

Art Work: Santiago Sierra and the Socio-Aesthetics of Production

Edward Bacal

Abstract

In this essay, I consider the work of contemporary artist Santiago Sierra in order to assess the social, political, and cultural role of labor in contemporary artistic and economic production. Looking at Sierra's controversial performance pieces, in which he hires itinerant workers to enact menial tasks for minimal remuneration (e.g. paying unemployed workers minimum wage to sit in cardboard boxes for four hours), I argue that Sierra collapses the distance between art and work, thereby translating the aesthetic into a pure function of capitalist instrumentality. Sierra, as such, explores the dark potential of art's reduction to wage labor, to the extent that the former wholly operates within the capitalist monetization of time and the neoliberal decentring of space. In doing so, he posits decidedly irresolvable questions about art's inextricable relation to the exploitation of work and to the larger subjective and biopolitical technologies that organize global divisions of labor today. With this in mind, I locate my analysis of his work at the intersection of historical materialism and institutional critique so as to examine the political vicissitudes of art and aesthetics in and against the unremitting commodification of art. Given Sierra's refusal to offer any alternatives to the troubling questions he poses, I hope to uncover the fruitful insights he may nevertheless reveal about the relations between aesthetics and politics and between artistic and economic production. Ultimately, I aim to theorize what his art may say and do beyond simply reproducing systems of economic exploitation.

Keywords

Santiago Sierra, immaterial production, art economy, institutional critique, globalization, post-minimalism.

Since the post-WWII period, the relation between art and labor has become increasingly complex, fluctuating in tandem with the social and economic transformations of capitalist production. In particular, the status of the art object has echoed post-industrial shifts in the labor market, adopting the increasingly globalized and decentred structure of contemporary capitalism. Consequently, art has become subject to new aesthetic and political criteria alongside new institutional and economic pressures. As theorists like David Harvey and Fredric Jameson have asserted, these artistic shifts reflect the socio-economic and spatio-temporal conditions of neoliberal or “advanced” capitalism, which have become particularly pronounced since the spread of postmodernism in the 1980s.¹ From this perspective, many contemporary art practices have mirrored recent developments in economic production and policy, specifically with respect to the increasing prevalence of immaterial production. As an emblem of the turn from traditional Fordist models of industrial production (so named for Henry Ford’s advent of the assembly line as a paradigm for the manufacture of material goods) to those of “post-Fordism,” immaterial production encompasses the informatization of labour, the manufacturing of experience and affect, and concurrently reflects the global diffusion of industry and the growing instability or “precarity” of employment. As such, immaterial production represents an increasingly dominant order in social, cultural, and economic production in the West. Between the virtuality of finance networks, the growing importance of communications and service industries, and the dematerialization of the art object, immaterial processes of production have taken firm hold in the contemporary socio-cultural imagination.

To be sure, the dematerialization of the art object dates back to at least the 1960s, at which point Conceptual artists were creating works actively divorced from tangible objects.² However, whereas that generation and its immediate successors saw ephemeral art as a counterpoint to the encroaching commodification of the art object, contemporary artists like Santiago Sierra collapse this distinction between art’s alternate resistance and subjection to capitalism. Following the art market’s co-optation of the strategic dematerialization by which earlier artists eschewed commodification, Sierra’s work is today exemplary in reflecting post-Fordist socio-economic conditions to the point of mimetically reiterating them. To this

end, Sierra enacts dystopian scenarios of art's total subsumption to the logic of capital, thereby positing decidedly irresolvable questions about art's inextricable relation to the exploitation of work and to the larger socio-political techniques that organize the global divisions of labor today. With these questions in mind, I will examine Sierra's more controversial work, in which he hires itinerant workers to perform menial tasks. In doing so, I intend to assess the social, political, and cultural role of labor in contemporary artistic and economic production, further assessing the interconnection of the two within the context of globalization. By locating my analysis at the intersection of historical materialism and institutional critique, moreover, I intend to examine the political vicissitudes of art and aesthetics in and against the unremitting commodification of art. Finally, in spite of, but also because of, Sierra's refusal to offer any alternatives to the troubling questions he poses, I hope to uncover whatever insights he nevertheless reveals about the relations between aesthetics and politics and between artistic and economic production. In sum, I aim to theorize what—if anything—Sierra's art says and does beyond simply participating in systems of economic exploitation.

