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## Give a Quote

### How to (Not) Mind One's Own Business

*Quoting – The Anthropological Dimension of Circulating References*

quote: to name a price

quote: a passage or expression that is quoted or cited

(The free dictionary)<sup>1</sup>

quota:

1. the proportional share or part of a whole that is due from, due to, or allocated to a person or group

2. a prescribed number or quantity, as of items to be manufactured, imported, or exported, immigrants admitted to a country, or students admitted to a college

(The free dictionary)<sup>2</sup>

The ambivalent territory of the quote seems to be a perfect point of departure for opening up and mapping trajectories of debate and reflection leading in and out of a specific series of Irena Lagator's works, which for some years now have been circling around what I would like to refer to as numbered responsibility. In singling out responsibility, Lagator places her emphasis on the fact that we can no longer count on responsibility as a driving force of social coherence. By placing a finger on the issue of responsibility, it becomes apparent that the notion of solidarity is reduced to an old-fashioned illusion outdated, even undermined, by the more recent notion of limited responsibilities, a way of easing out of being held responsible by resourceful delegation. Stepping up to the demands of responsibility is not an easy task.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.thefreedictionary.com>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.thefreedictionary.com>

The word “quote” presents itself as an ideal term to find connections as well as contradictions between the rules of art and the rules of economy. Different systems come with different sets of rules that are inherent to their functioning and their specific generation of meaning. Being part of both worlds, the art world and the economic world, the quote is not only a direct link acting as an articulate semantic interface, but also the material basis of Irena Lagator’s pursuit of responsibility and its rather questionable limitations which reveal themselves upon closer inspection.

The starting point for this essay is how precisely to take into account the void that opens up the fragile position in between these different sets of rules, practices, politics and economies at work within the system of art and the system of economy. On one hand we are dealing here with the economy of the thinking of art, the strategies, methodologies and traditions at work when it comes to quoting. On the other hand, we can join the quote to the terminology of the economy when it comes to quoting a price. In thinking it through from both sides, the price we pay as a collective for the rules of the game called late capitalism is the very quote Lagator evokes through her series of works referring to “Limited Responsibilities”. These works so far exist in an evolving state of slightly varied titles all referring to the relations at work between society, limitation and responsibility. To think of the fragility of this void opening up between the systems of art and the systems of economy, existing as the vulnerable, in between affords the chance to perceive the void as a marginalized, yet strongly demanding, position constantly begging to be filled, refilled and refilled yet again. Daring to go into the void and extract from its depths the strong pulls of meaning working both ways towards the system of art as well as the system of economy characterizes Lagator’s artistic strategies. She manages to engage with the underlying assumptions and principles of both of these systems through the process of going deeply into it and working strongly against it through collecting its quotes, building them up, letting them burn and taking hold of the process through documentation revealing only traces of the process behind it.

Rather than attempting a narrowly defining and strongly denoting description of Lagator’s series of works bearing reference to the issue of limited responsibility, this essay chooses the format of varied responses to a train of thought provoked through her body of work that places itself deliberately in the interstices of economy, art and society. In order to critically reexamine the perpetually renewed and refueled logics and ideologies of the deliriously accelerated meeting ground of the production of art and the production of economy, it is important to face up to the frailties and precariousness of the heartbeat of production in its encompassing globalism. Who can be held responsible for what we claim as a society? Whom can we quote when it comes to moving above and beyond economic justifications by looking back at the very justification that is lacking and openly declaring this lack through the proper terminology of the economic paradigm?

