

ICEBERGIAN

ECONOMIES

OF

CONTEMPORARY

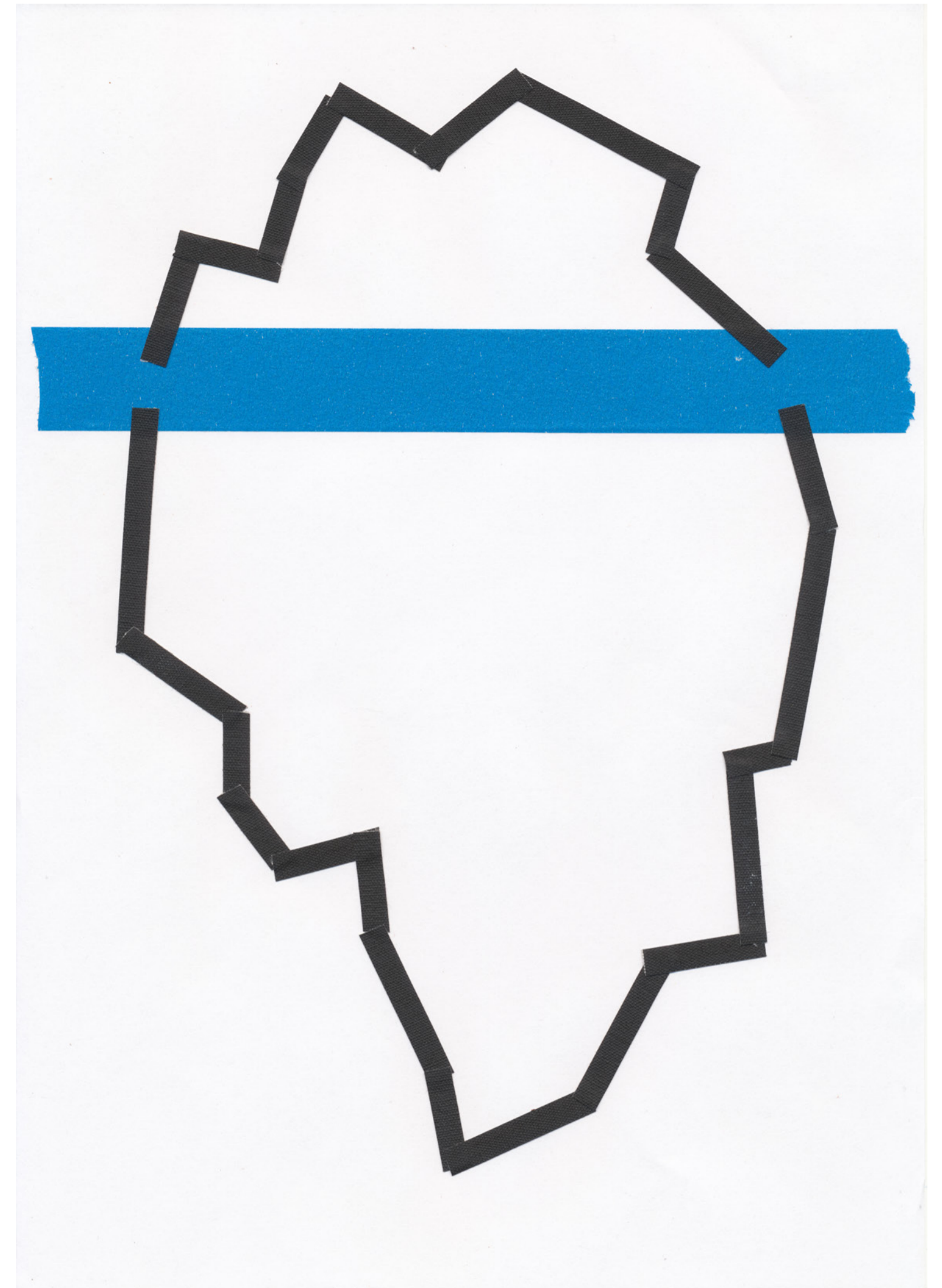
By the Centre for Plausible Economies (Kathrin Böhm and Kuba Szreder)