In a recent article on the social composition of the world's top art collectors, Andrea Fraser examines the activity of this miniscule, ultra-wealthy contingent of devout neoliberals.³ By way of her analysis, Fraser deduces that art is not only severely compromised by its market function but that its affiliation with the art market inevitably exacerbates income disparity in general. With this bleak picture, artists and critics face the challenge of legitimating art practice in and against the totality of the capitalist logic in which it exists. As she explains:

If our only choice is to participate in this economy or abandon the art field entirely, at least we can stop rationalizing that participation in the name of critical or political art practices or—adding insult to injury—social justice. Any claim that we represent a progressive social force while our activities are directly subsidized by the engines of inequality can only contribute to the justification of that inequality—the (not so) new legitimation function of art museums. The only “alternative” today is to recognize our participation in that economy and confront it in a direct and immediate way in all our institutions.⁴

It is with this quandary in mind that I want to introduce Santiago Sierra, for he is an artist who critically recognizes his participation in an economy based on inequality at the same time as he willingly bolsters it. Sierra, who was brought up in Spain and studied art in Germany before establishing his practice in Mexico, has over the last fifteen years quickly elevated himself into the art world's international markets and critical discourses. Meanwhile, having staged installations and performances throughout the world, his work has found a distinct perspective on the inbuilt mechanics of art institutions in a global context. As such, his art responds to the art world's embedded socio-economic disparities through pieces that consist of deadpan and nihilistic demonstrations of these very conditions. For example, by hiring itinerant workers (including, but not limited to, wage laborers, illegal immigrants, refugees, prostitutes, and drug addicts) to sit in a cardboard box or have a line tattooed on their backs for minimum wage, Sierra demonstrates his role as a profiting artist within encompassing systems of exploitation.⁵ Consequently, these controversial works have invited considerable backlash, such that much of the discourse surrounding the artist — whether decrying or defending his artistic aims — concerns his debatably dubious motivations. While such critiques are not unwarranted, they are not a primary concern of mine. Rather than choose which side of an ethical threshold Sierra's work falls on, I am interested in looking at the concrete relations that his works create — works that render inoperative the question of whether his art simply does good or bad.

In short, Sierra's art encompasses performance, installation, and often sculpture (not to mention the standard low-quality black and white photographs and video with which he documents it), resulting in conceptualist works that consist of understated yet markedly contentious gestures. Specifically, Sierra stages acts of passive, unskilled labor that straddle the line between the properly aesthetic and the base functionalism of socio-economic relations. The subjects he employs, whether standing immobile in the corner of an art gallery or being tattooed, demonstrate the basic fact of their expendable labor. As bodies that perform tasks or have tasks performed upon them—that is, as bodies come to function as the socially and physically inert matter of labor—their existence is reduced to their productive function, essentially quantifiable in the relative terms of time and money. At the same time, their labor is directed to neither the ends of aesthetic nor economic production, for, in his work, these enterprises lose the autonomy by which they may be thought of as separate. Thus, in spite of Sierra's opposition to the increasing

subsumption of art to the logic of the market, and by extension the self-perpetuation of the disparities that lie at the heart of capitalist production, these works actively actualize the potential of art as *pure instrumentality* (i.e. as the rationalized means to the end of generating profit). Indeed, they reduce art to a function of capitalist alienation in which value is determined relative to labor time: here as in the factory, the worker's disadvantageous submission of time and effort to the capitalist generates surplus value and drives capital accumulation. Or, as Marx tells us: "the product of [the worker's] labor serves him solely as exchange-value. But it cannot acquire the properties of a socially recognized universal equivalent, except by being converted into money."⁶

