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Building a *Blog Cabin* During a Financial Crisis

Introduction

“You design it at DIYnetwork.com. We're building it just the way you want it. And one lucky viewer will get to call it home.” Every episode of the television show *Blog Cabin 2008* on the DIY Network begins with this simple formula. As the host recites those lines, images of fingers on keyboards, a computer drawing of a cabin, and computer screens teeming with interior and exterior design options flash on the television. This is followed by shots of contractors and construction workers sitting at computers while at the build site, ostensibly taking democratically generated orders from the audience-collective.

The home-improvement television show *Blog Cabin 2008* and its website offer evidence to support the growing research on immaterial labor and how that labor and the surplus value it creates is being extracted by capitalists. However, in the effort to outline the theory of immaterial labor and how that labor is interpellated and exploited by capital, researchers often neglect to examine the instances where those doing the labor attempt to expose their own exploitation. Since this exposure often comes in the very same venue as the exploitation, it can have a cascading effect. For example, in a social networking situation or in the comment section of a blog, those doing immaterial labor can often expose their insights to a large and often sympathetic audience. In the case of *Blog Cabin 2008*, this culminates in an impressive set of economic and social demands from the users. Certainly, their demands do not reach the level of radical criticism of commercial media or capitalism, but for those researchers interested in outlining how capitalism exploits labor in the digital age, highlighting these moments of user-led critical engagement is as necessary as uncovering the structures of domination themselves.

Immaterial Labor and the WWW

The political economic concept of immaterial labor has been expressed first by Michael Lazzarato (1996) and later developed by Hardt and Negri (2000, 2004), Dyer-Witheford (1999, 2001), de Peuter and Dyer-Witheford (2005), Arvidsson (2005), and Coté and Pybus (2007). These theorists form part of what is called autonomist-Marxism, or *autonomia*. Considering the plight of the Marxist labor theory of value, especially as it relates to digital production (Sofronov et al 2008: see Jameson's comments), immaterial labor has been an extremely useful concept in understanding some of the ways in which surplus value is created in late capitalism. Immaterial labor is the activity which imbues the commodity with its informational and cultural content. For Lazzarato and those after, this concept draws attention to two prominent features of late capitalist production: 1) the ways in which production is increasingly automatized, digitized, standardized, and remote controlled, and 2) the ways in which the tastes, desires, and opinions of consumers are shaped. The first focus draws our attention to what Haraway (2004) calls the “informatics of domination” (p. 20): cybernetics, robotics, modern organizational techniques, and the vertical circuits of production and exchange which appear in globalization. In this sense, immaterial labor owes much to Mandel's (1975) arguments about late capitalism, where financial and cultural institutions are pre-eminent in highly developed capitalist economies.

It is the second aspect of immaterial labor which is the focus of this paper. This sub-category of immaterial labor is referred to by Hardt and Negri (2004) as “affective labor,” defined as the work of creating bodily and ideal affect in subjects. For example, in addition to receiving food at a restaurant, one expects to receive immaterial goods such as hospitality, friendliness, and comfort. This is often supplied by hosts and waiters who not only supply food but also positive feelings. The labor that goes into creating this cultural content “gives form to and materializes needs, the imaginary, consumer tastes, and so forth, and these products in turn become powerful producers of needs, images, and tastes”

(Lazzarato 1996, p. 137). This is labor aimed on the production of desires and tastes, and in capitalism, this labor produces surplus value which is immediately alienated from the laborer.

In a sense, the theory of immaterial labor is nothing new; it is similar to prior arguments about advertising. For example, Leslie (1995) presents advertisers as “mediators” between production and consumption. Advertisers are professionalized laborers who set and shape tastes and desires in consumers for the benefits of their clients. However, much of the recent scholarship which deals in immaterial labor often examines the role of what might be called non-professional mediators: participants in social networking websites (Coté and Pybus, 2007), amateur video game coders (Sotamaa, 2003), bloggers (Arvidsson, 2005), and amateur web users (Terranova, 2000). Their immaterial labor differs from prior modes of labor in that the distinction between what is work and what is play (and therefore, which activities deserve pay and which do not) is increasingly unclear. This illustrates a process Marx (1863) called “real subsumption”: the total penetration of the ethics of capitalist accumulation into every aspect of social life, which in turn leads to what autonomists call “the social factory,” where every activity is judged by how productive it is.

This theory of immaterial labor is particularly useful in understanding labor on the Web. Arvidsson (2005) used the concept to understand the ways in which consumers (rather than professionalized advertisers and marketers) have added value to brands. His primary insight is that proper brand management (that is, the nurturing of the immaterial affects of the commodity in the form of recognizable symbols) results in an “ethical surplus”: “Brand management works to ensure that the productivity of consumers *becomes* productive labour” which in turn “produce[s] an ethical surplus in the form of a social relation, a shared meaning or, more generally, a common” (p. 249). This practice is found in the “real world” activities of social gatherings at supermarkets (many of which host events such as wine and cheese tasting) and at branded festivals (such as Jeep Fest), where corporations gather consumers together to discuss and learn about products. It also appears increasingly online at sites such

as Ebay.com and Amazon.com, where users write reviews of and discuss products. In Arvidsson's view, the consumer labors to create much of the affective value of the brand. This is done by discussing and publicly performing with branded goods.