ART



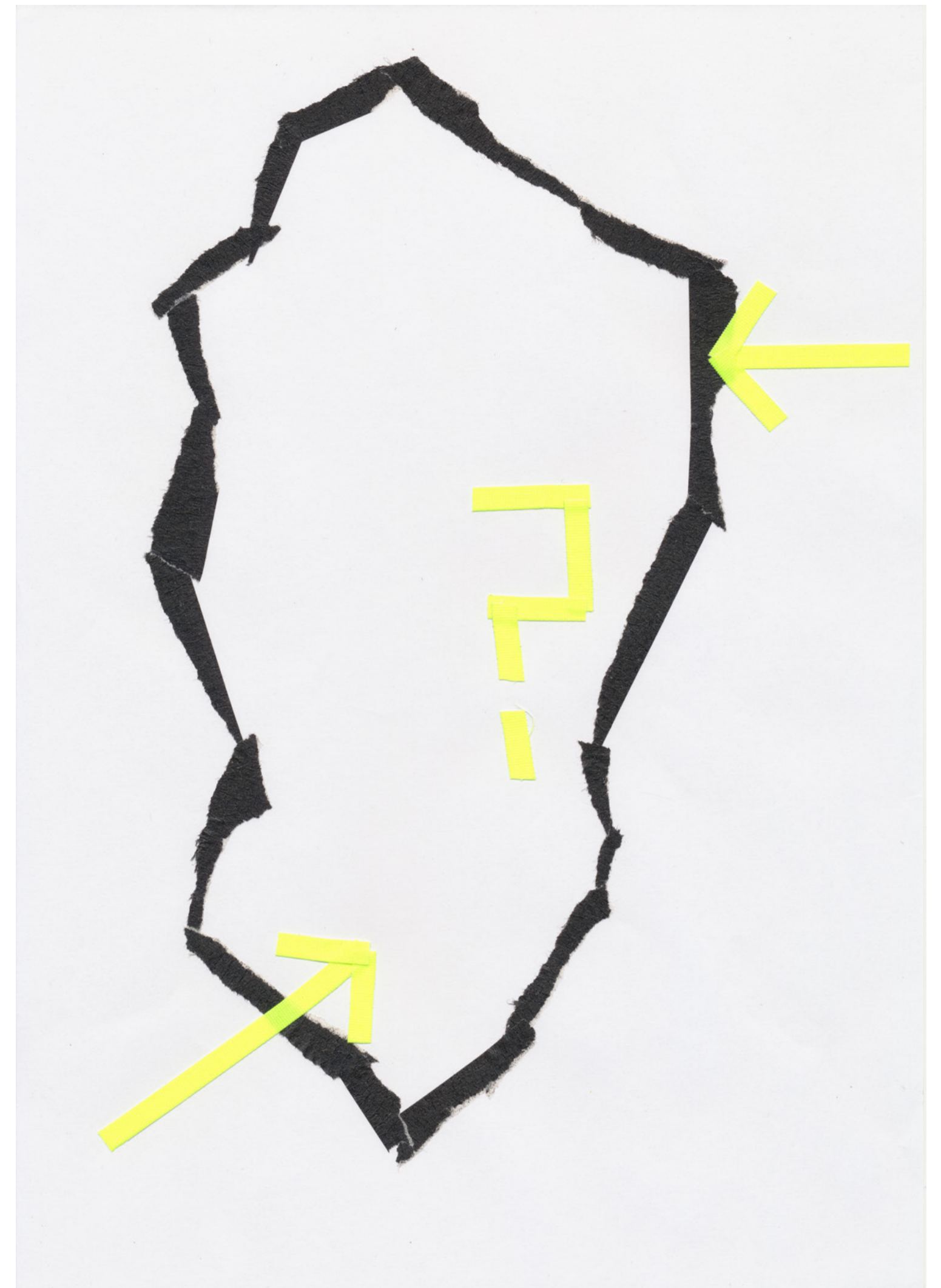
THE ICEBERG

The feminist economist geographers J.K. Gibson-Graham were the first to float the iceberg as a visual metaphor explaining the diversity of economic systems and debunk the capitalocentric visions of economy. They argue that monetary transactions, wage labour and capitalist institutions are like the tip of an iceberg, hovering over a mass of unaccounted labour, gift economies, non-monetary exchanges and human self-organisation. This social mass underpins the capitalist economy, in spite of its own invisibility.



THE INFORMAL BULK

The informal bulk of the economic iceberg is constituted by the care labour of women, without whom nothing could have been produced or sold, but whose work goes unremunerated. It is created by informal chit-chats and exchanges on social media, where people exchange information, maintain social ties and generate trust, without which markets and logistical networks would cease to function. The economy at large is sustained by the exchange of everyday gifts and neighbourly self-help, the formalisation of which would incur enormous costs upon the whole system. Capitalist enterprises are powered up by workers, whose know-how and daily toil keeps production going, value thus generated is notoriously exploited by higher management and shareholders, who never want to pay workers more than they are forced to. The non-human agents, plants, animals, water, soil, and air, are treated as a resource, grabbed by capitalists to fuel brutal accumulation.



VISIBLE/INVISIBLE

The invisibility of intentionally and unintentionally low-waged and free labour, the unaccountability of exchanges, the informality of institutions, and the muted presence of non-human agents, is a systemic condition of their exploitation. They are relegated as mere externalities of economic calculi. They are so easily exploited precisely because they are unaccounted for. This system of oppression has a self-interest to be seen. To shine. To be on top.