More pointedly, the worker's labor also provides the basis for the artwork's realization, both conceptually and in terms of the institutional and financial structures in which it is brought to life. In this sense, Sierra cynically posits the monetization of labor as the essence of his art while positing the disproportionate surplus value of the finished product as the essence of art's institutional apparatus. The according commodification of art—rarefied as the differential value between art *qua* art and art *qua* labor—therefore serves as the aesthetic manifestation of the art object's instrumentalized exchange value. For example, this disparity is directly explained in his piece *Person Saying a Phrase* (2002), a video in which the artist hires a beggar to utter the following sentence in exchange for £5: "My participation in this project could generate 72,000 dollars profit. I am paid five pounds." With this perverse self-reflexivity Sierra here illustrates how the inherent inequality of the labor market acts as the institutional and aesthetic condition of possibility for the artwork itself. Similarly, by paying eight unemployed Guatemalan men a pittance to sit in a box for four hours (*8 People Paid to Remain Inside Cardboard Boxes*, 1999 – fig. 1), he displays a damning indictment of the very process he enacts—complete with the tragic irony that, as Sierra reflects, when the work was restaged in Berlin critics failed to notice that museum guards in the same building were being paid comparable rates to *stand* for *eight* hours.⁷ In looking at Sierra's work, then, we see in one and the same thing an exceedingly valuable, institutionally legitimated artwork and a real enactment of economic marginalization that is exceedingly cheap. The content of his art, ultimately, is found in the tension between these poles.



Fig. 1 Santiago Sierra, *8 People Paid to Remain Inside Cardboard Boxes*, *G & T Building*, Guatemala City, 1999.

Given the nature of these works, Sierra has attracted much vitriol, particularly with respect to the patent ethical concerns they raise about his role as an artist—a critique he rebuts by explaining that he is merely making extant conditions visible.⁸ It is too easy,

however, to simply dismiss Sierra's work on ethical grounds alone (at least relative to the abundance of worse forms of generalized exploitation that go uncriticized everyday).⁹ In light of Sierra's contradictory aims, it is more productive to consider his curious—if not outright dubious—position as a political artist. In that sense, I want to consider what, beyond simply holding a mirror to society, his work can do or tell us about art and labor in the twenty-first century. Following these questions, we must account for the social and political ramifications of his work in tandem with its aesthetic and art-historical considerations, lest we reduce his art to a calculus of Marxist logic or art historical strategy. Such an account must therefore encompass the interrelated transformations of socio-economic and cultural production over the last thirty years, so as to appropriately understand how the status and subjectivity of the worker, as produced within the context of contemporary neoliberal globalization, functions within Sierra's work and the economy at large.

From roughly the 1960s onward, the dissolution of Fordist models of production in the West (based on specialized, long-term labor, concentrated in specific locations and focused on manufacturing physical products) has brought with it the dissolution of the material processes and institutional supports that have traditionally underpinned workers. As industries searching for new markets and ever-cheaper labor have dispersed and outsourced formerly centralized production sites overseas, factory workers have become divested from the specificity and long-term scale of their place on the production line. Furthermore, by severing their dependence on skilled laborers, such industries have diminished the size of workers' collectives, thereby undermining the foundation of unions and compromising the job security, rights, privileges, and protections to which workers are entitled. In sum, as workers have become dispensable in relation to the mining of cheap, foreign, and unspecialized labor, the increasing precariousness of professional labor has become a structural feature of advanced capitalism. In other words, the prevalence of so-called precarious work has since been formalized with the innovations of temporary work contracts and the internship economy, for example, which have allowed companies to avoid providing the pay, benefits, and job security that come with long-term skilled work. Less formally, this precarity also abounds in the increasing trend of freelance and entrepreneurial work, and far more problematically, in the abundance of undocumented labor that pervades and traverses the "developed" world.