Similarly, Coté and Pybus (2007) examine the social networking site MySpace, arguing that participants in that site labor to build their own personal brands. This personal-branding process, and the networking of “friending” that grows out of it, is an accumulative logic: to be successful in MySpace, one must not only have a unique personal brand, but one must also have a large collection of “friends” who culturally valorize that brand. All the while, News Corporation (the owner of MySpace) examines these networks, looking for patterns of affect which can be innocuously delivered to advertisers. “The ‘work’ of MySpace, as a corporate entity, is to ‘monetize’ these practices in a manner which does not compromise the good will of users” (p. 96). Both Arvidsson and Coté / Pybus have convincingly demonstrated the value of the theory of immaterial labor as a tool to examine online activities.

And yet, what is missing from these interrogations is the concern with *labor* as such. That is, a major facet of the *autonomia* school is that labor is seen as in a struggle against capitalism, and that this struggle involves recomposing all those who labor into a coherent movement against the exploitation inherent in capitalism. As Dyer-Witheford (1999: pp. 65-67) argues, the autonomist-Marxist school of Tronti, Negri, and Lazzarato consciously seeks to affirm labor's active resistance to being merely a component of capitalism's process of value creation. Laborers seek to compose themselves as a coherent class politically and socially opposed to this process. While autonomists recognize that the logic of capitalism is increasingly able to penetrate into more and more aspects of life (private spaces, state institutions such as schools, religious institutions, to name a few), they also note that this increases the likelihood that broader portions of the population will find a common interest in organizing against capitalism and hijack the advanced digital networks of late capitalism to form more democratic

economic systems.

The consideration of composition, or the ability of laborers to form a coherent and politically aware class, is missing in Arvidsson and Côté / Pybus. Côté and Pybus do conclude with a consideration of the possibilities of such a composition, but their paper is not focused on discovering those possibilities. In the pages that follow, I want to examine *Blog Cabin 2008* not only as further empirical evidence of the existence of immaterial labor; I also want to engage in the explicit *autonomia* practice of finding moments when immaterial laborers (in this case, the audience of *Blog Cabin 2008*) re-compose themselves into a class with a defined political economic agenda opposed to owners of capital. In the website created by the producers of *Blog Cabin 2008*, the audience does just this – albeit for a brief moment.

Blog Cabin 2008

Blog Cabin 2008 is the second season of a television show in the home-improvement genre. This show aired on Thursdays at 9 pm Eastern Time on the DIY network, available on cable. The broadcast ran from August 14th until September 25th 2008 and was immediately repeated in the following weeks until November 13th. The show is about the process of building a 2700 square foot luxury log cabin in rural Tennessee. It is hosted by Ahmed Hassan, who demonstrates building and landscaping techniques and walks viewers through the process of building a cabin. He is joined by a rotating cast of hosts from other DIY home improvement shows, each with their own special focus, from carpentry to masonry to landscaping. In addition, guests from nearby home-improvement companies in Tennessee make occasional appearances. Once completed, the cabin is given away as a prize to a randomly selected entrant in an online contest.

However, as the show's title indicates, it is not simply another home-building show. *Blog Cabin 2008* uses a web site¹ to solicit design ideas from the audience. In this way, *Blog Cabin 2008* combines

1 <http://www.diynetwork.com/blogcabin>

the home-improvement genre with what might be called a “viewer-vote” reality genre (as seen in talent shows like *American Idol*). In the weeks prior to the show being aired, the audience is asked to vote on particular design aspects: the floor plan, lighting, exterior features, bathroom and kitchen styles, flooring, color schemes, use of large spaces in the basement, and cabinetry. The range of choices fell between two and seven. All told, forty-two features were voted on prior to and during the construction of the cabin. The show received over 3.3 million votes on these choices.²

Furthermore, the website is not simply a forum where the audience votes for log cabin features. In addition, the show's producers host a blog which advertises upcoming episodes. Between 9 November 2007 and 13 November 2008, the DIY website hosted 39 blog posts featuring the various votes, pictures and videos, a call for show location ideas, and updates on the production of the show, all pertaining to the 2008 season. As of 22 November 2008, these blog posts received 11,297 comments for an average of 290 per post.³

Thus, *Blog Cabin 2008* is an incredibly complex media object. This object has four discrete parts: 1) the television show itself, with the facts of its production (the labor and capital involved) and its advertising; 2) the television audience, who consume the television show and advertisements; 3) the website for the show, with its own production inputs (again, capital and labor) and its own advertising (often coming from the same sponsors as the broadcast portion of the show); and 4) the audience/users of the website (presumably, but not necessarily, drawn from the broadcast audience).

How do we make sense of this object? The second aspect of immaterial labor – the imbuing of the commodity with cultural content – is the key. How are affinity and affection created during the *Blog Cabin 2008* season? How do the participants in the show's website labor to create themselves as a community centered on consuming the show? And how does this process create value? How is the

2 http://www.diynetwork.com/diy/blogcabin2008/text/0,,DIY_30896_66199,00.html

3 Note that a small portion of these comments are written by the show's producers in response to questions posed by the viewers. However, this is a statistically small part of the sample.

building of a log cabin infused with cultural mythologies and content, and how does the audience relate to this cultural content?

At first glance, it is clear that the producers of *Blog Cabin 2008* utilizes the web to create an easily quantifiable audience. Encouraging an audience to actively comment on the program and participate in an on-line community is an objectively measurable method to gauge audience response. This can be done with simple tracking software which collects IP addresses and analyzes how much time a visitor spends on a site, what pages she opened while there, how she came to the site, and where she went as she exited the site. This differs significantly from prior methods of measuring ratings. Methods such as focus groups and follow-ups have rarely been useful to television producers and distributors, since these methods are highly imprecise and economically impractical (Havens, 2003, p. 27). With Web tools that track site participants, the producers of this show have more accurate numbers they can use as they sell advertising space on television and on the website. Moreover, advertisers can use that same tracking technology to analyze online purchases and the effectiveness of their advertising efforts.