BLUE LINE OR THE SURFACE

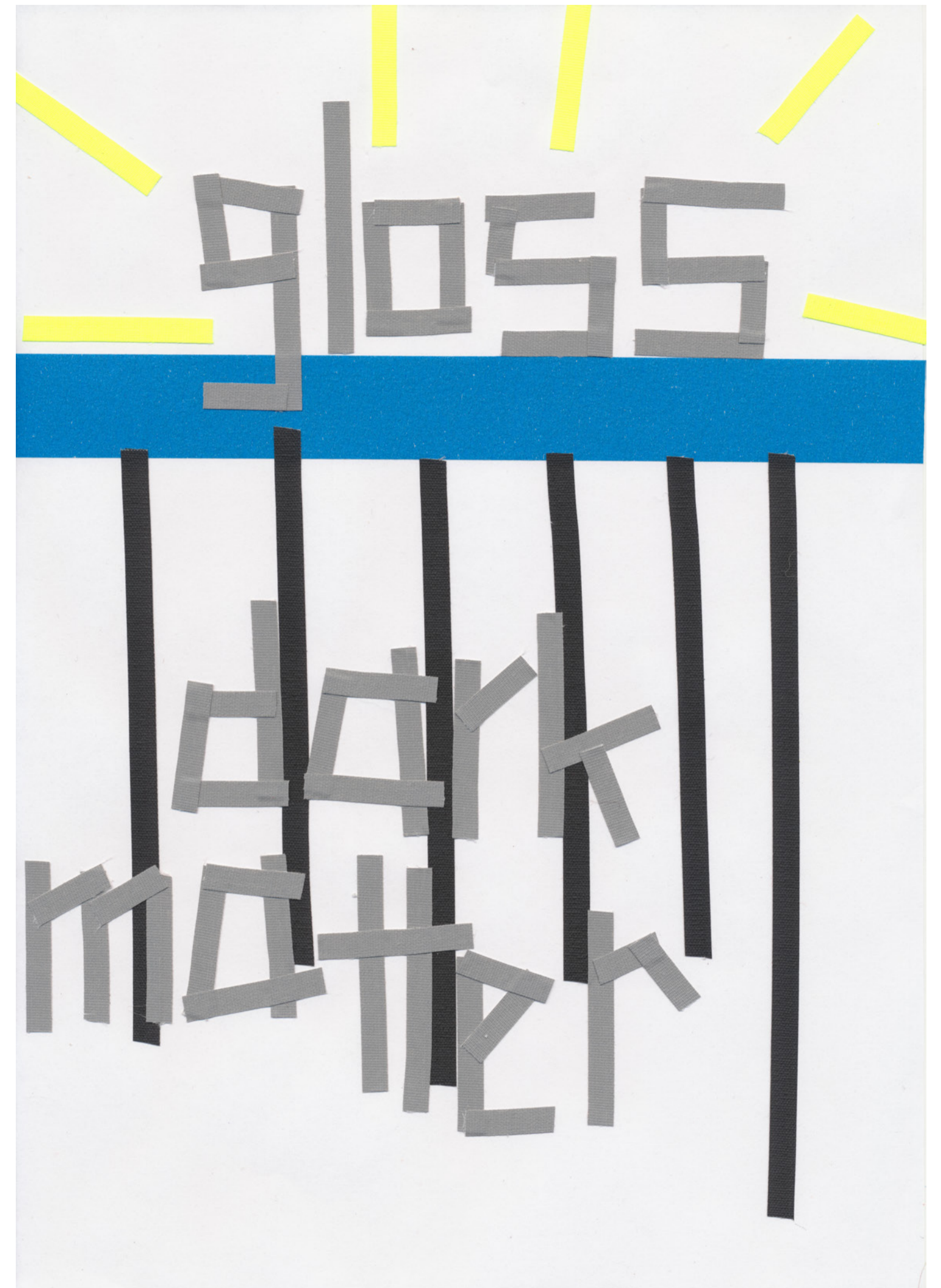
The economic calculations are like a reflective surface of water, over which the tip of an iceberg hovers. Their political pervasiveness is due to their omnipresence, as they constitute an economic cabinet of mirrors.

Images of capitalist splendour, such as GDP figures or advertisements, reflect upon each other, creating an illusion of perpetual growth. The art market is another instance of such self-perpetuated economy. The never abiding circulation of artistic commodities, celebrities, biennales and fairs sustains an illusion of the booming art world. The accelerated movement of capital and commodified art dazzles people, manufactures consent and erases alternatives.



