



Locating work in Santiago Sierra's artistic practice

Andrés David Montenegro Rosero

abstract

This paper closely analyses Santiago Sierra's understanding of the relationship between work and freedom in contemporary society. By focusing on a series of works where the artist hired someone to perform a specific activity (often involving labour or a contractual working agreement), this essay explores the location(s) of work in Sierra's artistic practice. In these pieces, the artist delegated or subcontracted a part of the artistic event, either to remain still, hidden inside a box or in a humid, hot compartment in a ship under the sun. At the same time, he remained as a 'director' or 'coordinator', dictating the conditions of possibility for these actions, the ensuing documentation and its posterior commercialisation. This implies that we can find, at least, two moments where work can be located in Santiago Sierra's practice. On one level, work (manual labour associated with a paid wage in a determinate economic context) happens at the moment of the actual performance by the hired employees. At the same time, work can also be located at the moment when the artist records and produces an artwork (as intellectual labour). In this sense, the artist uses the work of others in order to produce his own, blatantly turning the workers from a means to an end. This duality suggests that work can be clearly antithetical to freedom for some in a system of advanced, corporate, capitalism while deceitfully emancipatory for a select few. By carefully examining the complex networks of work displacement in Santiago Sierra's practice, it is my intention to lay bare the premises that support his vision of *work* as a site for constant struggle between freedom and subjugation.

Introduction

On many occasions, Santiago Sierra's pieces have fallen under heavy criticism.¹ Accused of being unethical, exploitative or authoritative, many of his works have shocked both audiences and art critics alike. As exemplified by *245 cm3* (2006), a work that was closed prematurely due to the pressure exerted by the local media, in many cases his constant provocation has even resulted in outright censorship. In this case, the pressure exerted by several media groups led to the eventual cancellation of the show based on the claim that Sierra had built a literal gas chamber in a Synagogue in Germany. Similarly, he's been accused of using and exploiting underprivileged people with the intention to make a profit by selling their effort as artworks and, therefore, endowing it with value beyond the actual cost of materials and actual labour. Under this interpretative frame, Sierra's practice is viewed as nothing else but the unscrupulous exploitation of generally underprivileged situations by a historically privileged subject. This implies a vertical power relation, where the artist is located in a superior subjugating position casting a moral judgement on a specific situation. Under this perspective Sierra's work only reproduces the methodologies of economic exploitation as configured by the current capitalist system. As a result, Sierra's art is viewed as an expendable non critical re-enactment of power, worthy only of derision and cynical commentary, and used only as a counterpoint to laud artistic practices that seek the cohesion of the human tissue or a revolutionary, pseudo-activist engagement with political issues.

One of such tendencies, what became known as relational aesthetics, theorised on 'the extent to which art has become, more immediately and above all else, a matter of its social constitution' (Martin, 2007: 370). Understanding art as social experiments, Nicolas Bourriaud's theory promoted works of art that, in his opinion, 'outlined...hands-on Utopias', based on a desire to 'prepare and announce a future world' (Bourriaud, 1998: 4). The desire to 'model possible universes...', to 'inhabit the world in a better way' (1998: 5), drives Bourriaud's account of artists such as Felix González-Torres, Rirkrit Tiravanija or Carsten Höller. These artistic practices are lauded for offering a range of 'services' or 'models of sociability' which aim at 'fill(ing) in the cracks in the social bond', to '...patiently re-stitch the relational fabric' between individuals (Bourriaud, 1998: 16). Bourriaud's description of several 'relational aesthetics' projects state:

Rirkrit Tiravanija organises a dinner in a collector's home, and leaves him all the ingredients required to make a Thai soup. Philippe Parreno invites a few people to pursue their favourite hobbies on May Day, on a factory assembly line. Vanessa

1 For images of the works discussed and further information see www.santiago-sierra.com.

Beecroft dresses some twenty women in the same way, complete with a red wig, and the visitor merely gets a glimpse of them through the doorway. Maurizio Cattelan feeds rats on 'Bel Paese' cheese and sells them as multiples, or exhibits recently robbed safes. In a Copenhagen square, Jes Brinch and Henrik Plenge Jacobson install an upturned bus that causes a rival riot in the city. Christine Hill works as a check-out assistant in a supermarket, and organises a weekly gym workshop in a gallery. Carsten Höller re-creates the chemical formula of molecules secreted by the human brain when in love, builds an inflatable yacht, and breeds chaffinches with the aim of teaching them a new song. Noritoshi Hirakawa puts a small ad in a newspaper to find a girl to take part in his show. Pierre Huyghe summons people to a casting session, makes a TV transmitter available to the public, and puts a photograph of labourers at work on view just a few yards from the building site. One could add many other names and works to such a list. Anyhow, the liveliest factor that is played out on the chessboard of art has to do with interactive, user-friendly and relational concepts. (Martin, 2007: 370)

