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Working with Amateur Labour

Between Culture and Economy

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The theme of this special issue emerged out of a panel organised by the issue editors for the Cultural Studies Association of Australasia (CSAA) annual conference in 2010. In the months preceding the conference we were struck by similarities emerging between the demands placed on professional lives dominated by the imperatives of the neoliberal marketplace of the contemporary university and the drive among non-professionals to position themselves in relation to similar structures, for what appeared to be no logical (and no financial) motive at all. In everyday communities, in the entertainment industry and especially in the complex architecture of the digital media system it increasingly appeared to be the case that being called professional was the highest compliment one could receive. The theme of the 2010 CSAA colloquium, 'A Scholarly Affair', was most appropriate as it

problematizes cultural studies as a field developing an established professional identity after many years as an academic outlier.¹

Over the last five years the field of cultural studies has given growing attention to the characteristics and practices of paid and unpaid work in the context of our networked, globalised, post-industrial society. Various mechanisms for the market-based valorisation of labour have transformed over the last few decades so instead of 'work' being the sole site for the production of value, massive apparatuses and techniques for the 'counting' of actions and extraction of value have emerged.² The Google-spectre that haunts us through market-based valorisation of every banal detail of our lives—realised in the figure of the 'quantified self'³—has emerged from new practices and cultures of valorisation. There has been a democratisation of valorisation so that all 'users' contribute. Crowd-sourced valorisation such as practices of 'liking' and 'endorsing' have opened the field in certain ways so that it is relatively easy to find a cultural niche organised around valorising specific forms of cultural and economic value. There is a topology of opportunity where cultural value and economic value intersect; 'opportunity' here is an intensive field in which individuals and entire collectives are called to account using the metrics of the digital market.

The connection between creative practices and digital networks obviously owes something to the development of easy-to-use (digital and media) tools that promise the democratisation of (media) production, but it has also been engendered by a shift in the meaning of creativity, and the envisaged value of creative work, to the economy and to its practitioners. Once axiomatic concepts such as 'creative' and 'work' have shifted so all sorts of people are seen as 'creative workers' even when their activities don't adhere to previously commonplace definitions of those terms. 'Creativity', once associated with the 'natural' or 'acquired' gifts of the artist, has expanded to include virtually all the performative labours producing the information economy, from computer coding to legal research. Similarly, the modern idea of work takes many different shapes and sizes: paid or unpaid, but also voluntary, casual, provisional and so on. The practices and principles that guide digital culture (many themselves shaped by economic imperatives) have been integrated into discourses about the nature of creative work and creative abilities. Many people are willing to put themselves to work for free on projects that require

all the skills and qualifications associated with modern day careers but without some (or many) of the usual rights and rewards. Accordingly, a growing body of academic research is now engaging in the investigation of the nature of immaterial labour, the knowledge economy, free labour and co-creative collaborations between volunteers and corporations. One thing, however, has not yet been thoroughly confronted and this is the degree to which in both scholarly debate and everyday life the figure of the amateur has tended to be ‘taken as read’, as though all amateurs (their motivations and their efforts) were equal. It is worth asking ourselves to what degree unpaid labour, volunteerism, entrepreneurial spirit and co-creation accord with the experience of the amateur.

Amateur pursuits were once understood as a *diversion* from work life. Quaintly, one might have referred to ‘the hobbyist’ or ‘the enthusiast,’ someone who spent their weekends or evenings coaching hockey or painting watercolours simply because it pleased them to do so. Now, ‘amateur’ is a catch-all term used to describe a significant proportion of all the activities taking place online. Ten years ago, amateurs didn’t have outlets like Etsy, Kickstarter or Soundcloud to sell their wares, raise money for projects or share their talents. The advent of this amateur economy has been animated by a host of online tools that have become widespread, easily available and virtually free. Anyone can sell themselves and their skills from the comfort of their lounge room. At the same time as amateurs have been starting businesses in their spare rooms and basements, businesses have been attempting to make their workplaces look more like spare rooms—places for creativity, ‘me’ time and fun. Changes like this suggest that the boundaries between professional and amateur are not as stable as they once were. There is nothing new about staff longing for more engagement and freedom in their work roles, or about enthusiasts who enjoy doing something in their free time wondering if there isn’t a way to make a living from it. What is new is the way in which these two desires are fusing into a single vision regarding work life.