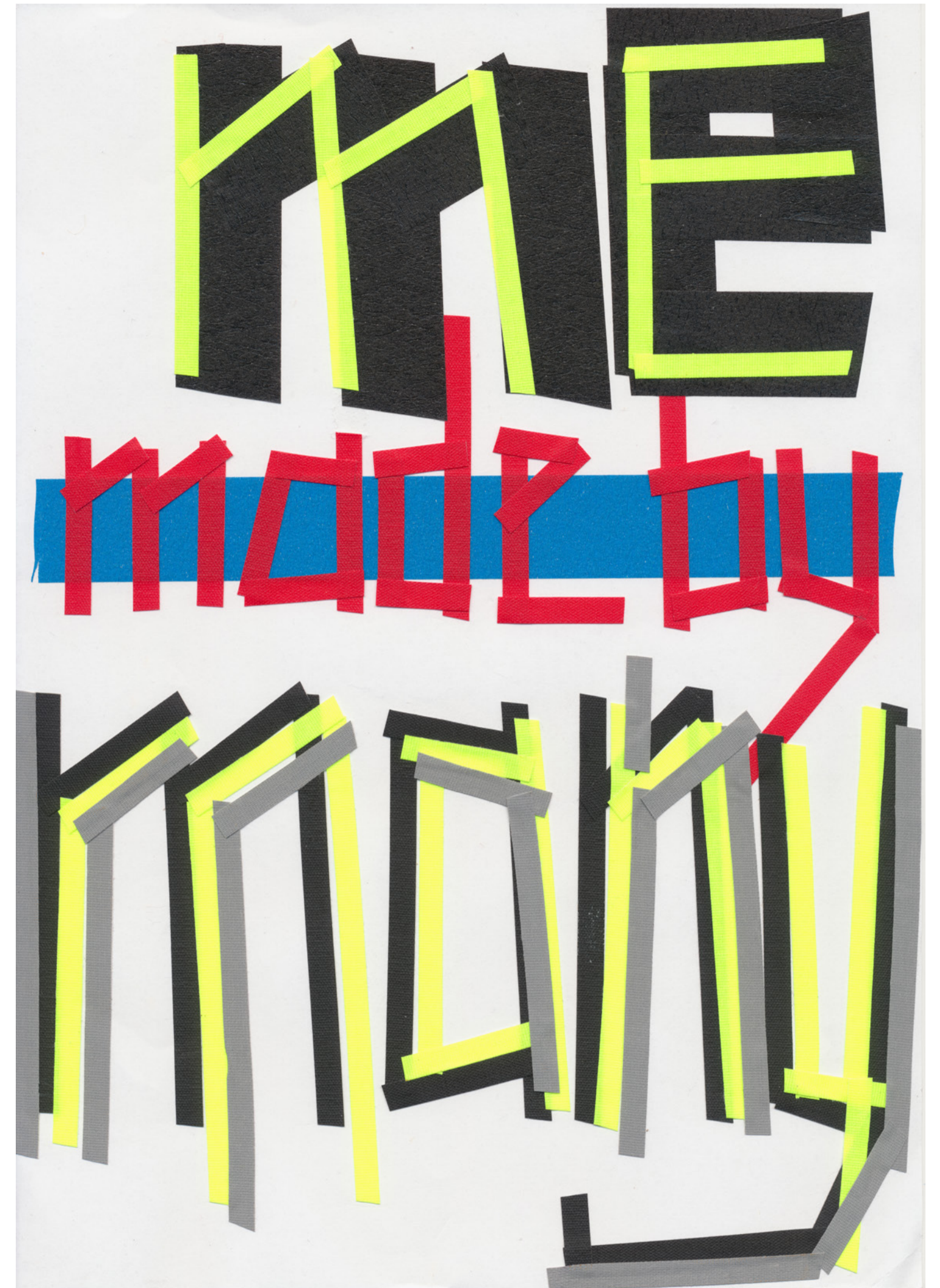
THE GLOSS OVER THE DARK MATTER

Just as the capitalist economy is the tip of an iceberg, the glossy world of celebrity art dominates over the vast – yet invisible – realm of artistic dark matter. This metaphor was coined by Greg Sholette to denote the shadowy realm of artistic labour that sustains the social gravity of the artistic universe, just as physical dark matter prevents the cosmos from collapsing. Artistic dark matter is composed by people who are always beyond the radar for many different reasons and for varied durations. Voluntarily, forced, because there is no other choice, unintentionally, unaware. For a short while, forever, sometimes. One thing does not change. Their unrelenting presence is indispensable for the reproduction of the artistic mainstream. Dark matter attends exhibitions and lectures, takes courses and buys supplies, disseminates ideas and maintains reputations. Just as care labour is demoted to a mere externality of the economy proper, dark matter is erased from the artistic equation, belittled as a flock of wannabe art stars, amateurs or failed artists.



ME VERSUS MANY

Me, myself, and mine. Art, idea, object, commission, position, job and visibility. These all are mantras of the artistic mainstream, obsessed with what Rasheed Araeen exposed as the artistic narego, the narcissist fixation with the individual self, an exaggerated version of bourgeoisie subjectivity, attached to 'their own' properties. However, most art, and a vast chunk of the more interesting type of art, is made by many, by cohorts, bundles and movements of artists, not-not-artists and postartists, people who plot together and make art happen, sometimes in seclusion, at other times revelling in their togetherness. Creating art of the multitudes is like taking a deep breath, our bodies inhale and exhale, slowly, but never alone, always in connection with their surroundings.



