



FRESH  
ART  
INTL

research  
guide

# the art of capitalism

issue 5 | 2020



## FRESH ART INTERNATIONAL CONVERSATIONS ABOUT CREATIVITY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

This Research Guide is a digital publication featuring conversations and themes illuminated in the **Fresh Art International podcast**. A resource for individuals, communities, and schools, the podcast combines interviews with field recordings and rich sound effects that inform and inspire each conversation. Keeping in mind both the curious and the cognoscenti, Fresh Art promotes and supports public access and awareness of the arts through a free digital archive. The podcast brings you informed, balanced, and diverse stories through the lens of today's art, film and architecture. Extending to public talks, workshops, residencies and educational resources, Fresh Art engages with cultural communities at the center and fringe of art scenes around the world.

### Research Guide: The Art of Capitalism Issue 5 | 2020

Based on episode "**The Art of Capitalism**"  
Original publication date: August 6, 2018

Featuring original content from "**Occupy Museums on Artists and Debt**"  
Original publication date: March 16, 2017; Sound Editor: Guney Ozsan

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Published 2020  
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# introduction

Market collapse, toilet paper hoarding, skyrocketing unemployment, unpaid rents, and an improvised work-from-home culture: this is the new face of free market capitalism across much of the developed world in Spring 2020. Even before the havoc of COVID-19, the global 21st-century economy was marred by trade wars, housing shortages, burgeoning personal debt, exploitative outsourcing, and increasingly stratified wealth. What does art have to say about our careening global economy? In abandoned bank buildings, failed urban development projects, and public squares, we discover artists and their communities in the U.S., Western Europe, South America, and Greece taking on the challenge—as whistleblowers, catalyts, educators, money makers, evangelicals, and documentarians.

In this **Fresh Art International** Research Guide, we delve into “**The Art of Capitalism**,” a 60-minute segment originally released in 2018. The podcast episode brings together the perspectives of artists, curators, and creatives from around the globe. The guide expands on a multifaceted conversation with hyperlinks to information about people, places, events, and art concepts, as well as bios of artists and institutions, a supplementary reading list, discussion questions, and activities to more deeply engage with the content.

Artists Imani Jacqueline Brown and Kenneth Pietrobono face these issues head on, as members of Occupy Museums, a group bringing the economic critiques of Occupy Wall Street to the art world. Mounted as an open-source digital exhibition as well as a physical display at the 2017 Whitney Biennial, their project, *Debtfair*, makes tangible the escalating student debt incurred by expensive arts degrees in the United States. Occupy Museums has left a lasting mark on the culture and tenor of the Whitney Biennial: at the 2019 biennial, the group Decolonize This Place mounted a successful protest leading to **the resignation of Warren Kanders** (the owner of a company that manufactures tear gas and other military gear) from the Whitney Museum of American Art Board.

Three separate but concurrent “Museums of Capitalism” in Oakland, Berlin, and Brussels draw connections between class, race, environment and trading systems. These museums, founded by political scientists, historians, students, artists, and activists, use site-specific installations and interactive displays to educate their respective communities about the conditions of capitalism and the possibility for more equitable financial systems in the future.

In Santa Fe, New Mexico, curator José Luis Blondet introduces *La Torre de David [The Tower of David]*, a work included in the 2018 SITElines exhibition Casa Tomada at SITE Santa Fe. In Venezuela, Ángela Bonadies and Juan José Olavarría documented the complex political machinations surrounding an unfinished highrise bank building occupied by homeless families. Their portrayal of this improvisational community captures both the universal inequities of global capitalism and the fraught socio-political conditions of contemporary Venezuela.



Listen along  
with the episode.



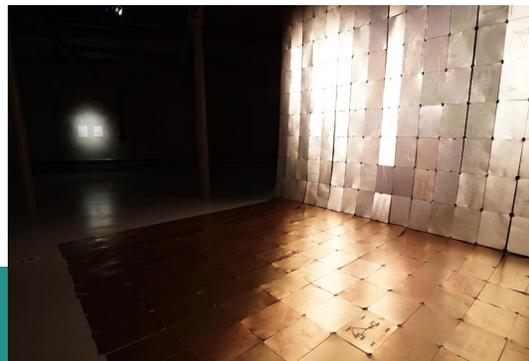
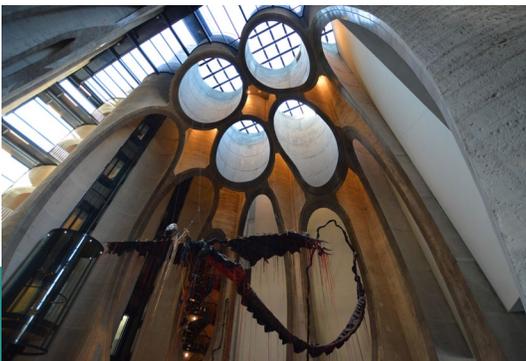
On the mainstreet of a gentrifying London suburb, artist Hilary Powell and musician/filmmaker Dan Edelstyn started their own money printing and banking operation. Don't worry—they're not counterfeiters. Rather, their unique DIY currency is helping to eradicate the burden of local debt and raise awareness of our individual and communal agency within a larger economic system.

In Athens, Greece, we find ourselves on a central shopping street, in the middle of a rally that diverts tourists from mindless consumption. Instigated by the incendiary artist/activist Reverend Billy and his performance collective, the Stop Shopping Choir, this urban intervention blends evangelical preaching and gospel music with a radical anti-capitalist message.

In Spring 2020, many artists, curators, arts institutions, and cultural organizations are facing a new economic reality: one of tenuous remote work, insecure funding, mass layoffs, and postponed or cancelled exhibitions and public art and performance projects. Rather than seeming like voices from another time, the perspectives shared in this episode feel remarkably prescient and increasingly relevant. The issues called out by these pioneering artists and activists, including overconsumption, student debt, predatory lending, affordable housing, and fiscal and environmental sustainability are more urgent than ever.

Will you take up Reverend Billy's tireless call for economic and environmental justice? Join us online, in museums, galleries, and out on the streets as we consider the relationship between art and global capitalism. In a moment when the future of funding for culture and the arts has never felt less certain, let our Research Guide to "The Art of Capitalism" inspire your own creative practice and activism—for now, in the safety of your home, if you are fortunate to have one.

Sarah Rovang  
Publications Editor



Want to learn more about how museums and galleries are reusing the historical spaces of industrial capitalism as innovative venues for contemporary art and design? Read Publications Editor Sarah Rovang's Fresh VUE "[Art and Industrial Space: Siting the Contemporary.](#)"

Left: Lobby of Zeitz Museum of Contemporary African Art, Cape Town, South Africa. Right: Artist Theresa Traore Dahlberg's exhibition *In the Wake of Shifts and Memory* at Färgfabriken, Stockholm, Sweden. Source of Images: Sarah Rovang, 2018-2019.

# special COVID-19 acknowledgement

COVID-19 and the mandate for social distancing have altered the way that creators from around the globe make and share their work. While it remains to be seen how these changes will affect the art world in the long run, this guide provides critical information and inspiration during this difficult time. We designed this publication for creative thinkers, makers, educators, and learners across fields who seek the challenge of complex conversations around issues and ideas, art and culture.

With stock markets plummeting and many cultural workers currently unemployed or underemployed, there has never been a better moment to open a frank dialogue about the relationship between art and capitalism. Museums are laying off workers. Arts organizations and publications are struggling to secure funding. Various private and government **relief programs** are emerging to keep these vital institutions afloat, but will they be enough? Who will step up to acknowledge and uphold the tremendous value of art (both morally and monetarily) to society? This guide invites you to engage these thorny topics alongside inspiring individuals and collectives that have wrestled with these issues for years.

Produced in Spring 2020, this guide is designed to be used for individual study or research and as part of remote curricula while in-classroom learning has been suspended in many countries across the world. All of the opportunities for sparking discussion and creation can take place in the digital realm and with no in-person interaction required. Several of the educational elements directly address the relationship of COVID-19 and creativity.

## Get Informed

**The Coronavirus Outbreak**, free (no paywall) coverage on *The New York Times*  
**A Daily Report on How COVID-19 Is Impacting the Art World**, Valentina Di Liscia, *Hyperallergic*

## Stay Safe

**How to Practice Social Distancing**, Isaac Chotiner, *The New Yorker*  
**How to Wash Your Hands**, *The New York Times*  
**It's Time to Make Your Own Face Mask**, Farhad Manjoo, *The New York Times*

## Pitch In

**How You Can Help During the Coronavirus Outbreak**, Kanyakrit Vongkiatkajorn and Laura Daily, *The Washington Post*  
**Find Your Local Food Bank**, *Feeding America*  
**Coronavirus Tech Handbook**, an open source list for makers  
**Schedule Your Blood Donation with the Red Cross**, *Red Cross*

## Keep Learning

**Resource Guide to Distance Learning**, *Fresh Art International*  
**Art Resources During the COVID-19 Pandemic**, *Southwest Contemporary*  
**Teaching Art Online Under COVID-19**, Kaitlin Pomerantz, *Hyperallergic*  
**Art Education and the Coronavirus (COVID-19)**, *The Art of Education University*  
**Art History Teaching Resources**

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## fresh voices

In the episode that informs and inspires this guide, you hear from the following artists, curators, and creative thinkers. Speakers are listed in the order that they appear:

### Imani Jacqueline Brown

London, UK

Like many of the artists featured in “The Art of Capitalism,” **Imani Jacqueline Brown** makes little distinction between her creative practice, intensive research, and political activism. The New Orleans native has a history of focusing on racial, environmental, and economic justice in Louisiana and the United States more broadly. Dedicated to creating a **#FossilFreeCulture**, she founded the **Fossil Free Fest** (2018) and a **Museum Liberation Movement** (2015) to initiate dialogue about our continued reliance on fossil fuels with music, art, food. During the 2010s, much of her work centered on affordable housing and **urban development** in post-Katrina New Orleans. In this podcast episode, we hear about her work with Occupy Museums, an extension of Occupy Wall Street aimed at a contemporary art world deeply entangled with global capitalism. We hear Brown articulate an intersectional understanding of economic class—one that frames class as part of a larger personal identity that also encompasses race, gender, and sexuality.

**Related Episode: Occupy Museums on Artists and Debt**



Imani Jacqueline Brown, “Home Court Crawl,” Blights Out, 2014. Brown is a cofounder of **Blights Out** (2014-2018), a “collective of artists, activists, and architects who seek to demystify and democratize the system of housing development and expose the policies that lead to gentrification.” Operating in post-Katrina New Orleans, **Blights Out** combatted gentrification and housing policy discrimination through actions such as the “Home Court Crawl!” in this photo. Image source: **Imani Jacqueline Brown**.

### Kenneth Pietrobono

New York City, USA

**Kenneth Pietrobono**’s practice is concerned with the production of knowledge, and the problematic ways that knowledge is applied to intricate and chaotic real-world problems. Born in Miami, Pietrobono brings his expertise in law, property, institutional organization, and system analysis to bear on his work with Occupy Museums. In a 2018 email exchange with his Occupy Museums collaborator Imani Jacqueline Brown published in the online publication **Art Practical**, he discusses the interrelated problems of culturally-induced ignorance (called agnotology) and of intentionally complex systems that inhibit wider public understanding. Looking at these phenomena in tandem, the artist questions why many of the major achievements and landmark movements of the past ten years did not spark a real “remedy” or lasting change. His work attempts to fundamentally reshape the structure of our shared political language, reworking the vocabulary and syntax from the ground up.

