

EVA BARTO'S GAMBLE



Eva Barto, *The Infinite Debt*, exhibition view, Level One, gb agency, Paris, 4 February - 16 March 2016.



Rachel Valinsky and Eva Barto, Skype, October 2017.

Almost all gamblers soon learn to control their face¹

Opened to almost any page, Eva Barto's first publication, *All in: An Anthology of Gambling*² reads as an accumulation of competing visual and textual registers. First, occupying the majority of each page, are enlarged reproductions of sixty-five texts concisely excerpted for this compendium and selected for their relevance to the notions of loss, profit, and play. Second, and indiscriminately obstinate in its placement, is the title of each excerpted book or essay placarded at the top of its respective page. This and the occasional inclusion of a bill from a publisher detailing the reproduction fee, often overlap with the facsimile enough to disturb the text's conditions of legibility. In the upper and lower right hand corners, values replacing the conventional designation of the page number indicate, on the one hand, the book's production budget, and on the other, the artist's gains and losses. These numbers fluctuate as the pages go on, while the book's final form is caught in the crossfire of an equation determined on the basis of risk. Gambling forms the pretext for this investigation of value and quality premised on the relative availability of funding.

In 2015, Barto received a 3,000 EU grant from the umbrella for corporate philanthropy, Mécènes du Sud, to produce *All In*³. Barto gambled the funds in casinos, charting her gains and losses over the course of one hundred and ninety-five bets which each had the potential to sink the project entirely. On December 11th, 2015, as her activities drew to a close, Barto partnered with artist Yann Serandour and the curator and publisher Jacob Fabricius for a last gamble. The

trio put the totality of the remaining production budget on the line (a meager 1,920 EU supposed to cover the costs of an ambitious two-volume edition, ultimately produced as one volume). Serandour recounts the exhilaration and absurdity of the gesture, governed by a perhaps ill-devised strategy, and the “dumbfounded” feeling that followed as they walked away with 5,240 EU, having won the upper hand.

Barto’s *pari*, her gamble, rests on the production of risk and the potential of loss; a practice wound tightly around the notions of deflation and waste. Plastic chips of course, perpetuate the artifice of money to the greatest degree—a symbolic economy sustained through a system of trust, an agreement on signification. We trade on meanings: a coin grants you so many cents, a bill, so many dollars. As Antonia Hirsch writes, “economy can be regarded as a system in which, through exchange, a type of dialectical operation enacts representation⁴.” In casinos, all exchange is representational. The sordid reality of addiction and neurosis meets the fictional world of possible strategies, within the casino’s illusion of structure. It’s pure simulacrum. But of course, there are consequences to this expenditure. Or are there? Barto experiments with the relativity of cause and effect in loss, in waste, in art. She writes: “In [the] case of no or almost no earnings: writing of a letter of excuse to *Mécènes du Sud*. Try to find money to replay. Play again⁵.”

Incidentally, I can’t get the image of Baudrillard in a gold lame jacket singing his lecture “Suicide-Motel” with a band, in a desert bar in Nevada, out of my mind. A writer who attended this event, a three-day symposium titled “Chance Event” organized by Chris Kraus, remembers that “for a grand finale, one of the Chance Band members found a box of betting chips backstage and hurled them at the audience and everything erupted in an ecstasy of Free Money⁶.”



Eva Barto, *The Infinite Debt*, exhibition view, Level One, gb agency, Paris, 4 February - 16 March 2016.

Speculate

In the exhibition, *The Infinite Debt*, presented at gb agency in Paris in 2016, the outcomes of *All In* and the unforeseen, final, earnings at the casino thanks to which the book could be produced, were re-articulated under the sign of failure. In *Speculate*² (2016), Barto drafts an account of the project for her patron in which she reimagines (we might also say, falsifies) the conclusion of the story, claiming that in fact all the funds were eventually lost. It's certainly a more dramatic fate to invoke, but its assertion as truth follows Barto's subtle use of fiction to enact a series of negations and reversals prevalent in her work. These elusive strategies are threaded from project to project, wherein works are often repeated and modified, cancelled, or compromised. The resulting instability generates a number of difficulties, none the least in the (already failed) attempt at a reconstruction that would render the conceptual, visual, and objectual scope of

her work plain. Yet, her practice inherently and intentionally resists this pursuit. The work recoils, recedes, even as one approaches it, if one in fact notices it at all; its tendency is toward the illegible.

