



Industry as Culture as Industry

In 1990, six artworks (of which four on loan from the nearby Van Abbemuseum) were installed in a then recently-dismantled textile factory to test the capacity of the building as an exhibition space. Works by Rob Birza, Marlene Dumas, Guido Lippens and Marc Mulders were mounted for the occasion on several makeshift walls erected inside the former factory. This one-day trial installation marked the beginning of what became De Pont Museum of Contemporary Art.¹ In the frame of the artist-in-residency at Gastatelier Leo XIII in Tilburg, Timo Demollin presents *Manufactuur*, an exhibition featuring six textile works entitled *Surplus Composition (I–VI)*, each exactly the same size as the artworks featured in De Pont's first test exhibition. Attached to Demollin's works stands this commissioned text; conjointly, they aim to take a position in recent economic shifts, both in Tilburg and beyond. The work signals the development from a home-based cottage manufacturing process to massive industrialization, to a service economy.

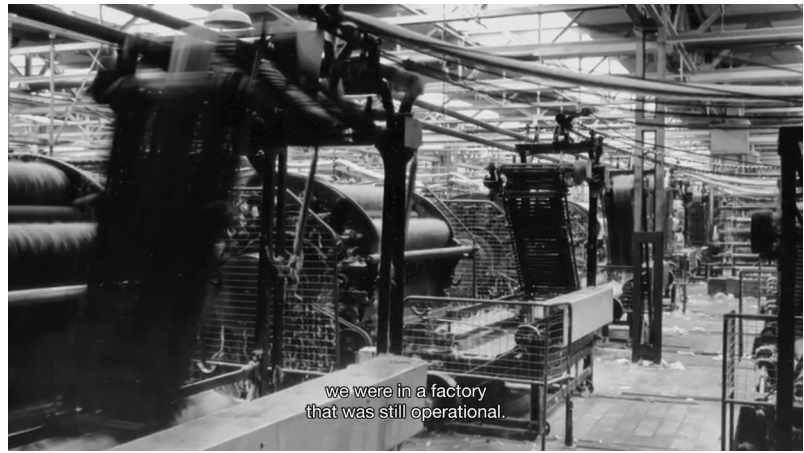
I *Surplus Composition (I–VI)*

The series *Surplus Composition (I–VI)* is made with left-over cloth from the TextielLab, situated around the corner from the residency. Their computer-controlled Jacquard weaving machines produce an extra length of surplus fabric for every operation: in order to keep the tension in between the different batches of textile, dispensable material is woven in between them with residual batches of cotton yarn. This residue is then manually cut off from the actual product, and is usually either thrown away or used as cloth to clean the machines. These left-over textiles, now used to upholster six stretchers, echo the wider industrial history of Tilburg in their fabric and the six works that initiated De Pont Museum in their size and display.

The shapes of the canvasses from De Pont's first exhibition are confronted with the uniform sizes of the surplus resulting from mechanical standardization. The grey, white, and ecru left-over rags all have the same standard 165 cm width, though they vary in length. The artist let a randomizing sorting algorithm shuffle the order of these rags to make one bolt of fabric, which was then cut up according to the size of each of the subsequent works, giving each work its aleatory pattern. Just as labor is nowadays more and more organized by algorithms, also the composition of the works is outsourced. Demollin's decision to finish the textile works at the location of the residency highlights the resemblance between the artist-in-residence and pre-industrial manufacturing, which was performed by artisans in domestic workshops.

The rags handily invoke visual references to a painterly idiom, while—at least on a primary level—they are precisely not about that. The works first and foremost reflect on different types of labor, ranging from manual, to machine, to digitally automated processes. However, on a secondary reading, *Surplus Composition (I–VI)* does position itself in a system of value creation and thus very much invites us to apply a frame of references onto the work. The oil stains as an indication

¹ De Pont recognizes the value of this moment, as photos of that first exhibition are shown at the entrance of the museum and it recently restaged the display as part of its twenty-fifth anniversary exhibition *WeerZien / ReView*.



of blue-collar origin, the fabric itself as an allusion to the *Stoffbilder* of Blinky Palermo, all these possible references are welcomed. As this text will try to show that creative economies are dependent on industrial heritage, an artwork is equally dependent on clues to cultural heritage to acquire meaning and thus value.

