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Breaking into The Bubble: brand-building labour and 'getting in' to the culture industry

Abstract

Brands increasingly engage aspiring writers, artists, musicians, designers and other creatives as content producers in brand-building programs. Brands present these programs as a responsible investment in cultural production. This narrative obscures the labour of aspiring creatives in both building individual brands and in identifying with the imperatives of branding. In this article I draw on interviews with participants in two experiential branding programs by a fashion retailer and computer manufacturer. I complement these interviews with observations of the programs online, in retail spaces and at music festivals. I explore how participants account for their brand-building labour and articulate their cultural practice within branded social space. Brands' engagement of creative meaning makers deserves critical cultural analysis. Participants in branding programs identify with brands at the same time they distance themselves from their own participation by claiming to 'see right through' brands' claims. The creative labour unfolding in branded social space reflects broader trends in cultural production in the interactive and demotic era.

Getting In

Competitions like HP Go Live are a great way of getting experience in a pretty difficult industry to break into. I entered because I'm working to become a presenter and anything that helps me achieve that is worthwhile. (aspiring TV presenter 1, male, HP Go Live participant)

As part of the 2009 Big Day Out festival device manufacturer HP gave aspiring music journalists the chance to let their 'creativity go live'. They 'auditioned' to be a backstage reporter at the Big Day Out music festival by reviewing their favourite album of the past year and posting the video on YouTube. The winner of the competition, David Murray, told the press he hoped that Go Live would prove to be a 'great boost to what I really hope is going to be my career' and an opportunity to 'get a foot in the door of an industry which can be pretty hard to break into.'¹ Many of the Go Live contestants imagined that being a reporter backstage at a music festival would help them to enter a closed cultural milieu and become a recognized and professional creative producer of culture:

I wanted the shot at the major prize because I thought hey, if I'm in the VIP section I'd maybe have a chance at meeting the inside people as in maybe people who actually work for labels or the bands and artists, or maybe meeting promoters or publicists. And yeah, I'm hoping to make it in the music industry, maybe working for a marketing company or being a PR for some record label. (aspiring music publicist, female, HP Go Live participant)

Contestants expressed a desire to work in the media and music industry. Several were already involved in some way in their own media and musical projects. They were in bands, studying media, working in community media, or ran their own blogs or YouTube channels. Their hope that the brand would offer them access to a closed cultural world is reflective of the demotic turn, described by Graeme Turner (2010) as the increasing visibility of the aspirational ordinary person as they participate in media production.

One feature of the 'demotic turn' (Turner 2010) in cultural production is the spectacle of ordinary people competing with each other for attention and the chance to become a professional producer of culture. While key demotic sites like reality TV have been the focus of much analysis in the past decade (for instance, Andrejevic 2004, Collins 2008, Couldry 2003, Holmes 2004, Murray and Oullette 2004, Turner 2010) brands have also taken a demotic turn.

Branding's demotic turn is characterised by a populist narrative of empowerment, participation and authenticity.

This article examines how brands engage the labour of 'getting in' to professional forms of cultural production. Brands offer aspiring creatives a chance at more 'professional' forms of labour within the flexible, fragmented and decentralised cultural industries (Harvey 1989, Hearn 2008, Lash and Urry 1994, Louw 2001, McRobbie 2002). They exploit the desire of emerging creative meaning-makers, such as musicians, artists, designers, writers and journalists (hereafter, I will refer to them collectively as 'creatives'), to be insiders in the exclusive 'professional' backstage of cultural production. This engagement of aspiring creatives is similar to the competitive spectacle of reality TV programs like *Idol*, *So You Think You Can Dance*, and *Masterchef*. Beyond considering how these programs exploit the creative labour of their participants, this article will examine how aspiring creatives compete to brand themselves and make their creative output desirable to brands. While participants act more like brands, brands position themselves as benefactors of artistic and cultural production. For instance, fashion retailer General Pants pitched *The Bubble* as a 'plugged-in populace for young talent to be found, recognised and nurtured'. *The Bubble* aimed to help artists out of the 'primordial slime of their suburban bedroom' and 'over the parapet' into 'gainful employment' as 'consultants' for the brand.ⁱⁱ