Although never mentioning Sierra directly, the ameliorative, palliative and restorative rhetoric that characterises much of Bourriaud's *Relational aesthetics* reverberates through other current accounts of contemporary art². In *Deconstructing installation art*, for example, Graham Coulter-Smith criticises Sierra for 'promulgating what might be called a politics of cynicism' (2009: 276). In his account, Sierra's practice is 'arrogant', 'derisory' and 'pretentious' (2009: 278), treating both public and hired performers as subordinate to the artist's will. Articulating what he calls the 'antithesis of participation', Sierra is criticised for producing *artworks* out of the 'exploitation' of generic others that, in the public circuit of art, act as a 'chic species of ethical credibility' (Coulter-Smith, 2009: 277). Additionally, Sierra's 'contempt' for the viewer is interpreted as a sign of smug, 'contemporary art star' behaviour that is deeply compromised with the institutional frame of the artworld (ibid.).

Similarly, in *Social works*, Shannon Jackson criticises Sierra's practice for being artist-centred and inextricably bound to the artworld. According to her, Sierra's projects rest heavily on the importance of his 'authorial name, one that receives artistic commissions, fees and royalties from an artworld network of biennial, public art commissioning, museum, and gallery-collector systems' (Jackson, 2011: 43). However, Jackson's biggest issue with Sierra's practice is that they eclipse the 'voice' of the hired performers, turning '... "collaboration" into a hiring relationship' that denies the identification of the participants and mentions 'little' of the 'histories of the participants' or even their names (2011: 68). For Jackson, Sierra's anonymisation of the worker, of his hired performers, not only neutralises, instrumentalises and rejects the individuality of his waged labourers, but also reinforces the power of the author and the economic circuit

2 For a more detailed discussion of Bourriaud's disregard of Sierra's work, see Bishop (2004).

that defines it. Grant Kester, in *Conversation pieces*, also criticises Sierra's approach for denying the possibility of 'dialogical exchange' between the participants and the artists. In his view, Sierra's practice offers no ethical or aesthetic critique for it does not seek to initiate or mobilise a new, particular social interaction; on the opposite, in Kester's account, Sierra's works try to 'teach us a lesson', through disruptive, destabilising, quasi-avant-garde gestures that judge the viewer to be ignorant about the realities of the artworld and society at large. By deploying the very same conflicts and contradictions encountered in our contemporary life, Sierra's works seek to 'enlighten' the public, to offer a 'cathartic' moment of socio-economic reality-check (Kester, 2004: 73).

Contrary to these opinions, this paper claims that there is a particular critical edge in Santiago Sierra's artistic practice. In the following pages I will argue that Sierra's work critically engages, not only the artworld, but the imbrication of this system with the larger schema of capital exchange and control. Here, I will argue that his works enact a tactic that could be described as criticality by complicity where the reproduction of economically determined mechanisms is aimed at unmasking the power relations implicit in a specific situation. Accompanied by a very negative, almost pessimistic, understanding of the current state of affairs, Sierra's complicity engages a series of notions fundamental to our times. Issues such as the supposed moral superiority of art, the role of contemporary art in the system of globalised capitalism, the relationship between work and freedom, are constantly addressed by works that focus on the politics of a particular space within a specific context. Under this frame, Sierra's work does not simply reproduce methodologies of exploitation but critically appropriates its procedures to bring to light the conditions – both social, economic and political – that configure a specific situation.

Standing against Bourriaud's advocacy for a 'positive' renegotiation of human relations, against Coulter-Smith belief in 'new-media' art as the solution to the world's problems, against Jackson's 'testimonial' model and against Kester's ameliorative 'dialogical' practice, Sierra does not seek alternative formations to the current state of affairs. One could argue that one implication of Sierra's practice is the *un-stitching* of the social bonds through the extreme re-enactment of its, also extreme, realities. Sierra's work does not seek a new alternative because it believes that under our present conditions it is impossible to conceive of worlds beyond the one we inhabit; not only impossible, but, perhaps, a waste of time. His practice does not point towards a different future but brings us back to one of the main premises of contemporaneity, the promise of *freedom* through *work*. As a result, his practice questions the premises on which many, less 'fatalistic' accounts are based; that is, the *possibility* of freedom and the role that labour, be it material or creative, plays in this process. Sierra's work does not

posit emancipatory networks of participation because it denies that the conditions of possibility permit such imaginations. His work ushers a demand to re-evaluate the founding presupposition that, perversely, link *work* and *freedom*, and simultaneously, to re-evaluate the position that art plays in relation to that discourse.