**Related Episode: Occupy Museums on Artists and Debt**

## Timothy Furstnau

Oakland, CA, USA

A writer, curator, and artist, Timothy Furstnau is half of the collaborative studio FICTILIS, along with artist and musician Andrea Steves. Furstnau frequently engages institutional verbiage and corporate culture to expose the use and misuse of language within those social structures. Working across print and media, his interventions disrupt the text embedded in our everyday lives—writing and language so commonplace that we no longer see it. Furstnau’s inquiry extends to museum taxonomies, corporate call centers, storefront signage, theater marquees, and graffiti. He used his background in linguistics and anthropology to great effect at the Museum of Capitalism project in Oakland, California. There, he defamiliarized both the form of a museum, and the capitalist culture in which we are immersed. Although the Museum of Capitalism exhibits a strong activist perspective, showcasing alternatives to capitalism and spotlighting the historic and current injustices of this system, the project also serves an important archival function—recording and preserving material evidence of the late capitalist society we inhabit.



## José Luis Blondet

Los Angeles, CA, USA

José Luis Blondet is a curator, writer, and artist specializing in performance art. He currently teaches Theater History at the California Institute of the Arts. Since 2010, he has been Curator of Special Initiatives at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). Originally from Venezuela, Blondet’s work frequently forefronts Latin American identities and Latinx art. In a [2017 interview](#) with *Frieze*, Blondet described an exhibition he co-curated for the Southern California arts initiative **Pacific Standard Time** entitled *PST: LA/LA*, where each “LA” might stand for either “Los Angeles” or “Latin America.” Blondet expressed his interest in “re-examining strategies of display instead of plumbing the depths of [the artists’] own identity: the works... suggest a meta-display, as if subtly contesting Latin America as a subject.” This productive tension is evident in work that Blondet introduces in the SITE Santa Fe biennial: *La Torre de David [The Tower of David]*, a multimedia photography installation by fellow Venezuelan artists Ángela Bonadies and Juan José Olavarría.

FICTILIS (Timothy Furstnau and Andrea Steves), Museum of Capitalism, Oakland, CA, 2017. This image from the Museum of Capitalism shows Sharon Daniel’s installation *Pledge: SOS*, which paired “interviews with incarcerated people in California with objects manufactured in the prison system.” Drawing on Furstnau’s background, many of the installations featured in the exhibition employed interpretive strategies from anthropology and linguistics. If you’re interested in the intersection of art, capitalism, and prison reform, check out Nicole Fleetwood’s new book, *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration*. Image source: FICTILIS.

## Hilary Powell

Greater London, UK

Artist Hilary Powell describes her practice as “imaginative salvage—recovering hidden histories, reclaiming forgotten techniques, placing value on the overlooked and highlighting and creating the extraordinary in the everyday.” Infusing art with activism, the objects of her “salvage” are frequently the detritus of modern UK history: artifacts and images of capitalism, industrialization, and urbanization. Powell and her partner Dan Edelstyn operate an artistic collaboration known as OPTIMISTIC Foundation (motto: “Another world is possible. Pessimism of the intellect. Optimism of the will.”). The work of the Foundation includes the Bank Job discussed in this episode. Her recent print series, Farewell Rock: The Last Coal Miners of South Wales, makes the decline of British coal mining visceral and personal through close-up portraiture. In addition to printmaking, her individual practice and collaboration with Edelstyn encompasses audiovisual work, performances, creative pop-ups, and workshops. Underscoring a belief in the power and agency of the next generation, OPTIMISTIC Foundation’s initiatives frequently engage children inside and outside the classroom.

**Related Episode:** [The Art of Breaking the Bank](#)

## Dan Edelstyn

Greater London, UK

For musician and filmmaker Dan Edelstyn, the past isn’t something dead and gone—it’s a legacy that lives on, ready to be reanimated through creative storytelling. Whether writing songs for the experimental band **Orchestra of Cardboard** or turning a **building demolition** into an opportunity for community participation, he **believes** that “Each work of art is an act of resistance in this culture that punishes artists and wants to turn everyone’s life into a meaningless muddle.” Taking a hands-on approach to excavating personal history, Edelstyn and Powell recently documented their attempt to **resurrect Edelstyn’s Russian family’s** vodka empire, using his grandmother’s diary as both historic resource and inspiration. The resulting pseudo-documentary, **How to Re-Establish A Vodka Empire**, was OPTIMISTIC Foundation’s first feature film. Like Powell and Edelstyn’s Bank Job, a premise that might seem like a stunt in concept becomes a poignant mediation on bigger issues such as family history, the Russian Revolution, and ethnic and religious prejudice. Picking up on familiar tropes in filmmaking and music, Edelstyn’s art subverts expectations by using humor not as a bridge to cynical satire or empty irony, but instead to earnest, sustained reflection.

**Related Episode:** [The Art of Breaking the Bank](#)



Hilary Powell and Dan Edelstyn, call to action for *Bank Job*. Image source: [OPTIMISTIC Foundation](#), photo by Tony O'Brien.

## Reverend Billy (William Talen)

New York City, USA

Reverend Billy is a comic preacher character performed by William Talen, the minister of the Church of Stop Shopping. Talen made his debut as Reverend Billy (“a new kind of preacher”) in 1997 outside the Times Square Disney Store in New York City where he declared Mickey Mouse to be the “Antichrist” from his pulpit (apparently, a stolen newspaper distribution box). Since then, Talen has continued to share his anti-capitalist gospel message with the help of his artistic partner and spouse, Savitri D, and the Stop Shopping Choir. In addition to Disney, other corporate targets of Reverend Billy’s evangelical wrath have included Starbucks, Monsanto, and the Tate Modern’s patronage from British Petroleum. Like other activists you’ll hear from in this podcast, Talen and his church are also fighting to end global reliance on fossil fuels. When we meet Reverend Billy and Savitri D in 2018, they are at the Athens & Epidaurus Festival in Syntagma Square with the Stop Shopping Choir, rallying against senseless tourism, overconsumption, and militaristic nationalism.



Reverend Billy and the Stop Shopping Choir, Athens, Greece 2018.  
Image source: Pinelopi Gerasimou.

## take note

“The Art of Capitalism” introduces the following people, places, institutions, histories, and concepts:

\*Denotes voices featured in this episode

### profiles

#### Ángela Bonadies

Venezuela-born artist Ángela Bonadies (based in Madrid, Spain) uses photography to consider the hidden and visible aspects of urban space, memory, and the archive. Along with Juan José Olavarría, Bonadies created *La Torre de David*, an artistic collaboration that documented the occupation of an unfinished bank building in Caracas, Venezuela. This work was named one of the “Best Architecture and Landscape Projects 2011” by the magazine *Polis* and was featured in *DomusWeb* “Best of Architecture 2011.”

#### \*Noah Fischer

A socially-engaged artist and member of the group Occupy Museums, Noah Fischer’s voice can be heard in this episode as part of a performance/demonstration at the 2017 Whitney Biennial. That year, Occupy Museums presented the project titled *Debtfair*. Fischer has continued to organize Occupy Museums exhibitions and events, including *Debtfair Puerto Rico* (2017), *Debtfair New Mexico* (2018), and *Occu-Pie* (2019), a performance at the *Aufstand der Utopien Festival*, Chemnitz, Germany.

#### David Graeber

A Professor of Anthropology at the London School of Economics, David Graeber is also an activist and anti-debt crusader. His 2011 book *Debt: The First 5000 Years* influenced filmmaker Dan Edelstyn in the creation of *Bank Job*. He played an early role in Occupy Wall Street and has used his work to support labor unions, environmental activism, and other causes. His **most recent research** explores the proliferation of meaningless jobs in the global economy.

#### Geoffrey Hodgson

A significant inspiration for the Museum of Capitalism (Oakland, CA), British economist Geoffrey Hodgson is best known for his critique of mainstream economic theory and modern polarized politics. Though Hodgson identifies with progressive and left-leaning values, he believes that the contemporary Left **has lost direction** and should return to its historic position as a “champion of genuine and complete liberty, within a cohesive and caring society.”

#### \*Samuel Hus

**Samuel Hus** is one of the student founders of the Musée du Capitalisme in Belgium. Rather than leading visitors to some preconceived realization or dogmatic takeaway, Hus and his collaborators strive to keep interpretations open. As Hus articulates, “Some of us are socialists, others free-marketers. The visitor must make his own opinion. The museum is open-source.”



Noah Fischer, *Debtfair* at 516 Arts, Albuquerque, November 17-January 26, 2019. Image source: [noahfischer.org](http://noahfischer.org).

## SITE Santa Fe

An anchor of Santa Fe, New Mexico's rapidly developing Railyard district, SITE Santa Fe fosters the work of innovative contemporary artists and challenges the conventions of a traditional gallery experience. Their series of three SITElines exhibitions highlighted art from across the Americas, encouraging a diverse and hemispheric understanding of work coming out of South, Central, and North America. In this podcast, we explore *Casa Tomada*, the final SITElines exhibition (2018), which featured the work of Ángela Bonadies and Juan José Olavarría.

## Juan José Olavarría

Multidisciplinary artist Juan José Olavarría uses art as a form of community activism. Born in Valencia, Venezuela, much of his work comments on the social and economic conditions of his home country, using various media to reveal the challenges faced by contemporary Venezuelans. He collaborated with Ángela Bonadies on *La Torre de David*, a project that documented the occupation of an unfinished bank building in Caracas.

## La Torre de David (The Tower of David)

The subject of documentary films, photography, journalism, and critical writing about late capitalism, Centro Financiero Confinanzas (a.k.a. La Torre de David) is an unfinished, abandoned skyscraper in downtown Caracas, Venezuela. Construction on the tower began in 1990, spurred by the investment of financier David Brillembourg. Progress stalled in 1994, and the building stood empty. In the early 2000s, squatters took up residence on the tower's incomplete floors, largely in response to a housing shortage in Caracas. The squatters were evicted in 2014, and the tower has been empty ever since. Juan José Olavarría and Ángela Bonadies explored and documented the tower while it was occupied during the early 2010s. Curator José Luis Blondet introduces us to their eponymous project.

## Andrew Ross

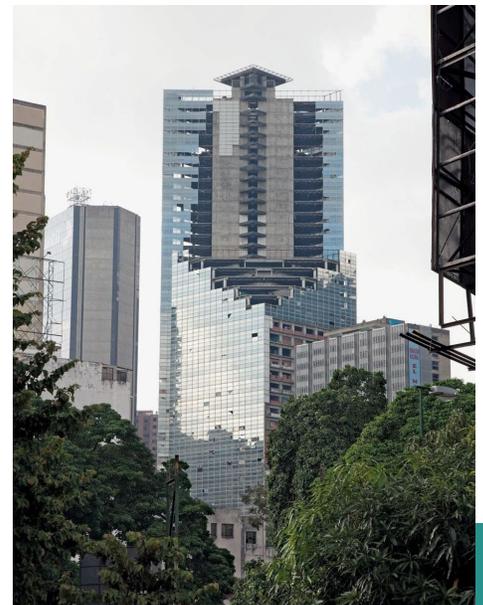
The author of *Creditocracy* (2014), economist Andrew Ross is a major influence on Dan Edelstyn and Hilary Powell's *Bank Job*. In **Creditocracy**, Ross defines the titular term as "1. governance or the holding of power in the interests of a creditor class / 2. a society where access to vital needs is financed through debt." For Ross, many western democracies have transformed into creditocracies, creating a system of widespread "debt bondage" that can only be reversed by radical debt refusal.