I focus on two branding programs that have created brand content through partnerships with emerging creatives. The article takes an ethnographic approach to the collection and organisation of empirical material. I draw on 23 email interviews with participants in both programs, observation of the programs on line, in store and at music festivals, and analysis of brand collateral (advertisements, websites and other promotional material). HP's *Go Live* offered aspiring creatives who wanted to be music journalists the opportunity to be a live backstage reporter at the *Big Day Out* music festival. General Pants' *The Bubble* asked aspiring

artists, writers, fashion designers, graphic designers and musicians to upload their work to The Bubble gallery for the chance to win mentorships, exhibitions, publications and in-store commissions. The HP and General Pants programs are similar to many other branding programs in the past five years that have created brand content through engaging the labour of aspiring creatives. Tooheys, Jack Daniel's, Coca-Cola, Virgin, Jagermeister, Toyota, Nokia, Converse, and Duracell, to name a few, have run similar programs in Australia since 2005. In each of these programs the brand uses young creatives to engage with popular culture and social space. The HP and General Pants' programs offered (though not necessarily delivered) real career opportunities to aspiring creatives in exchange for producing cultural content for the brand. In both programs some of the participants identified with the imperatives of the brand and perceived that a mutual exchange of value took place. Other participants, often those who didn't get access to 'professional' forms of cultural production, felt the brands exploited their labour and creativity.

The labour of a branded self

In a media-dense social world brand meanings are not simply created within closed spaces of cultural production and distributed for consumption to an audience. Instead brand value is created through 'social relations' that rely not just on the labour of professional brand-builders but also the creative and evaluative activity of aspiring cultural producers and consumers (Arvidsson 2005, Foster 2008, Holt 2002). On one reading of brands this empowers consumers by making brands more reflective of, and sensitive to, the meanings they find important (Holt 2002, Firat and Dholakia 1995). This narrative deserves scrutiny because while people's creative participation gives meaning to commodities, this doesn't necessarily happen 'under circumstances of their own devising' (Foster 2008: xix). Openness in the production of brand meanings obscures the increasing emphasis in branding not on the construction of particular meanings but on the management of the social spaces where brands are made. Marketers are

concerned that brands are embedded affectively within the social world around which cultural actors can create constantly shifting meanings.

In the branding programs examined here ordinary and aspiring cultural producers are engaged as labourers who create brand value by producing meanings that embed the brand within their social world. This labour is immaterial in the sense that it relies on the knowledge and communicative capacities of the participant (Lazzarato 1996). Immaterial labour has symbolic and affective facets (Hardt 1999). Symbolic labour refers to the communicative artefacts produced. In the cases considered in this article these include YouTube videos, designs, photographs and visual art. Affective labour refers to the ideas, emotions and communicative capacity participants deploy to create communities and collective subjectivities (Hardt 1999). In this article, participants in brand programs are considered affective labourers as they deploy their social network, creative practices, identity as an artist and sense of taste to create meanings and communicative networks valuable to the brand. Allison Hearn (2008) extends this conceptualisation by arguing that participants in branding programs not only make individual brands meaningful and valuable, but identify with the logic of branding in producing themselves. In Hearn's (2008) formulation the labour of producing brands within social life not only creates new forms of branding; it also creates a 'branded self'. Following this argument, aspiring creatives can imagine themselves as a brand, self-consciously exploiting their taste, knowledge and dispositions for perceived material gain or cultural status.

Hasn't Channel V got back to me yet?

A consequence of the demotic turn is that as participants engage in symbolic production processes like branding they take on a 'post-deferential' (Andrejevic 2009) attitude. Describing this attitude, Mark Andrejevic (2009: 40) observes that 'as users shifted from consuming mediated images to creating them, they gained a self-conscious, practice-based awareness about the constructed character of media representations'. For instance, despite HP couching Go Live

as a chance to let their 'creativity go live' contestants related to me that HP 'wouldn't just start this competition simply for the greater good, it has to give them something as well' (aspiring TV presenter 2, female, HP Go Live participant). Another realised that they were engaged in HP's strategy to 'flog its latest line of products to the intoxicated and impressionable youth of the country' (aspiring journalist, male, HP Go Live participant). And, he understood that the Big Day Out was a mainstream commercial venture that didn't book bands that attracted audiences who were 'angry people who hate popular culture and that kind of corporate bullying' (aspiring journalist, male, HP Go Live participant). The participants critiqued the 'constructed' nature of HP's claims about supporting their efforts to become professional cultural producers.

