Abstract
Critical new media art is based on research-based art practice. It is both research- and process-oriented, so that the final result is not “completed” works (products) but rather process artifacts. This paper describes the artistic research and development of the art-group “Artistic Bokeh”, which is developing new documentation formats, and conducting experiments about the value of artistic practice and labor.

Keywords
Artistic Research, Bitcoin, Performance, Media Arts, Artistic Bokeh, Bitcoincloud, Community Practice, Artistic Capital

Introduction
“The human gaze has the power of making things precious; though it’s true that they become more costly too.” Ludwig Wittgenstein [1]

How many seconds do you need to stand in front of a work of art, staring either blankly or attentively at it before it has served its function? Before it has served you? How can the attention an artwork receives be measured? Would it be useful to place a little red button next to each work so that the gallery audience could press it and ‘like’ the work?

In 2012, I became aware that a photograph of one my installations had been doing the rounds on Tumblr. It was the first work of mine that was ever exhibited for sale at a commercial gallery. This one never sold. Yet I was strangely satisfied that despite this particular failure in the art market, it found a home online. Being re-blogged 3000 times by teenagers on Tumblr meant that it had been seen. This multi-channel video installation found its biggest audience not as an art object inside the gallery, but outside the artworld, as a still image distributed within the fragmentations of the network society.

No market?
According to Geert Lovink, “there was—and still is—no market [for media art], no galleries, few curators and critics, and no audience.” [2] There is a need for new distributed forms of attention and presentation for art, new markets for the new economies that are emerging, this sharing economy, that conceptual economy or the ever-pervasive attention economy. We find ourselves in an age of capitalism that fuels itself with the effigies of knowledge, creativity, individuality, openness and the social. The artist should be well placed to supply the increasing demand for these resources, and they often do, once they are extracted from the artworld and integrated into the creative industries.

But what of the work of art? What role does it have in this world of Joshua Simon’s neomaterialism? [3] A world where art prices go up: not when the whole of society becomes wealthier, but when income inequality increases. [4] It’s only when the rich get richer and the poor get poorer that the work of art increases in value, at least in quantifiable terms, which are the only terms that seem to matter in this rational realm of the knowledge economy.

I had been working through these ideas in my performance practice with the works “The Old In Out, Dancing in his bedroom (It was a waste of time anyway)” and “Comings and Goings” when I was first approached to participate in the Viennese group Artistic Bokeh. My performance works dealt with the generation of conceptual capital as a form of ‘value adding’ within the knowledge economy. Conceptual capital is the ‘value added’ to the viewer of the work of art, a sort of upgrade to the viewer’s perception of the world, and an increased capacity to manufacture meaning in and from the world. Artistic Bokeh had been exploring similar questions of art and value within the networked society, so I joined the group to continue to develop their experimental practice [5] that slips in and out of the art world, working with them to perform “The Old In Out” for the Austrian Chamber of Labour’s symposium on knowledge work, and most notably continuing the development of BitcoinCloud. [6]
**BitcoinCloud**

Hovering above your head are a few hundred computer fans spinning and glowing, reacting to your movement through the exhibition space. Your presence, your attendance to this artwork, is generating Bitcoin. Therefore your attention to the artwork accords the artwork real monetary value. At your feet are several computers, you hear the noise of the fans power on as more people enter the exhibition space. The cloud of computer fans above you begin to spin and to glow more brightly.

In 2008 Satoshi Nakamoto created Bitcoin, a digital decentralized peer-to-peer payment system. Hidden within the original code was a reference to an article from the The Times: ‘Chancellor on brink of second bailout for bank’. This reference, together with the opening statement of Satoshi’s white paper, [7] outlined how Bitcoin could function as an alternative means of exchange that would not require a centralised financial institution. A bank that is too big to fail. Bitcoin is an experiment that is testing the hypothesis that money can exist without a bank, without a central institution. [8] BitcoinCloud is another experiment that asks how can art exist outside an institution, in this case the art market. The work offers an alternative method to quantifiably measure the value of art.

Bitcoins are limited to 21 million units ever produced, so this first ‘cryptocurrency’ also represents a deflationary currency. New coins are minted through a sort of ‘lottery’, depending on the processing power dedicated to the whole Bitcoin network. Computers are required to solve increasingly difficult cryptographic puzzles (called mining) – which is in turn rewarded with newly generated coins.

BitcoinCloud replicates the principles of the “economics of attention”, by changing the amount of processing power dedicated to its mining rig depending on the number of visitors and the intensity of their interaction with the installation. By tracking the amount of visitors in the exhibition space, BitcoinCloud creates new Bitcoins and increases in value, only if it receives enough attention. These dynamics of attention allow an ambiguous existence: BitcoinCloud is part of the art market at the same time as it is setting itself apart from this market by capitalising on its own economic attention-value. The Bitcoins earned by the attention to BitcoinCloud were then used by Artistic Bokeh in further experiments in art and value, including Blockchain Performance (2012).

**Blockchain Performance**

In 2010 the Tate Modern commissioned Ai Weiwei to produce Sunflower Seeds. The work consisted of 100 million double-burned and hand painted porcelain seeds. In the Chinese city of Jingdezhen, 1,600 people had been working on the project for over two years. Visitors at the Tate stole a great number of these small porcelain objects and started to sell them on both Facebook and eBay. The Tate soon decided to not let visitors near the artwork, although they cited health concerns due to the porcelain dust, rather than art theft. In a Sotheby’s auction in 2011, one hundred kilograms of the Sunflower Seeds sold for $559,394 and in 2012 the Tate purchased eight million seeds (10,000kg and 10% of the total artwork); these purchases created a market and value for the stolen seeds.

