

I AM (ALSO) ADAM SMITH'S MOTHER

*Scenes from this world
and the intertwined structures of hidden economies*

by Lise Skou, 2018

Prologue

"Women's unpaid labor in the home has been the pillar upon which the exploitation of the waged workers, "wage slavery", has been built, and the secret of its productivity."

Sivlia Federcic - Caliban and the Witch, 2004

Scene 1
Becoming precarious

Adam Smith: *'It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the baker or the brewer that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own self-interest.*

(The Wealth of Nations, 1776)

Taking a perspective of feminist critique we return to the household of Adam Smith, as he writes his foundational text on the study of contemporary economics *The Wealth of Nations* (1779). Smith's writing took place in the safe space of his mother's house – his domestic needs, cooking, cleaning, etc. were taken care of by her labour.

Note 1

The contradictions inherent in this narrative form the hub of my artistic practice. I am interested in returning to this theoretical oversight – the point where Smith neglected to account for the hidden economy of the household while developing his ideas on free market economy that continues to shape today's economic theories. Shedding light on hidden economies is at the heart of the practical aspects of my projects, as well as of the methods, concepts and theories involved: What kind of work is remunerated, and what is not? What does and does not have value from a socio-economic perspective? And according to what criteria is value attributed? I aim to discuss how focusing on these hidden economies can shape an understanding of a future beyond capitalism – or the possibility of producing new economic narratives and a more nuanced understanding of contemporary economics.

Scene 2

A rainy, spring month in 2015 brought me to London for a conference on feminism and parenting. I stayed with a friend in a part of London I no longer remember the name of. As usual when I travel I felt incredibly lonely and vulnerable, despite the fact that there were both adults and children in the house I was staying in. This is a state that usually provokes feelings of frustration at my position as an artist and the futility of my endless attempts to create something meaningful over the years. I always wonder why these thoughts arise. Is it the loss of identity due to lack of context? Is it the longing for some meaning in art that

suddenly hits me when I'm in a position without identity and have endless time to reflect? Is it the feeling of limitless free time, because in this city that is not my own I do not have the usual domestic labour of childcare, packed lunches, washing up, laundry, taking my children to and from school, tucking them into bed, and making sure their lives hang together, and – not least – taking care of my youngest son, who has suffered from serious separation anxiety for the past two years? Is this freedom not one to be embraced and celebrated?

One morning I went for a walk. It was raining, so I was wearing my raincoat. The rain was so heavy that it ran down my coat onto my trousers, which were soaked through in a matter of minutes. This made me feel even more vulnerable, as if the last trace of my identity had been washed away by the rain. I went into a café for a coffee and croissant. After being cold and wet it felt lovely to sit in a warm, cosy place. The staff seemed happy and comfortable with their working situation. It was a relaxed place, and the menu stuck to the Raw Food and organic, locally sourced trends of recent years.

Note 2

In autumn 2014 I organised a seminar called *Hidden Economies - how to smash capitalism at home in your spare time* in collaboration with American artists Bonnie Fortune and her husband Brett Bloom. Inspired by the work of feminist geographers JK Gibson-Graham (Julie Graham and Katherine Gibson) *Hidden Economies* was a two-day seminar with presentations and workshops focused on hidden economies existing within, alongside and on the edges of capitalism. We were interested in how cultural work can contribute to shedding light on economic difference and to articulating new economic realities. This inspired Bonnie and I to think about art projects as businesses. We were looking for ways to start up a business that would also function as an art project, and at the same time generate an income for us and the other people involved in the project. We wanted to know whether we could somehow set up an art project that was not profit based and at the same time could save us from the precarious economic life that accompanies life as an artist, woman and mother.

Scene 3

Constructing (new) economic narratives

Adam Smith: *Give me that which I want, and you shall have this which you want, is the meaning of every such offer; and it is in this manner that we obtain from one another the far greater part of those good offices which we stand in need of.*

(Adam Smith "The Wealth of Nations" 1776)

Customers came and went while I was there. It seemed as if everyone knew each other. As I sat there in the midst of a community I was not part of it suddenly struck me: I wanted to

have a shop. A shop that could fulfil my need for community, provide a source of income, and at the same time provide a way to explore the possibility of implementing an economic model that J.K. Gibson-Graham describes as functioning beside, alongside or on the edges of capitalism. In other words, the idea was a shop where people not only traded with cash or currency, but also through other kinds of transactions. I dreamt of opening a shop where with others I could create new narratives about how we work, shop, produce, and live together.

The year before I had written a manuscript and produced a reading performance entitled *We all suffer from capitalism, but refuse treatment* based on Marge Piercy's feminist science-fiction novel *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976). In the book we meet the main character Connie, a psychiatric patient who claims to be able to travel in time. She travels to the future universe of Mattapoisett. Here she meets Luciente, who shows her around. In Mattapoisett the nuclear family has been disbanded: children do not have two parents but several co-mothers. They live in children's houses, nobody owns anything, everyday items are made to last, and luxury goods are produced to be perishable. Puzzled, Connie says to Luciente: "You don't get to keep anything for yourself!" To which Luciente replies: "We pass along the pleasure". That was it! That was to form the basis of my shop. We were to pass along the pleasure. I wanted to make a shop with good, traditional machines people could borrow for home production. Like a library of things.