This post-deferential attitude was also illustrated when HP's chosen backstage reporter finished one of his videos by saying, 'upload it to the net, share it with the world and wait for the job offers to come in. Speaking of job offers... any minute now... hasn't Channel V got back to me yet?' While mouthing the brand's claims of empowering participation and access to professional forms of cultural production, the participant included a barbed joke. Even though he dared to dream of 'making it big' he 'knew' it probably wouldn't happen.

Andrejevic (2009) suggests that rather than this 'post-deferential' awareness making participants more critically engaged in social and political processes, it instead leads them to be more cynical about the functioning of symbolic communication. This attitude is radically limiting because, while aspiring creatives may 'see right through' brands' claims and 'know' that brands are partnering with them in order to make them and their social world a part of the brand production process, they still 'do' the work of participating. Moreover, they identify with the brand and are grateful for the opportunities it provides. When I asked a HP participant if he felt he played a role in building the brand he replied, 'I hope so. If I didn't I didn't really achieve what I was there for' (aspiring TV presenter 1, male, HP Go Live participant).

The creatives who do get the limited opportunities to go backstage, go on tour, make a record or be a reporter enjoy being treated like an insider. One aspiring TV presenter related to me:

In a lot of ways the whole 'backstage reporter' experience exceeded my expectations. It was completely surreal not just because I got to interview some great bands. I kinda approached that side of it as work, really cool work, but still work. It was all the other stuff that went on around the interviewing and reporting that made the whole experience so special. One of the best parts was running into bands I had met outside of the festival – at the airport or at the hotel – and being able to interact with them in a way that wasn't them as rock star and me as the fan. (aspiring TV presenter 1, male, HP Go Live participant)

To this participant the chance to work backstage in the industry is an 'intensive internship' (aspiring TV presenter 1, male, HP Go Live participant). He felt he was paid for his labour with immaterial benefits like access to a closed cultural milieu and exposure for his own creative work. In the following section I examine how participants both identify with and distance themselves from the brand. This disposition makes the forms of participation associated with branding a legitimate part of the social activity of aspiring creatives.

Getting 'plugged in' to The Bubble

Participants in fashion retailer General Pants' The Bubble program entered told me they their work to 'get noticed' (graphic designer, male, The Bubble participant), 'get exposure' (graphic designer, female, The Bubble participant), 'get a break' (photographer, male, The Bubble participant), to 'get a mentorship with some of (their) favourite designers' (illustrator 1, female, The Bubble participant) and 'connect with the 'design world'' (graphic designer 2, male, The Bubble participant). The program 'seemed like a pretty big deal' (illustrator 2, female, The Bubble participant) and General Pants is well regarded among indie-adopters and trend-setters. In addition to the mentorship opportunities available The Bubble offered a

wide reach to potential audiences and clients, which is really what aspiring artists need.

Being attached to the General Pants company also opens you up to a whole network of

creatives that would be otherwise difficult to encounter without such platforms. (media creative, female, The Bubble participant)

Another posted their work on The Bubble

because of the possibility that it might gain exposure. Participating in The Bubble allows emerging artists to garner an audience, by placing them alongside more prominent artists who are actively driving viewers to the same website (in order to boost their own chances of winning the competition). (visual artist, female, The Bubble participant)

According to these participants, General Pants act as a gatekeeper that offers aspiring artists and designers access to real jobs, clients and 'the industry' (photographer, female, The Bubble participant). They hoped to be part of the 'General Pants iconography' (photographer, male, The Bubble participant) because General Pants is emblematic of artistic production. They felt that affirmation from General Pants would anoint them as an artist. And so, the brand is perceived as empowering, supportive, and offers its own infrastructure to aspiring creatives as a way to promote their own work. As an 'emerging artist you take all the opportunities you can' (illustrator 3, female, The Bubble participant).