This was well illustrated recently when a small storm of online outrage materialised after Etsy, the online marketplace where users buy and sell handmade and vintage arts and crafts, revealed that it would make changes to its platform and its user charter to allow its merchants to hire staff and outsource various aspects of the ‘handmade’ labour process. The announced changes demonstrated a desire to

move beyond the idea of the amateur marketplace towards a model of entrepreneurial retail. Rules on the Etsy website had once limited 'makers' from working with outside vendors or additional teams of staff. If an enterprising craft-maker wanted to expand operations by hiring support staff to ensure production levels kept up with demand, they were placed in the position of having to abandon the Etsy platform. Now, this would not be the case. More significant is the site's decision to provide vendors with a platform that will allow them to partner with large chain-store style retailers to distribute their products in bricks-and-mortar shop fronts and catalogue businesses. These announcements provoked talk in the website's forums, where speculation quickly turned to the prospect of Esty-sweatshops and off-shore outsourcing for items that were ostensibly appealing to consumers on the basis of their (now false) amateur and artisanal origins. These were not just cynical complaints: Etsy already had weathered criticism for its lax policing of the charter of use; most notably in the case of a handmade furniture retailer that in reality was sourcing pre-fabricated items from Indonesia. At the time, Etsy explained the situation by claiming the problem was one of classification: the maker in question needed to identify herself not as a single one-woman operation but rather a collective with 'local staff'. Now, it would seem, Etsy's changed business strategy will ensure no further classification problems.⁴

Behind user misgivings about Etsy's slow erosion of its original ethics, the site has been prompted to make these changes because of a legitimate problem: not all of its amateur craftsmen and women are equal. Many of Etsy's merchants want to see the platform grow and expand with their businesses. As they develop from hobbyists to entrepreneurs the website needs to keep pace so as to prevent losing them to larger competitors. From its beginnings in 2005, Etsy framed itself as a counterpoint to the alienation of mass production, standardisation and dehumanisation of large-scale retail. 'Instead of having an economy dictate the behaviour of communities, [the vision for Etsy is] to empower communities to influence the behaviour of economies,' the founder Rob Kalin told the *Wall Street Journal*. These high-minded principles aren't just all talk—Etsy is distinct from many other recent internet start-ups in so far as it doesn't depend on advertising revenue as part of its business model. Instead, it relies on serving its buyers and sellers; vendors pay Etsy 20 US cents per listing and 3.5 per cent of the final sale price on

each item. The website also offers to profile particular products for a charge of up to \$US15 on a special showcase page. While hardly a commercially disinterested enterprise, Etsy puts community and direct relationships front and centre in the consumer act, and aims to create a virtual simulation of the village marketplace.

In accounting for this somewhat parochial vision for online global retail, Kalin's own artisanal background is often cited. After graduating with a degree in classics, he abandoned the search for a traditional job in favour of his woodworking hobby. (Fittingly, his aesthetic tastes blended the hi-tech and the handmade; he crafted wooden casings for computers). Struggling to get such an idiosyncratic product before an appreciative audience he came up with an idea for Etsy.⁵ Many of the site's users share his ambition to turn a passion project into a small sideline business; most of its merchants are 'stay-at-home moms and college students looking to supplement their income rather than make a full-time living'.⁶ Like Kalin, many of these makers work hard, for little initial reward, because they are energised by the opportunity to pursue an idea of their own. In a very direct way Etsy's vision is representative of many of its users, an operation founded by passionate people who are sometimes inexperienced and without credentials, looking for alternative paths in working life. 'Etsy Inc. was just four people ... We were working for free, working day and night all the time,' Kalin wrote in a blog post reflecting on the growth and success of the website. 'There's a reason that small groups of people are able to launch things that large companies can't', he said, acknowledging that much modern day success is built on the basis of a willingness to work nearly constantly, unpaid, under-resourced and with a single-minded determination.⁷

Etsy grew, but the site has often neglected to note that the businesses of many of its users were growing too. Merchants have been critical of the website's failure to provide essential support for business development, complaining that this has limited their potential for expansion and retail growth. The company has now promised to address this with the introduction of new mobile platforms for shopping and attention to developing international markets with multilingual apps and help centres. For many of its amateur producers, the market popularity of Etsy has brought about an entirely new and unanticipated set of industrial concerns. Vendors worry about price competition, a crowded market and a creeping standardisation of products ('put a bird on it!' as the meme from the satirical

television show *Portlandia* goes). These concerns are considerably more industrial or corporate than those we usually associate with amateurs and hobbyists.