In *The Infinite Debt*, Barto plays specifically with the potential indistinguishability of her work from the existing surrounds, construed broadly as the physical space of the gallery, and the economic and social systems in which it is rooted. The exhibition followed on the heels of a fashion show and Barto used the opportunity to anchor the ensemble of works exhibited through a reference to and critique of the gallery's temporary privatization. Clothing racks and hangers remained on view, alongside new works by Barto. Visitors noted the perceptible feeling of an "aftermath"—evoked by the allusion to a past event and the incongruity of the lingering fashion apparatus within the gallery—and the uncertainty of the space's function, generated by the presentation of competing or dissonant representational programs. Eschewing a kind of immediate legibility, Barto's work requires attention in an attention economy on the wane, and a desire to piece together coupled with the acknowledgment that these pieces may not cohere because not all has been made visible.

What You Got Here Won't Get You There⁸

The induction of this state of impenetrability goes beyond the on-site exhibition context. When Eva and I met at the outset of the research for this text, she expressed her reticence at sharing images of her work at [all](#)⁹. This *prohibition* on circulation has become an integral element of her practice. It applies not only to reproduction for publication (the reader will note the conspicuous absence of conventional illustration); here, it was also invoked as a challenge to the apparatus of critical writing.

Eva and I agreed that the text should effect an intentional de-emphasis and deflation of the formal, avoiding a descriptive modality which could not do justice to the visual or spatial qualities of the works, themselves often ancillary to each project's complex conceptual basis. But how? This produced a number of methodological impasses, or potential impasses. How to write without an image, in the absence of documentation, in the interdiction of the image's circulation?

Certainly, the descriptive modality of so many press releases, catalog essays, and reviews—the dreary way in which this manifests as insufficient tautology—is a phenomenon analogous to the all-too pervasive distribution of images, through which the work is decontextualized and placed within an endless cycle of dissemination and consumption that nearly ravages any sense of its ideational register and relegates it to the commodified regime of the visual. Barto's fraught engagement with images and their circulation does not constitute, however, a whole-hearted anti-aesthetic. Images leak, of course. And some are even leaked by the artist herself—though they always seem to present everything *beside* the work¹⁰. Rather, she rejects the notion that the artwork's *meaning* or *value* could be experienced as such, emphasizing instead the importance of the network of relations, exchanges, and dynamics that vectorize the work's production,

mobility, and (albeit dispersed) reception.

Barto has clearly learned the lessons of conceptual art's upbringing in the age of advanced capitalism; she has assimilated the ways in which the so-called *dematerialization* of the artwork encouraged, rather than warded off, the commercialization of such non-object-based art. As many scholars have noted, the exhibition and circulation of artworks in the guise of innovative catalogs and printed matter, the relocation of art from an object to an image regime, and the historical transformation of the role and labor of the artist signaled by conceptual art, in time all lent themselves with ease to the logic of marketing, publicity, and global capital¹¹. In the contemporary context, this recognition gives way to what Peter Osborne has called the "post-conceptual" condition of art: transcategorical, enmeshed in the "dialectical constellation of the *aesthetic*, *conceptual*, and *distributive* aspects of art," post-conceptual art "registers the historical experience of conceptual art as a self-conscious movement, as the experience of the impossibility/fallacy of the *absolutization* of anti-aesthetic, in conjunction with a recognition of an ineliminably conceptual *aspect* to *all art*¹²."

The contemporary ubiquity of images and seeming boundlessness of their circulation in an age of "irreversible" proliferation has brought about, as David Joselit has argued, a shift in the regime of value within which images operate. Rather than merely document or "*witness* history, they constitute its very currency¹³." Thus, the mobility of images is inextricably entangled with their commercial viability. Where some artists have addressed this emergent phenomenon through a saturation of the image field, others like Barto have opted instead for visual withdrawal¹⁴. To talk about the work in the absence of the work's presence, then, requires a discussion of its operations which is attentive to each project's specific conditions of emergence alongside its drive for loss and tendency toward amnesia (consider the subtle intervention in the space that the visitor does not see, the letter placed in a drawer that is only half open, the crucial conversation to which we are not privy). Approaching the problem from a similar direction, Monika Szewczyk has noted the importance of thinking through the phenomenon of the blank, for instance, without speaking of its value, but rather, by unveiling one's investments in it¹⁵. This aspiration is likewise articulated in Joselit's attempt to imagine "how art can function as a currency without falling into monetization¹⁶." Barto's work lends itself well to this form of discursive "forecasting" and "speculating" even as it invokes and undermines those procedures consistently in its own processes and fictionalizations.



Eva Barto, *L'Abandon au profit* (2016), book, 180 pages, black and white. Graphic design: Bureau Roman Seban. Financed by the Biennale de Rennes. Book production cost: 2880.50 Euros.