Delegated labour

One of Sierra's favoured artistic mechanisms is to hire a person, or a group of people and have them perform a determined task. As the art critic Claire Bishop has argued: '... "subcontracting" or "externalising" the work towards badly remunerated workers in developing countries' (2010), the artist has employed people to perform a series of activities which range from physical, manual labour to self-exhibition, invisibilisation and even tattooing.

Paid labor: Manual work

It is important to mention that, although relatively new to mainstream performance art, using others is not a strategy 'original' to Santiago Sierra. Arguably, audience participation is now a given, if not a founding premise, for much of contemporary art. What makes Sierra's practice categorically different is the inclusion of an economic transaction, in the form of a contractual arrangement, as the organising principle for his pieces. In this sense, the artistic event is reduced to an exchange of goods (money) for services (delegated performance). The most significant historical referent for this performative method can be found in *The working class family* (1968-99), by the Argentinian artist Oscar Bony. Conceived for the exhibition *1968 Experiences*, sponsored by the Instituto Torcuato di Tella in Buenos Aires, Bony's piece elicited strong rejection from the public. According to Ana Longoni's description:

The piece featured a worker, his wife, and their ten-year old child sitting on a platform, on public display during the opening times of the show. They were accompanied by a soundtrack the artist created with recordings from sounds of their daily life at home. A sign announced, 'Luis Ricardo Rodríguez, a machinist by profession, is earning twice his normal salary for staying at the exhibit with his wife and child for the duration of the show'. (Longoni, 2008: 92)

Bony's piece was characterised by publicly displaying the private life of an industrial worker. Incorporating the worker's child and his wife (along with the soundtrack), the piece staged a private setting in the public realm. The work was, also, accompanied by a text that described the situation in clear terms and divulged the economic agreement behind the performance. By clarifying that the worker was being paid double as he would have in his regular job, Bony hinted at

the economic disparities that separated the working class family from the elite artistic audiences. At the same time, the duplication of the wage elevated the artistic activity (the public self-exhibition) and suggests that industrial, manual labour is an abject kind of work, at least not as profitable.

Like Bony, Santiago Sierra has also hired people to perform his pieces. In 1999, in Los Angeles, USA, Sierra produced *24 blocks of concrete constantly moved during a day's work by paid workers* (1999, hereafter *24 blocks*). As the title suggests, for this action the artist hired ten workers 'of Mexican or Central American origin..., of the type that usually offer to work in public places in Los Angeles' (Sierra, 2011) and commissioned them to continually displace the 24 forms along the gallery space. Using manual elements, such as crowbars and other metal props, the employees were meant to exert the maximum amount of effort for very little visible results, except for traces in the form of 'damage to the floors and walls of the gallery' (ibid.). After this repetitive action, Sierra decided to only exhibit the marks left by the workers such as food wrappers and drink containers, along with the metal bars assigned for this burdensome task. In works like these, Santiago Sierra retracts the body of the artist to an administrative role, saving it from having to undergo excruciating physical labour. In this case, a contractual economic agreement stipulated that the person had agreed to participate in an exchange of services, regardless of what these might have been. *24 blocks* is different from *Working class family* in two fundamental aspects: contrary to Bony's work, Sierra does not bring an intimate mood into his works. In his pieces, the workers are treated as units, isolated from their families and their personal lives. If, for Bony, the worker had an identity named 'Luis Ricardo Rodríguez', in Sierra's pieces they are devoid of any identification; they are nameless, public service-providers. At the same time, and perhaps even more importantly, Sierra's workers are not overpaid for their labour; they receive the minimum amount as stipulated by local laws. If Bony's piece elevated the artistic task of performing while deprecating industrial work, Sierra's works debases both. In this sense, performing for an artwork (being the work) is equated to working in a construction site; neither forms of labour elevate or emancipate the worker, not socially nor economically. On the contrary, they contribute towards its subjectification and domination. In Sierra's practice, art *work* debases and objectifies the person through its mercantilisation.

There are, however, many similarities between *Working class family* and *24 blocks*. Sierra's practice is characterised by being accompanied by a short text that describes the conditions of possibility for each piece. Similar to the format used by Bony in his label, Sierra makes explicit where the workers came from, how they were hired and how much they received for their work. The text accompanying *184 Peruvian workers* (2007) serves as a perfect example of the

structural and grammatical similarities between Bony's and Sierra's statements. It says: 'The workers were hired for 7000 Chilean pesos – around 15 dollars – and a meal to pose for this photographic series and to be part of a piece performed in the same place' (ibid.). Just like Bony, Sierra clarifies how much exactly he is paying his performers and states the worker's purpose (in Bony's case to 'just be exhibited', in Sierra's to 'pose for a photographic series and to be part of a piece performed in the same place') (ibid.).