II From proto-industrialization to post-Fordist creativity

The origin of the cloth used in *Surplus Composition (I–VI)* is not accidental. TextielLab is an innovative workshop space inside a defunct woolen blanket factory that was reconverted into the TextielMuseum in 1985² and currently describes itself as a “working museum.” As such, the textile museum condenses the transition to a *creative* industry. The website says: “Visitors are welcome to watch designers, artists and architects at work, getting a unique peek into a world that is normally out of sight. By experiencing first-hand how tests are conducted and products are made, you as a visitor will become part of the creative process.”³ After the demise of the Tilburg textile industry in the 1960s, the TextielMuseum managed to regenerate textile production by specializing in technological and digital developments and started to commission its designs from renowned artists and designers. Part of the value is created by having the entire production process on show in a clean space in which remnants of the industrial era remain visible, and in which visitors can wander around the hi-tech machines that have replaced their predecessors.

We need a bit of history to understand this economic transition. Since the late Middle Ages, textiles were produced in Tilburg and the surrounding region by people who worked from their homes, in what is known in Dutch as *wevershuizen*, *weaver houses*. The production here functioned on a system of subcontracting arrangements, the so called putting-out system. Whereas independent artisans worked directly for their clients, these manufacturers worked for drapers, that is, traveling traders whom Marx described as capitalists functioning within a pre-industrial system.⁴ Looking past the industrial era that followed, we can note that the artist’s studio and, especially, the artist-in-residence are eerie throwbacks to the atomized structure that existed prior to the Industrial Revolution. Today, the post-industrial worker is once again working from home without collective organizing, and once again working for little pay.

Locally, the Industrial Revolution accelerated when Tilburg saw the first steam engines arrive to put spinning machines in motion in 1827, and by 1870 the appearance of the mechanical loom pushed textile production decisively away from the domestic domain into the factory.⁵ Since the social structure of the *wevershuizen* was dependent on the Catholic church, and hence less organized than guilds, their fragmentation made it impossible to bargain collectively over their working conditions.

2 The TextielMuseum actually exists since 1958, but it was housed in a villa until its relocation in 1985.

3 www.textielmuseum.nl/en/page/textiellab

4 Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, Volume 1, chapter 14: Division of Labour and Manufacture, section 3, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch14.htm#S4>

5 C.H. Doevendans et al. *Stadsvorm Tilburg, historische ontwikkeling: Een methodologisch morfologisch onderzoek*, (Eindhoven: Technische Universiteit Eindhoven, 1993), p. 94.



The eventual decline of the traditional textile industry towards the second half of the 20th century⁶ obliged Tilburg—along with cities with a similar history such as Manchester, Leeds and Ghent—to diversify its economy. Cities that had once been dependent on heavy industries started to try, among other things, to revitalize factory complexes, to implement a proactive cultural policy, and to enable cultural consumption.⁷ In a strange twist of fate, these waning industrial sites became incubators for “creativity”: “The industrial heritage has become available during post-Fordism as raw material for an emerging cultural economy that is looking for new urban sources of inspiration and creativity.”⁸ Suddenly the artist, the creative worker par excellence, found him or herself at the center of a new economic model.⁹ Within the context of this exhibition, it is important to examine the implications of this development for creative work and, by extension, the creative worker. An artwork can address its complicity in a changing economic system by drawing on a tradition of self-reflexivity, but how are we to describe this process in a text? Without being limited to an analysis of “gentrification”—the only prism through which a hipster can perceive the class-struggle—how exactly is “invisible” symbolic capital subsumed into a wider economy?

III The value of industrial heritage

How does the creative economy enter the “real” economy? Tempting as it may be, it is too easy to look at art only in terms of its financialization, to analyze only how art is used as an asset for financial investors to diversify their portfolios.¹⁰ That path certainly offers a clear explanation of how creative work enters a more concrete economic system, but it is too limited. It misses the system (we could also call it “ecology” or “field,” but system is the least opaque term here) at work *below* the star artists, the surplus value generated by all the non-famous cultural workers who are part of the same economy.

The sociologists Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre offer an ambitious analysis of this creation of value in their recent book *Enrichissement. Une critique de la marchandise*.¹¹ Their theory of an *economy of enrichment* is more concrete than Bourdieu’s notion of “symbolic economy” or Baudrillard’s notion of “signs,” both of which are too vague to capture the fact that nothing remains symbolic once it is subsumed into the exchange of goods. Pressing the symbolic aspect

6 At its prime, 15.000 workers were employed in Tilburg. Subsequently, the textile industry went from employing around 12.000 workers in 1960 to 2000 in 1977; by 1985, the number had dwindled to a mere 1000 workers. See: Lou Keune, *Het wel en wee van Tilburgse oud-textielarbeiders in de jaren 1980–1990* (Tilburg: Gianotten, 1991).