But there are deeper aspects to this than simple market quantification. Marketing and branding are cultural techniques which seek to create organic groups by binding people together (Moore, 1991; Klein, 2000; Gedde, 2005; Arvidsson, 2005). These binds rely upon cultural myths, the stuff of the cultural commons. In the case of *Blog Cabin 2008*, there are two key cultural myths that are central to this bond: the home and the American pastoral. In a manner similar to Mosco (2004), I argue that these myths are powerful and should not be discounted simply because they are not falsifiable in a positive sense. Along with Mosco, I see myths as a key to understanding not only our relationship to one another; they help us understand why new technologies (such as social networking) are seen by users as providing a better life than the ones we had before their arrival.

The mythological space “home” is a powerful and overdetermined cultural object. A person's

home reveals much: economic circumstances, political views, religious views, and attitudes towards family, community, and health. The home binds: etymologically, “husband” arises from “house bond,” bound to the home and the “house wife.” In American culture, particularly post-Industrial Revolution, this bond becomes more important as the home is seen as the place of “not-work,” a private space (Cowan, 1983). It is a place where labor (most often women's labor) and technologies are used to reproduce the species (Davis, 1983; Hennessy, 2000). Even as Americans experience all sorts of spaces (hospitals at birth, illness, and death, work spaces, educational spaces, social spaces, political spaces, media spaces, and liminal spaces such as highways and airports), “home” is a place where Americans “live.” Culturally, it is perceived to be at the center of nearly every other activity in daily political/economic/social life.

Obviously, the DIY Network and similar networks (HGTV, the Food Network, for example) heavily rely upon and add to this myth. As they do so, these networks modify the longstanding myth with technology: they introduce new gadgets and techniques to users. *Blog Cabin 2008* is no different, demonstrating the latest in technical and technological marvels available to improve the home. In addition, the show's focus on the social networking technology of the blog is an attempt to link home and community into new networks. Here, an old myth is updated in a new technological setting. As Mosco (2004) argues, a successful new technology is nearly always linked to a longstanding myth.

However, the log cabin featured in *Blog Cabin 2008* is not just any home. Built on a lake in rural Tennessee, this home offers the American pastoral. The pastoral, as Leo Marx (1964) argues, is a major foundational mythology in America. It is the space between the demands and domination of industrialization and the chaos of nature. It is thus a designed space, where humans simultaneously hack away at “nature” by creating open fields, grazing areas, and gardens, all the while holding off urbanization. As Marx argues, the pastoral is thus the balance between human emotion (signified by the irrationality of nature and animals) and rationality (signified by modernity and industry); both are

sought in moderation.

The pastoral myth is relied upon by the show's producers. In an early blog post, the producers post pictures of the build site and describe the bucolic setting: "The first thing that greeted us as we pulled into the lot were two deer only 100 yards away. They took a fleeting interest in us before moving on (too quickly for us to get our cameras ready), but gorgeous Mother Nature was all around us."⁴ However, this is not a nature show. The intention of the show's producers, of course, is to build a home in the midst of "Mother Nature," thus carving out a space habitable to humans. But there must be a balance; the intention is not to *overdevelop*. This is not a show about building a stripmall or a high-rise apartment building, but about building a space where one can simultaneously escape urbanization and yet enjoy the fruits of industrial capitalism. Overall, the ideal space that *Blog Cabin 2008* imagines is decidedly anti-urban and anti-public but pro-consumption.

While the producers of *Blog Cabin 2008* used these myths as key components of the show's narrative, it would be wrong to say that their use of myths was the bond that created their audience. Rather, it would be more accurate to see their use of these myths as a *proposed* bond. As evidenced in the more than 11,000 comments on the show's blog, the audience actively added to, negotiated with, modified, and improved upon these myths. In so doing, the audience bound itself together as a fan community. This is clearly an example of what is alternately called "produsage" (Bruns, 2008) or "convergence culture" (Jenkins, 2004 and 2006), where fans of a media object imbue that object with meanings and ideas that exceed the expectations of the producers. This is also clearly an example of the free, online immaterial labor that Arvidsson and Côté / Pybus discuss.

The first myth that the audience helped develop was the pastoral myth. On the same 9 November 2007 post in which the show's producers describe their close encounter with the deer, the audience posted 112 comments (as of 22 November 2008). Many of these comments examined the

4 <http://blog.diynetwork.com/blogcabin/2007/11/09/blog-cabin-2008-first-look/>

“picturesque” build site. One commenter, Therese, exclaims, “I agree with other [sic] to leave the site as undisturbed as possible since it is so magnificent. When you look at something like this, you just have to feel closer to God and His touch on this earth. Makes me feel responsible to help keep it that way.”⁵ Terra Fitts adds, “I absolutely ‘love’ this piece of land... I can imagine sitting in a handmade rocker, blanket snuggled around, drinking a cup of coffee and watching the morning sun melting the mist coming off the lake on a beautiful autumn morning. It would be very peaceful to see the full moon reflected upon the still waters on a warm summer night and have a cool breeze softly blowing.”⁶ And Carrie Miracle says, “The new land for the blog cabin is just gorgeous! The lake views are just beautiful and animals to see is Exciting [sic].”⁷

If these comments seem cliché, it is because the idea of communing with nature and thereby coming closer to God are culturally ingrained aspects of the American pastoral myth. It is not surprising that the audience (as well as the show's producers) rely on this myth; it is a readily available part of American culture. The pastoral myth would remain a constant theme in *Blog Cabin 2008*, not only in the blog comments on the website, but also in the show broadcasts, as well. The pastoral myth is metonymically apparent in the name of the cabin – as suggested by one of the viewers - “Serenity Shores.”