## \*Savitri D

The director of Reverend Billy and the Stop Shopping Choir, Savitri D is an activist, artist, and organizer living in New York City. Her practice is fueled by her love of the Earth, and her campaigns have fought against major corporations and corrupt institutions in favor of economic and environmental justice.



SITE Santa Fe. SHoP Architects designed the major building expansion of SITE's exhibition space in 2017. Image source: Mary Robnett, 2020.



Ángela Bonadies/Juan José Olavarría, image from *La Torre de David*, 2011. Image source: DOMUS.

## Andrea Steves

An artist, curator, and producer, Andrea Steves collaborates with Timothy Furstnau under the name FICTILIS. We hear about their work on the Museum of Capitalism in Oakland, CA. As with many of their collaborations, this project explores the relationships between urban development, natural habitats, and economic infrastructures in the Bay Area and beyond—echoing the **definition of their collaboration’s Latin name**: “capable of being molded or changed; earthen.”

## \*Chloé Villain

Chloé Villain is one of the student founders of the Musée du Capitalisme in Belgium. Villain stresses two major principles of the project: that it be educational and accessible to groups including both high school students and investment bankers, and that it be a bit subversive (as in their ambition to occupy the former Brussels stock market building).

## movements

### Bolivarian Revolution

Named for South American independence leader Simón Bolívar (1783-1830), the Bolivarian Revolution began in Venezuela in 1999 under President Hugo Chávez (1954-2013). Chávez’s new program emphasized social welfare programs, nationalism, the use of the military in development programs, and a nationalized economy. Chávez also framed a foreign policy that was explicitly hostile to the United States, aligning his government with Russia. In “The Art of Capitalism,” Venezuelan curator José Luis Blondet references the mixed and troubled legacy of the Bolivarian Revolution, pointing to the “Chávez Vive” (“Chávez Lives”) banner posted on La Torre de David (The Tower of David).



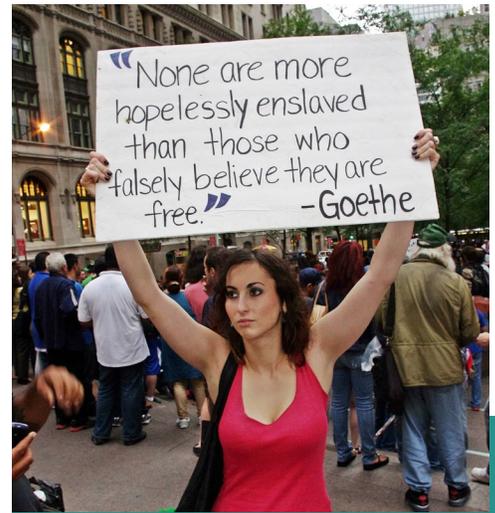
A billboard of Hugo Chávez’s eyes and signature in Guarenas, Venezuela, 2013. Image source: [Wikipedia](#), photo by [Wilfredor](#), CC0 1.0 Universal.

### Occupy Museums

A spinoff of Occupy Wall Street (OWS; read more below), Occupy Museums is a movement dedicated to calling out and combating social and economic injustice within arts and cultural institutions. Founded in October 2011 by the OWS Arts and Culture Working Group in New York City’s Liberty Park, the group’s original call to arms came out of the **manifesto written by Noah Fischer** (featured in this episode). Their **mission statement** explains that, “We occupy museums to reclaim space for meaningful culture by and for the 99%. Art and culture are the soul of the commons. Art is not a luxury!” Finding a close equivalence between “high culture” and “high finance,” Occupy Museums staged a number of radical actions during OWS, occupying major museums in New York to speak out against an art world they perceived as increasingly capitalist, exclusionary, and elitist. After the initial wave of museum occupations during 2011, the group has expanded its actions to include different forms of protest and institutional critique. In 2016, they contributed the project *Debtfair* to the Whitney Biennial. Core Occupy Museum members Imani Brown and Kenneth Pietrobono join us to talk about how the project took shape and how it represented the collective’s ongoing mission.

## Occupy Wall Street

On September 17, 2011, **Occupy Wall Street** (OWS) launched in Zuccotti Park in New York City's financial district. **Adbusters**, a Canadian anti-consumerist non-profit organized the original protest movement and its associated social media accounts. OWS quickly developed into the much larger Occupy Movement, as people across the world found community and solidarity in their identity as "the 99%." Imani Brown of Occupy Museums credits OWS with a resurgence of class consciousness in the United States, as the movement heightened awareness of the extreme stratification of wealth. Riding a wave of economic unrest following the 2008 recession, protesters found common ground in issues such as limited access to affordable housing, the real estate foreclosure system, financial corruption, endemic student debt, and excessive corporate influence on politics. In November 2011, after authorities disbanded the original encampment at Zuccotti Park, the larger Occupy Movement pivoted to occupying other spaces and institutions. Occupy Museums is one example of how the OWS legacy continues to this day. In 2020, Occupy Wall Street threw its support behind **FluMob**, an apolitical coalition dedicated to eradicating the COVID-19 virus.



Occupy Wall Street Protestor in Zuccotti Park, New York City, September 28, 2011. Image source: [Wikipedia](#), photo by [David Shankbone](#), CC BY 3.0.

## Stop Shopping Choir

A key element in Reverend Billy and Savitri D's anti-capitalism crusade, the **Stop Shopping Choir** is a performance group based in New York comprised of "dancers, carpenters, artists, technologists, organizers, scientists, arborists, attorneys, students, teachers, dog walkers, filmmakers, acrobats, healers, writers, photographers, and gardeners." We hear the Stop Shopping Choir in Athens, Greece, musically meditating on the differences between economically and politically disenfranchised migrants and consumerist, capitalist tourists.

## Strike Debt!

With the tagline "You Are Not A Loan," the U.S.-based group **Strike Debt!** educated the public and advocated for debt resistance and refusal. Highlighting the effects of systemic debt as a tool of widespread top-down societal oppression, Strike Debt! employs "direct action, research, education, and the arts" to counter those forces and promote innovative alternatives. Founded in 2012, the group spawned *The Debt Resisters' Operations Manual* and today continues in the form of **Rolling Jubilee** and the **Debt Collective**. Their work provided key inspiration for Hilary Powell and Dan Edelstyn's *Bank Job*.

## Tourists Against Trump Campaign

An initiative of Reverend Billy, Savitri D, and the Stop Shopping Choir, #TouristsAgainstTrump crystallizes a critique of late capitalism, rampant consumerism, and militant nationalism around the 45th president of the United States. Announced at the Athens & Epidaurus Festival in Syntagma Square (where this podcast episode takes us), the movement combines Reverend Billy's framing of contemporary shoppers as perpetual "tourists" in search of fleeting gratification through goods, services, and experiences and his antipathy towards today's megalomaniacal "strongmen" in the U.S. and around the globe.

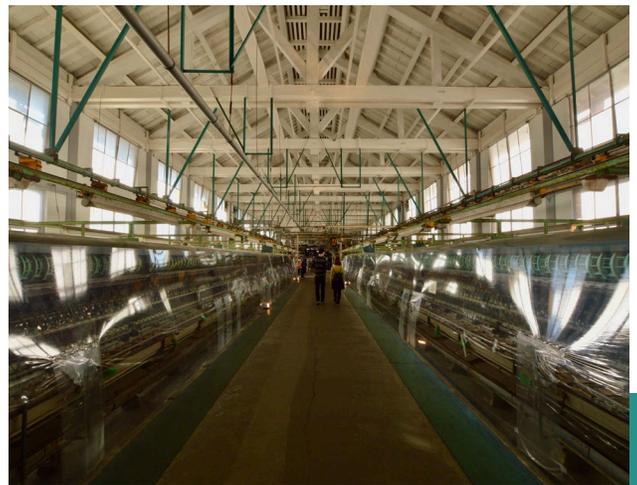
## concepts

### Big Bang

In economic history, the “Big Bang” refers to the October 27, 1986 deregulation of the London Stock Exchange (LSE). Before the “Big Bang,” the LSE had lagged behind the booming New York Stock Exchange and other global markets. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and her Conservative government loosened many restrictions and rules around stock trading to open UK markets to more foreign investment. While this new legislation did lead to the LSE’s rapid growth, it also created problems, particularly for working-class people and prospective homebuyers. Parodying the event’s “Big Bang” epithet, Hilary Powell and Dan Edelstyn’s *Big Bang 2* (2019) blew up a cash-in-transit vehicle to call attention to ongoing consequences of UK’s economic rise in the mid 1980s.

### Capitalism

Both an economic and cultural system, capitalism is characterized by free markets, open competition, accumulation of wealth, and a system of labor in which those who make products are not those who own the means of production. Capitalism in its modern form is associated with the Industrial Revolution, which enabled the mass production of affordable marketable goods and created a culture that valued and encouraged consumption of those goods. Proponents frame it as a “natural” evolutionary system. Applying Darwin’s “survival of the fittest” theory, they contend that capitalism encourages innovation and healthy competition, leading to greater consumer satisfaction and faster technological development. In “The Art of Capitalism,” we meet many critics who argue that this system intensifies economic inequality, alienates workers from their labor, creates systemic debt, and perpetuates mindless consumption. Check out our **Dig Deeper** section below to enhance your understanding of capitalism.



Spinning plant, Tomioka Silk Mill, Gunma Prefecture, Japan. Established in 1872, the silk reeling, or spinning, plant at the Tomioka Silk Mill was part of Japan’s self-conscious attempts to modernize and industrialize various traditional industries. French expert Paul Brunat helped the Japanese adopt many of the techniques that had already revolutionized French silk production, including mechanized production and use of electricity. Image source: Sarah Rovang, 2018.

### Class

The socioeconomic group with which one identifies. Historically, class configurations change over time in response to different economic structures. For instance, the rise of a “middle class” in developed nations is a relatively recent phenomenon. Today, some economists are concerned that the middle class in the United States is **shrinking** as incomes become increasingly stratified. Class is defined by more than income level, however, and frequently becomes inseparable from **certain cultural biases**. Imani Jacqueline Brown and Kenneth Pietrobono discuss how the movement Occupy Wall Street led to a resurgence of class consciousness in the United States.

## Commodification

Critics of capitalism often argue that this financial and cultural system reduces all relationships to those embodied by the market economy, i.e. those between buyers, sellers, and goods. Economists and cultural historians often use the term “commodification” to refer to the treatment of people, nature, and knowledge as objects of trade whose value derives from economic potential rather than an inherent sense of worth external to the capitalist system. In addition to denouncing flagrant and obvious examples (like human trafficking or strip mining), critics of capitalism also point to the way that commodity relations are inextricable from our most mundane interactions. Reverend Billy’s indictment of “tourists,” for instance, suggests that the tourist class commodifies travel experiences, treating experiences as expendable, exchangeable, and collectible—more like cheap souvenirs rather than complex interactions with locals and their cultures. Julian Genten, a cofounder of the **Museum des Kapitalismus** in Berlin, suggests that we can break the ubiquitous cycle of commodification “by not buying everything, trying to share, getting connected with other people, and building relations which are not based on principles of private property, exchange, and domination.”