7 Nienke van Boom and Hans Mommaas (eds.), *Comeback Cities, Vernieuwingsstrategieën voor de binnenstad*, (Rotterdam: NAI Uitgevers, 2009) p. 46.

8 Ibid, p. 49 (my translation).

9 Considering the fact that Tilburg is a prime example of an industrial city gone creative, it is ironic that Pascal Gielen’s landmark book, *The Murmuring of the Artistic Multitude* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2009), which analyzes the production of art under post-Fordist conditions, was commissioned by an art academy from Tilburg, the Fontys School of Fine and Performing Arts.

10 For such an analysis, see: “Derivative Days: Notes on Art, Finance, and the Unproductive Forces,” in *Texte zur Kunst*, no. 69, March 2008, pp. 146-153. Reprinted in shorter form in *It’s the Political Economy, Stupid: The Global Financial Crisis in Art and Theory*, eds. Gregory Sholette and Oliver Ressler (London: Pluto Press, 2013), pp. 72-83.

11 Can be translated as *Enrichment: A Critique of the Commodity Form*.



would perpetuate an opposition between a material and a symbolic realm, when in fact anything that enters an economy, a relation of exchange, can always be considered under these two aspects simultaneously. As one commentator notes: “Even if one wishes to distinguish between a ‘material economy’ and ‘immaterial economy’ (or, in the words of Boltanski and Esquerre, between ‘the trade of things’ and ‘the trade of “immaterial” goods’), these two market spheres are inextricably linked.”¹² Boltanski and Esquerre insist on this confluence in an attempt to capture how the production of “immaterial” cultural items (which are thus always partly material) helps to enrich the happy few.

Their book argues that fashion, luxury products and tourism are the engine of a new mode of extraction of value for the very rich. These new sources of wealth are modeled on the economy of the artwork. What they mean is that current wealth is generated less by industrial production and is instead extracted more and more from intangible raw materials, from ideas and concepts: the narratives that give value to things, places, and persons. This doesn’t mean that purely material goods have lost their significance, but that goods that are often characterized as immaterial (art included) have started to constitute a major source of economic profit for the super-rich.¹³ Although this economy is directed primarily at those who are already wealthy, it is also directed at those who act as *if* they were rich—or at least richer than they actually are.¹⁴ Specifically cultural workers are the creators of this new society of enrichment.¹⁵ However, many of those who are equipped with the cultural and symbolic capital necessary to participate in the production of these “immaterial” products lack the economic capital to participate in the profits generated by these markets.

All this cultural energy is aimed at cementing the reputation of what the French call *terroir* and *patrimoine*: the commodification of regions and cultural heritage. The value of art, fashion, tourism, and luxury products (champagne and cognac being the clearest ones, as they literally *name* their respective regions) partly depends on the value assigned to a particular geographical area, to which a brand can link its name and status.¹⁶

To return to the link between a creative economy and the replacement of derelict industrial economies, we can say that the irony is that the former factories have specifically endowed cultural hubs with an interesting value, one that makes them apt for cultural tourism. A former

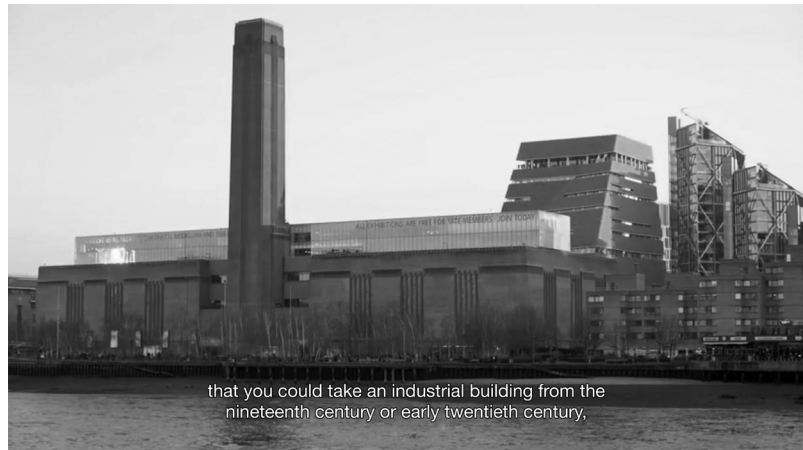
12 Simon Susen, “The Economy of Enrichment: Towards a New Form of Capitalism?” in *Berlin Journal of Critical Theory* Vol. 2, No. 2 (April, 2018): p. 20.