## Quoting One Another

“The face of the wholly other is without a name. The ‘other’ that we narrativize or grasp

consolidates the self, through a kind of *stade du miroir*. Thus, before a fundamental ontology, or a transcendental phenomenology, there must be an ethic of ethics.” (Gayatri Charkavorty Spivak)<sup>3</sup>

“It is a highly unstable theory about the world, which has to assume that vast numbers of ordinary people, mentally equipped in much the same way as you or I, can simply be thoroughly and systematically duped into misrecognizing entirely where their real interests lie. Even less acceptable is the position that, whereas ‘they’ – the masses – are the dupes of history, ‘we’ – the privileged – are somehow without a trace of illusion and can see, transitively, right through into the truth, the essence of a situation. Yet it is a fact that, though there are people willing enough to deploy the false consciousness explanation to account for the illusory behaviour of others, there are very few who are ever willing to own up to that they are themselves living in false consciousness! It seems to be (...) a state always reserved for others.” (Stuart Hall)<sup>4</sup>

A quote is always more than it was before having been quoted. The quote embodies the continuous change and metamorphosis of the original. Through the delicate and precious procedure of quoting, the traveling of concepts, the infectious meeting of new semantic neighbourhoods, the meeting and joining of others with yet again others begins. With the skilful prestidigitation of the quote and its movements of transfer, a part of somebody’s thinking becomes part of somebody else’s thinking. The quote then becomes more than just simply a part of somebody else’s text, more than just simply a part of somebody else’s image. A quote is a circulative form of connectivity, referentiality and even crosscurrents. We ought to say a few words on the presence of the other, on the presence of the one in the other, when it comes to the very act of quoting. What enters through the quote is the porosity of the position of the subject. Quoting, the way it is understood in the context of this essay, is not seen as the prestigious system of heraldic references of academia practicing the boot camp of survival training through footnotes. Instead, it is the theoretical and artistic practice of joining forces with the other, of joining fields and contexts not necessarily related before, not becoming the same through this act of joining but maintaining their difference in what is shimmering through the quote and its meandering transfer from one field into the other.

In this connection, the act of quoting reveals itself as an act of transfer. The transfer affords the quote its transitory identity, its supple difference, its fragile strength. By placing a quote, one makes a new home for it, at the same time allowing for the inscription or attribution of (r)evolving layers of new meaning. Quoting enhances the process of symbolization as well as the proliferation of meaning in production. The quote creates juxtapositions and relations, conflicts and neighbourhoods. The quote, in essence, is the migrant particle forming links between one text and another, between one century and another, between one space and another, between one artist and another, between

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<sup>3</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*. New York London Routledge. 2009, p. 238 f.

<sup>4</sup> Stuart Hall, “The Toad in the Garden: Thatcherism among Theorists”, in: Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Urbana and Chicago University of Illinois Press. 1988, p. 44.

one field and another, between one author and another, between one system and another. Almost effortlessly, the quote transgresses boundaries, transverses meaning and keeps referring back to where it came from, to where it has been before, to the circulations undertaken from the starting point of some kind of original context.

The range of texts, images, information, sayings or events that can become active as a quote, thereby establishing a reference to the traveling it did, transmutes into an activating flow of ongoing and unfolding referentiality. Within this system, the quote is nothing without its surroundings. There is an interdependence linking the quote not only to its source but also to its new contemporaries, its new surroundings, its new neighbours, its new semantic outriggers, its new touching tentacles.

Indeed, there is a risk in relying on the quote's strength; there is a risk in quoting as we always have to bear the responsibility for whom we quote, for what we quote. Sometimes, the responsibility of the quoter is not even taken into account; the responsibility is relegated to the original quote. This strongly resembles the limitations of responsibility Lagator chose to work with. The demands of responsibility made by a quote are the forgotten undercurrent making a claim not only to the act of quoting, but also to the quoter. Between one extreme and the other, relying heavily on the quote and at the same time taking full responsibility for the quote without ever being able to know where else it has been straying or with whose tactics and strategies of meaning production it has been mingling, between being true to the original and being true to the new, the emerging, the not there yet, they who quote are continuously confronted with the two sides of the same coin, the ambivalence of reliance and responsibility.

What power is it that resides in a quote making it the shape-shifting transmutant between the regimes of economy, law, society and art? We might ask ourselves what it means to live in a constantly changing and shifting universe of quotes. What is the price we pay in the name of the quote? One quote refers to the other; one quote is based on the other. Looking closely at the productive force of meaning stemming from quoting, it reveals itself as the productive force that establishes an intrinsic link between the two different economies at work – the economy of thinking on one hand and the thinking of the economy on the other. If we are to allow ourselves to imagine a fragile and yet forceful position of the in between connecting the economy of thinking and the thinking of the economy, then a multitude of possible referential moves, a multitude of outreaching symbolizations will take their start up into the differences of the strata connected through this act of a deliberately vulnerable positioning. Popular strategies of amalgamation and itinerancy shine through the act of quoting. By way of quoting, one makes oneself a part of the collective.