## Debt abolition

In economics, debt slavery is a system where a class of debtors is caught in a longrunning cycle of debt to those who own the means of production or hold the capital (landowners, factory owners, moneylenders, etc.). A frequently cited historical example is the pattern of tenant farming that took hold in the Southern United States after the Civil War. Though African American farmers were no longer technically slaves, many were caught in an unjust system of peonage where white landowners forced them to pay high rents on land, resulting in perpetual debt and eliminating any opportunity for economic advancement.

In contrast, “debt abolition” is the end of “debt slavery” through the forgiveness or cancellation of debt. Economists like Andrew Ross have argued debt abolition is necessary to end the endless cycle of debt intrinsic to late capitalism. We hear how Hilary Powell and Dan Edelstyn enacted the literal destruction of debt with their *Big Bang 2*, blowing up a cash-in-transit vehicle.



Alke Schmidt, *The Work of Salts*, 2018, commission for Salt’s Mill, part of the series *Wonder and Dread*, oil and acrylic on cotton. Schmidt’s painting, part of the permanent historical exhibition at Salt’s Mill, portrays the global implications of 19th-century wool textile production in the utopian planned community of Saltaire, England. The aggregative reinterpretation of Saltaire places the architectural edifice of Salt’s West Mill at its center, fronted by several Victorian bourgeois women, clad in Salt’s signature fine Alpaca wool. Around the periphery, a palimpsest of images and maps depict the other people and places who contributed to the manufacture of wool in Saltaire, including both South American Alpaca farmers and British factory workers.

## Late Capitalism

Also called late-stage capitalism, this uniquely 20th-century form of the capitalist system is frequently cited for being particularly absurd, opaque, bureaucratic, and alienating. Critics of late capitalism point to the ways in which money and capital are increasingly abstracted from everyday life of working people. The critic Frederic Jameson's book *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) was a foundational text that connected post-industrial, globalized economic conditions directly to cultural production, showing how the forms of art, film, architecture, and more have responded to what Jameson calls the postmodern condition. Jameson's clear articulation of how culture reflects and re-instantiates the economic system can be seen as a precursor for movements like Occupy Museums, which reappropriated the critiques of Occupy Wall Street to fuel an artistic and institutional critique. Though the term has been around since the early 20th century, late capitalism has gained even more cultural currency (no pun intended!) in recent years, as this [article](#) in *The Atlantic* explains.

## Predatory Lending/Debt

As artist Dan Edelstyn points out, debt in a society is not inherently wrong, since we all occasionally borrow and owe to each other. What Edelstyn and others take issue with is the system of predatory lending unique to capitalism. Predatory lending (or predatory debt) is a condition where the terms on a loan make it intentionally difficult for the borrower to pay back. Often, predatory lending is marked by extremely high interest rates; the loan forces borrowers to go deeper and deeper into debt. This issue has been particularly prevalent in home mortgages. Obtuse legal language can also conceal lenders' hidden fees, making it difficult for borrowers to evaluate the risk of taking on any kind of loan. How do you avoid falling into a predatory lender's trap? The site Debt.org has a [helpful list of red flags](#) to watch out for, whether you're applying for a loan, buying a new home, or signing up for a credit card. While we might not all be able to "blow up debt" as in Edelstyn and Powell's *Bank Job*, we can at least take steps to educate and protect ourselves and our communities.



Vincent Van Gogh, *A Pair of Boots*, 1887 (above) and Andy Warhol, *Diamond Dust Shoes (Random)*, 1980 (below). Image sources: [Baltimore Museum of Art](#), The Cone Collection, formed by Dr. Claribel Cone and Miss Etta Cone of Baltimore, Maryland (above) and [Warhol Museum](#) (below). Through a series of comparisons in art, architecture, and film in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Frederic Jameson elucidates the difference between modernism and postmodernism as economic and cultural conditions. His juxtaposition of Van Gogh's oil painting titled *A Pair of Shoes* and Warhol's screen printed *Diamond Dust Shoes* is one such pairing. For Jameson, the Van Gogh image embodies modernity in that it helps us construct a whole material and cultural world outside the painting; it speaks to something beyond itself about the nature and quality of peasant life at the time it was painted. Warhol's image, by contrast, does "not speak to us"—it is self-contained and symbolically silent in a way that Jameson identifies as typically postmodern.

# conversation



## introduction

**Cathy Byrd:** Global trade wars, suffocating student debt, entire countries bankrupt, virtual currencies, and coded financial security systems—what is the role of art and artists in this financial situation? How are artists responding to the evolution of free enterprise? In abandoned bank buildings, failed urban development projects and public squares, we discover artists and their communities in the U.S., Western Europe, South America, and Greece taking on the challenge—as whistleblowers, catalysts, educators, moneymakers, evangelicals, and documentarians. An economic and political system that favors private ownership, capitalism has sparked some profoundly creative pushback.

In 2017, the **Whitney Biennial** exhibition gave voice to an artist collective known as **Occupy Museums**, inviting the group to present *Debtfair*. Their wall-sized installation illustrated extensive research into complex and obscure financial systems that impact artists who pursue their studies in the United States. Our conversation was originally featured in the Fresh Art INTL episode “**Occupy Museums on Arts and Debt**” (published March 16, 2017). Artist organizers **Imani Jacqueline Brown** and **Kenneth Pietrobono** explain the concept behind *Debtfair*.



Occupy Museums, *Debtfair*, Whitney Biennial, New York City, 2017. Image Source: Kenneth Pietrobono.

## conversation



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with the episode.

**Imani Jacqueline Brown:** Occupy Museums was formed in 2011 during **Occupy Wall Street** as part of a call to bring that movement's critique to museums. Occupy Wall Street had been challenging the control of financial interests over our national politics, our national values, our national economy. But financial interests are also controlling our culture(s) and the ways in which people are able to engage with our cultural institutions.

**CB:** What exactly is *Debtfair*?

**Kenneth Pietrobono:** *Debtfair* is a project of Occupy Museums. It is a platform where we invite artists who consider their artwork and their economic reality as connected. The most expensive schools in the United States are art schools. More people are identifying as artists than any other profession in the **U.S. census**. **Student debt** has just hit 1.3 trillion dollars. The common state of the U.S. artist today is an artist in debt. *Debtfair* asks artists, how does your economic reality affect your art?

**CB:** You invited people to share their economic reality with you as the source material for your presentation at the Whitney.

**KP:** Correct. Many artists are familiar with being asked for an **artist statement**, where you describe the materials you use and the inspiration for your work. While we asked those questions of artists, we also asked them how their debt affects their art, what feelings it brings up, what ways their work would be different if they weren't in debt. It's bringing a shared conversation into a community that is disincentivized from talking about class and economy.

***Debtfair* reveals that debt underlies all of our institutions and all of our realities within a capitalist society—debt connects us all.**

*Imani Jacqueline Brown*

**IJB:** Within the “art world,” we often look at work and create work through the lens of our various **identity politics**. But I see economic reality in class as being yet another identity politics. Just as so-called race can cross genders and sexuality can transcend race, **class** is something that factors greatly into the way that one experiences the world. Our society is very hesitant about the idea of class and identifying as a class. That's something that Occupy Wall Street made sure to forefront in its political and economic critique. Occupy Wall Street saw the return of class consciousness and solidarity and we are exploring how that emerges through art. *Debtfair* reveals that debt underlies all of our institutions and all of our realities within a capitalist society—debt connects us all. There is a possibility to leverage that power if we recognize that debt is something that we share.

**CB:** You had more than five hundred artists who participated in your open call and you selected thirty. How will **this installation** look at the Whitney?

**IJB:** We chose thirty artists specifically who are indebted to JP Morgan Chase, Navient, and Puerto Rican institutions like Banco Popular and FirstBank of Puerto Rico. We have them organized on the wall in three bundles.

**KP:** The artists were free to submit any material they wanted. There is no one theme. No artist is being asked to respond to debt in general, though many of them actually do. The work is just so complex—within thirty artists, there’s work that deals with incarceration, gentrification, race, and class. There’s abstraction; there’s immigration; there are colonial histories. It’s an incredibly broad range of aesthetic and conceptual approaches. Every artist who sent in information, whether or not they were physically shown, has a profile on [Debtfair.org](http://Debtfair.org). Every profile will be shown digitally in the museum as a slideshow.

**IJB:** I’m so pleased that *Debtfair* is being realized on this public scale at this time when the public is ready to understand what it means. We are all in this system together and without all of us standing up and saying that we will no longer be a part of these systems of economic and political and racial violence, we won’t be able to overcome.

**CB:** The crisis that you represent in this work is an opportunity for action and for artists and their followers, supporters, and communities to actually engage with these issues.

**IJB:** Certainly. I think what really fueled Occupy was a rediscovery of the force of art; art as a means of engagement.

**CB:** Here’s **Noah Fischer**, another voice of Occupy Museums at the Whitney Museum. The day of the United States’ 2016 presidential inauguration, he sums up this group’s collective commitment.

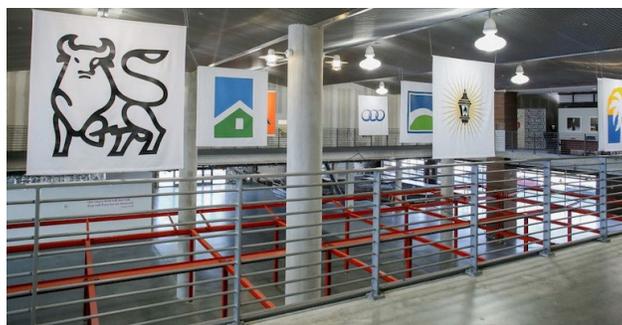
**Noah Fischer:** We value art that is authentic, layered, diverse, and unafraid of delving into the complexity of our shared experiences. We commit to a struggle against the reign of hegemonic power brokers in the arts and in support of a more committed discourse. Museums must move towards greater social justice in order to remain relevant. Thank you. [applause]

**CB:** Occupy Museums is just one example of how artists in the United States are critiquing capitalism. In Oakland, California, the artist duo **Andrea Steves** and **Timothy Furstnau** establish an exhibition venue to explore the history, philosophy, and legacy of capitalism. For their collaborations, Steves and Furstnau go by the name of **Fictilis**, a Latin word that means “capable of being changed” to express their hope to make a difference. In 2017, the **Museum of Capitalism** set the stage for conversations about resistance and alternatives to capitalism, and opportunities to seek justice for its victims. British economist **Geoffrey Hodgson**’s critical view of mainstream economic theory inspires the artists’ response to modern capitalism, a system they believe creates inequality and diminishes financial freedom.

**Timothy Furstnau:** In our 2017 Oakland exhibition we took an intersectional approach, looking at the ways that capitalism influences a lot of other issues around race, gender, class, and environment in the United States, but also globally.



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with the episode.



FICTILIS, Museum of Capitalism, Oakland, CA, 2017.  
Installation “Bankrupt Banks” by Superflex. Image  
Source: FICTILIS.

**Art is really good at getting us to look at things that are right in front of us, but are just too familiar for us to really notice.**

*Timothy Furstnau*



FICTILIS, Museum of Capitalism, Oakland, CA, 2017. “Conversations with King: Capital, Economy, & Politics” an intergenerational conversation organized by artist Kate Haug using the MOC library. Image source: FICTILIS.