13 A prime example here is Bernard Arnault, the holder of, among other things, champagne and fashion brands under the group LVMH (Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy); he is also at the helm of the Philips Auction House and the Frank Gehry designed Louis Vuitton Foundation in Paris.

14 I’m thinking of the precariat here, who fly to Basel, Kassel, Athens, Venice, etc. without a dime to spend but dressed in Margiela.

15 Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre, *Enrichissement. Une critique de la marchandise*, (Paris: Gallimard, 2017), pp 441-457.

16 This strategy is also a well-known artistic one: site-specific practices obtain value and meaning from their surroundings, just as the hosting institution profits from the work in question. As Institutional Critique has shown, whether the work is critical or not is of no importance to the value created by this dependency.



that you could take an industrial building from the nineteenth century or early twentieth century,

factory has the right coolness as a *patrimoine* for cultural centers to link themselves to.¹⁷ Tilburg's history as a city of textile industry "has become part of its spatial, economic, cultural and social repertoire."¹⁸ For Museum De Pont and the TextielMuseum, it is their industrial history that gives value to their respective art collection and design production.¹⁹ To zoom in on the TextielMuseum, the steam engine that once propelled the entire factory is still running, though now it is electrically powered and runs aimlessly: it does not affect any other operation, and its only function is to set in motion the reminiscence of the factory's past.

IV Critique as added value

The status of text, also this very text, must likewise be considered within a system of value creation. In the crudest sense, the works of *Surplus Composition (I–VI)* are made with left-over cloth, and it is up to the artist's verbal and the critic's textual capacities to maximize their surplus value. From a cynical viewpoint, the quality of this text does not really matter. In an exhibition context, the accompanying text mostly serves as a placeholder: what matters is that it must help the work to circulate.²⁰

In the case of this text, it can be argued that it additionally functions as a necessary element that activates the signification of the work in question. This text is a commission by the artist, whose explicit wish was that the text would investigate the ways in which his exhibition *Manufactuur* references economic systems within which it functions. By questioning systems of value creation, the text adds to the value of the work itself. The text, consequently, is both cynical and generous. It functions as a mere representation of what an explicative text needs to do in an exhibition, and it helps along with the work in question to untangle systems of value creation. Precisely this ambiguity between cynicism and engagement, both of which are, perhaps, present in the work and its text, might be a necessary condition of critique.

17 Was Warhol a prophet when he named his studio *The Factory* during its three iterations, between 1962 and 1984? Manhattan in those years can be seen as a paradigmatic example of gentrification. Manufacturing was closing down, workers were moving out of a de-industrialized area, and artists moved in to produce a thriving artistic scene—until that re-capitalization started to force them to move elsewhere.

18 Nienke van Boom and Hans Mommaas (eds.), *Comeback Cities, Vernieuwingsstrategieën voor de binnenstad*, (Rotterdam: NAi Uitgevers, 2009), p.43 (translation mine).

19 Nicholas Serota, director of Tate from 1988 to 2017, has stated that De Pont has served as a model to open Tate Modern on the former bankside power station: "There were two or three very good examples of institutions that had occupied a former textile building or a former factory building. One which opened in 1982 was in Schaffhausen [Hallen für Neue Kunst], and the second was De Pont. De Pont opened in '92, just at the moment we were thinking about what to do with the Tate, and in 1992-1993 I visited it on more than one occasion. It showed to me, and I think also to my trustees, that you could take an industrial building from the nineteenth century or early twentieth century, and you could make from that building a very fine museum." See: *De Pont. Ruimte voor Kunst*, YouTube video, 58:57, posted by "Museum De Pont," March 29, 2018, youtu.be/vLD-b4jqmyU?t=1375

20 This could be the conclusion of a heated debate that ensued in 2012 with the publication of the essay "International Art English: On the Rise—and the Space—of the Art-world Press Release," by David Levine and Alix Rule, in *Triple Canopy* (Issue 16). The text analyzes art speak—the propensity to improvise nouns ("visuality," the "essayistic," etc.), the use of fashionable jargon, the abuse of prefixes such as para, proto, meta—as a side-effect of the ongoing professionalization of the art world.