## Being Held Responsible

“Legal objects, signs, forms, rules and decisions are understood, however, to be a special kind of fact, a legal fact. Perhaps we should collapse the distance between the words legal and fact to write legalfact to emphasize the procedures of law that are the grounds for constructing facts, that is, legalfacts. In other words, jurisprudence recognizes at its

core that its truths are created only through its particular processes and that the relationship between legal facts and empirical facts is at best only approximate.” (Susan S. Silbey, Ayn Cavicchi)<sup>5</sup>

“The discussions of the ‘social responsibilities of business’ are notable for their analytical looseness and lack of rigor. What does it mean to say that ‘business’ has responsibilities? Only people can have responsibilities. A corporation is an artificial person, and in this sense may have artificial responsibilities, but ‘business’ as a whole cannot be said to have responsibilities, even in this vague sense. The first step toward clarity in examining the doctrine of the social responsibility of business is to ask precisely what it implies for whom.” (Milton Friedman)<sup>6</sup>

Lagator’s found object of interest, the Limited Responsibility Society, is more than a name, but it starts with what is in a name, turning it into a quote, that will then take on a life of its own. In different countries they are found under different names: in France it is called the Société à Responsabilité Limitée (SARL); in Italy it is to be found under the name of Società a Responsabilità Limitata (SRL); in Austria and Germany it is referred to as Gesellschaft mit beschränkter Haftung (GmbH); in Great Britain they are called Limited Liability Partnerships (LLP); in Russia they are known as Общество с ограниченной ответственностью (ООО); in Ex-Yugoslavia it is the Društvo s Ograničenom Odgovornošću (DOO), and in the US, in all 50 states, it can be established as a Limited Liability Company (LLC).

What is actually a legal name, a form of organization structuring business ownership, regulating partnership structures as well as tax structures, shaped by the reality defining parameters of law and economy, can become a far better model to reflect contemporary society than some of the slowly revolving ur-questions of philosophy. The essential question to be examined is how this awkward compromise of limited responsibility can be at the core of one of the primary organizational models of economic pursuit. How can we as a society accept a concept of limitations of responsibility? Has responsibility, long evaporated from the core business of economy, made its way back in from the margins? A new prose of economic vocabulary is rewriting moral issues into economic matters. Ranging from corporate social responsibility to ethical trusts, these words point at the scars and wounds caused in the wake of the illusionary prestidigitation of assorted magic hats worn for global risk management. It seems no matter how much we may want to, we cannot escape the blurred relationship between billable hours and responsibility, between the logics of accumulation and the claims of ethics. With an astounding sleight of hand, Lagator persuaded local supermarkets in various European countries to hand over their limitations of responsibility. Since the limitations were there in the first place, they agreed to an afterlife of their responsibility in the context of the art world. This transfer

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<sup>5</sup> Susan S. Silbey, Ayn Cavicchi, “The Common Place of Law. Transforming Matters of Concern into the Objects of Everyday Life”, in: Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (eds.), *Making Things Public. Atmospheres of Democracy*. ZKM Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe, Massachusetts Institute of Technology Cambridge, Massachusetts. 2005, p. 556.

<sup>6</sup> Milton Friedman, “The Social Responsibility of Business is to Increase its Profits”, in: *The New York Times Magazine*. September 13, 1970.

shows how the real world is transformed into a quote, into a found object with a life of its own that takes on a rather startling appearance in its next life as part of a time-based artistic process. Lagator exerts the influence of the artistic paradigm of the transformation of reality and the autonomy of transcending it to conduct a perfect study of the driving forces of late capitalism where responsibility has vanished into its new, legally guaranteed limitations.