In addition, these developments parallel, and to a certain

extent overlap with, those of immaterial or cognitive labor and the establishment of the services industries. Indeed, the turn away from manufacturing in the global North has been followed by the imperative to “treat manufacturing as service,” as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri note.¹⁰ This is to say, production has become a matter of providing consumers immaterial experiences and affects, such that the sale of commodities largely concerns manufacturing emotions and ideas (certainly, art has entered this equation as well, comprising much of the so-called “creative industries” to which artists, curators, gallerists, etc. contribute their cognitive capital). Consequently, as Maurizio Lazzarato notes, this turn toward immaterial labor has not only created new forms of commodification and consumption but has also engendered new social relations and subjective positions based on this advanced form of capitalist instrumentality: “If production today is directly the production of a social relation, then the ‘raw material’ of immaterial labor is subjectivity and the ‘ideological’ environment in which this subjectivity lives and reproduces. The production of subjectivity ceases to be only an instrument of social control (for the reproduction of mercantile relationships) and becomes directly productive.”¹¹ Hence, whereas the worker’s subjectivity under Fordism was thoroughly abstracted (reduced, as it were, to a machinic appendage of the factory), here it comes to the fore as something reified, a commodity to be manufactured and sold. Inasmuch as the selling of products has become the selling of lifestyles, workers are mobilized to provide experiences and affects through the (effectively deskilled and disposable) presence of their manufactured subjectivity. At the same time, however, we must not forget that these developments have always been geographically asymmetrical, to the extent that the informatization of production and dematerialization of labor have predominantly occurred in the “West. Physical manufacturing has been mostly exported to the “developing” world where the creation of immaterial labor markets has largely remained auxiliary to the management of Western corporations (as in the massive call centre industry in India, for instance). In sum, these economic shifts have formed new divisions of labor on a global scale, accompanied by the production of new forms of subjectivity and social relations. These conditions have redefined the differential modes of work within the complex global landscape of capitalism, reorganizing the social hierarchies and systems of dependence that structure labor today.

In this light, it makes sense that Sierra’s hired performances began around the turn of the millennium, roughly the same time that these socio-economic transformations were being progressively taken up by theorists like Hardt, Negri, and

Lazzarato.¹² Further, we can also place these works in the context of mounting debates and concerns surrounding the future of globalization, as institutions like the World Trade Organization began to severely dismantle the national mechanisms protecting the developing world from neoliberal domination. Certainly, Sierra's work (given the artist's European upbringing and later migration to Mexico) is to some extent colored by his experience moving through different conditions of global development and income disparity. This is most notably evident in his interest in post-socialist Latin American underdevelopment vis-à-vis the failed integration/imposition of Western free-market capitalism. Indeed, a work like *8 People Paid to Remain Inside Cardboard Boxes* demonstrates these conditions that, in regions like Guatemala, have produced abundances of cheap labor available to private wealth, such that a commercial artist can readily pay people minimum wage to sit in a box for four hours. As such, Sierra's work articulates the complexities of the rising global order of neoliberal capitalism, at least to the extent that Sierra represents the divisions of labor, financial disparity, and institutionalized power relations that the latter engenders. It is to this end that Sierra traces these socio-economic conditions back to the mounting order of precarious work, the immateriality of commodity production, and capital's reliance on the unacknowledged labor of those whose existence and exploitation have always supported these systems. Additionally, Sierra testifies to advanced capitalism's refinement of art's commodification, to the growing extent that the market's instrumental rationality has subsumed the art world. By bringing socio-economic disparity into the ostensibly autonomous space of the art gallery, he implicates art's organizational structure in systems of exploitation, sparing not even the viewer nor himself from the art world's inevitable and nefarious ramifications (indeed, even the viewers who consume Sierra's art indirectly drive his exploitative apparatus).¹³

All things considered, we must then ask what Sierra actually tells us about the work of art, or the art of work, in the age of immaterial production and precarity. To be sure, most of the salient social effects he evinces (alienation, the division of labor, the exploitation of the worker in the name of surplus value, etc.) are as old as industrialization itself. Nor, for that matter, does he actually reveal much about post-Fordism that hasn't since become commonplace. Additionally, we might also ask where Sierra's artistic strategies differ from preceding generations of institutional critique artists, such as Mierle Laderman Ukeles for instance, who in the 1970s similarly deployed menial work as the medium by which to critique the marginalized labor bases supporting art

institutions. In other words, we must ask what Sierra's works contribute to contemporary discourses surrounding socio-economic relations, art, and social justice, given his claim that he is merely making visible what already exists? How, then, does making these conditions visible merit taking advantage of the underprivileged as he does? In response to these concerns, let us look more closely at the aforementioned restaging of *8 People Paid to Remain Inside Cardboard Boxes*.