**CB:** Why is this subject of capitalism important in the context of the art world?

**TF:** There is a lot we aren’t taught about capitalism. The existence of our project and those in other parts of the world speaks to the need for education and a closer look at capitalism. Art is really good at getting us to look at things that are right in front of us, but are just too familiar for us to really notice. The museum as an institution is capable of creating powerful experiences. There is thinking about capitalism but there’s also feeling capitalism. Exhibitions can create places where we can explore our feelings, and that includes really complicated feelings.

**CB:** You described it as a museum that treats capitalism as a historical phenomenon and looked at it as a memorial to an idea, philosophy, a system.

**TF:** Depending on who you ask, capitalism has either already ended or is in the process of ending or even transforming into something worse.

**CB:** In the process of organizing and developing this idea, you ended up discovering other museum projects that were about capitalism. There’s one in Berlin, a permanent museum, **Museum des Kapitalismus**. And there was the **Musée du Capitalisme** in Brussels.

**TF:** It’s amazing that these three projects popped up at almost the exact same time in three different places.

**CB:** Your venue was the **Jack London Improvement District** in Oakland.

**TF:** Jack London was our non-profit partner—the grant was from the **Emily Hall Tremain Foundation**. We worked with the district to find an empty space in the neighborhood. The location was centrally located in Oakland and really accessible by public transit. It was the former home of **Oakland Port**, which had undergone redevelopment in the 1990s in an attempt to rival San Francisco’s waterfront district, and it never quite worked. They had hundreds of thousands of square feet of vacant commercial space, which was almost a readymade exhibit on capitalist speculation and development.

**CB:** The space itself was part of the exposé, wasn’t it?

**TF:** We had labels on the building itself calling attention to this history and the context of the exhibition. That combined seamlessly with the exhibition labels. There was a wide variety of artifacts and objects and installations and experiences in the museum. It was an open exhibition design which encouraged random pathways through the museum rather than a linear experience. The museum became a magnet for educators and organizers. Even though we were only open for two months, they contacted us and organized meetings, teach-ins, and retreats using the museum space.

**CB:** And Occupy Museums had a role to play in the Museum of Capitalism?

**TF:** A few members of their collective came to Oakland and we did an event that was an offshoot of **their Debtfair work**. We asked artists to donate artifacts of their debt to the museum, almost like a ritual shedding of debt, that would create part of the museum's ongoing collection.

**CB:** What's the most significant takeaway from the Museum of Capitalism?

**TF:** We were able to explore the linkages between social and environmental issues, which often tend to get siloed. Capitalism is a very convenient way to bring those issues together. This project has caused us to more earnestly engage with institutions and the institutions we create as artists and as curators—and to be intentional about how we do that.

**CB:** Two more museums of capitalism have materialized recently in Europe: in Berlin, once a politically and economically divided city, and in Brussels, the financial capital of Europe. In 2013, Julian Genten, a historian, and Janos Rimke, a political scientist, were among those who launched **Museum des Kapitalismus** in Berlin. Their definition of capitalism is a system of dominion that infiltrates a whole society, where every relationship is subordinated to consumerism.

**Julian Genten:** For a lot of people, capitalism seems to be so natural that you don't even realize that it's a system—that it doesn't have to be that way and that it could be changed. With the museum, we want to show how capitalism works, the problems of the system, and what kind of exclusions it produces.

**Janos Rimke:** We consider ourselves a political educational project. We have a lot of political science and history classes come to the museum.

**CB:** What's the experience of capitalism that you bring to the space?

**JG:** It's a rather small museum. Because we are collectively organized non-profit groups we can't afford to rent a huge space. The exhibition is basically divided into three parts. There's one part where we show how capitalism impacts the everyday life of each and every one of us. In the second part, we look at the question of how capitalism actually functions. What are the basic mechanisms of capitalism? What are alternatives to the system? How can it be overcome and what could a different, just society look like?



Interactive display demonstrating the balance of company and worker power, and the resulting effect on wages, Museum des Kapitalismus, Berlin, 2018. Image source: Museum des Kapitalismus.

**What are the basic mechanisms of capitalism? What are alternatives to the system? How can it be overcome and what could a different, just society look like?**

*Julian Genten*

**CB:** Are there interactive displays?

**JG:** A lot of kids from the neighborhood and from the housing project where we are based come to play with the exhibits. Even if you don't understand them, some of the exhibits are very fun to interact with. At the moment we have one permanent exhibition and we have events once or twice a month on specific topics. This week we'll have an event on colonialism and capitalism and how you can depict those topics in museums.

**CB:** What conversations do you hope to spark as a result of the experience of your museum?

**JR:** First, I hope that visitors become aware of how capitalism affects them and where it affects them—how it actually works and functions. And then, I want them to talk about this! Second, I want visitors to think about alternatives, think about what could be different and where it already is different, and talk about how they could participate in that change.

**CB:** What is an alternative to capitalism?

**JG:** Under capitalism, relationships between humans are normally organized as relationships between humans and commodities. One can break these commodity relations, for example, by not buying everything, trying to share, getting connected with other people, and building relations which are not based on principles of private property, exchange, and domination. This is, of course, a very general statement. But I think you have to start with these kinds of general assessments to find more concrete steps.

**CB:** In Belgium, we reach out to **Samuel Hus** and Chloé Villain, current members of the group that's been operating **Musée du Capitalisme** since 2015. Launched by university students pursuing degrees in sociology, engineering, and energy; economics and literature, the collective enterprise involves individuals aged 22 to 36. Their nomadic project has introduced capitalism to more than twenty thousand people so far.

**Samuel Hus:** When most of our collaborators were still at the university, we wanted to create a space for discussion about society, about capitalism, about our economic system. We decided to use the form of a museum, inspired by the **Museum of Communism** in Prague. We were like, why is there a Museum of Communism and not a museum about contemporary society?

**CB:** Why are you interested in capitalism? What motivated your group to get involved in this subject?

**Chloé Villain:** Our generation really is questioning society, and they ask themselves a lot of questions. [Understanding the mechanisms of] Capitalism answers a lot of those questions.

**SH:** Now we have an exhibition that moves around. We've been into six different locations in Belgium already.



Installation at Musée du Capitalisme, Brussels, Belgium, 2018. The tag on the phone poses a question to the visitor in French and German, translated as: "What is the relationship between a mobile phone and the Congo?"

**CB:** How are you defining capitalism for your project?

**SH:** We created our own definition to be able to talk around the same topic, and our definition is that capitalism is a system that needs profits; a true private property.

**CB:** Tell me how the museum looks. How do you occupy the space with this conversation?

**SH:** Every space is filled with tools to help people discuss the topic we want to talk about. For example, there is a huge balance scale where people can present their choices and there is a room that makes you feel like you're inside of a bank. There is a whole corridor where you feel claustrophobic because you're surrounded by thousands of objects; to talk about overconsumption. We present things on walls, but also create tools—through everyday objects, we actually talk about the system we live in. Why does capitalism still exist? What are the opportunities of capitalism? What are the hopes of capitalism? Why do we believe in the system? But we counterbalance it with the limits of capitalism. And we end with this question of how can we change it? If you talk about museums, we often talk about objects, we talk about restoration, we talk about preserving history—not only preserving it but sharing it with people. The Museum of Capitalism in Brussels is not really a museum in the conventional terms of a museum. We don't have a fixed collection. We present topics that change.

**We present things on walls, but also create tools—through everyday objects, we actually talk about the system we live in.**

*Samuel Hus*

**CB:** Who are your visitors? Who were the people interested?

**CV:** People from very diverse origins! Loads of high school and college students come because our exhibition is not really understandable for people under sixteen. You need a certain amount of vocabulary and understanding of history. For professors, it's good for their courses because it's a visual way of showing and understanding a very complex subject. We also have a lot of non-profit organizations and people who are learning French. But we also had banks, including a team from a well-known bank, BNP Paribas Fortis Banque—a Belgian bank. We also have people come just out of curiosity.

**CB:** I understand you're looking to find a permanent space.

**CV:** What would be really great is **the ancient bourse**; the old stock exchange.

**CB:** The old stock exchange building is **your next location**?!

**CV:** Yeah, it would be amazing! But it's so political. They want to make a **beer temple** for tourists in Brussels, and we want to be next to this beer temple with our exhibition about capitalism. But the thing is that all the **civil societies in Brussels** (these old but very mobilized non-profit organizations) disagree with this project. So it's not certain that we are moving there. We want to. We hope we can. And for the mayor, it's a way to say, all right, we'll have the Museum of Capitalism. Then we can build this beer temple. We really hope we can get there; it will be very symbolic.



Listen along  
with the episode.

**CB:** Meanwhile, thousands of miles away in Venezuela, we discover an unexpected monument to capitalism: an unfinished high-rise financial center that became home to a disenfranchised community from 2007 to 2014. Two Venezuelan artists, **Ángela Bonadies** and **Juan José Olavarría**, document the story of this community in their project, *La Torre de David*. Curator **José Luis Blondet** invited the artists to display an installation of photographs of the tower in the 2018 biennial exhibition titled *Casa Tomada*, part three of **SITelines: New Perspectives on Art of the Americas**, presented at **SITE Santa Fe**, New Mexico.

**José Luis Blondet:** “*Casa Tomada*” is a well-known short story by Argentinian writer **Julio Cortazar**. It literally means “house taken over.” We thought it was provocative to name the biennial in Spanish, in a foreign language. We were interested in the concerns addressed by Cortazar in that story. The plot is about two siblings who have lived all their lives in this house. Inexplicable, mysterious forces progressively kick them out until they end up on the sidewalk. Then they decide to lock the door so no one will rob them. There’s the paranoia of locking the door when they have lost almost everything, in dialogue with an image of dispossession; of people who have been kicked out of the house where their families have lived for generations. This brought up questions about class, about dispossession, about displacement, about notions of belonging. Who is the guest? Who is the host? Who overstays his or her welcome? That was the premise that we used to start thinking about the dialogue among the artists who we invited for the biennial.

**CB:** I’m very interested in this project, *The Tower of David* [*La Torre de David*]. The “Tower of David” to which they refer was an investor’s dream of a **financial center** that was never completed and which was taken over by a community.

**JLB:** In 1990, construction of the Tower of David funded by investor David Brillembourg began.

From the beginning, it had that title, “The Tower of David,” which sounds like it’s from the Bible’s Old Testament. But Brillembourg died in 1993 and there was a financial crisis at the time. Construction of the tower was halted and the building remained an incomplete skeleton in downtown **Caracas**. It was like that for many years. In 2007, over two hundred families occupied that building. It was **not a spontaneous takeover**, but was commanded by different groups that were active in Caracas, somehow endorsed by the government. They lived on the unfinished floors.

You can see the city of Caracas from the tower in the photographs **Ángela Bonadies** and **Juan José Olavarría** took. But also you will see the conditions of poverty and survival necessary to live in such an inhospitable environment; an unfinished concrete building. And, of course, the tale has the fantastic allure of taking over a bank tower.



Ángela Bonadies and Juan José Olavarría, photograph from *La Torre de David*, Caracas, Venezuela, 2014.