The company is now struggling to accommodate hobbyists and entrepreneurial merchants alike. On the one hand, Etsy seems to have moved more slowly in responding to these concerns than many of its users would have liked, failing to recognise the very business-like concerns amateurs face. On the other hand, there are those worried that Etsy's changes to its classification system for producers and its provision of new platforms for distribution threaten to turn handmade into little more than a trademark. All of this points to the fact that operations such as those that are facilitated by site like Etsy (or countless others), while they are often classified as amateur endeavours, in fact represent something quite different. This is a form of work practice that straddles both the amateur and professional realms and which borrows ideology and instrumental logic from both. Identities like 'professional' and 'amateur' have given way to practices ('professionalism', 'amateurism') that float amorphously, to be seized or cast off as appropriate to the individual.

Etsy's crisis is one context for the problematic explored in each of the contributions to this special issue of *Cultural Studies Review*, which is the shifting composition of relations that develop between and constitute the amateur and the professional. A number of key themes emerge across the collection. Firstly, there is the question of movement from the amateur to the professional, which is less a question of identity (though recognition is key), than it is a question of visibility and the character of opportunities that emerge in creative and social networks. Lawson Fletcher and Ramon Lobato examine the way amateur music writers are blocked from access to 'professional credentials, institutions and pathways' and respond in creative ways that involve the production of new forms of value. This is experienced by new entrants into fields of cultural production, and in particular by those vying for the hotly contested quasi-professional roles of cultural intermediaries. Fletcher and Lobato make a surprising suggestion that what is at stake is not the passage from amateur to professional, or whether amateur practice has agency, but 'how they knowingly negotiate precarious and piecemeal employment situations, including tactically donating labour when needed, to gain pleasure and payment doing what they love'.

'Doing what you love' has often been seen as payment enough for amateurs to mobilise and 'give' their labour for free. Caroline Hamilton argues that amateur practices are significantly more complicated than simply doing something just 'for the love of it'. Indeed, Hamilton notes the etymology of amateur is French via Latin, meaning 'a lover of' and entered English in the eighteenth century to describe an individual with a passionate interest in a subject or an activity. The association of 'amateur' with an unabiding love for one's activity creates a number of false binary assumptions; for instance, that amateurs necessarily draw satisfaction from their work while their opposites, professionals, do not. Hamilton uses the example of Wikileaks as an ostensibly 'amateur' outfit to frame a discussion of such problematisations. The political actors involved in the Wikileaks geo-political drama are engaging with different positions in relation to the normative roles of professional (journalist, editor, politician and so on) versus the amateur (spies, 'freedom fighters'). Hamilton then turns her attention to more prosaic tensions in the fringe location of liminal roles bound by such divisions within conventional 'discourses of amateurism' as paid/unpaid and authorised/unofficial.

Esther Milne engages with parody as a key site for amateur labour that exists in the interstices of different interests. Milne works to extend the notion of the economy to incorporate the multidimensional character of amateur practice, this includes economics, pleasure, aesthetic, influence and legitimation. She contends that parody is a form of cultural production rich with possibilities for exploring the differing appreciations of 'economy' and, with this in mind, analyses two examples of parody video on YouTube. YouTube videos operate within and across multiple economies of value, and Milne's focus is primarily on the contested legal terrain of parody and the conditions of legal value (or not). Milne also looks at the unhappy convergence of the social media platform of Twitter and the corporate brand of airline Qantas, and traces the fortunes of the parody account QantasPR as an example of political activism using 'brandjacking'.

In her article on DIY urbanism and the demand for spatial justice, Ann Deslandes argues that there is an ethical dimension to warding off professionalism or, at the least, tactically enacting the identity of the 'amateur' as a broader strategy of reconfiguring power relations to ensure 'the equitable distribution of places to live, be social and make culture'. Deslandes acknowledges that DIY urbanism

represents a 'partial, or interested, claim; in that it cannot account for the marginality of others, and risks overriding it with an appropriative "chic".' The complex ethical dimensions of amateur practice are also the subject of Helen Kennedy's paper, which addresses the fraught bringing together of paid and unpaid labour in the field of 'spec work'. It shares a concern with what it means to be an 'amateur' when 'opportunities' are presented in the form of spec work competitions, yet conversely, the strategic articulation of 'amateur' for the purposes of capturing amateur labour in this arena involves a tactical disavowal. Kennedy takes a step back. Using empirical research drawn from professional media producers about the impact of amateur production activities on their work, she extends debates about amateur economies in a direction that to date has been somewhat lacking.