The other major myth, that of the home, developed later in the series and the comments. Its development corresponded with the building of the cabin, especially in the many votes the audience was asked to participate in. That is, as the show's producers presented the audience with choices in the floor plan, lighting, flooring, and decor, the audience came to see the log cabin as a materialization of their ideas of what “home” means and should be. As these ideas were constructed by the celebrity-

5 Therese on Jan 3rd 2008 at 8:32 am

6 Terra Fitts on Jan 2nd 2008 at 2:03 am

7 Carrie Miracle on Dec 3rd 2007 at 7:05 pm

laborers, the audience members recognized their contributions to the log cabin. In the comments section of the blog, the cabin was transformed from being a log cabin (in the contemporary American sense of being a second, vacation house, usually set in a rural area) to become a viable home, where children, grandchildren, and parents could spend their private hours. Stephanie Lapinski sees this possibility: “I am so excited I have already set my DVR so that I could watch each episode over and over and invasion [sic] myself and family there!”⁸ Commenting on the home and on a special children's bed made in the shape of a boat, WENDY KALAN writes, “FINALLY A PLACE TO CALL HOME AND BE PROUD OF. MY FAMILY DREAMS OF THIS LIFESTYLE! ... WHAT A DREAM LIFE! WE ARE READY! MY LITTLE BOY WANTS THE BOATBED!”⁹ Similarly, Linda writes

My grandchildren would love this home especially the oldest who is 9 yrs old, Nicolas. He would see this as an adventure! My littlest grandson who lives with me and my son, his name is Connor (4 yrs old) would love the childs [sic] bedroom. He is fascinated with boats and would love that special boat bed.(that [sic] what he calls it. His dad is my son,who absolutely would love living on the water, to fish and raise his son in a great environment.¹⁰

Besides these fantasies of raising children or grandchildren in ostensibly worry-free pastoral Tennessee, the audience shared child-rearing ideas in the comments section of the blog. In addition, as the myth of home is developed by the audience, other domestic issues arise. For example, a surprising number of commenters confess to having serious health issues. There are dozens of comments that describe experiences with chemotherapy, hip surgery, multiple sclerosis, and trips to doctors. Another

⁸ Stephanie Lapinski on Aug 14th 2008 at 3:46 pm on the post “The Blog Cabin Sweepstakes is ON!” (<http://blog.diynetwork.com/blogcabin/2008/08/14/the-blog-cabin-sweepstakes-is-on/#comments>)

⁹ Emphasis in the original. WENDY KALAN on Oct 29th 2008 at 12:12 am on the post “A Note from Management” (<http://blog.diynetwork.com/blogcabin/2008/08/18/a-note-from-the-management/>)

¹⁰ Linda on Sep 19th 2008 at 3:21 pm on the post “A Beautiful Boat Bed; Time is Running Out” (<http://blog.diynetwork.com/blogcabin/2008/09/19/a-beautiful-boat-bed-time-is-running-out/>)

such phenomenon is the exchange of recipes in the comments section of the blog. Human health, food preparation, and child-rearing are all part of the greater myth of the home; homespace is seen as a space of comfortable convalescence (as opposed to a hospital), and food preparation is integral to what we do in homes, and homes are the sites where children are safely raised.

Thus the myth of “home” is shaped by the audience into a very recognizable form: the home becomes a basic economic space, or more accurately, the space of *oikos* (household/family) and *nomos* (convention/law). As is often noted in etymologies of the word “economics,” its roots in the Greek *oikos* and *nomos* reveals a two-thousand year long concern with the home and the management of the family as the foundational unit of economy.¹¹ This foundational unit is nearly always assumed to be a space for reproduction of the species, as well as for production of many human necessities (food, clothing, shelter, maintenance of health). The confessional comments about medical issues, the recipes exchanged, the child-rearing ideas: all of these facets of *oikos* are presented in the comments section of the *Blog Cabin 2008* blog, often in startling candor.¹² The desire to share “tips” on managing these facets appears to be exceptionally powerful among the audience. Moreover, as the audience votes on various aspects of the log cabin, many of the arguments over the options center on organizing the potential space of the cabin in order to best manage the homespace.

To sum up, as they developed the pastoral and home myths, it would not be accurate to say that the audience of *Blog Cabin 2008* was produced by the narratives, advertising, and mythologies of the show's producers. Instead, to borrow a similar concept from science and technology studies, the

11 It is not the focus of this essay, but an examination of *Blog Cabin* (or any other home building show) as subtle supporters of heteronormativity would be quite revealing. In the case of *Blog Cabin 2008*, the inclusion of a “Man Cave” - basically a den with a large-screen television – implies a particular type of family: heterosexual, with traditional gender roles and age-roles. Again, to return to the roots of the word “economy,” Aristotle describes the well-managed home as a place where there is the male master, subservient female, and even more subaltern slaves and children. The Man-Cave could be a contemporary materialization of the house as a highly gendered space.