In *Workers Who Cannot Be Paid, Remunerated to Remain Inside Cardboard Boxes* (fig. 2), presented in Berlin in 2000, Sierra employed six Chechen refugees to sit in cardboard boxes for four hours a day over six weeks. However, because political exiles are not legally permitted to work in Germany, these individuals had to maintain anonymity and be paid in secret, lest they risk deportation. The boxes therefore served to conceal the identity of the workers, ensuring their protection from legal sanction at the same time as they allegorize their social invisibility. As such, this display of undocumented work (in the dual sense that Sierra paid these workers under the table and that his documentation did not include images of them) effects its own process of becoming invisible. This is to say, this work evinces the way that visibility is conditioned and ultimately falters with respect to the representation of the itinerant worker: beyond alluding to the fact that unrecognized labour serves as the invisible basis of economic and cultural production, Sierra renders the liminality of this tenuous position in terms of the viewer's (in)ability to perceive the working subject.

Because we cannot see these refugees, nor have any proof of their existence, we must take the presence of their bodies and their labor on faith. As such, this work stops us short of completely reifying the workers and their labor, to the extent that we are ultimately only able to recognize their unrepresentability. This is to say, the social invisibility of the worker is here registered as his or her literal invisibility; likewise, the presence of his or her labor—that which generates the work's conceptual function of producing surplus value—is registered only in absence. As Pilar Villela Mascaró corroborates: "the crux of [Sierra's] statement is that the value of this particular thing is not a result of the work of the person who has been directly hired to do it (her, here, now); but of the work of *someone, somewhere else* who, by definition, within capitalism, and in relation to commodities, becomes invisible."¹⁴ In essence, Sierra is concerned with what we do not see precisely because we cannot see it. The categorical invisibility of the work he represents, *including his very own labor*, is thus the content of his art, which enacts the becoming-invisible of bodies, subjectivities, and labor



Fig. 2 Santiago Sierra, *Workers Who Cannot Be Paid, Remunerated to Remain Inside Cardboard Boxes*, Kunst Werke, Berlin, 2000.

that capitalism effects. And indeed, the labor of Sierra's workers is itself made possible by other workers—the mass “*someone, somewhere else*”—who exist well outside the gallery and who the viewer will never know. To grant the worker presence is therefore impossible; nonetheless that impossibility serves as the very condition of possibility with which we can conceive (but not perceive) the worker's presence.

By making labor's invisibility visible, Sierra evidences the radical extent to which the worker—indeed, work itself—has been disavowed within the global social imaginary. To this end, Sierra's art inverts canonical art historical tropes of representing labor: rather than depict a legible and romanticized image of the downtrodden or the common man, as Socialist Realists did in attempting to produce a new Communist subject, Sierra displays the impossibility of any such representation as evidence of the eradication of the worker's subjectivity. In this capacity, Sierra evokes the extent to which neoliberal globalization exercises domination over the worker: if the Fordist factory worker's subjectivity was abstracted to the point of figuring as a machinic appendage, and if the service industry worker's subjectivity is reified, marketed, and sold for consumption, then the subjectivity of the itinerant worker—denied the socio-economic conditions by which she gains legibility—is the object of negation. In other words, the itinerant worker comes to represent what in a different context Judith Butler has termed precarious life, whereby precarity is raised to an ontological level: insofar as workers lacks the discursive socio-political status by which beings are socially recognized as subjects, their basic existence as social entities cannot be guaranteed.¹⁵

