

REVISITING ‘POLITICAL ECONOMY: STATE OF THE ART’

Joy Paton

There has been continuous teaching of political economy (PE) at the University of Sydney for fifty years. My own journey began as a mature aged student in 1994 after dropping History and Psychology in exchange for majors in Government and Political Economy. In undergraduate studies through to PE Honours and finally completing a PhD in 2007, I had the privilege of learning from and working alongside some incredibly inspiring teachers, researchers and colleagues before moving on to another University in mid-2015. In parallel, I held a long-standing interest in art and have been a practicing visual artist and ‘accidental’ curator. Bringing together my interests in political economy and art, one of the highlights of those twenty-one years at the University of Sydney was organising and curating an art exhibition marking the ‘retirement’ of Professor Frank Stilwell.¹

The exhibition – *Political Economy: State of the Art* – coincided with a conference considering the contributions Frank had made to the field of Political Economy (and which resulted in an edited collection, *Challenging the Orthodoxy: The Contributions of Frank Stilwell to Political Economy* [Schroeder and Chester 2014]). The exhibition themes aligned with those of the conference, traversing both topical and enduring issues, including: the green economy, cities and regions, economic

¹ The exhibition was held at Verge Gallery (University of Sydney Union) from 29 March to 12 April 2013. Despite official retirement in 2012, Frank continues to be an important contributor to the field of PE, not least through his ongoing JAPE editorial activities.

inequality, the contest of economic ideas, economic policy and the pedagogy of political economy. These themes reflect areas in which Frank made significant impacts over his career and which, today, remain important areas for critical scholarship. In their differing modalities, both the conference and the exhibition honoured the contribution Frank made to research and teaching at the University of Sydney as well as to the broader Australian political economy movement.

In this article, I focus on that *Political Economy: State of the Art* exhibition as illustrative of what lies at the interface of art and political economy. Hence the inclusion of some of the images and narratives exhibited. However, I also explore the visual more broadly in relation to political economy and suggest this is an area rich in potential for research and teaching. This does not purport to be an analysis of art from a political economy perspective. The latter would require consideration in this article of the art market, which is already a substantive area of analysis with a (surprisingly) long history.² Nor does it focus on the place of art in the capitalist economy.³ Rather, my focus here is on the more modest, but perhaps also more fundamentally important, task of considering how and why we might engage in *visual* 'political economy, now!'

The PE of visuality and the visuality of PE

Why should political economists be concerned with the visual? One reason is that, beyond arts-based critique or social commentary and even Cultural Economy, 'visual economy' is expected to dominate the future of business and with it, the organisation of and values in, the capitalist economy/system of provisioning. In a world of 'new media visuality' (Ibrahim 2020: 1), the way businesses communicate is rapidly changing. According to Hatch (a coaching and consulting practice for business owners), the combination of digital social media platforms and declining attention spans – they suggest the average is now just 8 seconds – means consumers prefer 'quick, engaging visuals that deliver information instantly', rather than text-heavy content (Porterfield n.d.). This shift, they

² See, for example, Throsby (2011), on John Ruskin's 1857 *Political Economy of Art*.

³ See Mattick (2003), for a useful primer engaging (critically) with art history and theory.

argue, has led to the rise of the visual economy where ‘images, videos, and graphics dominate how brands connect with customers’ (Porterfield n.d.).

Although the Hatch claims above are not referenced, there is much anecdotal evidence regarding shorter attention spans in the digital era. The intensification of white-collar work is likely related. However, a statistically significant study conducted by Medvedskaya in 2022 demonstrated that adult readers have a higher ability to concentrate attention than active Internet users (both young people and adults), keeping their capacities within the normative boundaries that were inherent in people of the pre-digital era. This kind of evidence supports the idea that we are in a particular ‘visual epoch’ that warrants the attention of political economic analysis.

