**John Chilver**

**Parts and Labour in Osan**

The project that developed into *Parts and Labour (Osan)* in 2014 began at Camberwell Space in London in 2012. I wanted a group show where the artists would be straightjacketed within excessively tight uniform constraints. Where it would be hard to tell the difference between works. This was the tyrannical curator’s fantasy. Daft but serious. Serious in that it could be a retort to art’s constant overdetermination of authorship. And a reflection on how that overdetermination runs hand-in-hand with an evacuation of authorial agency, as in the artfair where the active authors are the galleries, not the artists.

The curatorial scheme arrived at was this: artists would be invited to give instructions for things to be done to materials within a maximum of 2 ‘person-hours’ of labour. This labour was to be done by paid volunteers who would read and carry out the instructions provided to them.

All along there were informal conversations with the artist Brighid Lowe, who was critical of many of the project’s details. In the end I invited her to be a co-curator, and so the device of defining the list of materials came from Brighid: the artists all had to work with exactly the same kit of materials. (This kit was helpfully materialised in the exhibition by Adrian Piper’s instructions.) Hence there remained an echo of the fantasy of uniformity, in that the resulting artworks could all be grasped as permutations of the same set of materials.

*Parts and Labour* thus addresses the two (related but distinct) questions of authorship and labour.

The project sets out a production process in 3 phases: first, the curators select the list of materials or “kit of parts”; second, the artists write instructions; third, the ‘labourers’ carry out the instructions. In London the labourers were students of Camberwell College of Arts. In Korea they were citizens and students of Osan. In some cases carrying out the instructions allowed for very little creative input from the labourers and was not unlike assembling a flat-pack wardrobe from IKEA; in other cases instructions might need a good deal of subjective interpretation by the labourers.

The production of any artwork – be it a sculpture, a photograph, a social assemblage or a staged conversation – relies on labour that becomes invisible and inaudible in the resultant work. Somebody always has to take away the trash, clean the toilets, proofread the press releases, lock up at night, etc.

In so-called “intentional communities” where members actively choose to join and co-construct a new social grouping, there is often an attempt to take responsibility for all required labour within the sphere of the community. No labour is outsourced to distant, invisible hired hands. The utopian intentional community takes responsibility for every moment of labour time, and thereby seeks to redeem it such that no labour is unvalued, unshared or shunned as undignified or unhygienic.

The problem of labour is central for us all today. And art offers a space in which to address it.

Within the evolving frameworks of the global economy, a persistent problem for capitalism since the 1970s has been to resist declines in the real values of wages. This in large part motivated the financialization of the US and European economies in the run up to the crash of 2008: because the diminishing purchasing power of wage-earners has been unable to drive an increase in aggregate demand, other means have been sought to concoct demand through financial conjuring.

Several threads come together today: globalisation of the labour market, historical declines in real values of wages, financialization of capital; alongside robotizations of industrial production, off-shoring and contracting-out of manufacture, growth of social media and immaterial labour and the rise of language itself as a privileged mode of production. Corporations like Nike and Apple keep their hands clean by holding manufacture at arm’s length, never directly manufacturing themselves. Instead they contract external suppliers to assemble their commodities. Operating like design practices, they hire the cheapest global labour competent to execute their instructions. As the tagline on the back of the iPhone proclaims: “Designed by Apple in California. Assembled in China.”

Art is no innocent witness of these developments. Indeed, it’s a cliché of criticism that conceptual art of the classic period (around 1965-75) rehearsed the rise of immaterial labour and of intellectual property rights as the decisive anchor of financial value. Artworks by Sol LeWitt in the 1970s or Tino Sehgal today are saleable as intellectual property rather than as material objects.

In the corporate context it’s the securing of intellectual property rights that ensures money value can be extracted more by the designer than by the assembler of the product. Similarly in the art context it’s the signature, or the name of the author that dominates. Despite a century of reflexive critiques of authorship since Duchamp created the signature of “R. Mutt”, there has been no overcoming of what Foucault called the author function. In other words, our artistic institutions (in the broadest sense) are unable to value artworks without naming an author. A truly anonymous and unauthored work of contemporary art remains unthinkable.

In all iterations of *Parts and Labour* it is important that the labourers are named and credited.

Hannah Arendt thought in terms of a distinction between labour whose resultant product endures in time (statues in stone) and labour that produces ephemeral stuff (loaves of bread). Authorship intersects with labour here too: we know the names of individual sculptors of ancient Athens, but not bakers. Today’s technology can archive any act or gesture, however ephemeral. The processes and fruits of any labour can be made to endure somehow. The challenge for us now – artistically, socially, politically - is how to distribute the processes and fruits in relation to the distribution of names and voices.