In light of Demollin's work, this double position is not a strange one. Demollin does not settle for undertaking a critique of the art system, but goes further to point out his own involvement in that system. It is not just an external critique of the art world, but is always-already also a critique on the position of the artist.²¹ Demollin considers his own role and the reception of the work—which this text is part, enlarging the parameters of art production that are brought into scope. Although this is informed by strategies associated with Institutional Critique, it clearly goes beyond it. To quote Dorothea von Hantelmann, such an analysis is never detached but always engaged: “Unlike with Minimal Art, it is not only a question of the phenomenological conditions of the exhibition space but also of art’s discursive framing. And it is not just about rendering visible, or exhibiting these discursive framings and conventions as in Institutional Critique, but about *operating with them*, i.e. recognizing the potential for construction and change that lies in their usage.”²²

In-situ practices can forcefully extract meaning from a specific context, but become trivial once placed outside of it. As we have seen, inscribing a work in a specific context is a strategy that has been masterfully implemented by industries of fashion, luxury products, and tourism. In this regard, it should be noted that *Surplus Composition (I–VI)* manages to take on its own context: it not only places itself vis-à-vis the conditions of a residency and the local industrial history, but also takes on its discursive framing by notably commissioning this text. It frames its framing. Operating with the cultural settings in which the work is embedded, it opens up the possibility to engage with creative economies and the position of the artist at large, beyond the spatial limitation of an in-situ work.

Laurens Otto ⁱ

21 Andrea Fraser addresses the misreading of Michael Asher's work as “Institutional Critique”: “The clearest and most consistent object of Asher’s critical intervention is not the institution of the museum or gallery but that of artistic practice and the symbolic and material economies in which it exists.” See “Procedural Matters: The Art of Michael Asher,” *Artforum* 46, no.10 (Summer 2008), pp. 374–381. On this same topic, see as well her text ‘From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique’, *Artforum* 44, no.1 (September 2005), pp. 278–286). She writes: “Representations of the ‘art world’ as wholly distinct from the ‘real world,’ like representations of the ‘institution’ as discrete and separate from ‘us,’ serve specific functions in art discourse. They maintain an imaginary distance between the social and economic interests we invest in through our activities and the euphemized artistic, intellectual, and even political ‘interests’ (or disinterests) that provide those activities with content and justify their existence.”

22 Dorothea von Hantelmann, *How to Do Things with Art*, (Zürich: JRP-Ringier, 2010), p. 178 (italics are mine).

ⁱ The author thanks Emiliano Battista for his valuable comments and relentless editing.

* All still frames: *De Pont. Ruimte voor Kunst*, YouTube video, 58:57, posted by “Museum De Pont,” March 29, 2018.

Manufactuur
Timo Demollin

February 22 – February 24, 2019
Gastatelier Leo XIII, Tilburg

Surplus Composition (I–VI), 2019
Jacquard fabric on stretcher frame, six parts

(Surplus Composition (I, Genetiese Heimwee), 130 × 110 cm;
Surplus Composition (II, Het Kwaad is Banaal), 125 × 105 cm;
Surplus Composition (III, I hate Brancusi), 300 × 208 cm;
Surplus Composition (IV, Corpussen op de ateliervloer), 120 × 220 cm;
Surplus Composition (V, Zonder titel), 205 × 165 cm;
Surplus Composition (VI, Zonder titel), 205 × 165 cm)

Industry as Culture as Industry, 2019
Commissioned text

Thanks to:

Hanneke and Frans Bedaux, Rob Birza, Hendrik Driessen, Marlene Dumas, Jantiene van Elk, Robert Glas, Bas van den Hurk, Jan-Pieter Karper, Jules van den Langenberg, Guido Lippens, Ruben Mols, Marc Mulders, Wyatt Niehaus, Laurens Otto, Judith Peskens, De Pont Museum, Domeniek Ruyters, Maria Schnyder, Nicholas Serota and Tate Modern, the helpful machine operators of TextielLab Tilburg, TextielMuseum Tilburg, Katleen Vermeir and Ronny Heiremans, the Van Abbemuseum library staff, Karina de Vries, Vincent Vulsma, my dear Stedelijk Museum bookshop colleagues, the full Gastatelier Leo XIII team and everyone else involved.

Surplus Composition (I–VI) is generously supported by TextielLab Tilburg.