Note 3

I started *Exchange Library* in March 2016 as part of my overall artistic research project *Trade Test Site*. My good friend and colleague Bonnie Fortune was part of it: discussing the project, supporting me, and being involved in as many aspects of it as possible.

Trade Test Site consists of three strands of research: a *Public Program* of production workshops and lectures; *Trade Test Site Imprints* publishing booklets on feminist economies; and the *Exchange Library* – concrete trials and models for economic narratives that differ from the narrative of capitalist hegemony.

Scene 4 *Exchange Library* - A Shop and a Café

Members are business owners; business owners are workers;
workers are financiers; financiers are producers;
producers are shopkeepers; shopkeepers are distributors;
distributors are cleaners, cleaners are managers;
managers are members; members are business owners.

Note 4

The Exchange Library is a small shop in one half of the exhibition space rum46 in the centre of Aarhus, Denmark. The shop is in a constant process of flux with different models of trade and exchange being tried out and discussed.

In the beginning the *Exchange Library* was based on the idea of membership. Initially membership cost 50DKK per month – later I lowered it to 35DKK per month. For that sum members could borrow equipment for home production for free: an apple press, butter churn, fermentation container, flourmill, juice distiller, and much more. Members could either take the equipment home with them, or use it in the small kitchen at the back of the shop.

We also organised *The School for Home Production - Passing on Knowledge, Preserving Memories* – a monthly evening class and communal dinner. Here we taught ourselves and each other how to produce traditional foodstuffs using the recipes and methods of food preservation and storage of earlier generations. One of these was fermented cabbage, which had been a key element of self-sufficiency for former generations in the Nordic countries. We revived these old skills in order to discuss the value of this hidden labour, the hidden economy of producing such consumables in the home, and to link these to Adam Smith's mother and Adam Smith's omission of such labour as of value from a socio-economic perspective. It developed into a small production collective, which also produced goods for the shop.

The shop was open three days a week, and anybody and everybody could come in off the street to trade just like in any other shop. Except in our shop purchases were made via *Direct Exchange* or *Time Banking*. This led to discussions about some of the central themes of the project: How do we establish the value of products? And what is the value of the labour involved when production is based on hidden economies like direct exchange, gifts, home production, home-grown ingredients, self employment, producer cooperatives, non-capitalist processes, etc.

Members could also collect 4 litres of Kombucha a month. We brewed lots of Kombucha during our *School for Home Production* evenings, as well as syrups with different flavours to add to it. Members could also get a Kombucha fungus and learn how to brew their own Kombucha at home. Also open to them was our *Kombucha Fungus Hotel*, where we tended the fungus and brewed Kombucha from it while its 'owner' was travelling or otherwise unable to look after it.

Scene 5

Guy Standing: *... if the precariat can become a class-for-itself, with effective agency, and a force for forging a new 'politics of paradise', a mildly utopian agenda and strategy to be taken up by politicians and what is euphemistically called 'civil society'*

(The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class, 2011)



Photo: *School for Home Production - passing on knowledge; preserving memories.*
The theme of the evening was Cooking with Bacteria

Note 5

The idea of membership arose primarily out of my own need for income. I wanted to make an art project that was non-profit-based, non-exploitative, but that still – in one way or another – could generate the economy necessary for me and all the other members that wanted to work in the shop hosting events, cleaning, serving customers, communication activities, washing up, etc., etc. Everyone could book the hours they wanted to work on a calendar in the shop. Everyone had to do all the work that needed doing, and the pay was the same for everyone regardless of seniority or education. We owned and ran the shop collectively and non-hierarchically. Nobody was below or above anybody else. All work was of equal value. The ideal was that membership fees would generate enough money to

give all of us an economic foundation to live our everyday lives. My goal was to find out if this kind of business model was possible. I wanted to see if an artistic project, the main purpose of which was to discuss the precariat and new economic narratives, could take the form of a business with paid employment for all the staff.

Scene 6
Hidden Economies - Constructing (New) Economic Narratives



Photo: Customer cleaning the floor in the *Exchange Library Shop and Café* in exchange for coffee

Note 6

As well as the shop, I started the *Exchange Café*, where people could get coffee or whatever else was in the café using a barter system. What was available in the café depended on the customers. If, for example, I wanted a cup of coffee, I could exchange it for a jar of jam I had made myself. The jam then entered the goods available in the café that other guests could enjoy when they visited the café. In addition to this kind of Direct

Serving cake in the café, 2017.

Note 7

The idea of membership did not work. Despite a lot of people thinking the idea was interesting, and a lot of people participating in the many production workshops we ran, it was as if something stopped the majority of them joining and getting involved in the way this kind of collective project required. This meant the idea of membership fees generating pay for workers could not be realised. Today the shop mainly runs on my unpaid labour as business owner, worker, producer, shop cleaner, manager, etc. – and as an artist.

I no longer consider the idea of membership to be the driving force behind the shop. The shop and café are open three days a week. People come in off the street and trade what they have with goods produced by other customers in the shop and café. In this way the customers function as a production collective in the city. Time Banking or Direct Exchange are still the fundamental economic models for trade. I see the shop and café as a new public realm for non-monetary-trade: a space for new economic narratives.

Scene 8 WHAT IS WORK?



Sorry, have to go now. My son needs me ...

Epilogue

Guy Standing:

Being precariatized is to be exposed to pressure and experiences, leading to a precariat existence, where you live in the present without a sure identity, or sense of development achieved through work or life choices.

(The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class, 2011)