12 It is important to note that these comments have no bearing on the contest – the contest is not based upon who deserves the home more or any other subjective decision; it is a random drawing. Thus, there is no logical reason for the audience members to confess to illnesses, distressed economic situations, or family needs.

audience and show co-produced (Jasanoff, 2004) each other as they worked through and developed these two myths. Those audience members who participated in the blog recognized this, giving themselves the name “The Off-Site Build Team.” Their work is evidenced on the website. There, the amount of writing the audience produced far outweighed that of the show producers. To take a representative example, on the post “Great Evening of Blog Cabin Tonight, plus Something Exciting,” Watson, the DIYnetwork.com manager, produced 137 words. The audience produced over 36,000.¹³ Clearly, the show producers might create narratives that rely on myths, but the audience does much of the development of these myths and thus developed themselves as a community of audience-owners.

Audience-Owners

In addition, given the powerful bonds that the audience and show producers have co-produced, the fact that the audience refers to itself as the “Off-Site Build Team,” and that one member of the audience will win the log cabin, it is not surprising that the audience often demonstrates a sense of ownership of the cabin being built. The commenters often refer to the cabin as “ours” or “mine.” For example, audience member Gail: “a big thanks to everone [sic] who is working so hard on our beautiful Blog Cabin!”¹⁴ The audience members frequently comment on the winning features of the cabin (the floorplan, the fixtures, and the decor) as their ideas, whether or not the ideas were originally generated by them or were presented as options that they could vote on. In fact, several key aspects of the cabin, including its name (Serenity Shores) were directly created by the audience.

The show producers use this language in their blog posts. For example, a post on 7 April 2008:

This next round of voting focuses on some of the cosmetics and extras of Blog Cabin 2008. Choose a cool toy for *your* sunny afternoons on Watts Bar Lake, feel good about *your surroundings* with an outdoor green feature, relax in an adirondack or rocking chair

¹³ This post is available at <http://blog.diynetwork.com/blogcabin/2008/09/11/great-evening-of-blog-cabin-tonight-plus-something-exciting/>. Accessed 22 November 2008.

¹⁴ Gail on 14 July 2008 2:41 on post “Checking In” (http://blogs.scrippsnetworks.com/diy/blogcabin/2008/07/checking_in.html)

(painted or natural), select *your* patio furniture style and last, but not least, choose *your* kitchen cabinet hardware. Happy voting!¹⁵

Thus, it is hard to say whether this fantasy language, where all the audience owns the cabin, originated with the show's producers or with the audience itself. However, it is clear that this language is used extensively by the audience and is not discouraged by the show's producers. The audience members recognized their impact upon the building of the cabin. Its design was a collective effort, and the audience saw themselves as just as invested in the building of the cabin as the celebrity-laborers who did the physical work. In this language and with these actions, “Our cabin” means that *everyone* – the DIY Network, the producers of the program, the celebrity-laborers, and the audience – owns the cabin. As we will see, this is an untenable narrative.

As *Blog Cabin 2008* aired, the suggestions and votes of the audience shifted into demands. That is, they began to ask the show producers to add features to the cabin that were not planned. These features were not, however, calls for different lamps or interior decorations. Rather, the audience demanded simple, but powerful, symbolic additions to the house, like plaques and memorials. This grew out of a concern within the “Off-Site Build Team” over one member of the audience, CabinCraver2008, who discontinued commenting on the *Blog Cabin 2008* blog posts around May of 2008. Prior to her disappearance, she was very active, campaigning for her favorite options as they became available. In her comments, she confessed to a remission of cancer, repeatedly mentioning hospital visits and being too weak to sit at her computer. Often, her daughter Erika would post comments under her name, informing the community of her mother's status. In one such post, Erika described in graphic detail a surgical procedure her mother was undergoing:

It looks as if it's going to be closer to a ten day hospital stay, and there were a couple of problems during the surgery. Her right lung collapsed and they have what looks like a

¹⁵ “Paying Attention to the Details” (my emphasis, <http://blog.diynetwork.com/blogcabin/2008/04/07/paying-attention-to-the-details/>)

thin dryer vent hose going through a hole in her back right now, but her doctor assures me that when she is breathing fine on her own that will come out. During the surgery her temperature went up to 105 degrees, and apparently she had pneumonia!¹⁶

After mid-May, Cabincraver2008 stopped posting comments. Within a month, other audience members began to openly ask the DIY Network to dedicate episodes of the show to her. They also asked that the webmaster of the blog contact Cabincraver2008 via email in order to find out her condition. They were noticeably concerned about a woman they felt was part of their community. This concern grew: on the 13 June 2008 post “Two New Slide Shows!”, the audience members began to petition the network.¹⁷ The vast majority of the 326 comments on that post focused on Cabincraver2008's condition and called for some sort of on-air dedication to her. The petitions continued the next day on a new blog post. As the show's episodes were aired (without any mention of Cabincraver2008), the audience members continued to demand a dedication. LindaL's statement is typical: “there was no mention of CabinCraver on the videos or the tv [sic] shows. Do you think DIY thinks we will forget that they were asked to do something?”¹⁸

Other audience members demanded a more tangible tribute: “I think a permanent marker for Serenity Shores would be a great idea. It would be a lasting tribute to all that [sic] participated,” argues Kacy.¹⁹ Audience member Tingoat agrees:

I would vote for a more permanent type of plaque or marker on the property. It doesn't have to be large or flashy just something that will endure. Then, any of us who might find our way to Serenity Shores at some point in time could see it and remember this

16 Cabincraver2008 on Feb 19th 2008 at 2:03 pm on the post “Darlene Branim Reports Changes to *Blog Cabin 2008*” (<http://blog.diynetwork.com/blogcabin/2008/02/14/darlene-branim-reports-on-changes-to-blog-cabin-2008/>)