It makes me think of that famous quote from **Bertold Brecht's** *The Threepenny Opera*: “What is the robbing of a bank compared to the founding of the bank.” It’s so powerful to imagine these families taking over a bank instead of a bank taking over the house of a family. But this story, of course, has many more layers. That’s what I find to be really powerful about this project. Ángela Bonadies and Juan José Olavarría tried to talk about that collision, the clashing of social architectures inside the tower. For instance, one of the most iconic photographs of the series shows a sign that was placed in the entrance to the tower. It was a cardboard sign beautifully decorated with flowers where the code of conduct was spelled out: the monthly fees you had to pay; not having visitors stay overnight; kids must be with an adult at all times; no hanging out in the hallways—things like that.

Soon you start realizing this ideal, utopic fantasy of a community of homeless people taking over an unfinished bank also comes with regulation, exclusion, and a very severe code of conduct. There’s a great photograph of the exterior of the tower showing **two large government banners** that say “**Chávez Vive**” [“Chávez is Alive”]. So that complicates that narrative of poor people taking over the tower; it’s also about how the government manipulates this narrative, presenting the tower as a housing solution when it was clearly not a solution.

**CB:** What happened to the building? Who occupies the building today?

**JLB:** No one. It has been empty for a while. These families took over the building in 2007. The artists Ángela and Juan José visited the tower in 2010, and by 2015, the government **evicted the families living in the tower**. China supposedly bought the tower to finish it, but nothing ever happened to that, and the tower is empty now.

**CB:** What is the importance of telling this story?

**JLB:** I’m answering that question as a citizen from Venezuela. There is so much misinformation; there is so much romantic projection over the **Bolivarian Revolution** in Venezuela. It was very easy for people living abroad to connect with this story and immediately romanticize it. Bonadies and Olavarría problematize the story. Their project is always different; they make selections specifically for every installation. Sometimes they add text or drawings. In the *Casa Tomada* version, we have wallpaper with an original real estate presentation drawing for the towers. This contrasts with the photographs of people living inside the tower, trying to tame those wild spaces into something more domestic, more livable.

**It’s so powerful to imagine these families taking over a bank instead of a bank taking over the house of a family.**

*José Luis Blondet*



Ángela Bonadies and Juan José Olavarría, photograph from *La Torre de David*, Caracas, Venezuela, 2014.



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**CB:** The artists have interpreted what they witnessed and recorded of community life within the Tower of David in multiple ways, including a spoken word performance titled *The White Elephant* (*El Elefante Blanco*).

Spoken word performance of *The White Elephant* in English: We watched it for a long time from the outside and pondered its form. [...] We surrounded it. We climbed the slopes of a decadent paradise, where the lower levels and the top levels evoked different and separate eras—from the horizontal with its patio and the sun filtering in from above, to the vertical with the central atrium and the sun that was dominated by a suffocated cage of now broken mirrors.

**JLB:** They wrote a beautiful and strange script for a performance—a fictive conversation between Ángela and Juan José in which they are wondering about the meaning of visiting the tower. Politically, what does it mean for two artists to be there? They are trying to show all the layers that are part of this *La Torre de David* project.

**CB:** Across the Atlantic Ocean, in England, an artist and a filmmaker are wreaking havoc with the capitalist system in their home country. By opening their own bank, printing their own banknotes, and selling the currency to buy up debt in their community, **Hilary Powell** and **Dan Edelstyn** are acting on their ideas about financial value. Their **OPTIMISTIC Foundation** demonstrates what Powell refers to as “pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the will.”



Dan Edelstyn and Hilary Powell inside HSCB. Image Source: Matt Allwright interviews Dan Edelstyn and Hilary Powell for The One Show about their project *Bank Job*, 17 May 2018; photo by: Peter Searle.

**Hilary Powell:** The plan is to put up fifty thousand pounds worth of our banknotes to exchange with pounds and divide the funds in half; twenty-five thousand to the four local causes; the other twenty-five thousand to buy up and abolish one million pounds worth of local **predatory debt**. This is a project where different filmmaking in the arts and the participation in community will come together within this *Bank Job* that we’re doing.

**CB:** So what sparked this *Bank Job*, this whole idea of actually creating and printing your own money?

**Dan Edelstyn:** Yeah, we are **printing our own money** on the faces of notes. We have local heroes replacing Adam Smith, the Queen, and Winston Churchill. So we have Gary, Saira, Steve and Tracey as the heroes on our banknotes. Gary opened a food bank in the area. Saira runs PL84U-AL SUFFA with her entire family, which is a homeless kitchen. Steve opened the Soul Project, which is a youth project, taking kids from some of the most underprivileged areas of **Walthamstow** and giving them positive role models and something to do other than get involved in violence or get caught up in negative behavioral patterns. Finally, Tracey is the headmistress of our children’s school.

**HP:** We're talking to you from our bank, which is **Hoe Street Central Bank**, H.S.C.B. (not H.S.B.C.) on High Street in Walthamstow, which is in northeast London. We've taken over what was the Co-op Bank where we had a rare opportunity to set up our own street-facing money creation act in a location that is good for engaging communities. I suppose the story of why we're doing this begins actually in America, really. [laughs]

**DE:** Yeah, America and a group called **Strike Debt!** They really inspired us because they were buying up and destroying millions of dollars worth of **student** and **medical debt** in America. They've changed their name now to the Debt Collective. **Andrew Ross**, who's a professor at New York University and one of the founding members of Strike Debt!, wrote a wonderful book called **Creditocracy**. He described that book as movement literature around the act of **debt abolition**. Reading that book was very transformative for me as a filmmaker and as an artist. Ross argues that debt is being wrapped around access to all of the social goods and Western democracies were being systematically stripped away and replaced with debt- or **creditocracy**. I didn't have a deep history of economics, and certainly had never really been involved that much in politics either. When I started reading and corresponding with Andrew Ross and also reading **David Graeber**, I began to look at debt in a massively different way. This idea that one should always repay one's debt seems very much the cornerstone of morality. It's even encoded within Christianity that one should "neither a lender nor a borrower be" and that Christ was the redeemer who was "paying off the debts" of humanity. This idea that sin and debt were absolutely the same thing, which is so encoded within our moral DNA, is challenged by these amazing thinkers and writers. So that's the genesis of our bank.

The system whereby money is created across the world is something which leads to systematic inequality, because 97 percent of all money that's in circulation in Britain is created by private banks as interest-bearing loans. What that means is that the more money that's in circulation, the more debt. Since the 1960s in Britain, we've got twenty-five thousand percent more money in circulation over here, which means twenty-five thousand percent more debt at the same time. Most of that debt, about 64 percent of it, is created when banks make loans for mortgages. Because that's a non-productive area in the economy, it inflates the value of houses to the point where it's very difficult for new house buyers to afford a house. Rents go up as well. There's a huge lack of awareness of it. In November 2017, this group called **Positive Money** did a survey of a hundred politicians in Westminster and 85 percent of them didn't know where money comes from. That's why our bank, in a way, is an educational project as well as everything else.

One of the major things we're trying to argue is that the money system itself is leading to this systematic inequality. Encoded within money is an



Hilary Powell and Dan Edelstyn, Hoe Street Central Bank; London, UK, 2018.

invisible force of destruction. What we're trying to create through the bank is a positive form of money based on social value. There's no harm in people having debts between one another. That's normal in any community. It's how we pay one another back effectively—that is the question.

**What we're trying to create through the bank is a positive form of money based on social value. There's no harm in people having debts between one another. That's normal in any community. It's how we pay one another back effectively—that is the question.**

*Dan Edelstyn*

**CB:** What is the experience of your bank? How is the community engaging in this bank?

**HP:** We have a diverse selection of local people working with us, not all of them artists. We wanted to have a real mixture of people with printmaking skills to work on a public production line. Everyone's in their uniforms with green accountancy visors. We've been **screenprinting**, **letterpressing**, **foil blocking**, and **papermaking**. Because it's a street-facing location, people walk past and see money being printed and hung up to dry. People can come in and go on a tour, and through that more tactile making and sharing, start to talk about some of the bigger concepts that this project interrogates and to share knowledge about how money is made, how debt works.

Essentially, it's a community of people making. In the evenings we've had various debates and talks around these themes from other money like cryptocurrencies and local exchange schemes or cooperatives. We've invited key thinkers on debt and money alongside local community people who are also working on those themes, so it's been quite a mixture. It really took off and we didn't know what to expect. We were lucky to have a **Guardian article** come out. And then we had queues down the street of people wanting to exchange their Elizabeth and Winston crown sterling for our currency.

**CB:** What has been the interest of the art world?

**DE:** It's growing; we've sold full sets.

**HP:** The **Victoria and Albert Museum** bought a full set because they have a remit of collecting the art of protest. And then the **Bank of England Museum**, the **Museum of London**, the **Fitzwilliam Museum**. These major institutions have recognized the social value.

**DE:** We're trying to get the **Tate** to accept it. Our next plan is to explode cash in transit vehicles full of all the debt that we're just buying up now, literally to explode it with plastic explosives and call it **Big Bang 2** and then to hang that in the **Turbine Hall** of the **Tate Modern**. I've been tweeting to the Tate asking them if we can use that Turbine Hall for the installation. We're being a little bit provocative in our attempts to bring this into the art world.

**CB:** Let's talk about the film.

**HP:** We started filming in American meetings of Strike Debt! It's been maybe four years of building this. It only became *Bank Job* quite recently when



Hilary Powell and Dan Edelstyn, *Bank Job* cash register. Image Source: OPTIMISTIC Foundation, photo by Tony O'Brien.

we found the bank, when we decided to make these local people into the characters on the notes. It took a long time to persuade people to stand up and be kind of like icons on the notes. So the film itself would contain all of this.

**CB:** I love your description: “An unlikely team, seemingly insurmountable odds, even explosions.”

**DE:** Yeah, that’s the climax. We’re taking our cues from the genre of the heist movie. You’ve probably seen the original *Italian Job* with Michael Caine. There’s a moment in that film where they’re practicing trying to blow up a cash in transit vehicle, which they can then take all the money out of. And they try to blow up just the doors, but they blow up the entire vehicle. And then Michael Caine says...

**HP:** [Imitating Michael Caine] “You’re only supposed to blow the bloody doors off!” [laughter]

**DE:** Hilary did that very well as an Australian [laughter]. So we want to blow up this cash in transit vehicle and we’re going to call it *Big Bang 2*, because *Big Bang One* was 1986 when **Maggie Thatcher** deregulated the city and allowed the city traders to use retail bank money to speculate on the stock market and to make loans to whoever they fancied without worrying about the fractional reserves they held in their vaults, which led to massive price increases in housing around Britain. *Big Bang 2* is the climax of our movie where we’re going to blow up this cash in transit vehicle, blowing up a million pounds of local debt in the back. That’s going to be the heart of our film.

**HP:** There’s lots of films on economics and money and they tend to be quite dry. We’re trying to tackle these big concepts with humor and warmth, stemming out of this community that we’ve built. Hopefully we create a film that pierces the heart of the financial system.



Hilary Powell and Dan Edelstyn, *Big Bang 2*; London, UK, 2018. Image source: OPTIMISTIC Foundation.

**DE:** I heard somewhere that you should never underestimate what a small, determined group of citizens could do. We can change the world if we put our mind to it. So I recruited a team to make it happen.

**CB:** **Reverend Billy**, a New York-based artist/activist, is known for attracting the attention of media and law enforcement officials, too. Fresh Art International met up with Billy in Athens, Greece, where he was appearing in the annual **Athens and Epidaurus Festival**. With his disciples, the Reverend has been preaching against consumerism for nearly two decades, carrying out cash register exorcisms, retail interventions, corporate resistance, and public protests.