My exchange with entrants on The Bubble indicates that some of them did have their work published or used by General Pants and their partners. Some of these contestants were paid for their work and its use in General Pants stores, catalogues and promotions. These entrants generally thought highly of the program and its offerings. For one artist, General Pants were a 'pleasure to deal with and always paid me for the use of my images' (illustrator 1, female, The Bubble participant). For another the 'exposure would ordinarily be extremely difficult to arrange on my own. I have received invitations to exhibit and also requests for prints from people who have seen my artwork in-store and also on the website' (visual artist, female, The Bubble participant). And another has had 'several fashion labels and people contact me since seeing my work there and have asked me to complete paid commission work for them' (illustrator 3, female, The Bubble participant).

Other entrants had mixed experiences. Some were disappointed in the ‘popularity’ (photographer, female, The Bubble participant) based voting of the program. They sought ‘real’ validation from industry insiders. General Pants offered this but didn’t always deliver:

I won my division (or was deemed a ‘Discovery’). The Brand Manager contacted me and said, ‘we would like to engage you in some manner either to produce work on our behalf or to potentially exhibit in store or at one of our events. Have you been working on any art projects of late, or do you have any ideas you’d love to bring to life?’ I told him about some things I had been working on and showed him my website and portfolio. I’ve not heard from him since, and I doubt I ever will, to be honest. I was pretty crestfallen, especially since I was just so excited to win. I thought I’d get published or something equally cool. (illustrator 2, female, The Bubble participant)

And another,

They published one of my photographs on a ‘thank you’ gift card, on which, I’ve heard no follow up. I have friends who have also contributed their writing and art, and who have actually won in their particular categories, but General Pants has failed to even get in contact. (illustrator 1, female, The Bubble participant)

Regardless of whether their work was used or acknowledged by General Pants, some contestants did report that they felt the program increased their exposure. They measured this in terms of enquiries and commissions, but also in traffic and hits on their personal websites and blogs. Just like a brand, the participants evaluate themselves in terms of their impact in the attention economy.

Participants in The Bubble could identify strategic reasons for why General Pants’ ran the program and how it paid off for them as a fashion retailer whose brand values positioned it at the cutting edge of pop culture, music, art and design. Several participants thought The Bubble offered General Pants a reservoir from which they could select promising emerging artists, keep

abreast of new trends, 'styles' and 'interests' and target Bubble participants to 'carry out market research as well as act as a database to send out General Pants marketing to an audience which is already interested in their brands' (illustrator 1, female, The Bubble participant). Participants pointed to how their participation both offered valuable content to the brand and enabled the brand to construct an 'image' of supporting and discovering artists:

To get even more exposure for their brand, under the pretence of promoting 'undiscovered talents' and whatnot. I'm sure they're legitimately interested in showcasing young talent, as the brand has always been about individuality and creativity. However, from a marketing source, The Bubble is an invaluable source of padding up their brand image as an eclectic, arty, indie store. It emphasises their point of difference, it increases interest and demand in their products, it seems a pretty clever strategy really. (illustrator 2, female, The Bubble participant)

Young artists recognise themselves as a source ideas, taste and style. Through The Bubble General Pants could 'milk current pop culture trends using the guise of cultivating talent to develop relationships with their target market and build a database for commercial purposes' (graphic designer, female, The Bubble participant). The Bubble is a way of cultivating and harnessing the affect that emerging designers and artists circulate. The artists here are affective labourers whose ideas and taste help General Pants to 'strengthen their brand image as innovative and creative. It keeps them contemporary and relevant. They also get free art works and designs by artists that are fresh and innovative as part of the deal' (media creative, female, The Bubble participant).

Symbiotic and parasitic

There is a symbiotic relationship to some extent between General Pants and their trend-setting market. General Pants proselytise for the cultural spaces and practices that their brand feeds off (Holt 2006). Their adopter-elite customers reflect the General Pants' aesthetic of the inner-city creative hipster. The Bubble creates a 'pond' of these people so that General Pants can

'grasp inspirations and ideas' (video and photographic artist, female, The Bubble participant) from them. Some articulated the relationship as a mutual one where General Pants 'help out young up-and-comers whilst gaining publicity for themselves' (graphic designer 1, male, The Bubble participant). Others thought it was a more parasitic relationship to 'pretend to support artists' (textile designer, male, The Bubble participant) to poach ideas and generate publicity for General Pants.