17 Post “Two New Slide Shows!” available at <http://blog.diynetwork.com/blogcabin/2008/06/13/two-new-slide-shows/>

18 LindaL on Aug 29th 2008 at 2:08 pm on post “Watch Blog Cabin, Enter Blog Cabin” (<http://blog.diynetwork.com/blogcabin/2008/08/22/watch-blog-cabin-enter-blog-cabin/>)

19 Comment on June 19, 2008 11:50 AM on post “Checking In” (http://blogs.scrippsnetworks.com/diy/blogcabin/2008/07/checking_in.html)

experience and the part that CabinCraver and Erika played in it. Let's face it, the TV show will come and go, but a marker would last much longer...maybe even forever? *this beautiful home would not exist in its present form without all of us who shared our ideas and feedback.*²⁰

This demand reflects a desire on the part of the audience to leave a material mark upon the building or land. This impulse is akin to construction workers signing trusses or writing their names in wet concrete on a build site. They may not own the product of their labor, but they can at least leave their names behind in an effort to make a small claim on the objects they produced. Like these material laborers, immaterial laborers are expressing a desire to control, or at least be remembered for, what they produce.

In this case, these immaterial laborers – the “Off-Site Build Team” - wanted to do something similar with a permanent dedication to Cabincraver2008 (and, indirectly, themselves). They recognize their vital role in the creation of the cabin and want that role materialized at the build site. In fact, audience member Blognbob enjoyed a brief moment of fame when an American flag he donated to *Blog Cabin 2008* was a featured part of one of the show's episodes. In the comments on the website, Blognbob noted that his goal was “To share a part of [my family] with everyone.”²¹ Blognbob's contribution might have been innocuous – American flags are banally common outside American houses – but his desire to materially affect the build site is shared by the other audience members who sought to have a “permanent marker” placed in honor of Cabincraver2008.

However, the producers did not comply with the demands for a plaque or for an on-air mention of Cabincraver2008. In their defense, many of the episodes were filmed well ahead of the demands made by the audience, perhaps making it too difficult to retroactively change the credits or add new

20 My emphasis. Comment on June 19, 2008 7:25 AM on post “Two New Slide Shows” (http://blogs.scrippsnetworks.com/diy/blogcabin/2008/06/two_new_slide_shows.html)

21 Comment on Sep 11th 2008 at 8:25 pm on the post “A Great Evening of Blog Cabin Tonight, Plus Something Extra” (<http://blog.diynetwork.com/blogcabin/2008/09/11/great-evening-of-blog-cabin-tonight-plus-something-exciting/>)

footage. In addition, show host Ahmed and show producer Watson posted comments on the website mentioning their concern about Cabincraver2008. Despite this lack of response, this series of coordinated demands made by the audience members demonstrates their awareness of themselves as a cohesive group, a group that provides a service and is somewhat in opposition to the show producers. In other words, the audience began to recognize its role as key immaterial laborers in the production of the log cabin. The organized petition demands made on behalf of a member of the audience led to greater demands which arose from a particular historical context.

Building a Log Cabin in a Financial Crisis

In the summer and fall of 2008, as the 2700 square foot luxury log cabin featured in *Blog Cabin 2008* was being built, foreclosure rates in America began to climb. *Blog Cabin 2008* was produced during what is now being recognized as one of the worst economic downturns in American history. Alongside the homes lost, banks and investment firms began to crumble; several banks which did not fail were purchased by other banks at extremely low prices. Home prices plummeted further and banks stopped lending, further exacerbating problems in the housing markets, resulting in further foreclosures as homeowners saw their equity disappear. This was particularly apparent among homeowners who used non-traditional loans, such as interest-only or sub-prime loans. According to the Mortgage Banker's Association, as of 5 December 2008, foreclosure rates have reached 3%, three times higher than foreclosures during strong economic times.²²

The irony of participating in the planning and construction of a luxury log cabin during a financial crisis was not lost on the “Off-Site Build Team.” During the public/media debate about a proposed government bailout of the financial industry, the audience members of *Blog Cabin 2008* began to connect the DIY Network show, their own housing situations, and the greater political economics of home markets and finance in American capitalism. Alongside the constant focus in the

²² A summary of the Mortgage Banker's Association December delinquency report is available at <http://www.mortgagebankers.org/NewsandMedia/PressCenter/66626.htm>

American news media on housing prices, election-year tax policies, and economically depressed regions of the country, in August the *Blog Cabin 2008* audience members began to consider the true costs of winning a large log cabin in a private real estate development in rural Tennessee, far from urban centers. A first major concern was the income tax that the winner would have to pay as a result of winning such an expensive prize: "...there is such a high tax price just for the house and property alone. I know once winners receive the blogcabin it becomes income earned. Then taxed."²³ Several audience members began to calculate what the tax burden might be. One in particular, Roger in Odessa, carefully examined the sweepstakes rules and came to the following conclusion:

The winner will have to pay income tax on \$750,000, and is likely to be 35% federal, plus whatever Tennessee's [sic] income tax is, plus whatever your home state income tax is (none in TX). I figure that you will need a \$290,000 mortgage to cover the taxes, which at the interest rate of 5.25% for a 30 year mortgage will run you about \$1600 per month. I would want to be making at least \$55,000 a year to have that size mortgage payment.²⁴

StevieT noted that "For a few people \$260,000 or so in tax is no problem. For some it will be possible with some lifestyle adjustments. For most it will be hard to impossible."²⁵ And WarrenOH came to this stark conclusion:

The way property prices are going and will continue for some time the winner will have a potential 'white elephant' on their hands with an ARV [annual retail value] of \$750,000 but a 'real' value (the price it can actually be sold for) considerably less. Unfortunately, Uncle Sam doesn't care about this value, for tax it's just the declared ARV that will be