Hidden workers: immaterial work

Sierra's strategy of hiding hired performers can be traced back to *8 people paid to remain inside cardboard boxes* (1999, hereafter *8 people*). For this piece, Sierra created eight boxes of residual cardboard and installed them according to a strict grid in the exhibition space (the top floor of a semi-occupied building in an industrial zone of Guatemala City, Guatemala)(Sierra, 2011). Confronted by the viewer, the boxes seemed to be, at first, parodied, precarious minimalist forms. What the public did not know, however, was that Sierra had hired several workers to remain seated inside these cardboard geometries. They had been put inside the boxes prior to the opening of the exhibition to the public, and were meant to remain silent and still for four hours, receiving 100 quetzals, about 9 dollars, per hour (ibid.). In this work, Sierra equated the tedious task of sitting in a still position under excruciating heat to the work carried out by a worker paving the streets or a university professor. In this sense, *8 people*, highlighted silent, excruciating labour as one materialisation of the concept of work.

Unsurprisingly, this work has had to undergo several changes in its program according to the contextual conditions of a particular exhibition space. For its Berlin version, *Workers who cannot be paid, remunerated to remain inside cardboard boxes* (2000, hereafter *Workers who cannot be paid...*), for example, Sierra hired Chechen political exiles in Germany who, because of their migratory status, are not allowed to work according to the country's legislation. With a similar temporality of six weeks and four hours a day, the workers had to collect their wages in secret as working for a salary could be understood as a breach of migratory regulations and could be a legal cause for deportation. Similar to the Guatemala piece, *Workers who cannot be paid...*, highlighted an unproductive task as economically productive labour. At the same time, and contrary to the Guatemala version, the piece also brought to light the economic limitations imposed upon migrant, underprivileged communities as it is articulated in a city like Berlin. By hiding the 'illegal' workers, Sierra underscored their condition as marginalised, secluded and economically disadvantage. Similarly, the New York iteration of the piece also emphasised marginalised sectors of capitalist society. In this case, the majority of the people who answered Sierra's call were women of

either black or Mexican origin. Different from *Workers who cannot be paid...* and *8 people*, for *12 workers paid to remain inside cardboard boxes* (2000, hereafter *12 workers paid*), Sierra had to create a completely new binding agreement because of the strict employment laws specified by the US. In order to avoid ‘formal complaints being made about the working conditions, that is remaining locked up for four consecutive hours’ (Sierra, 2011), Sierra hired these performers as extras, not as direct participants, ‘due to the fact that legislation is permissive in this case’ (ibid.).

Locating work in Santiago Sierra’s practice

In 2001, in Barcelona, Sierra produced *20 workers on a ship’s hold* (2001). The piece was simple; it consisted of a hired cargo boat that picked up 20 passengers at different points along the port. The passengers were to remain hidden in the cargo compartment of the vessel for the duration of their stay. They received 4000 pesetas – about 20 dollars – for three hours of their time. A year before, in *12 workers*, the artist hired several workers, the majority being black women or of Mexican origin, and paid them the minimum wage – 10 dollars an hour – to remain seated inside individual cardboard boxes. For this pieces, the artist delegates or subcontracts a part of the artistic event, either to remain still inside a box or in a humid, hot compartment in a ship under the sun. At the same time, remaining as a ‘director’ or ‘coordinator’, the artist also dictated the conditions of possibility for these actions, the rules of the contract, the ensuing documentation, the art object, and its posterior commercialisation, as an artwork. This implies that we can find, at least, two moments where *work* can be located in Sierra’s practice. On one level, *work* (manual *labour* associated with a paid wage in a determinate economic context) happens at the moment of the actual performance by the hired employees, either the sitting in the boxes or the hiding in the ship. At the same time, *work* can also be located at the moment when the artist records and produces the *artwork* (as intellectual, symbolic *labour*). Work, in this sense, is located in two different subjects, the performers and the artist.