A second major theme that emerges from this special issue is, what are the productive capabilities of amateurs and how can such outputs be measured? Susan Luckman examines one of the more visible amateur cultures organised around the handmade craft production as a 'pro-am cultural economy'. Luckman notes the various characteristics of this resurgence, arguing that different measures of craft-based activism engage with revaluing the historically devalued areas of 'women's domestic, unpaid activity'. Austere cultural consumption is furnished with a more complex cultural valency when largely derivative cultural practices of 'handmade' are rearticulated in the context of DIY entrepreneurialism on Etsy. A (largely 'alternative') regime of practices and media representation then develops around expressing the cultural and economic values of 'handmade' in the contemporary context. Similar to the danger noted by Deslandes in overly enthusiastic celebrations of apparent resistance expressed through amateur practices, Luckman asks the question whether we should consider such craft-based movements an expression of genuine change or are they, like Etsy itself, tightly woven into the (venture) capitalist milieu.

A key dimension of amateur economies is that of competence and the capacity to enact forms of expertise and participate via subcultural literacies. Glen Fuller explores economies of tacit, embodied 'know how' by looking at the ubiquitous 'how to' article.' The 'how to' guide is a staple text for contemporary amateur cultures and is primarily organised through online modes of communication. Older forms of amateur practice also distribute these texts through specialist print media, such as

enthusiast magazines. Fuller explores the key problematic in the distributed and mediated apprenticeships belonging to amateur cultures, the transmission of ‘tacit knowledge’. How is tacit knowledge transmitted without it becoming explicit knowledge? He argues that what is captured in media representations are the conditions through which tacit knowledge is developed—experience—rather than the knowledge itself.

The final article is from McKenzie Wark who challenges us to rethink materialism in terms of ‘making’. ‘Making’, in this context, is a certain kind of amateur labour valorised through the ‘maker’ subculture and attendant commercial enterprises organised around it, it is also a way of thinking about resistant practices as a practical materialism instead of what Wark describes as a ‘contemplative materialism’. Resonating with Milne’s investigation into the parody of existing cultural identities, Wark argues that maker culture ‘wants the power to make everything available for remaking’. Wark turns our attention to suburbanisation as an illustration of the way nature was rendered as a material object of contemplation in a ‘billion backyards’ thereby connecting with the spatial politics of urbanisation addressed in Deslandes work.

Indeed, Wark’s article teases out another way of thinking about the amateur. Rather than thinking in terms of a particular subjectivity or in terms of a specific set of objects, the amateur can be understood in terms of its conditions of individuation; amateur labour then becomes the force of will in this perpetual striving.⁸ Here modernity is imagined less as a historical period and more as a process of an ever-increasing proliferation of milieus (social, technical and otherwise) for the ongoing individuation of labouring subjects. Wark’s model for an understanding of the amateur as a subject that exists in terms of mobile relations of valorisation helps to clarify our own position in relation to the genesis and the production of this special issue. In our experiences as early career academics, and particularly in the context of the ‘scholarly affair’ that is contemporary cultural studies, we note that at the root of so much academic labour is a non-rationalised drive for knowledge that can only be described as the hallmark of the amateur.⁹ Academic conferences and similar events are primarily organised by volunteer (often postgraduate) staff whose uncredited and at times invisible labour are depended upon to make these fora happen. Participation is driven by the commitment and enthusiasm of individuals

who offer their expertise without the index of the consultant's schedule of fees or calculation of the risks involved to productivity. This tension between professional milieu and personal drive has been noted by Melissa Gregg, who suggests that it reflects:

the fate of those of us who have grown up in the corporate university, who face immense expectations to qualify for jobs in a system that is hardly recognisable, and who remain passionate enough to fight for the career we were led to believe in.