INSTITUTIONS / ECOSYSTEMS

Typically, the institutions are built from brick and mortar. They crouch over a chunk of the public realm. They have real estates, walls, rooms, offices, exhibition halls. Ecosystems are not so delineated, but not any less solid. For an untrained eye, the concreteness of grand museums overshadows their social environment, freely exploited due to its invisibility. The institutional landscape of commercial art is populated by dinosaurs: gigantic corporate museums, super-visible galleries, and ultra-wealthy auction houses. They fashion themselves as arbiters of taste, but in fact serve as mere exhibitionary salons for the aspirational middle classes and playgrounds for the ultra-rich, closely integrated with the financial oligarchies and spectacular industries. But there are alternatives, from informal collectives to large museums, who take care of their social ecosystems, maintain the bulk of artistic iceberg, cater to art scenes instead of pampering financial elites, facilitate usership of art rather than mass tourism. These museums decolonize themselves, establish relationships with their constituents, are socially useful, and serve the common by partnering with social movements.



ART WORLD/S

There is always more than one art world. Just as capitalist economy presents itself as an only viable alternative, the proponents of the art market argue that there is no art outside of their own institutions, no way out from the corrupted system, often of their own making. But under this glossy surface a plethora of plausible art worlds thrive. Those cooperative networks sustain art in multiple different forms and guises, from feminist art activists and super-savvy meme-warriors, to guerrilla gardeners and Sunday conceptualists, the artistic dark matter is realm of chthonic creativity. Oftentimes it is treated as a resource by the commercial mainstream, just as humans and non-humans are exploited for the sake of capitalist expansion. But wherever value resides, power follows, as the values generated below the surface, instead of sustaining mechanisms of their own alienation, can be expressed to fuel systemic transformation.



OBJECT/PROCESS

The critique of artistic commodity is as long as modern art itself. It has only intensified since the conceptual revolution of the 1960s. Art objects have been oftentimes criticised as undead fetishes of artistic energies, museums ridiculed as sarcophagi, collections as burial grounds, openings as funeral rites. However, this strand of institutional critique arrived at a dead end, if you excuse the pun, as currently even processes can be commodified. Much more interesting is the background noise of artistic production, usually lost in the market translations. This revaluation also follows a long term trend in artistic theory and practice. Generations of art makers and thinkers deemed art not to be a specific, isolated skill, but rather an expression of human lifeforces and human willingness to play, unrestrained by the deadening regimes of society at large. Such life-art is an expression of creative, social surplus, a collective luxury generated as a result of communal economies. This luxury is about quality and intensity and not quantitative expansion, it is like having a walk, while talking a good talk, picking (fruits and ideas) and brewing (drinks and transformations).



ART/ARTISTIC

Artists, post-artists, not-not artists dwell in the bulk of artistic iceberg. Sometimes, what they do can only by a stretch be called art. More often than not, labelling something as 'art' is motivated by a bad will, as experts aim at denigrating the plethora of artistic activities as 'bad art'. But why limit ourselves to such narrowminded definitions in the time of profound social transformation?

In two or three decades, the towers of capitalist growth will crumble, just as their pyramidal predecessors did, their dust mixing with the yellow sands of the always expanding desert. Artistic icebergs melt as fast as their natural namesakes. While the conventions of art shift, artistic energies diffuse in the creative struggles of life today. The best of former-art becomes not an object to be owned but an artistic competence to be activated, a weird tool that people make use of in various walks of life, an an-artistic practice.



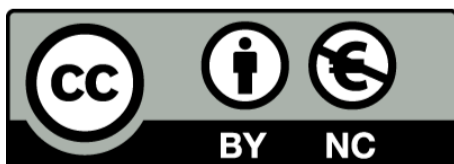
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