Contrary to many artistic products, where *work* is centralised in the figure of the artist as producer of an artistic object or idea, Sierra’s practice posits a complex network of *work* displacement, not only in physical terms, but also in terms of meaning, where the semantic unit *work* refers to very different actions with different significations and implications. For the hired performers, *work* seems to imply a contractual agreement where a specific fee is exchanged for a service, which, in most cases, is demeaning, humiliating or unproductive. *Line of 30cm tattooed on a remunerated person* (1998), or *A person paid for 360 continuous working hours* (2000), exemplify how *work*, for Santiago Sierra’s performers,

means subjugation justified by an economic transaction, a wage. Freedom, in this scenario, is completely surrendered to the working mechanics of advanced capitalist societies in two ways: in the first place, freedom is denied at the level of opportunity and necessity, which means that the basic conditions of capitalist societies do not provide the conditions of possibility for a true free individual. At the same time, freedom is conditioned by the desires and necessities of the context that surrounds the individual, and in this manner, limited to the expectations and perverse needs of an outside. As Vilela Mascaró argues: 'What he [Sierra] is saying over and over again is that he is able to sell thin-air, bus-rides, pictures of empty buildings, blocks of shit, or gold necklaces because *someone, somewhere* (as the poor scavengers from India) was forced – usually through violent means – to work for a pittance, and someone somewhere else, was willing and able to pay a lot of money for them' (2008a: 23).

For the artist, however, *work* means something different. As demonstrated in the section dealing with his artistic practice, Sierra's role is usually that of a distanced director, not an involved, direct participant. As exemplified by pieces where he subcontracts the main actions (such as the tattooing pieces or the hired group performances), Sierra avoids explicit involvement in the enactment of the piece. This does not mean, however, that he is completely absent from the pieces – quite the contrary, as 245m3 exemplifies, the works develop and abide following his careful instructions. *Work*, in this sense, means an activity that is less physical than moving blocks or being tattooed, for example, and more intellectual or symbolic. Operating in the realm of cultural labour, *work* for Sierra implies much more freedom than for his hired performers. As his pieces demonstrate, it is not him who is hidden at a party or exposed according to the colour of his skin. Instead, he triggers and documents a particular situation remaining tangentially implied (through documentation) but directly involved (by setting up the project).

Work also means differently in terms of economic remuneration. Whereas for the hired performers *work* means a wage that, more or less, corresponds to the socially convened minimum payment for someone's labour, *work*, for Santiago Sierra, implies an enormous economic gain. Operating in the privileged site of the artworld, Sierra's *work* is worth much more than the work of an illegal street vendor in Venice or a political refugee in Germany. Whereas for the hired performers the wage resulting from their work may be enough for their basic sustenance, the artist's pay-cheque (and in this specific case Santiago Sierra's), is much more than the earnings of the actual labourer. Under this perspective, Sierra's *work* has a higher economic value than the manual labour of an unprivileged individual, which also implies a higher status than the workers'. In this sense, *work* is rendered as a means to economic betterment which, in our contemporary capitalist society, also implies individual betterment and freedom.

Sierra's practice articulates two opposing understandings of *work*. On the one hand, *work* implies the individual's direct subjugation to an economic system that fosters and maintains the conditions of possibility that condition its subjectivity. On the other hand, *work* entails the possibility for betterment and for the achievement of some degree of economic emancipation. This duality suggests that *work* can be antithetical to *freedom* in a system of advanced, corporate, capitalism while at the same time emancipating to a select few. Although these perspectives might seem contradictory, their ultimate implications are very similar. The artist's *work* is not an activity that is performed outside a particular framing system, in this case capitalist. As a result, the artist's work is also imbricated in the overarching structure, being subject to its expectations and demarcations. As a result, the symbolic *work* carried out by Sierra is only deceptively liberating as, in the end, it also reproduces mechanisms that subject the artist to the conditions imposed by the system itself. These conditions are expressed through the mechanisms of circulation and reception generated by the system itself that tend to be articulated only according to its interests in an exclusive configuration. As a result, the *work* of the artist is just as subjugated and subjugating as the *work* of the hired performers, regardless of what their actual value, both economic and social, may be. *Work*, therefore, is configured as a site of constant struggle between individual freedom and economic, systemic subjugation where the winner is, unsurprisingly, the established order.

In-visibility

In terms of *work*, it is clear that Sierra's pieces invite the spectator's gaze to oscillate between two contingent understandings of the word. These meanings, and their ensuing implications, are determined by the societal locus occupied by the *workers*. The delegated performers are characterised as underprivileged subjects and, therefore, *work*, in their case, entails a subjugating, demeaning practice. For the artist, however, and given its placement within the elite circle of contemporary art, *work* implies a means for emancipation and personal betterment, albeit the deceitful character of the economic transaction. By not offering a stable site where the audience can successfully recognise where *work* happens, the pieces constantly shift perspectives and in its perpetual movement, render the original sites of *work* invisible. By this I mean that in the constant displacement of *work* from one context to the next, the spectator never fully grasps the existence of a subject(s) that generates the work. In Sierra's pieces, often what ultimately matters is the end product of a particular action, not so much the protagonists of it. In *250cm line tattooed on 6 paid people* (1999), for example, the importance is placed on the tattooed line at the end of the artistic action, not in the stages, or the performers, or even the tattooer. What matters

here is that an actual 250cm line was inscribed in the backs of 6 paid individuals, not the individuals themselves, nor the executioner of the line.