One participant described the relationship between General Pants' brand value and the affect artists circulate:

From what I've seen of the store and labels it stocks, General Pants' target audience is trendy and young, with a large amount of disposable income and too much taste to spend it on the latest flagrantly offensive bag from Guess. Artists are stereotypically seen to be all of the above (without the large disposable income). They are living out a childhood dream, their working hours are unstructured and they can do whatever they want, they hang out at trendy cafes and go to exclusive gallery openings in the evening, and they dress with understated style (usually because of the absence of a large disposable income). (visual artist, female, The Bubble participant)

This is a paradoxical relationship. This visual artist suggests that the brand employs a 'stereotype' of the artistic lifestyle to sell fashion. The participant continues:

It is a stark contrast to what can be seen as the blatantly materialistic ideal and sterile aesthetic promoted by other flashier brands – and ironically, by associating itself with creative people through The Bubble, General Pants co-opts this image (and) lifestyle and says you can purchase it. (visual artist, female, The Bubble participant)

The artist goes on to offer insight into their own contradictory position as a participant:

I personally do not agree with the image-selling aspect of the program because I think the image it sells is false (my life is nothing like a childhood dream, and going to trendy cafes would pretty much break my bank account completely). Furthermore, I believe

that people who seek to purchase this type of lifestyle / image are really searching for something or someone to tell them who they are, and I don't believe brand names will ever provide them with a satisfactory answer. (visual artist, female, The Bubble participant)

In this participant's view, General Pants don't enable art as a reflective process for finding 'who we are' but instead deploy it as meanings attached to a commodity for purchase. Despite making this critique the artist distinguishes themselves from this process by proposing that General Pants' use of the 'image' and practice of artists (including her own) is better than the manufactured lifestyles of mainstream brands. This disposition toward participation in brand-building emphasises the openness of constructing particular meanings, and obscures how brands manage social spaces and meaning-making processes.

By reserving a position for themselves as authentic artists, participants downplay their own role in the creation of brand value. Where they might be critical of the 'mainstream' culture industry they miss how The Bubble engages them as an outsourced labour force for brand production. The brand is more profitable by not institutionalising them as a field of cultural production. If it did it would obliterate the 'image' of the artistic lifestyle they create brand value from. While the brand claims they support cultural production, in fact the relationship is an asymmetrical and exploitative one where artists compete to be recognised by the brand. They both sell their labour for free and reconstruct their cultural practice around the demands of brands.

Identification and distance

In addition to giving their artistic output to the brand artists undertake the labour of embedding the brand in their social world (by telling their friends about it, showcasing it on their websites and visiting the stores to see their work). In marketing terms, this makes the brand 'stickier' and more valuable because it is incorporated into the creative and communicative practices of the artists. Participants recounted to me that they 'tell their friends and get them talking about

General Pants' (textile designer, male, The Bubble participant). The artists recognised that they could offer the brand access to their niche audience of peers and customers who are highly engaged with their work. Their participation in The Bubble embeds the General Pants brand in their peer network. For instance, following the launch of The Bubble, General Pants' web developers claimed a '400% increase in unique visitors, 1000% increase in referral traffic and 25% increase in customer database'. Referral traffic is partly driven by artists encouraging their friends to visit the site by embedding The Bubble in their own web and social networking spaces.ⁱⁱⁱ This labour naturalises the brand within their creative milieu and supports the brand's claims to supporting culture. This value can only be made by labourers outside the 'professional' structures of the culture industry they aim to be a part of.

A similar activity was observed in HP's Go Live program. To enter Go Live participants had to post a review of their favourite album on You Tube. These video reviews captured the participant's sense of taste, style and knowledgeable disposition toward popular music. The Go Live contestants act as if the brand is auditioning them for the chance to be a professional producer of culture. Instead, the brands are after the value they generate by virtue of the fact that they appear to be outsiders or ordinary people. As ordinary music fans they appear interested purely in the music. This disposition conceals the labour of making their taste and knowledge of popular culture available to brand for it to use in creating value. In these programs ordinary and aspiring cultural producers make content, while professionals increasingly facilitate social spaces that harness and valorise that social activity (Arvidsson 2005, Deuze 2007, Hearn 2008).