It is the absence of outrage that is the general currency of now. It is this absence, this lack of direction in flurries and eddies of ideas how to react to this absence of outrage over the lack of responsibility which is very startling. Lagator critically examines this absence through the strategy of quoting and densifying. She is quoting from the real world of economy and transferring the real into the economy of the world of art.

## All-consuming Passions

“We may say that ‘consumerism’ is a type of social arrangement that results from recycling mundane, permanent and, so to speak, ‘regime-neutral’ human wants, desires and longings into the principal propelling and operating force of a society, a force that coordinates systematic reproduction, social integration, social stratification and the formation of human individuals as well as playing a major role in the processes of individual and group self identification and in the selection and pursuit of individual life policies.” (Zygmunt Bauman)<sup>7</sup>

“The commodity’s domination was at first exerted over the economy in an occult manner; the economy itself, the material basis of social life, remained unperceived and not understood, like the familiar which is not necessarily known. In a society where the concrete commodity is rare or unusual, money, apparently dominant, presents itself as an emissary armed with full powers who speaks in the name of an unknown force. With the industrial revolution, the division of labor in manufactures, and mass production for the world market, the commodity appears in fact as a power which comes to occupy social life. It is then that political economy takes shape, as the dominant science and the science of domination.” (Guy Debord)<sup>8</sup>

The quote exists in transfer only. Be it in the world of economic production or the world of artistic intervention, the quote lies at the heart of the deal that is struck; the quote reveals the underlying currents and crosscurrents at work in the wheeling and dealing of representational logics, be they the price that is named or the symbolic value of referentiality that is tagged. The act of quoting is an act of production via circulation. By way of placing a quote, meaning will start wandering, meandering, leaking or seeping from one text into another, perpetrating or referencing one image into another one. Quotes, like money, are wired. This marks their potentiality of potentializing by way of

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<sup>7</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Consuming Life*. Cambridge Polity Press. 2007, p. 28.

<sup>8</sup> Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*. Rebel Press Dark Star London. 1987, paragraph 41.

transfer. The mobility of words as well as of money are placed in new contexts. They become all wired up. These delicate joints of the colloquial, the real and the metaphorical never come to a screeching halt. Quite the contrary, they get wired up, they get fired up.

Irena Lagator works with a double movement which in itself unfolds the telltale paradoxes of strained relations. On one hand, she opens up semantic interstices between art, economy, law and society. On the other hand, she lets the different points of origin leading into her artistic process collapse into one, along the way transforming them. Through what I want to call her specific strategy of working with quotes, she transforms the endless paper receipt rolls from grocery stores into a strategy of alluding to the lost cause of responsibility. We as individual shoppers shape the daily outcome of these imprints on the paper rolls ceaselessly spilling out of the cash registers and their scanners at the check-out line in the supermarket. All these recorded figures on these receipts are there not only once, but twice. One copy is handed to the individual customer, the other one just keeps scrolling in order to take the minutes of consumption. Lagator works with this record. She quotes all of them, takes the rolls and starts building spiraling towers resembling the cityscapes of hypermodernity, only to confront them with their downfall. What the spectators are left with in the end is a frozen moment, a photographic documentation of a fragment of time, a stolen moment replicating the double movement of opening up and collapsing onto the ruins of late capitalism, onto the densely packed rolls of consumer logic towering citylike only to vanish in a slow self-consuming process of burning.

Not only do we consume as consumers, at the same time we are consumed. It is this paradoxical double movement Lagator exposes by way of turning these mundane quotes of late capitalism into an aesthetically striking, ruinous collapse revealing the proverbial foundation of how time is turned into money. What is recorded is the money that was spent. What went into this money is the time needed to earn it. What fuels the fire Lagator lights are the hours of work and the daily routines of consumption. What it leads to is a slow ritual of a melancholic bonfire of late capitalism illuminating the dark of the night. The battleground of cultural wars waged on the fields of excessive consumerism and drawn-out consumption as the state of being consumed is illuminated. For us as a collective, Lagator kindly quotes the price we will all have to pay if we go on consuming without limitations of responsibility.