Similarly, in *Workers who cannot be paid...*, or *24 blocks*, the artist also emphasises the 'product' over the sites of its production. In the case of *Workers who cannot be paid...*, the emphasis is placed on the actual hiding of the participants, not on the particularities of the individual sitting in the boxes. Here the *participants* or the *delegated performers* are rendered socially invisible, devoid of any identitarian features, lacking of any sense of individuality. In the case of *24 blocks*, the actual *artwork*, as described by the artist, consisted of the static blocks placed in the gallery space surrounded by detritus, candy wrappers and soda containers, left behind by the workers. The piece, therefore, highlighted the traces of the *work* performed by the delegated spectators yet in no way addressed the workers, or their *work*, directly. Quite the opposite, in this *work* the workers are not even present or mentioned, all we have are the indexical traces left by their *work*: the *artwork*. Under this understanding, the *work* carried out by Sierra's workers, underlines their existence while simultaneously stripping them from any sense individuality. This way, the delegated actors are always physically present in Sierra's pieces (as means to an end) yet always absent in their specificity (as particular, individual, named, subjects).

A similar process of invisibilisation also happens at the level of the artist's *work*. As we have seen, the majority of his pieces do not include the artist: in many cases, they don't even mention his existence unless it is revealed through the conventional method of gallery labels. In his description for the pieces, for example, he successfully removes himself from any direct action, either to be tattooed or to participate in the constant displacement of concrete blocks. In the cases where he is mentioned, as in *Obstruction of a freeway with a truck's trailer* (1998), the artist's participation is described as a premise for the realisation of the piece but not as the piece itself. In this sense, the artist is located in a suspended space beyond the actual work of art, outside of the artistic action. But what is it, exactly, that Santiago Sierra does as an artist? As mentioned before, his role is better understood as that of a coordinator or director who is involved in the project from a distance. By determining the instructions for the pieces, he provides the general conditions for the work according to his needs and desires. As a result, Sierra, the artist, is located as a necessary premise for the realisation of a particular work, as the provider for the structure of its development and enactment, but not as a necessary actor in the piece. Sierra's *work* also happens during the fulfilment of a particular task assigned to a hired performer. At this stage, the artist wears the hat of documenter, maintaining a critical distance from the ephemeral action and registering in posterity. Here, the artist's role, although

more physically involved with the realisation of the piece, still remains outside the work, detached from its intrinsic operations and implications.

Yet, in Sierra's practice, there is still another kind of *work* performed by the artist. This kind of *work* is carried out after the documentation of a delegated action and implies the actual, physical, production of the *artwork* as finished merchandise ready for economic circulation. This kind of work is much more 'conventional', as it requires the selection of images, the editing of a video, or the production of a photograph. In this case, the artist's role is fundamental for the actual production of a finished *artwork*, given that neither the delegated performers, nor the spectators of the live action, are the ones producing the commercial product that is an *artwork*. At this stage, the artist is directly involved in the completion of an artistic object, either a photograph, or a video or archival material; furthermore, it is constituted as essential for the successful completion of a piece. As a result, the role of the artist seems to be emphasised when the artistic product needs to be validated as an object of symbolic value worthy of widespread circulation and completely disregarded as 'setting up' the conditions of possibility for the enactment of a piece. The *work* of the artist is rendered as ambivalent or phantasmagorical, ignored at the beginning of the process of creating an artwork yet highly recognised at the end. Similar to the actual individuals in *Workers who cannot be paid...*, the artist, in Santiago Sierra's practice, is hidden yet his presence felt throughout his pieces. As Pilar Vilela Mascaró argues: 'In this case, the crux of the statement is that the value of this particular thing is not a result of the work of the person who has been directly hired to do it (her, here, now); but of the work of *some one, somewhere* else who, by definition, within capitalism, and in relation to commodities, becomes invisible' (2008a: 23).