**Reverend Billy:** I started this thing with **Savitri**. Her dad is a radical Muslim. My parents are radical Christians—the people who brought you **apartheid** and **Blackwater USA** and so forth. We’re both from that kind of background—very sexist, racist backgrounds. We think that consumerism is

the new big church in the United States and in the West. Shopping is a religion and we want to de-program the shoppers somehow.

**CB:** After a press conference in **Syntagma Square** in front of the **Parliament building**, the group staged a march down the city's main shopping street.

**Savitri D:** We are visitors in this great city, but we are aware of the tensions that exist here. They are alarmingly similar to those in our home city, New York.

**CB:** In Athens, the **Stop Shopping Choir** focused on what many consider a key factor to both the debt crisis and the refugee crisis in present day Greece.

**Savitri D:** Prefigured here is the endgame of capitalism after draining us of our complexity, shadowing us with debt, anxiety, and isolation, and wreaking havoc on the Earth's life systems. Capitalism has nearly completed its project, forcing us into the narrowest of roles, until there are only two kinds of people in the world: tourists and migrants. We live in service to billionaire overlords, as unaware of our servitude as we are of our freedom. Although

both sectors are victimized by capital, the suffering is nothing like equal. A much greater share of the pain is borne by the migrants. Donald Trump is our first target as his presidency is little more than a global brand—more insidious and vapid than any other; more destructive and emblematic of the terrible pressure exerted by capitalism.

[Gospel music sung by the Stop Shopping Choir]

**CB:** The marching choir sang about the similarities and differences between migrants and tourists. While tourists and local shoppers held up their phones to take pictures, some started to dance when they heard the music as they exited large chain stores lingering in the cool streams of air conditioning leaking from the doorways.

**RB:** Trump is the king of consumerism. Everything he sees that he wants, he stamps "Trump" on it and makes it his brand. The evangelical movement in the United

States is the core of his support. We started this thing twenty years ago and we feel like we're right back where we started. Consumerism and militarism, that pretty much wraps up the demographics and the groups of people and economies that are killing the Earth's life system. Tourists—basically people who are just shoppers—have got to recognize that what they're doing is not prosperity. It's not a good economy. It's not helping people. It's not freedom. It's not your nation state. It's not your religion. They've folded everything into consumerism now. And it's a lie.



Listen along  
with the episode.



Reverend Billy and the Stop Shopping Choir; Athens, Greece 2018. Image source: Pinelopi Gerasimou.

**CB:** With the population just under eleven million, Greece expects to welcome nearly thirty million tourists in 2018. Reverend Billy compares Athens to New York, imploring tourists and locals alike to join the cause of Tourists Against Trump to resist the lure of apolitical consumption.

**Consumerism and militarism, that pretty much wraps up the demographics and the groups of people and economies that are killing the Earth's life system.**

*Reverend Billy*

**RB:** They are considered apolitical because they're the ultimate consumers. They turn their destinations into products. There's an old saying that tourists destroy what they seek. We have immigrants and tourists pushed up against each other in Athens and New York City, sharing this upper class/lower class collision. They're all human beings and they are sharing an impossible, deadly apocalyptic season together. They are sharing what we call euphemistically the end of the world, where the major life systems of the Earth are radically changing their signals to us, where our ability to live in this "civilization" is undergoing an extreme change. Mortalities will go way up in both those groups. So what if they were to talk to each other? Here we have these strong men taking over these countries who find that late-stage capitalism fits their militarism really well. The supermall and the fighter plane, they go together really well for Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump. They're making that discovery: "Oh, keep them transfixed, keep them hypnotized. We will arm everybody. We'll take over." The people that might make it a real democracy—people of color, recent arrivals; people who still believe in neighborhoods, in the democratic process—they are criminalized. Now I'm preaching. You don't deserve this.

**CB:** In Athens, Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping ended their rally symbolically, where crowds of tourists and migrants gather each day.

**RB:** They are mixing right here before our very eyes. With the idea that we have, we couldn't be in a better place: Syntagma Square and here in the shadow of the Parthenon.

**RB [on megaphone]:** Ultimately our job is to walk down that street and find a way to solve the hypnosis of shopping, the narcosis of tourism, and I think we got it: music and dancing—yes!

**[Gospel music sung by the Stop Shopping Choir]**

**CB:** This is Fresh Art International. I'm Cathy Byrd. More than a few artists, curators and filmmakers are working to clarify our relationship with capitalism. They expose how financial markets are obscured in bank ledgers and legal frameworks. Artists make those hidden relationships visible, connecting the global system to our daily lives in ways we can feel and understand. These are just a few of the creative projects raising awareness of the impact of capitalism on our lives.

# investigate



# dig deeper

## suggestions for further reading

### defining capitalism

“Capitalism and Socialism,” Crash Course World History #33. [Read](#)

Jim Chappelow, “Capitalism,” *Investopedia*, updated April 6, 2020. [Read](#)

### art and the industrial revolution

Europeana, “Artists and Industrial Revolution: Images of the Changing World,” *Daily Art Magazine*, September 20, 2019. [Read](#)

Art History Project (Obelisk Art), “Industrial Revolution—Timeline of Art.” [Read](#)

Alina Cohen, “Harsh Realities Lurk behind Picturesque Impressionist Masterpieces,” *Artsy.net*, March 7, 2019. [Read](#)

### art, society, and late capitalism

Frederic Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” originally presented as a Whitney Museum Lecture, 1982. [Read](#)

Chuck Mertz and Max Haiven, “Destructive Creativity: Art and Late Capitalism,” transcribed conversation from the September 1, 2018 episode from *This is Hell! Radio* (Chicago). [Read](#)

Peter Osborne, “The Postconceptual Condition: Or, The Cultural Logic of High Capitalism Today,” *Verso Books Blog*, October 25, 2018. [Read](#)

### environments of late capitalism

McMansion Hell. [Read](#)

Kurt Kohlstedt, “Ghost Boxes: Reusing Abandoned Big-Box Superstores Across America,” *99% Invisible*, June 27, 2016. [Read](#)

Carlos Waters, “How IKEA mastered the Gruen effect,” *Vox*, Oct 17, 2018. [Read](#)

### resources for dealing with debt

[Debt.org](#)  
[Studentloanhero.com](#)

### viewpoints on COVID-19 and capitalism

Paul Mason, “Will Coronavirus Signal the End of Capitalism?” Opinion, *Al Jazeera*, April 3, 2020. [Read](#)

Paris Marx, “Coronavirus stimulus and disaster plans reveal cruelty of capitalist and political ‘reality,’” *Opinion*, *NBC News*, March 24, 2020. [Read](#)

“How to Beat Coronavirus Capitalism,” teach in with Naomi Klein, Astra Taylor, and Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, with a musical performance by Lia Rose through Haymarket Books. [Read](#)

# start a conversation

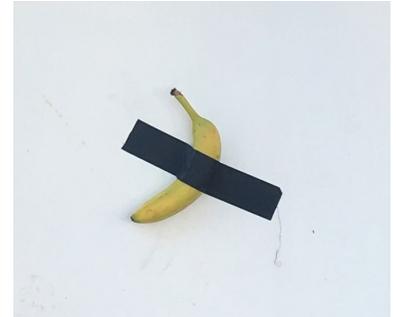
## questions to spark discussion

1. Americans are notoriously bad at talking about money. Despite its prevalence and role in American society, money remains culturally taboo. As [this 2020 article in the \*Atlantic\*](#) suggests, many U.S. residents are more at ease “talking with friends about marital discord, mental health, addiction, race, sex, and politics than money.” How do the U.S.-based projects described in the episode attempt to resist or dismantle this taboo? In what situation would you feel comfortable talking with your friends about your financial or student debt status? If you had the option to speak, write, or make a piece of art (like those on [Debtfair.org](#)) about your finances and/or debt, what personal history would you share?
2. Although art and the free market have had a relationship spanning back centuries, contemporary art has become inextricable from capitalism. Contemporary collectors, museums, and investors jockey to acquire desirable art objects at often outrageous prices. In other words, it’s hard to talk about “art” these days without also talking about the “art market.” What is the value of having an art market? How are artists driving the market? Curators? Writers? Big-name auction houses like Sotheby’s or Christie’s? Financial institutions? Anonymous buyers representing the world’s wealthiest 0.1%? Here are a couple of articles to fuel your meditations on today’s art market and what gives art financial value:

Andrew Frost, “Art takes on capitalism: but what’s at stake?”  
*The Guardian*, August 27, 2013. [Read](#)

Anton Vidokle, “Art without Market, Art without Education: Political Economy of Art,” *e-flux*, Issue #43, March 2013. [Read](#)

3. The artists, curators, and creative thinkers profiled in this episode have taken an overtly antagonistic stance towards capitalism. Artists such as Maurizio Cattelan—remember [the \\$120,000 sale of the banana](#) he taped to [the wall at Art Basel Miami Beach 2019](#)?—seem content to play by the art world’s rules while mocking them. The in-between position has made these artists highly controversial. Are they radical avant-gardes on the front line of a class war, or the worst kind of sell-outs, peddling in high-profile antics rather than actual critique? In recent times, big-name artists like [Damien Hirst](#), [Jeff Koons](#), and even the [seemingly subversive street artist Banksy](#) have drawn fire for pillorying our economic system while profiting from it. What’s your take? Do you have to be a “starving artist” to mount an effective critique of capitalism? Or is it possible to make fun of capitalism while also making money? Who gets to be the winner in this situation?



Above: A copycat banana aping Maurizio Cattelan’s *Comedian* at Art Basel Miami Beach, 2019. Image source: Cathy Byrd, 2019.

Center: Damien Hirst, *For the Love of God*, 2007, platinum, diamonds, and human teeth. Image source: [damienhirst.com](#).

Below: Jeff Koons, *Balloon Dog*, 1994 – 2000. Image source: [jeffkoons.com](#).

4. At the time of this guide's publication (Spring 2020), public health concerns about the global COVID-19 pandemic have led to the closure of museums worldwide. Many exhibitions have been cancelled or postponed, **museum workers have been laid off**, and **many in the creative community are turning to relief programs**. If you are living through this time right now, how do you anticipate COVID-19 will change the relationship between art and capitalism? In what ways do you think this crisis might impact the financial status of artists worldwide? What upsides or positive changes might come out of this crisis? If you are reading this guide after public life has resumed, think about the 'before' and 'after:' how did the global pandemic impact the art market and the everyday lives of artists? What are the most profound and lasting effects on the art world?
  
5. During the Great Depression (1929-1939), the New Deal in the U.S. (programs, public works, financial reforms, and regulations enacted by then President Franklin D. Roosevelt beginning in 1933) significantly altered the relationship of art, capitalism, and government by providing jobs and projects for artists across the country. For a full decade, the federal government became the largest patron of the arts. Artists produced **iconic posters, murals, and other works** for the **Federal Art Project** and other government programs. Some projects allowed artists a significant amount of creative freedom, while others were more strictly controlled in terms of style, content, and theme. In the wake of COVID-19, some cultural commentators **are already drawing parallels** between the New Deal and needs of our current situation. What ideas might we take away from the New Deal and its arts programs of the 1930s? How could national governments subsidize artistic production? What forms might such programs take? Envision the potential upsides and downsides for creators at the center and fringe of today's art market.