The participants could see The Bubble was a 'marketing ploy' (photographer, female, The Bubble participant) but they also reinforced General Pants' narrative that they 'actually do care about exposing and supporting young talent' (photographer, female, The Bubble participant). The participants generally distanced themselves from the suggestion they were overt brand-

builders. They described their contribution to brand value as ‘inadvertent’ and only ‘to a small degree’ (illustrator 2, female, The Bubble participant) or to ‘some extent’ (artist, female, The Bubble participant). Rather than acknowledge their role as individuals they pointed to the collective value created. One participant recalled:

To be honest, I don't think my contribution to the General Pants brand was very great directly. However, I do believe collectively, having so many aspiring and young artists submitting their works willingly on a volunteering basis does contribute to the brand's image, helping them stay networked and rooted to this demographic. I certainly told my friends that I had entered The Bubble and asked them to vote for me, and I am sure once they did that they lingered on the site, and by mentioning General Pants, it probably reminded that they should visit General Pants. So in a sense I guess my participation in The Bubble helped bring the brand of General Pants to front of mind for more people.
(media creative, female, The Bubble participant)

And another participant said:

General Pants becomes associated with all the different young artists that participate and hence get the reputation of being trendy, cool, artistic, new. They also get participants advertising their work on Facebook, asking and reminding to vote for them, so again the General Pants brand is being advertised and associated with their art. Plus they get free art to hang in their shop. They technically have a free team of artists, designers, writers working for them. (writer and painter, male, The Bubble participant)

The brand is made through the collaborative labour of The Bubble participants. The activity of branding is as much about managing social space as it is about creating specific brand meanings (Holt 2002). Brands ‘constrain’ and ‘cultivate’ the activity of participants within managed social spaces (Foster 2008). Leaving the specific content of the space up to the artists makes the brand appear disinterested, authentic and ethical by enabling them to collectively create the meanings they find important (Holt 2002).

Some of the young designers saw the free labour of getting 'exposure' as a 'necessary evil' (illustrator 1, female, The Bubble participant). To them these 'unpaid competitions often lead to paid work' (illustrator 1, female, The Bubble participant). Others thought that the programs are 'crap' (photographer, male, The Bubble participant) and nothing more than a 'clever ruse in order to really strengthen the brand' (illustrator 2, female, The Bubble participant). Making a living from creative work can be difficult and insecure. Many work for free in the hope of eventually generating an income. One response might be that this is because many more people want creative work than there are opportunities available. While this may be the case, brands are clearly working to exploit this surplus desire for creative work. They understand that the 'possibilities of these rewards will always generate returning participants' (graphic designer, female, The Bubble participant). There is a real discrepancy between the brand that constructs a social space where it extracts real material brand value, and the creative labourer whose affect is the source of that value. The brand controls the value making architecture, while the labourer makes the content for free.

The brands position these programs as an altruistic investment in the arts to help artists get established, when in fact, they continually profit from the fact that these creatives are stranded just outside professional forms of creative and cultural work. These branding programs only work for as long as there is an under-employed creative underclass. Their outsider status makes the affect they circulate particularly valuable (raw, authentic, not institutionalised, from the street) but also not worth paying for (they can be exploited easily because they have no access to the means of brand or capital production). The creative labourers have little real control over the social spaces within which they labour. Rather than challenge these social structures, participants in these programs consent to the brands' claims and managed social spaces. They feel thankful for the exposure the brands give them. They buy into the brand's narrative of supporting the arts.

The participants I spoke with identified with the brand with a similar post-deferential attitude to the HP participants described earlier. They could see the brand's strategic intent, but weren't concerned about the impact it had on their social world or creative practice. For instance:

I think it's a good thing, and have no huge objection to it. As much as I like to think that General Pants does this just because they have an appreciation of art and is interested in helping out aspiring artists, I know that there has to be a business aspect behind it all, otherwise it won't be worthwhile for a company like them to take on such a campaign. But I think the alternative, General Pants having nothing to do with aspiring artists, would probably be worse. So I am glad such platforms exist, and only hope it will take off, so artists do get more and more exposure. (media creative, female, The Bubble participant)