Art/iculating a critique of capital

If the role of the artist and the performers constantly fluctuates between an active participant and a disenfranchised instrument, what, then, is at *work* in Sierra's practice? The strategy of invisibilisation of the subjects that are required for the production of an artistic object conceals the real intentions behind Sierra's pieces, that is, the revealing of the economic conditions of possibility that frame and characterise a particular situation as directly correspondent with practices of individual subjugation. In his practice, certain contextual situations, such as unemployed immigrants in Germany or unemployed Tzotzil women in Mexico, are treated as 'readymade' elements; as given units within the current state of affairs. By this I mean that 'Sierra's work does not make "real issues" visible, because it counts on the visibility of the issues that it deals with as being already given, as determinate configurations' (Vilela Mascaró, 2008a: 31). As argued earlier, everybody knows that there are large sectors of unemployment, not only

in Germany or Mexico, but throughout the world and that, for the most part, the people that compose this sector are immigrants. For Sierra, these underprivileged situations are highly 'formed and codified spaces and situations' (ibid.), which are instrumentalised by the artist (he, literally, objectifies them), and uses them a tool or a mechanism for questioning the larger logic of capital exchange.

For example, *Sumisión (formerly word of fire)* (2006-2007), addresses its immediate surroundings, by identifying a problematic zone in Anapra, while at the same time addressing the larger economic relationship between Mexico and the United States. Furthermore, the piece also commented on the hierarchical relation established between the Global North and the Global South and the exclusionary practices enacted by the dominating party. In this sense, the situation in which Sierra operates, whatever lies outside of the artwork and the artworld, the contextual social, economic, racial specificities of a site, for example, are appropriated and refabricated as 'something (al)readymade' (Vilela Mascaró, 2008a: 21); as something 'real', already given, that instead of being analysed in its intricacies should be deployed for the critical analysis of the macro-narrative that created, maintained and validated it. As Vilela Mascaró says in reference to *21 anthropomorphic modules made by the people of Sulabh, International* (2005-2006): 'The scavengers were already scavengers and the shit was already shit before and independently of the *21 Modules*' (2008a: 21).

Understanding contextual conditions as 'social readymades', allows the artist to critically engage the way in which these are articulated and configured by a more pervasive, yet deceitful, system of control: capitalism. For Sierra, advanced capitalism provides the frame for the operation of all realms of life, from *work* to *leisure*. In this sense, his practice tries to trace the ways through which capitalist interests and desires are transformed and transplanted into other realms, be it social or artistic locations. Understanding art as a merchandise, his works activate the different locations where they are enacted and circulated (micro-context and macro-narratives) and make evident their symbiotic imbrication with the prevailing economic system.

Capitalism, according to Sierra, is a violent, exclusive, repressive, hierarchical, alienating (Martínez, 2003: 17), exploitative, pervasive and all-encompassing system of control (Wagner, 2006: 31-33). *Economical study on the skin of Caracans* (2006, hereafter *Economical study*) is a good example of the artist's exploration into the reach and power of money. For this work the artist photographed the back of 10 persons who claimed to have zero dollars, the back of 10 persons who claimed to have a thousand dollars, and the back of 10 persons who claimed to have a million dollars. From each group, the artist extracted a medium tone in a

greyscale that represented the average amount of money owned by the average person in each group. From this average, the economic values of pure black and white were calculated; the value of 'true' black was 2106 dollars while the value of 'true' white was 11,548,415 (Sierra, 2011). Exhibited for the Sala Mendoza, a neuralgic site for contemporary artistic practice in Venezuela, the piece brought into the gallery space a sociological and statistical strategy (San Martín, 2007: 71) reminiscent of Conceptual Art practices such as Hila and Becker's study of rural United States that deconstructed the relationship between race and economic access. In the case of Caracas, Sierra demonstrates the privilege associated with white skins and the underprivileged connotation of darker skins in actual financial terms. As a result, *Economical study*, on the one hand, bears witness to the permeating and extensive character of capital in a determined society. Everything and everyone can be classified according to bank statements, from the most dominant to the most underprivileged. On the other, it reveals the hierarchical nature of capitalist exchanges where, through its historical configuration, there are clear racial divisions between the economically, and therefore socially, powerful and the powerless. *Economical study*, critically engages the prevalence and ubiquity of money as a symbol for larger capitalists exchanges. As San Martín argued:

'the one in Caracas (*Economical study on the skin of Caracans*) pointed at the whitening ability of money and the self-exclusion of the economic elite from reproductive exchanges. It was a document that dismantled the Creole lie of a perfect racial integration in Venezuela and highlighted the actual presence of an excluding chiaroscuro in the life of Caracans. (San Martín, 2007: 71)

Hiring and arrangement of 30 workers in relation to their skin colour (2002), carried out a similar exploration to *Economical study*. Instead of focusing on the context of Caracas, this piece critically engaged the economic specificities of a city in the so-called 'developed world', the city of Vienna. As mentioned before, for the piece the artist hired and arranged 30 workers according to their skin colour and staged a live racial palette in the gallery space. Contrary to the Caracas piece, the Vienna work emphasised the various degrees of skin colour of the underprivileged sector of Viennese economic life. In this sense, the work was not aimed at denuding the 'whitening ability of money', but of demonstrating how in Vienna, the economically marginalised are not a group easily recognised by a particular race but that, in the context of the city, the work 'documented the variety and width of the "palette" that immigration has made available for Austrian business persons, from the clear Caucasians coming from the Slavic countries to the darker hues from sub-Saharan Africa' (San Martín, 2007: 71).