In 2013, the exhibition Couriers of Taste at Danson House in the UK exhibited piles of the stolen seeds collected from the nimble fingered from all across the globe. The exhibition included the stories and intentions of the thieves that came into possession of the seeds. The personal narratives demonstrated another means of adding value to the seeds, although not necessarily monetary. The Tate’s purchase of the seeds had originally valued them at £3.50 apiece. Currently the prices for Ai Weiwei’s Sunflower Seeds on eBay range from $0.22 (USD) to $20.00 (USD) apiece, however the authenticity of many of these seeds is questionable due to the emergence of many fakes. In 2012 Artistic Bokeh purchased 20 seeds as part of the work Blockchain Performance.

Blockchain Performance was a cooperation with the virtual community investment bank Spacebank run by Mexican writer and media artist Fran Ilich Morales. Spacebank’s virtual currency is backed by hijacked Ai Weiwei Sunflower Seeds. The Blockchain Performance included transferring 6.8305 Bitcoins mined with the BitcoinCloud to purchase 20 Ai Weiwei Sunflower Seeds to be exhibited alongside other ‘process artefacts’ from Artistic Bokeh’s experiments in the exhibition Documenting Artistic Technology at MuseumsQuartier Vienna, 2013. [10] The transaction between Artistic Bokeh and SpaceBank stays active in the Bitcoin Blockchain and is publicly viewable. The 6.8305 Bitcoins that were used to purchase the 20 Sunflower Seeds from Spacebank were valued at approximately $6,120.00 (USD) at the time of the transaction (26 November 2013); they are currently valued at $3,450.00 (1 September 2014). These 6.8305 Bitcoins were generated from the attention paid to BitcoinCloud during its first exhibition. If the BitcoinCloud had dedicated all of its processing power to mining Bitcoins during this first exhibition, and not only responded to the attention from visitors, it could have generated approximately $450,000 (USD) worth of Bitcoins. The value of the work remains ambiguous, it could be measured by its attention, its exchange value to established artworks within the art market, or it could also be measured by its potential loss of earnings within the Bitcoin market.

Figure 2. Artistic Bokeh, Blockchain Performance, 2012, 20 Ai Weiwei Sunflower Seeds purchased with Bitcoin from Spacebank ©Artistic Bokeh.
Too much money …

Artistic Bokeh continued to experiment with art and value in the recent work “Too much money…” exhibited at MuseumsQuartier Vienna. In cooperation with French collective Societe Realiste and Greek economist Georgios Papadopoulos, we exhibited 4,107 single (US) dollar bills, which were originally converted from Bitcoins mined through the BitcoinCloud. Alongside the money, a print-installation of Societe Realiste’s typographic work “A Proposal for a New Alphabetical Order Based on the Experanto Writing System and Pegged on the Euro Rates” was presented. The work of Artistic Bokeh represents a line of research undertaken to not only question the value of art, but to also work with the materiality of value, here exemplified by the dollar bill. One dollar bills provide the most paper cash you can acquire for your monetary value in Austria (in our case from €3,000) which relates to the fact that storage space is costly too, and Austrian banks will only store bills in foreign currencies that are related to the “key currency”, which is still the US dollar. Too much money… sought to address the ambivalent relationship between art and the market, pointing to the problematics of commodification, alienation and co-optation of creativity. Similarly to Ai Weiwei’s Sunflower Seeds, pieces of the artwork were stolen during its exhibition period: a currently unknown amount of one dollar bills were stolen. In late September 2014, the $4,107 (minus the stolen bills) will be sold as an artwork on eBay. The profit or loss that is made on the material value of the work will demonstrate what artistic labour is worth within the network society.

“Money is of critical importance both for the arts and for society at large, the only problem being that there is simultaneously not enough and too much of it.” Georgios Papadopoulos [11]

![Figure 3. Too much money… ©Artistic Bokeh.](image)

While pulling down Too much money… packing thousands of dollar bills into a supermarket tote bag, feeling the weight of it under my arm while riding home on the subway, it was evident that money is a material, just like any other, that could be manipulated and moulded by an artist. Value is something different though. At any moment we could cash out from this artwork – instead of having a shopping bag of thousands of dollars sitting in the corner of our studio, we could use it to fund a study tour, travel around Europe, visit galleries and museums, look at artworks. But what would be the value of that?

Acknowledgements

This essay was authored with the assistance of Matthias Tarasiewicz of Artistic Bokeh.

References

Books

Author(s) Biography(ies)

Andrew Newman is an artist and researcher based between Sydney and Vienna. His performative art practice poetically utilises methodologies from the communication sciences to examine value construction in contemporary culture. Newman is editor of the journal for research cultures (JRC) and is currently investigating immaterial economics as a PhD candidate at the National Institute for Experimental Arts in Sydney. He has been a director of Runway Journal for Australian Experimental Art since the first online issue Prototype launched in 2013. Newman is head of the ‘Austria Australia Arts Alliance’ which creates an exchange of experimental art positions between Austrian and Australian researchers and artists.