Others had no reservations and saw it simply as a 'fantastic opportunity for young artists' (graphic designer 1, male, The Bubble participant) to get exposure, it 'created opportunities for artists' (illustrator 3, female, The Bubble participant), 'is a win-win situation' (illustrator 3, female, The Bubble participant) and is 'mutually beneficial' (artist, female, The Bubble participant). General Pants 'promotes the arts' and 'this is a good way for people to share ideas with each other and get inspired' (writer and painter, male, The Bubble participant). The mantra of 'exposure' conceals how art not only gets deployed as brand value (which the artists see and say is a part of the 'deal') but also how their artistic practice becomes oriented to the platforms provided by the brand. After making the argument about exposure, one participant did go on to note that General Pants' cultivation of the 'underground' may eventually dry out that underground (an argument Holt (2002) has also made). This is unlikely for as long as branding programs continue to engage creatives as outsiders, held at arm's length from institutions where they would be employed as professional cultural producers. Branding does not 'colonise' creative practices, instead it creates a productive relationship with them.

The brand cultivates a symbiotic relationship that appears partly mutual and partly parasitic (depending on your point of view and subject position in the process). Like Andrejevic's (2008) *Television Without Pity* recappers, once participants in both the General Pants and HP programs felt the brand identified with them they in turn identified with the imperatives of the brand. These positions are subjectively bound, those who got to be insiders thought it was empowering and ethical, those who were treated like outsiders thought it was exploitative. Participants only mobilise personal arguments about empowerment and participation, they don't speak for any greater social, cultural or political values. They appear to evaluate the programs as 'ethical' and worthwhile if there is individual benefit for them, while still retaining the idea of art as a significant and collective social practice.

The consequences of brand building labour

While the demotic turn has increased the ability of ordinary people to make and distribute meaning within interactive media, it does not appear to give ordinary meaning-makers the ability to shape the way interactive space is organised (Andrejevic 2009, Hindman 2009, Turner 2010). Graeme Turner (2010) suggests the demotic turn creates a new democratic deficit. Talk of participation increases while real participation decreases. Turner is not alone in articulating how real power structures are largely concealed behind participatory rhetoric (see also, Andrejevic 2009, Hindman 2009, McRobbie 2002). In my view the cultural production of branding embodies this paradox. Firstly, brands create a narrative of participation and empowerment around their culturally embedded branding activities. This rhetoric of participation is misleading. Participants rarely secure long-lasting and meaningful access to the means of cultural production. Secondly, following Allison Hearn (2010), there is a case to be made that young creatives begin to imagine themselves and their creative labour in the terms set out by the brand, yet they still maintain an imagined distance or autonomy from the brand. Where their creative labour might have been invested in imagining new social and political

formations, it is instead directed toward reinforcing the social and political structures of branding.

This is detrimental because branding offers an impoverished and distorted notion of participation. As one participant claimed his 'generation has turned an artist into anyone with a digital camera' (photographer, male, The Bubble participant). As brands celebrate this demotic cultural production artists sense a hollowing out of the social, cultural and political weight of their creative practices. Nick Couldry's (2010: 13) argument about voice in the neoliberal era is instructive here. Couldry argues for a conceptualization of voice that challenges the way neoliberal logic 'runs together economic, social, political and cultural domains and describes them exclusively as manifestations of market processes'. His aim is to challenge 'apparent forms of voice (for example, practices of 'self-branding' celebrated in marketing discourse) which offer only the opportunity to compete as a commodity'. The forms of participation that branding programs offer claim to support the development of culture but in reality only offer the opportunity to 'compete as a commodity'.

Even though participants might recognise, as one artist put it, that the brand 'only wants things that are 'hip' or 'now' not works of conceptual or intellectual value' (photographer, male, The Bubble participant) they still find themselves participating in the hope of gaining exposure and being discovered. Imagining how things might be different is the work of aspiring, young and emerging creative people. If these people are increasingly caught up imagining themselves as an affective component of a brand, then the demotic turn paralyses our politics and culture. Creativity is reduced to a form of commodity production where aspiring artists, designers and cultural producers attract attention and make value. As they imagine themselves within branding as a mode of cultural production the political, social and cultural value of their activity is radically limited.

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ⁱ Bradbury, V. (2009) Novice's taste of the big time. *Hills Shire Times*. <<http://hills-shire-times.wherelive.com.au/news/story/novice-s-tasteof-the-big-time> on January 26, 2009>

ⁱⁱ From the General Pants website: <<http://www.generalpants.com.au>>

ⁱⁱⁱ From Reactive website: <<http://www.reactive.com/portfolio/default.aspx?project=216&filter=1>>