As a result, the work problematises the assumption that economic marginalization has a direct racial correspondent (non-white) and asserts that, at

least in the conditions imposed by Vienna, the problem of economic exclusion has more to do with illegal migration and border-crossings than with skin tonalities. In this sense, the work demonstrates how Capitalism created underprivileged sectors that are completely site-specific but that are configured following a universalist, all-encompassing capitalist logic. In that sense, the excluded presented by both works are different social groups, one characterised by race and the other one by illegal immigration, that have been, paradoxically, framed and nurtured by the same rules of exploitation determined by the current system of global capitalism. Although very different in terms of interests and characteristics, both groups are located in the same place in relation to capitalism: at the margins and underneath.

Unlike many contemporary artists, Santiago Sierra's practice is not concerned with alleviating or bettering a conflictual situation. Unlike many of his peers, artists who believe that art can offer a glimpse outside of the state of affairs, or a poetic pause in our depressing everyday, Sierra explicitly denies art's potential as social activism and acknowledges art's complicity with the current system of capital exchange. In his practice, the spectator and the artist are not effectively disassembling or dismantling any hierarchical or exploitative systems, nor deploying an emancipatory mechanism, nor involved in processes of activations of political agency. By avoiding to 'give a voice to the underprivileged' or to 'propose new modes of sociability' (Vilela Mascaró, 2008b: 9), Sierra's works strip art of its supposed 'moral superiority' (Schneider, 2004: 38); they 'undo(ne) the halo of humanist moral purity around the making of art' (Medina, 2009: 187). Sierra argues: 'Art is like a pretentious furniture store or a complicated jewel. It might be a complex jewel, but first and foremost it is a luxury object' (Mircan, 2006: 17).

To understand art as directly collaborative of economical and cultural coercive practices has deep implications for both the societal locus of the artist, as a producer of consumer goods, and the spectator's location, as a receptor of those economic products. The fact that art is described as the practice that produces and circulates luxury objects, implies that both the artist and the spectator have access to these products and circulatory platforms. This, in its turn, entails that they belong to a specific social group with access to, both, the spaces and the objects 'pushed' by this cultural industry. In this sense, both artist and spectator are located within a specific social group that, according to Sierra, 'is not the whole of society, but only its superior body - let's call it the most favoured classes, the ones that offer employment.' (Mircan, 2006: 17). Under this rubric, both the producer and receptor of the artistic object or event, are described by the artist as 'well-educated people, people who belong, at least, to a cultural elite' (Wagner, 2006: 17); or as 'the social group that is on top. On top globally, and on top

locally' (Wagner, 2006: 17). Art, under Santiago Sierra's perspective, circulates only in the highly specialised elites of contemporary capitalist society. As a result, and because of this direct complicity with the system of commodity exchange, art, for Sierra, has absolutely no potentiality for changing, altering or subverting the current state of affairs of, either, a particular micro-context, or the hegemonic, universal macro-narratives.

Given that art is created and circulated within a very exclusive field, both economically and intellectually, it is limited to this particular location, the geography traced by the circulation of both artistic products and ideas surrounding it. Under this understanding, art's limits are constructed and delimited by the displacements of both objects and art ideas within a field. Art, therefore, cannot offer a perspective beyond the conditions that construct it: it cannot provide an emancipatory function if it is configured by subjugating procedures and mechanisms. This means that, for example, given art's deep connection with capitalist interests, in the form of collections, auctions and institutional/national support, art is condemned to repeat the same exploitative relations that had previously configured it. In this sense, art, even the most radical art, only feeds into the cycle of insatiable cultural consumption fostered and maintained by a very small elite. This implies that art plays no political role in the pursuit of emancipation and freedom, and therefore, that Santiago Sierra's works are nothing but the confirmation of a current state of affairs, not a possibility for a new system, or a hope for a better, or different, present and future. In his pieces reality, the artworld, are understood as being configured and delimited by economic transactions that are ultimately physical expressions of subjugating ideological relations.

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the author

Andrés is a PhD Candidate at the School of Philosophy and Art History at the University of Essex.

Email: admont@essex.ac.uk