23 Carrie Miracle on Aug 20th 2008 at 6:21 pm on the post "A Note from the Management" (<http://blog.diynetwork.com/blogcabin/2008/08/18/a-note-from-the-management/#comments>)

24 Aug 14th 2008 at 10:06 pm comment on the post "The Blog Cabin Sweepstakes is ON!" (<http://blog.diynetwork.com/blogcabin/2008/08/14/the-blog-cabin-sweepstakes-is-on/>)

25 Aug 21st 2008 at 11:04 am comment on the post "A Note from the Management" (<http://blog.diynetwork.com/blogcabin/2008/08/18/a-note-from-the-management/#comments>)

used to determine the tax owed.²⁶

In the face of these numbers, several audience members considered ways that the cabin could pay for itself as a productive capital. Given the rural setting and appointments of the home, the conclusion drawn by several was to turn the cabin into a bed and breakfast hotel. This is an obvious choice, given that in the mythology of “home” we often think of the household as a space of production, particularly in rural settings where one can “live off the land.”²⁷ Besides farming, using one's home for hospitality by boarding others is a traditional means of profiting from home ownership. Other ideas included home-businesses such as accounting services, hair salons, dog kennels, or simply as a rental. However, StevieT reviewed the regulations of the private housing development where the cabin would be located and informed the community that “The Deeds and Covenants of the development prohibit home-based business. It’s even doubtful that the winner can rent it out. They want owner-occupiers or owner-occasional occupiers only.”²⁸ Indeed, the log cabin was being built in a privately-regulated housing development with strict rules about land use, landscaping, and colors. These regulations removed the home from the liberal “pastoral” and into a contemporary American phenomenon: the gated community.

If the winner were to choose to live in the log cabin and pay for it by earning a wage in Tennessee, she or he would have few options. The cabin is located in Spring City, Tennessee, population 2025 as of the 2000 census. In Rhea County, where Spring City is located, the median household income is \$30,418 (1999 dollars), \$15,000 below the national average. The average house value in the area is \$76,700 (1999 dollars).²⁹ Of course, these figures are now nearly eight years old, and do not account for economic conditions in the current financial crisis. In any case, Spring City,

26 Aug 19th 2008 at 11:40 am comment on post “A Note from the Management” (<http://blog.diynetwork.com/blogcabin/2008/08/18/a-note-from-the-management/>)

27 This concept of the household as a major site of economic production also appears in economic literature (Keen)

28 Aug 21st 2008 at 9:21 am comment on the post “A Note from the Management” (<http://blog.diynetwork.com/blogcabin/2008/08/18/a-note-from-the-management/>)

29 All figures from the 2000 census, available at <http://factfinder.census.gov/>.

Tennessee would presumably not have the breadth of employment options that the owner of \$750,000 home might require. Knoxville, the closest large city, is over 60 miles away, an estimated hour and ten minute commute. Unless the cabin went to an audience member who could *afford to win it*, it would indeed be a “white elephant.”

These challenges were not lost on the audience. As the season of *Blog Cabin 2008* progressed, and as the financial crisis deepened, the audience began to recognize their alienated position *vis a vis* the log cabin. While they were participating in its design and building a community of fans of the show, the odds of the winner of the cabin even being able to keep it appeared extremely low. As in the *CabinCraver2008* situation, the audience began making demands of the DIY Network. The leader of this effort was Carrie Miracle, who articulately called upon the show's producers to engage in affordable housing:

I believe BLOGCABIN should do some things a little different and really help families dreams come true I Think that with this home being worth \$750,000.00 [sic] it will most likely force the average viewer who is the potential winner to sell. And I have a problem with that. It's a gift it should be affordable... It's a giveaway to make dreams come true so why not make them come true! They also could build on more affordable land to bring overall budget cost and winner's tax totals cost down. Not every give away has to be built into a gated community with an awesome view.³⁰

On another post, Carrie Miracle comments

I know they can build smaller and cheaper [cabins] and just as nice! But It [sic] would be great if they made sure the home can adapt and be used by anyone no matter how old or young or how rich or poor they are. Build different sizes of homes in different types of neighborhoods, cheaper land, smaller home not necessarily a gated estate with alot

³⁰ Aug 19th 2008 at 11:29 am Comment on post “A Note From the Management”
(<http://blog.diynetwork.com/blogcabin/2008/08/18/a-note-from-the-management/>)

[sic] of rules to follow. Put it in a place where the potential owners can have a business and run it from the home and give them a fighting chance to keep the homes built to give away. That would be more of a blessing to your viewers in knowing *they are building something that really helps someone out more so than just being apart of it by blog.*³¹

And, in a completely different conception of what a television contest might mean, audience member katrinc argues

I think the cabin is fantastic and wanted to add that it would be really nice if the winner would donate the house to let others stay in it like missionaries or other volunteers that do so much for our enviornment [sic]. People that help our planet, the people and animals that live here. What a wonderful retreat it could be.³²

Carrie Miracle and katrinc both argue for alternatives to the current Blog Cabin model of building a massive and luxurious house and giving it to a single owner. They were not the only members of the audience to make radical suggestions such as these. Collectively, the “Off-Site Build Team” recognized the contradiction in building a home that many of them could not afford to live in, even if they won it. The contradiction is that despite the fact that they put in so much work into designing the cabin and composing themselves as an audience, in the end they would have no say over how the cabin would be used. Even the winner might be forced to sell the cabin in order to afford to pay the taxes it incurred.