Acknowledging this, Sierra articulates the ways that capitalism, and no less the global art economy, have engendered a field of social relations built on the socio-political production of living bodies and subjectivities. As Hardt and Negri explain: “in the postmodernization of the global economy, the creation of wealth tends ever more toward biopolitical production, the production of social life itself, in which the economic, the political, and the cultural increasingly overlap and invest one another.”¹⁶ In this sense, Sierra highlights how the geopolitical transformations globalization has wrought have deracinated workers from economic, geographic, and political stability, and as a result, from subjective agency as well. To be sure, the itinerant worker is a position very much galvanized by globalization, inasmuch as the latter has signaled the decline of national sovereignty, including the welfare state's institutional supports for the working class and the erosion of the national

boundaries that migrant workers and refugees contradict every day. Indeed, socio-economic efforts to undermine the subjective status of the global workforce have driven the process by which the global North's imperialist export of neoliberalism shapes the new global order of social, political, and economic precarity. As such, Sierra recapitulates the Marxist axiom that all that is solid melts into air, but includes in its scope the material structures of nationality and subjectivity representative of erstwhile political economies.

In light of these complex relations to the socio-economic and subjective ramifications of globalization, we might finally consider what Sierra's art, *qua* art, does; that is, to consider what function his work provides beyond the didactic critique it demonstrates. Putting aside, then, his more self-evident connections to institutional critique, conceptualism, and performance art, it is worth considering his relation to minimalism as well. For Sierra, whose early work uncoincidentally consists of sculptures that explicitly draw upon minimal art, minimalist idioms like the cube, grid, and serial repetition run through his oeuvre, where they serve as the abstract aesthetic support of his works. While this formal consideration may seem superfluous relative to Sierra's conceptual ethos, his use of abstraction (e.g. the use of serialized cubes in *Workers Who Cannot Be Paid...*) is what nevertheless anchors his art outside of mere exploitation. This is not to say that his formal means aestheticize or redeem exploitation (in fact, the overtly shabby construction of his structures, which themselves indicate the trace of manual labour, suggests the contrary) nor that they provide a formal supplement to prior content. Rather, abstraction here works in conjunction with the unrepresentability of the de-subjectified worker, serving as the affective, extra-representational basis by which Sierra screens the invisibility of his workers. Whether he tattoos a line on someone's back, places people in cardboard cubes, or makes someone stand in the corner, Sierra abstracts the human subject to the extent that he portrays the worker's own reduction to an abstraction within society.

Following this idea, let us again turn to *Workers Who Cannot Be Paid...*, which Claire Bishop notably describes as "an Arte Povera take on Tony Smith's celebrated 6 x 6 foot sculpture *Die* (1962), the work that Michael Fried famously described as exerting the same effect on the viewer as 'the silent presence of another person.'"¹⁷ This sort of exertion of the silent presence of the other is precisely what I want to emphasize in Sierra's aesthetic, for it is through this silent presence—the invisible *someone else*—that Sierra's work claims its aesthetico-political force. To be sure,

Bishop's concern is with the way Sierra engenders social relationships based on antagonism (in the latter's capacity as the heterogeneous or dissensual basis of democracy), as the artist's unwillingness to simply reconcile social difference indicates. To this end, Bishop notes that "Sierra seems to argue that the phenomenological body of minimalism is politicized precisely through the *quality* of its relationship—or lack of relationship—to other people."¹⁸ This is to say, Sierra draws upon minimalism's emphasis on the spectator as an embodied and sentient subject who exists in the shared phenomenological presence of the artwork.¹⁹ In other words, he looks to minimal art's capacity to create aesthetic social spheres shared between the artwork and its viewers, therein politicizing this relation by radically subverting its ends. Indeed, his engagement with minimalism manifests his interest in creating particular social relationships between the spectator and the worker; however, as Bishop hints, he perverts this relationship by foregrounding the subjective incommensurability that separates the two: to actively demonstrate this failure—that is, to palpably realize alienation—is precisely what he sets upon to do.