Even though ‘visual culture’ is a highly contested notion, it is acknowledged as an important area of study generating ‘political and ethical critique’ and highlighting the visual as an ‘instrument of domination’ (Mitchell 2005; cf. Debord 1995 [1967] on ‘the spectacle’; and Foucault 1977 on ‘surveillance’). Simultaneously, the visual is also a tool of resistance and activism whereby diverse artistic practices (including the ‘spectacle’ of public protest) are mobilised in the ‘picturing and politics of dissent’ and to ‘activate’ opposition to injustice (Cronin and Robertson 2011:1). Although Mitchell (2005) warns against the ‘reductive treatments of visual images as all-powerful forces’, the historical importance of imagery is not in doubt.

Each new wave of visual form – from ‘the invention of photography, of oil painting, of artificial perspective, of sculptural casting, of the internet, of writing’ – gives rise to a turning point worthy of scrutiny and analysis (Mitchell 2005). What then, is distinctive about the current *zeitgeist*? The latest ‘revolution’ in mass communication that began with the printing press is undoubtedly the advent of digital technology. According to Yasmin Ibrahim (2020: 36), the coming together and intensification of the visual and the technological in our time has engendered the most recent ‘visual turn’. This is characterised by the accelerated speed and reach of information via the internet (increased scope of dissemination) and mobile phones (reduced size of hardware), leading to new and more accessible platforms of social media and streaming services.

In her book *Politics of Gaze: The Image Economy Online*, Ibrahim (2020) explores how social media and the speed and scope of digital images has implications for how we organise and understand our world and ourselves.

She suggests that the technologically mediated everyday 'visuality' has wide ranging practical and ethical implications for how we 'construct our worlds, understand world events, represent ourselves, commodify our environments and transact these with the wider world' (Ibrahim 2020: i). In the process is a need to 'constantly negotiate [...] notions of what is public and private [alongside] issues of security and conflict whilst constructing moral codes for a technologically mediated society' (Ibrahim 2020: i). In highlighting these complex aspects of contemporary life, it becomes apparent that it is not just the behaviour of end-consumers that is of interest, but the whole production-distribution-consumption cycle shaping personal and social existence.

Vision and voice

The exhibition of visual work, thoughtfully curated and presented, can contribute to the amplification of marginalised voices and the visibility of diverse social and political economic issues. Such work may stem from a dedicated curatorial project with artists invested in arts-based enquiry and making work toward a specific theme for public consumption. However, it may also stem from deploying arts-based and visual methods that provide an avenue for purposeful research engagement and permit the articulation of stories (dissemination of data) that might otherwise go untold/unheard/unseen. Here, I propose a conception of visual political economy as an interdisciplinary and creative practice of economic enquiry and transformation where new knowledge can be folded back into the teaching domain. Such research is motivated by the principles of social justice, social change and a desire to amplify marginalised voices and address the stigma and real economic injustices that are so often intensified for people who lie outside the 'mainstream'.

Working creatively (visual methodologies) with marginalised groups or those whose experiences are often hidden enables their stories to be told while sensitising the public to marginalised experiences. Over the past decade, I've utilised arts-based methodologies to conduct qualitative research primarily, but not exclusively, under the broad umbrella of public health. Arts-based approaches offer 'different ways of knowing' and are 'more than simply adjuncts to typical data collection and dissemination' processes (Boydell *et al.* 2012). They offer a way of 'doing data differently' and often exceed what would be garnered in a typical

interview-based method. I've found Photovoice to be a particularly useful visual methodology, especially in sensitive research contexts (Paton *et al.* 2018), including mental health (Paton *et al.* 2017) and end of life (Paton *et al.* 2023; Leonard *et al.* 2023).

Photovoice is traditionally a form of participatory action research typically used to give voice to specific communities or marginalised people(s). The term was first used by Wang and Burris (1997) to describe their research with rural women in a Chinese province where they combined photography and written narrative to explore community issues, empower participants and reach policymakers to bring about social change⁴. Conceptualising participants as co-creators in knowledge production is a central feature of this work and using cameras is an accessible means for participant engagement, requiring no particular artistic skills. In turn, the sensitive curation of participant photography and narratives for exhibition and publication provides a basis for innovative research dissemination. Exhibition catalogues with essays and image-laden reports are useful teaching aids and provide a rich way of communicating findings that are accessible to the public while being suitable for government, non-government and industry organisations.