As scholars, we are tired of seeing good people leave the industry broken by its demanding and ever-moving goal posts.¹⁰

To a certain extent, then, the professionalisation of the discipline of cultural studies and related humanities disciplines in Australia also comes with some collateral damage. As Gregg puts it, 'growing up in the corporate university' involves a process of transformation, not only for the field, but for the players. For those who graduated from PhD programs in the era of 'three-year PhDs' this is a performative process whereby targets need to be met and the worst possible outcome is not failing to produce quality research, but failing to produce an output in the allotted time. After the PhD, the earlier career academic is expected to posit her intended (future) career by mapping opportunities; opportunities that need to be created or harnessed. One such opportunity is the academic conference. Another is the production of special issues for journals such as *Cultural Studies Review*. Similar to the tension noted by the conference organisers Offord, Cooke and Garbutt, there is an ethical and collegial tension here that we posit without trying to resolve. In organising the conference panel and this journal issue, we have enacted a skill highly valued and promoted in the neoliberal workplace, and indeed the neoliberal university: the capacity to produce or identify and then capitalise on opportunities presented by unpaid labour. This journal issue is an 'opportunity' harnessed in different ways by contributors, editorial staff and readers. It is an 'output' counted in regimes of industry-wide workplace performance-based accountability, yet this labour is what 'counts' and is not counted at the same time.

Perhaps the rite of passage for aspiring academics not only passes through the apprenticeship of the PhD, but also through the process of developing ad hoc epistemologies to operate as a 'professional' in the shifting power relations of

measurable performance. The 'system' is one here that conspires to appear 'professional' while at the same time, as every 'professional' knows, requires a massive investment in tactical labour. That is, there are formal processes of being accountable, but the provision of labour that is to be counted demands an entire other apparatus and set of practices. Least of which is the capacity to develop coping strategies with the mechanisms deployed to increase the countable outputs of labour (publications, teaching load, research funding successes, and so on). This is not to forgo the fight or surrender terrain in industrial battles. Rather, it is to recognise that fighting such battles requires energy and time that has to be extracted from somewhere. The ethics of amateurism can be tactically deployed when the relations underpinning professional subjectivities are no longer sustainable.

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¹ 'A Scholarly Affair' conference organisers Baden Offord, Grayson Cooke and Rob Garbutt note that 'this inherent tension about what a scholar does—and what is expected of and from them in the modern university—goes to the heart and relevance of cultural studies scholarship' (p. 188). 'A Scholarly Affair: Activating Cultural Studies in the Wilds of the Knowledge Economy', *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2012, pp. 187–90.

Notably, a celebration of the professional position of cultural studies as a discipline was cemented a year earlier with the 'State of the Industry' colloquium organised by the Cultural Studies Network (CRN) at the University of Queensland marking the conclusion of a highly successful period of Australian Research Council funding for the CRN.

² Antonio Negri, 'Notes on the Evolution of Thought of Louis Althusser', in *Postmodern Materialism and the Future of Marxist Theory: Essays in the Althusserian Tradition*, ed. A. Callari and D.F. Ruccio, trans. O. Vasile, Wesleyan University Press, Hanover, 1996, pp. 51–8.

³ See, for example, Quantified Self, <<http://quantifiedself.com/>>.

⁴ Details of this are taken from Rob Walker, 'Etsy Goes Pro', *Wired*, 26 September 2012, <<http://www.wired.com/design/2012/09/etsy-goes-pro/>>.

⁵ Rob Kalin quoted in Teri Evans, 'Creating Etsy's Handmade Marketplace', *Wall Street Journal*, 30 March 2010,

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702304370304575152133860888958.html?mod=WSJ_hp_editorsPicks>.

⁶ Notably, the average age of an Etsy trader is thirty-four and over 90 per cent of all users are women. See Walker.

⁷ Rob Kalin, 'Rob and Maria: The Long View', *Etsy News* blog, 2008, <<http://www.etsy.com/blog/news/2008/the-long-view-rob-maria/2150/>>.

⁸ For an examination of the representation and reification of amateur labour as perpetual striving and deferred threshold to the professional see Kirsten Seale, 'MasterChefs Amateur Makeovers', *Media International Australia*, no. 143, May 2012, pp. 28–35.

⁹ Because of a series of organisational glitches, the 'Amateur Economy' panel did not appear in the final conference program. That our participation was accidentally erased from the schedule seemed to speak to some of the themes we were addressing in our research. In response to the experience of CSAA, we reconvened a week later on a Saturday afternoon at the School of Media and Communication, RMIT University, to stage a 're-enactment' of the panel for an enthusiastic, engaged group—some of whose work is included in this special issue.

¹⁰ Melissa Gregg, 'Why Academia Is No Longer A Smart Choice', *New Matilda*, 24 November 2009, <<http://newmatilda.com/2009/11/24/academia-no-longer-smart-choice>>.