In this capacity, Sierra demonstrates a kind of negative ethics insofar as his art stages a *failed* encounter; that is, an encounter foiled by the impossibility of apprehending the worker's subjective presence (which, as I've suggested, never becomes present in any case). In effect, Sierra exacerbates the separation of the viewer from the worker and more specifically from the worker whose labor has been integral to the foundation of the bourgeois subject.²⁰ As if to sustain the worker's de-subjectified status, Sierra suspends the impulse to identify with or even relate to her. At the same time, he also disallows the viewer from simply surmounting the worker's subjective difference, prohibiting the former from disavowing his participation in the worker's exploitation; i.e. from disavowing the basic fact that one's status as a socially recognized subject is contingent on the exclusion of the worker from that same privileged status. Thus, while Sierra may not have any qualms about partaking in any such exploitation himself, he discourages viewers from negating the worker's presence by exercising mastery over her subjective difference. Therefore, while the worker does not actually become present, her absence serves to impress upon the privileged viewer his own place in the proverbial master-slave dialectic that Sierra enacts (i.e. following Hegel's classic schema, the viewer becomes aware of his dependence, as a "master," on the labor and recognition of the "slave," who remains dependent on the viewer as a capitalist agent). The discomfiting consciousness of this dialectical tension is, again, the content of Sierra's art, at least to the extent that it evokes the worker's invisibility at the same



Fig. 3 Santiago Sierra, *Group of People Facing a Wall and Person Facing into a Corner*, Lisson Gallery, London, 2002.

time as it forces viewers to confront it without, ultimately, making invisible what is nevertheless always already invisible. The viewer, presumed to be the subject of capitalist society, is thus forced to face his own inability to face the worker. As such, it is no coincidence that the worker turned away from the viewer's gaze is probably the most prominent motif in Sierra's oeuvre (fig. 3).

In this light, we may again ask whether Sierra's art merits its exploitation of workers? To offer a somewhat evasive response, I do not believe one can quantify this problem in a way that yields any appropriate answer, for the effect of Sierra's work can only be judged by recourse to the specific subjective experience it creates between particular viewers and workers (or in Bishop's terms, the quality of the relationship it [fails to] create). In fact, the ability to answer such a question would neutralize Sierra's critique by translating the quality of social relations into calculable formula, replete with the illusion of being able to exist outside of the social, economic, and geopolitical field in which these relations exist (as is the case, for instance, with corporate social responsibility campaigns that create an illusory façade of ethics in order to mask the social violence the corporate apparatus promulgates). As for the question of what his art *does* politically, Sierra accentuates the deep political vicissitudes that pervade art institutions and inflect aesthetic objects and experiences. However, he also complicates the status of the artwork itself, further challenging its long and already incredibly complicated relationship to everyday life. While Sierra evidently bridges art and life in his work, it is not without perversely and pointedly abandoning the avant-gardist commitments one associates with theorists like Horkheimer and Adorno or Peter Bürger. Indeed, Sierra merges art into life only to demonstrate the dystopian scenario of art's subsumption to capitalism; that is, he exhibits the failure of the autonomous artwork to resist "the rationality of domination...the compulsive character of a society alienated from itself."²¹ To these ends, Sierra bears witness to the internalization of the triumph of advanced capitalism within contemporary art, in terms of the ineradicable socio-economic domination that afflicts criticality as well as the increasing facility through which art, at the same time, trades its critical autonomy for commodity status. Does this then mean defeat? Any answer, it seems, can only be either cynical or mendacious, which remains the major flaw of Sierra's work; i.e. that the Pyrrhic success of his critique is contingent on its failure. In other words, any socially desirable consequences his work engenders, such as creating critical awareness, establishing new political subject positions, or (more arguably) providing the desperate with safe employment, is nevertheless born of a nihilistic cynicism (hence

Sierra's unabashed admission of his inability, and even lack of intention, to change the system). Thus, as political art, we can only say that Sierra's work fails, but also that it "succeeds" precisely because it fails. It is with this impenetrable political ambivalence that Sierra posits the vexing condition of thinking politics today; at the least, in recognizing this condition, we as viewers may come to know where to begin taking up this task.