Visual imagery in the public domain has the power to re-author and re-create social narratives, challenging dominant discourses and orthodoxies. Art makers give us all the opportunity to reflect on what we see and to be changed by encountering work that draws us into everyday stories and experiences. The work of art, John Dewey (1934: 344) argues, has the capacity to generate empathy in the viewer through the process of exposing suffering and injustice because it is 'saturated with story' connected to people and the rhythm of their lives. Embodied in visual portrayal, the 'everyday', becomes framed for deeper consideration underpinned by the capacity of the artist to make 'the objects of our common life [...] poignant and momentous' (Dewey 1934: 118). Visual imagery, indeed, art in all its forms, has the capacity to bridge different worlds. It can open up 'new fields of experience' for the viewer, but it can also reveal new dimensions and qualities in the 'familiar scenes' that we take for granted as 'normal' (Dewey 1934: 144).

⁴ They distinguished photovoice as a research method from other more general photography-related practices such as photo elicitation.

Political Economy: State of the Art

The artworks and attendant narratives on display in the *Political Economy: State of the Art* exhibition can be seen as fulfilling much of what Dewey expected of art. In their own way, each piece held the potential for generating increased awareness of the issues and struggles of concern to political economists. The exhibition was a collaboration between artists and political economists (students/alumni/staff) who used visual language to engage with and give voice to issues arising from the themes identified in the concurrent conference, *Challenging the Orthodoxy*. The exhibition continued the long tradition of arts-based social commentary, utilising visual media in the form of archival material together with new artworks created by staff, students, alumni and supporters of political economy.

The 12 new artworks in the exhibition comprised work by ten individual artists. A range of materials and media were used, reflecting the diversity typifying much contemporary visual art. Painting, drawing, photography and mixed media textile work sat alongside video, film and installations. Conceptually, the works engaged with political economic issues including power and global conflict, social and economic inequality, affluence and crises, exploitation, decadence and decay, and environmentalism. Below is a selection of artwork images and excerpts from artist statements drawn from the exhibition catalogue (Paton and Shapley 2013).

Figure 1: *For Sale* (Installation), Navid Ghezelayagh



'For Sale addresses the forces that determine the global political and economic conditions of the world under continuous modern colonialism'.

Figure 2: *Untitled* (Photographs), Nicola Edwards



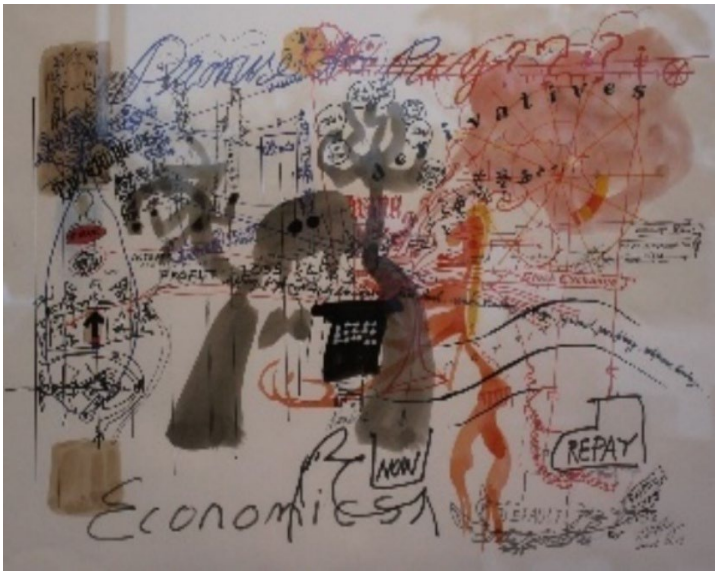
‘The photographs in this series document the international nature of inequality [...] I have tried to document my subjects with dignity, illustrating that the homeless have little, but remain human just like everyone else’.

Figure 3: *Untitled* (Film), Annika Elise Blau



‘This film is a montage of footage depicting three of the historical periods fallen to decadence [...] these eras of opulence [were followed by] disorder, revolution and economic depression. The audio clips tie this to our contemporary predicament. The film runs on loop to reflect decadence to degeneration as a cycle: by exposing it as a repetitive pattern, my work questions why we don’t recognise history repeating itself.’

