of it happening.

The trope of an exquisite corps embraces randomness and poetical serendipity. Both of those follow the modernist ideas of world as a coherent entity, where the mind creates connections even in a face of discord. On one level, the created profile is a pure random data inserted into prearranged categories or a template. Then, the human viewer employing interpretation performs work, which reestablishing the psychological continuity of the whole on a purely instinctive level. Andre Breton, one of the inventors of exquisite corps, talks about this suspension of reasoning mind as a success. "Finally, with the Exquisite Corpse we had at our command an infallible way of holding the critical intellect in abeyance, and of fully liberating the mind's metaphorical activity." (Breton, 1948)

The Dadaist, at the beginning of the last century, worked in a context of a society already filling up with information and disturbances such as World War I. Their reaction to the increasing complexity of the world was to positively make sense of it through play and discovery. Our present paradigm proves that it is possible for the information to accumulate infinitely. Faced with this predicament, can we still embrace the discovery process and draw pleasure from embarking on a voyage to encounter new sea monsters, to use a Dada metaphor, such as the generated profiles?

Perhaps this is the new creative act: data design and arrangement as opposed to data creation. The profiles undergo a certain design procedure according to a set of rules. In thus created system the content is almost secondary while the logic framing it endows the system with an aesthetic form recognizable to the human mind. This notion is congruent with the popularity of distribution platforms, which often make a bigger splash than the content being channeled through them. For example, Tweeter is worth fantastically more than any of its single posts. Similarly, a new online music player will create much more of a buzz and for a longer time than a new song that can be heard through it.

An exquisite corps as a design idea implies a possibility of data aesthetic understood on its own as just data. The Dadaists invented their game in an effort to move away from the tradition of mimicking the real world in art. As Andre Breton energetically postulates: "These drawings represent total negation of the ridiculous activity of imitation of physical characteristics, to which a large and most questionable part of contemporary art is still anachronistically subservient." (Breton, 1948) In a similar way, data is still harnessed in the service of communicating and mimicking an outside world, which the data is not. In effect, we can never deal with the digital world as such since we experience it as a metaphor of the physical world. Perhaps, rearranging data is the first childlike gesture that honestly deals with the medium itself.

## 5. Conclusion

The Avant-garde project claimed its place in the society by eluding established constructs and challenging existing modes of expression. These actions have been rendered futile every time the established institutions and economies reabsorb such gestures into the mainstream culture. The Hyper-Generator creates products, which in a similar way escape present web economy. While being tied to actions of a person, the profiles don't represent data that relate to a potential buyer since their aggregation is randomized. In this gesture, the system temporarily escapes the established economic construct and exists only for its own sake.

In evading the online market place, the gesture reclaims the meaning given to our modes of production on the Web. The actions contributing to the construction of the online profiles are not representative of an individual and consequently cease to have any marketing value. Thus, the work performed is rescued from the limbo positioned in between leisure and wage labor. Participating in Hyper-Generator is play and requires no additional effort to just being in a space. One does not reproduce oneself on the Web in a form of a more or less accurate profile, which could be

bought or sold. Instead, the production results in abstractions created for the sheer joy of reshuffling data.

If we are to exercise our leisure time on the Web, let it be just that: a play outside of the tedious economies of labor and production. The intensified world can then return to being an expanded playground unaffected by the economic struggle. History, however, teaches us otherwise. In the end, the Avant-Garde gestures become reconciled with the powers, which have been previously evaded. The hegemonic system incorporates the rebellion as part of itself. Regardless, the fun of inventing new spaces for play continues.

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