In short, the audience bears a great deal of the risk of producing the *Blog Cabin 2008* media object; they are heavily involved in the design of the cabin and the production of themselves as an audience. And once the cabin is given away, the winner would assume all the risks of ownership, even while being required to make television and online appearances promoting the show. If the winner did not want to keep the home, she would have sell it in a depressed housing market. Gehl (2009, pp. 53-

31 Sep 9th 2008 at 3:25 pm Comment on post “The 360 Degree Online Tour is Live” (my emphasis) (<http://blog.diynetwork.com/blogcabin/2008/09/02/the-360-degree-online-tour-is-live/#comments>)

32 Comment on Sep 26th 2008 at 12:11 pm on post “The Series End for Blog Cabin... Or Is It?” (<http://blog.diynetwork.com/blogcabin/2008/09/26/the-series-end-for-blog-cabin-or-is-it/#comments>)

54), calls this mode of media production the “collective risk” approach, where media companies seek to place as many of the risks of production (creation of concepts, promotion of the media object, and even in some cases content production) upon the consumers of the media objects. Gehl argues that this is an increasing feature of Web 2.0 applications such as YouTube and blogging. While this risk is dispersed as far as possible, the ownership of the media objects remain solely in the hands of the media companies to profit from as they see fit. *Blog Cabin 2008* operates in this way, and many of the audience members recognize this.

Conclusion

Certainly, the log cabin in Tennessee was not actually built by the audience. Celebrity- and non-celebrity-laborers did the physical work (and, of course, much of the mental work) of building it. However, a significant part of the media object *Blog Cabin 2008* is produced by the audience. This is similar to the digital “free labor” processes that Terranova (2000) describes. The immaterial labor of the audience was freely given, not only in the form of design decisions and concepts, but also in the very real work of building and binding together an audience.

The fantastical dimensions of the \$750,000 log cabin – which is, despite its humble name, a log McMansion – clashes with the dimensions of the audience members' lives: one bedroom apartments with no yards and long commutes to work, hospital visits and recoveries, ailing parents and kids going to college, layoffs and hours cut, working and looking for work. All of these concerns are expressed in the audience comments, providing complex pictures of the typical *Blog Cabin 2008* viewing demographic that no Nielson survey could ever uncover. Add to this all the labor that went into building the website and the log cabin – design decisions, debates, the cultural economics of recipe exchanges and personal confessionals. In the end, only one person could win the cabin, and the winner is Gayle Donaldson. The “white elephant” mortgage and tax bill would be hers alone. In the meantime,

despite the demands, the audience members have no sure way to effect changes in the location or purpose of Blog Cabin. But their comments remain on the Blog Cabin website, providing a wealth of ideas (also owned exclusively by the DIY Network, per the End User License Agreement) to show producers and advertisers.

It is not surprising that the audience members expressed frustration at the extravagance of the prize. While it took exceptional events – the serious and publicly confessed illness of one audience member and a once-in-a-generation financial crisis – the audience of this show did compose itself into a coherent political class, just as the autonomist-Marxist school predicts. Their criticisms did not reach the level of radical socialism. No one suggested that they should each literally own a percentage of the cabin, or that they should be paid for their design input. Nor did any member of the audience connect their alienation from the log cabin to the alienation they experience at their jobs.

However, as the \$700 billion dollar bailout package was being debated in the American media and in Congress, members of the *Blog Cabin 2008* “Off-Site Build Team” weighed in. Two comments, part of a larger exchange, are particularly radical. Frances argues:

I saw a commentary on what could be done with the \$700,000,000,000. It could pay for medical expense for the whole USA for 5 years. It could be used in education and fund teachers’ pay for 10 years. It could be divided amount [sic] every citizen of USA and each would get \$2000, that is ever [sic] man, woman and child. There were a number of other comparisons like fund the current middle eastern [sic] military actions for the next 10 years. I agree why not apply it where it would help the people pay their mortgages instead of paying the people that caused the mess.³³

And Blognbob (the audience member who donated an American flag to the log cabin) replies:

I agree with you wholeheartedly Frances. You know, if America bails out these idiots,

³³ Comment on Sep 27th 2008 at 7:46 pm on the post “The Series End For Blog Cabin... Or Is It?” (<http://blog.diynetwork.com/blogcabin/2008/09/26/the-series-end-for-blog-cabin-or-is-it/#comments>)

don't you think we should in essence be shareholders? You know the banks wouldn't hesitate a second to charge us interest. Why then shouldn't we? Or perhaps they could use this money to produce an alternative energy vehicle that could be *given to every family in this country*. No more dependency on oil, cleaner environment, and money well spent. But just about anything is better than giving away our money to those who will likely never appreciate it anyway. And probably just do it again.³⁴

Given these exchanges, and given the demands made by the audience upon the DIY Network, it would not be surprising to see this audience make the next logical step: compose themselves as a class, recognize the value of their immaterial labor, and demand that they share in the profits made by that network as it sells the audience's attention to advertisers both on television and online. However, in my view, a situation such as this is missing a key component: leadership. Anyone interested in revolutionary change in the political economy of the media would be well-advised to look to the activities of users of Web 2.0 applications for raw material. The next step would be to articulate the demands of these users with the broader inequalities of capitalism.

Bibliography

³⁴ Comment on Sep 27th 2008 at 8:13 pm on the post "The Series End For Blog Cabin... Or Is It?" (my emphasis) (<http://blog.diynetwork.com/blogcabin/2008/09/26/the-series-end-for-blog-cabin-or-is-it/#comments>)