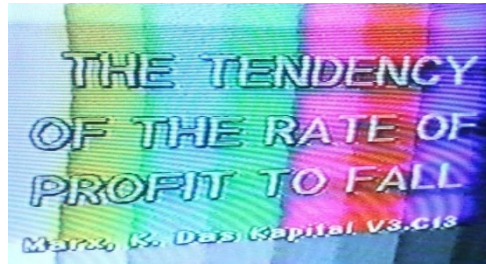
Figure 4: *Untitled* (Drawing), Bruce Petty



‘One of Australia’s most influential cartoonists, Bruce Petty, was also a writer and director, and an Academy Award winner for animation. Through his sharp, darting characters, squiggly lines and giant human machines he [...] created unique visions of Australian politics and society’ (ABC Radio National, *Big Ideas: The Wisdom Interviews*).

Bruce Petty created this work – and another work showing a lecturer addressing a large class of political economy students - to commemorate the retirement of his friend, political economist Frank Stilwell.

**Figure 5: *The Tendency of the Rate of Profit to Fall* (Video),
Matte Rochford**



‘Marx proposed that the motivating force of capitalism is in the exploitation of labour whose work is the ultimate source of surplus value and profit [...] In [this] video work, there are three sequences of images [...] a test screen, an excerpt from the animation *Cricket* (1980) and a scene from the film *Batman* (1989). Each sequence has been recorded on to a blank VHS tape and then dubbed again and again for the entire duration of the tape [180 minutes]. The first copy or generation is quite sharp and recognisable. With each subsequent copy, the image and sound get progressively degraded. The later copies are so distorted and washed out that they are no longer recognisable’.

**Figure 6: *The Labyrinth of Decay* (Immersive installation –
stones on large scale photographic prints), Joy Paton**



‘...former USYD lecturer and political economist Yanis Varoufakis (2011) described the US-led global economy as a ‘Global Minotour’. This metaphor stems from Greek mythology where the Labyrinth was an elaborate structure made to hold the mythical half man/half bull creature to which a steady flow of tributes must be made. Today, labyrinths are used for contemplation and quietening the mind. You are invited to walk this labyrinth, reflecting on the images of decay left in the wake of the minotour’.

Figure 7: *Untitled* (Textile – stitch and photography on cloth), Zsuzsanna Domenika Ihar



‘My work explores economic inequality [...] grey suits, normally an analogy for the business world, represent the cynicism and insensitivity often associated with wealth distribution and the cost of actions made by those in the world of finance and wealth [...] the suit morphs into a living skin of Australia’s varying realities, bred by disparate economic conditions [...] the stitches serve to symbolise the [...] collateral damage birthed by decisions made at the top. The vibrant colours in the work infuse the dichotomy of the rich and the poor [...] the various faces seen across the greater Sydney region included in this work [...] remind the audience of people’s the divergent and diverse experiences’.

Selected images from the University's Archive relating to the 'struggle' for political economy at the University of Sydney were also an important foundation for the exhibition marking Frank Stilwell's retirement. In part, this reflected acknowledgement that he, together with other staff and student activists, had been a key figure in securing political economy as both a discipline grounded in critical political economic analysis and a viable academic unit/department.

Original posters, many made at the iconic Tin Sheds Gallery, sat alongside prints of photographic and other visual material that chronicled this important element in the University's history. Below is a selection of poster images and photographs from the exhibition.

Figure 8: *The Struggle for Political Economy* (Installation view of photocopied archival material and photographs), Greg Shapley



Figures 9-12: *The Struggle for Political Economy* (Printed Posters), Artists not identified



The 'struggles' for political economy drew on the movements of protest and social commentary that proliferated in the sixties and seventies, continuing the much older tradition of print forms in mobilising support. The hand-printed posters and other visual materials portraying events across the seventies and eighties reflect the passion and commitment of those participating in protests, sit-ins and strikes, providing 'visual spectacles' aimed at securing a reflexive, non-elitist, democratic pedagogy.