# write on

## invitations to respond in writing

### 1. capitalism goes to the movies

Select and watch one of the following films that explore capitalism:

**American Factory** (Steven Bognar, Julia Reichert, 2019)

**Capitalism: A Love Story** (Michael Moore, 2009)

**How to Re-Establish a Vodka Empire** (Dan Edelstyn and Hilary Powell, 2014)

**Saving Capitalism** (Jacob Kornbluth, Sari Gilman, 2017)

**The Queen of Versailles** (Lauren Greenfield, 2012)

**The Wolf of Wall Street** (Martin Scorsese, 2013)

**Too Big to Fail** (Curtis Hanson, 2011)

**Wall Street** (Oliver Stone, 1987)

**Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps** (Oliver Stone, 2010)

Write a review of the film you just watched. HINT: Read some **other movie reviews** written about these films as inspiration before beginning to get a general sense of organization, length, and format. Your review should address the following questions:

- What is the plot or general conceit of the film?
- How was capitalism portrayed?
- What particular aspects of capitalism were being either critiqued or celebrated?
- How did the filmmakers convey their message? Did they use satire, hyperbole, farce, or other techniques to portray capitalism?
- Did the film suggest alternatives to our current capitalist system? If so, what were they?
- How effective was the film at either critiquing or valorizing capitalism? Why? What do you think might have made it more effective?
- How do the issues or topics explored in your film connect with the projects, performances, and exhibitions introduced in “The Art of Capitalism”?



Screenshot from the documentary *American Factory* showing Yuzhu Yang (left) training Lori Cochran at the Fuyao Glass America factory in Dayton, Ohio. Image source: Danni Wang/Netflix, via [npr.org](https://www.npr.org).

## 2. art and improvisational housing

The squatters' takeover of La Torre de David (2010 to 2014) in Caracas, Venezuela, is just one particularly iconic example of the improvised transformation and occupation of tall buildings intended for other uses. Fueled by speculative real estate development and the lack of affordable housing, empty high rise buildings have become home to the homeless in many urban contexts around the globe.

Read more about the political and social history of La Torre de David here:

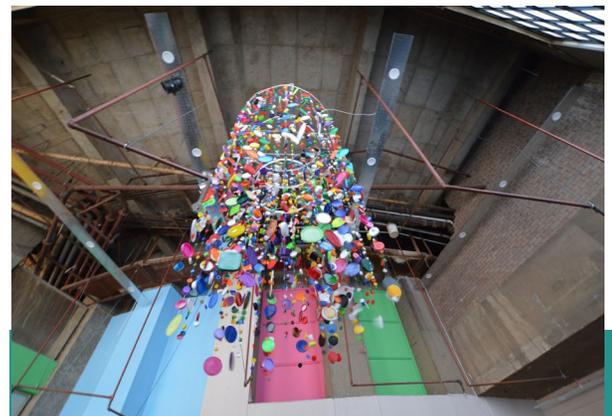
- Jon Lee Anderson, "Slumlord: What has Hugo Chávez wrought in Venezuela?" *The New Yorker*, January 21, 2013. [Read](#)
- Justin Davidson, "Emergency Architecture: Occupy Caracas," *New York Magazine*, October 7, 2011. [Read](#)
- Jesús Fuenmayor, "The Tower of David" (interview with Ángela Bonadies and Juan José Olavarría), *Domus*, April 28, 2011. [Read](#)

Ponte City Tower in Johannesburg, South Africa, offers another example of a skyscraper whose use and occupation has followed an interesting trajectory at the intersection of national politics and global capitalism.

Start by listening and learning about Ponte City Tower here:

- "Ponte City Tower," *99% Invisible*, Episode 277, September 26, 2017. [Read](#)
- Like La Torre de David, Ponte City has also attracted the attention of innovative photographers and documentarians over the course of its storied existence. Photographs taken by [Mikhael Subotzky and Patrick Waterhouse](#) in 2008 are especially striking.
- Finally, read up on the efforts of the organization [Dlala Nje](#), which brings arts, education, and programming to the tower's residents.

Based on what you've heard and read, write a short evaluation of the ways in which Ponte City and La Torre de David are the same or different. How have the political and cultural landscapes of South Africa and Venezuela contributed to their stories of occupation, desertion, and reuse? What role do you think the architecture itself plays in these histories? How have artists related or responded to these two structures? What role has art played in the redevelopment of Ponte City, and how do you think this could inspire similar changes at the still abandoned shell of La Torre de David?



Interior court of Ponte City; Johannesburg, South Africa. A hanging mobile created for Mandela Day in the learning and community center operated by [Dlala Nje](#) inside Ponte City. Source for both images: Sarah Rovang, 2018.

# make it your own

## projects to ignite critical thinking and creativity

### 1. design your own money

In “The Art of Capitalism,” you heard about Hilary Powell and Dan Edelstyn’s *Bank Job*, and their process for designing and creating a new form of currency that could be used to buy up predatory debt. Powell and Edelstyn selected four local heroes to become the faces for their currency.

#### ideation

Who are the heroes in your life and your community? Like the heroes in *Bank Job*, they might be the founders of non-profit organizations or inspirational educators. They might be local politicians or passionate community organizers who are making a difference. Consider, too, unsung heroes in your life. Do you have a neighbor who always takes in your mail while you travel? Maybe the janitorial staff in your workplace or school works long hours and receives little recognition. Perhaps you know a healthcare worker, first responder, grocery store employee, or pharmacist who has taken on significant risk during the COVID-19 crisis...

With your peers, make a list of the four heroes you want to feature on your currency. Choose a denomination that they will each represent.

#### design

The next step is to choose a visual identity for your banknotes. Will they be traditional? Avant garde? Will you use neutral tones or bright colors? Remember, within currency systems there is enough similarity between notes to identify the nation to which they belong, but each note is different enough that you can clearly distinguish it from the others. Check out [this site](#) to get inspiration from historic and contemporary paper money systems. Draw sketches (digitally or on paper) of each of your four banknotes.



“The Steve” and “The Saira,” two of the bank note designs created by Hilary Powell and Dan Edelstyn as part of *Bank Job*. Image source: [Bank Job](#).

## production

How will your new banknotes meet the world? If you are working through this activity as part of a class, you and your classmates might elect to vote on one design to carry forward into production, or you might decide to each produce a small set of unique currency. The process that Powell and Edelstyn used to make their money for *Bank Job* was quite similar to the actual process of printing real money, but for this DIY project, you can get inventive. What methods of small-scale mass production will allow you to quickly make multiple versions of each bank note? Will you copy on a standard home inkjet printer? Make screen prints? Use a laser-cut rubber stamp?

As you plan for production, consider the material qualities that make currency unique. If you have paper money in your wallet right now, get it out and examine it closely. How does it feel? If you fold it, how does it crease? What is the weight of the paper compared to a similarly sized sheet of printer paper or a flyer you might get in the mail? What is the texture like? Let your observations inform the choices you make about the paper and materials you use for your own banknotes.

## 2. a digital museum of capitalism

In “The Art of Capitalism,” we explore three different “Museums of Capitalism.” Go back and listen to that segment of the episode again (begin at 00:10:00) if you need a quick refresher.

For this project, you and your class will curate an online Museum of Capitalism. You will identify major economic challenges facing your local community, and translate those into an educational exhibition that will raise awareness of these issues.

## group brainstorm

While Museums of Capitalism in Oakland, Berlin, and Brussels share certain concerns and ideas, each is rooted in the particular history and culture of its founders. What dimensions of our economic system are having the most significant impact on the community where you live? Are your friends and neighbors struggling with payday loans? Limited access to fresh, healthy food? Escalating credit card debt? Prohibitively high cost of living? Low minimum wage? Endemic student debt? Layoffs during the COVID-19 quarantine? You and your peers may have experienced some of these issues, or know people who have. You may need to do a little digging online and in local newspapers to identify the economic challenges in your community.

## plan team exhibits

Once you have identified three to five major local issues, divide up into “curatorial teams.” Each team will take on one of these issues.

1. **Research your topic.** Start with a broad definition of the term or issue you’re working with. Then research how it is affecting your community.
2. **Hone exhibition content.** As you were researching your issue, what elements of the topic were particularly confusing or unclear? How will you clearly present the issue for your visitors? Work as a team to distill three to five unique takeaways. What is the most important thing you’d like for them to learn from your exhibit?
3. **Develop your exhibition strategy.** Your goal is to help a broad audience understand your economic issue, and to feel invested in it. Think back to the various strategies used in the Museums of Capitalism we introduced. Imagine the effect of encountering a crowded room of objects dedicated to the concept of over-consumption (Brussels), or entering a massive warehouse space left vacant after a portside redevelopment project failed (Oakland). Both these strategies relied on an in-person, bodily response. Since your exhibition will be digital, what are the tools and strategies you can use to invite visitor engagement? (See the “Get Inspired” box on the next page for more ideas)
4. **Design your presentation.** Will you demonstrate your concept with art? Charts and graphs? Writing? Photo documents? Create at least one interactive feature to help audiences connect with your content. Will it be a survey such as the one that generated the informational and artistic elements in *Debtfair*? How might you ask visitors to reflect on and share their own financial experiences? A call-in internet radio show where your audience shares their stories and opinions? What social media tools can you embed in your public programming to spark engagement? How about staging a Facebook or Instagram live session (or both!), or a starting Twitter feed where you share surprising facts and statistics from your research. Perhaps you will invite local artists and experts to join in a web-streaming conversation about the initial and ongoing impact of COVID-19 on the creative economy of your community.

## develop team exhibits

Delegate and divide tasks among group members to make your exhibition content a reality. Who will take on graphic identity? Who has the skills to contribute back-end development of the web experience? The writers in your group can lead a group brainstorm session to create a title and a tagline, and devise the introduction and explanatory text. Create a timeline with due dates for each step of the process. Make a list to confirm individual commitments, and check in frequently to make sure that you are achieving your goals.

## plan and present a “grand opening”

How will your class announce your exhibit to the world? Since you will launch your exhibit in digital space, why not stage your “opening” on an internet platform such as Zoom or Slack so your visitors can meet you and each other? What creative interventions might attract your digital community and get media attention for your project? Review your takeaways from this podcast episode: how did the artists and activists gain visibility for their causes?

## invite audience feedback

Make sure that your audience has a way to communicate with you and let you know how your site is working. Consider adding a short survey to your web platform or soliciting feedback directly from friends who visit your digital exhibition. What are their takeaways? What interactive features and events did your visitors like the most? Reflect on the feedback; what would you and your collaborators do differently next time? What did you learn from the process of research, curation, and realization?



## get inspired

learn how university students are connecting art and culture with today’s issues and ideas

How do you research, develop, and activate an exhibition in the digital realm in one semester? Graduate students in the course “Intro to Curatorial Practices” at OCAD University in Toronto were challenged to do exactly that. Their work culminated in the online exhibition [connection\\_found](#). Listen in on their early development of the project in this episode from [Fresh Art International’s Student Edition: “OCAD University—Curating in the Digital Realm.”](#) What can you learn from their experience? What ideas, tactics, and methods can you borrow from their process?



In “The Art of Capitalism,” we meet artists and their communities confronting a careening global economy—as whistleblowers, catalysts, educators, money makers, evangelicals, and documentarians.

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