Given the complexities and contradictions that inundate Sierra's work, it remains difficult, if not impossible, to draw any definite conclusions. Certainly, his work remains an evocative, powerful, and articulate critique of the capitalist exploitation of the worker. No less, it testifies to the ways that neoliberal globalization has galvanized this exploitation through new techniques with which to produce, control, and ultimately deject the bodies and subjectivities of the global workforce. Additionally, Sierra reveals the extent to which such processes cannot be thought outside larger socio-economic shifts in capitalist production that have radically reschematized how labor today is organized and exploited. Sierra's art, therefore, is not just about work and the worker, but is also about the encompassing socio-economic and geopolitical circumstances that have historically and discursively constructed them — including, significantly, the contribution of the art world to neoliberal imperialism. It is true that Sierra's is a defeatist and likely impotent critique, but it nevertheless creates new situations in which to open new forms of dialogue and engender critical consciousness. While it may not change the system, nor even try to, it presents a particularly cogent and affecting picture of it. This in itself is never enough, but that is precisely the point: Sierra's works are not autonomous entities but elements in a social system that extends everywhere. If we realize this, hopefully we may also realize our obligation to intervene in it.

Edward Bacal is pursuing a PhD in Art History at the University of Toronto. His research focuses on the intersections of ethics, aesthetics, and politics in contemporary abstract art.

Notes

¹ See Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991) and David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 1991).

² The notion of “the dematerialization of art” itself comes from Lucy Lippard and John Chandler’s 1968 essay of the same name. See Lucy Lippard and John Chandler, “The Dematerialization of Art,” in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1999), 46-51.

³ Andrea Fraser, “L’1%, C’est Moi,” *e-flux* 83 (2011).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁵ The wages paid are typically relative to specific circumstances; for example, the minimum wage of the country the work is staged in. Sierra in fact emphasizes the socio-economic specificities surrounding the creation of particular works.

⁶ Karl Marx, “Money, or the Circulation of Commodities,” in *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume One*. Translated by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (Progress Publishers: Moscow, 1978), 72.

⁷ Teresa Margolles and Santiago Sierra, “Santiago Sierra,” *BOMB* 82 (2003): 65.

⁸ Santiago Sierra, “A Thousand Words: Santiago Sierra Talks About His Work,” *Artforum* 41:2 (2002): 131.

⁹ As Pilar Villela Mascaró contends, such ethical judgements operate according to a suspension of reality and art that serves to negate the reality prior to Sierra’s work, thereby retaining a fallacious illusion about art’s moral superiority. “Not in My Name: Reality and Ethics in the Work of Santiago Sierra,” in *Santiago Sierra: 7 Works* (London: Lisson Gallery, 2007), 17.

¹⁰ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 285.

¹¹ Maurizio Lazzarato, “Immaterial Labour,” in *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, edited by Michael Hardt and Paolo Virno (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 143.

¹² Moreover, the intense and relatively sudden development of information technology at the end of the millennium also galvanized these shifts and surrounding discourses.

¹³ Certainly, we can criticize the way Sierra seemingly enforces given subject positions, such as that of “the worker” or “the viewer.” In any case, Sierra’s point remains that our assumption of such positions (whether by choice or imposition) are hardly ideologically neutral or homogenous.

¹⁴ Pilar Villela Mascaró, “Not in My Name: Reality and Ethics in the Work of Santiago Sierra,” 23.

¹⁵ See Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004).

¹⁶ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, xiii.

¹⁷ Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and relational Aesthetics," *October* 110 (2004): 74.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ In this sense, *Workers Who Cannot Be Paid...* is strikingly similar to Robert Morris' *Box for Standing* (1961), in which Morris presented himself standing inside an open wooden box

²⁰ Grant Kester, "Theories and Methods of Collaborative Art Practice," <<http://grantkester.net/resources/groundworks.pdf>> accessed March 21, 2012, 18.

²¹ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr. Trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 95.

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