Figures 13-14: *Protests (Photographs)*, Photographers unknown



Despite the different forms of visual material, there was an evident synergy in the exhibition as a whole that reflected its underlying subject matter. Karl Marx once said the commodity was the ‘cell form’ of capitalism and, intentionally or not, this was taken up in the contemporary art of Andy Warhol who pioneered the commodity as art form through the distinctive use of repetition. In keeping with this now key feature of much contemporary art, a number of the exhibited artworks featured ‘repetition’, reminding the viewer of the commodification and accumulation at the core of capitalism. The notion of repetition was also implicit in the historical posters produced in the print shop at the former Tin Sheds Gallery as well as in the historical photographic material.

Conclusion

Revisiting *Political Economy: State of the Art* in this article, however briefly, has been sobering yet thought-provoking. The various artworks and images continue to hold traction more than a decade after they were first exhibited. Indeed, even the ‘struggle for PE’ archival material going back more than 40 years still speaks in today’s environment of university cuts and restructurings. The exhibition provides an example of how the concerns of political economists can and have been represented visually, whether through historical images of struggle or through using art forms to illustrate themes of ongoing political economic concern. There is ample scope in the rapidly changing digital world to grow the field of visual political economy across teaching, research and activism.

Joy Paton is an academic, artist and curator in the School of Social Sciences at Western Sydney University.

joy.paton@westernsydney.edu.au

References

- Boydell, K. M., Gladstone, B. M., Volpe, T., Allemang, B. & Stasiulis, E. (2012) The Production and Dissemination of Knowledge: A Scoping Review of Arts-Based Health Research, *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 13(1).
- Cronin, J. and Robertson, K. (2011) Imagining resistance: An introduction. In Cronin, J. & Robertson, K, Eds., *Imagining Resistance: Visual Culture and Activism in Canada*, Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.
- Debord, G. (1995) *The Society of the Spectacle* (D. Nicholson-Smith, Trans.), Brooklyn, New York: Zone Books.
- Dewey, J. (1934) *Art as Experience*, New York: The Berkley Publishing Group.
- Foucault, M. (1977) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, New York: Pantheon Books.
- Ibrahim, Y. (2020) *Politics of Gaze: The Image Economy Online*, New York: Routledge.
- Leonard, R., Paton, J., Hinton, P., Greenaway, S. and Thomson, J. (2023) The end-of-life needs of Aboriginal and immigrant communities: a challenge to conventional medical models, *Frontiers in Public Health*, 11.
- Mattick, P. (2003) *Art in its Time: Theories and Practices of Modern Aesthetics*, London & New York: Routledge.
- Medvedskaya, E.I. (2022) Features of the Attention Span in Adult Internet Users. *RUDN Journal of Psychology and Pedagogics*, 19 (2), pp. 304-19.

Mitchell, W.J.T. (2005) *What Do Pictures Want?* Chicago and London: Chicago University Press.

Paton, J., Horsfall, D., and Carrington, A. (2017) *Picturing Recovery: Stories About Living Well with Mental Illness*, Western Sydney University: Penrith NSW.

Paton, J., Horsfall, D., and Carrington, A. (2018) Sensitive Inquiry in Mental Health: A Tripartite Approach, *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 17 (1).

Paton, J., Psychogios, H. and Leonard, R. (2023) *Stories of Care at End-of-life: Listening to Aboriginal and Culturally Diverse Communities in Western Sydney*, Western Sydney University: Penrith NSW, available: <https://hdl.handle.net/1959.7/uws:73710>.

Paton, J. and Shapley, G. (2013) *Political Economy: State of the Art*, Unpublished Exhibition Catalogue, University of Sydney Union: Sydney.

Porterfield, M. (n.d.) 'Why the visual economy is the future of business (and how to adapt)', available: <https://www.hatchtribe.com/blog/why-the-visual-economy-is-the-future-of-business>.

Schroeder, S.K. and Chester, L. (eds) (2014) *Challenging the Orthodoxy: Reflections on Frank Stilwell's Contribution to Political Economy*, Berlin & New York: Springer.

Throsby, D. (2011) The Political Economy of Art: Ruskin and Contemporary Cultural Economics, *History of Political Economy*, 43(2), pp. 275-94.

Wang, C. and Burris, M.A. (1997) Photovoice: Concept, methodology, and use for participatory needs assessment, *Health Education & Behaviour*, 24(3), pp. 369-87.