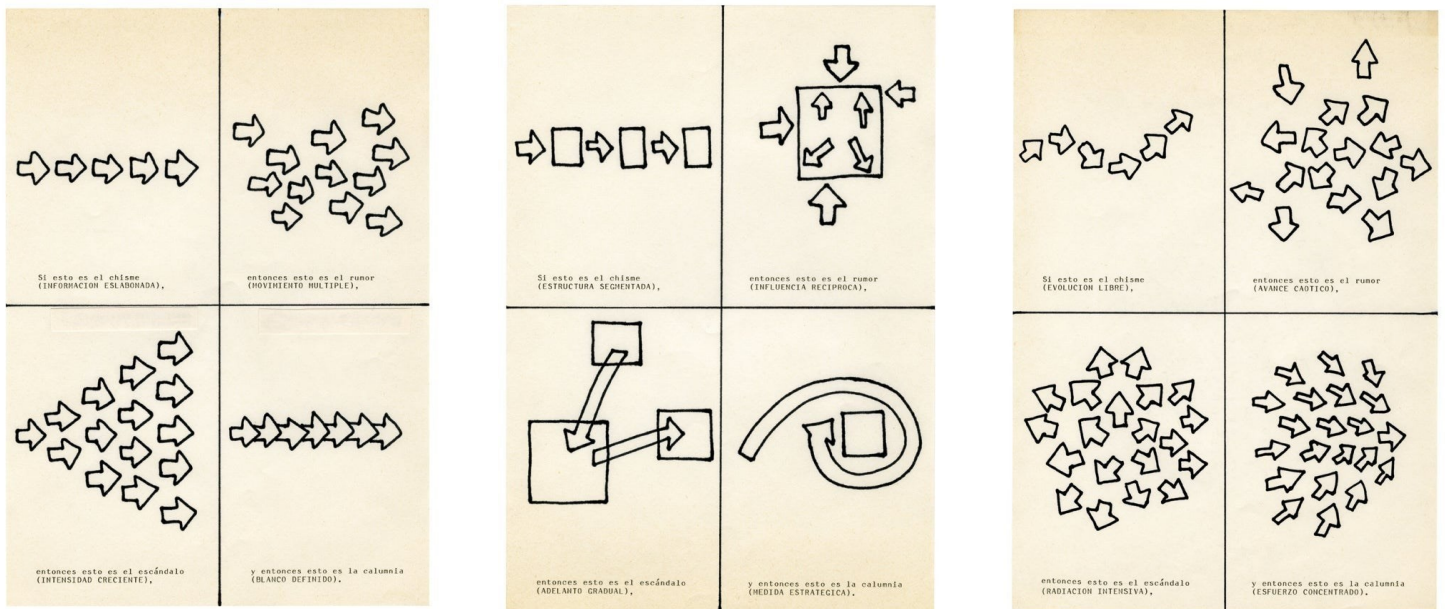
Rumor and Abandonment

For her contribution to the 2016 Ateliers de Rennes, curated by François Piron and Marie de Gaulejac, Barto published the 224-page book, *L'Abandon au profit*¹⁷ (Give Way to Profit). Eva hands me the small white volume at lunch, then quickly grabs it back from my hands and tears the spine apart to create two discrete objects. This is how a visitor to Biennale de Rennes might have encountered the work, except the books were physically dispersed, such that to gather the pieces and reassemble them first involved a rather indeterminate process of tracking them down¹⁸. This format of diffusion capitalized on the circulation of information through rumor and word of mouth. One was unlikely to acquire both parts of the book without actively participating in a networked search for the object whose generic appearance and fragmented assemblage resisted being found. Barto's reliance on rumor as a mode of information dissemination denied the reductive profiling of the work perpetuated by press releases and marketing materials, substituting it instead with an idiosyncratic

social system's output, run through the rumor mill. This opens the doors to all sorts of *other* information, be it erroneous, misguided, or partial. The scatter and dispersal through rumor grows organically; its vectors are social and spatial, its outcomes multiple and unpredictable. Consider, for instance, the visualization of this scatter in three of Ulises Carrión's 1981 hand-drawn diagrams, *Gossip*, *Scandal*, and *Good Manners*. In contrast to gossip, scandal, and slander, rumor's flows are multiple, its directionality chaotic, its influence reciprocal¹⁹.

The first part of the book is the thickest; its cover bears the imprint of a number of corporate and regional, cultural organization logos, from Lafayette Anticipation to Art Norac, as well as Lendroit éditions (Buttonwood Press's co-publisher for this title). The textual contents have predominantly been redacted. Barto's project involved the collection and publication of all correspondence between the administration of the Ateliers de Rennes, the curators, and the artists, concerning budgetary matters. Yet, the request for complete transparency was denied by the administration of the Biennale. Instead, this correspondence was redacted to exclude any and all specifics, namely the identity of the interlocutors in question, the works and projects under discussion, and the many financial negotiations at play to ensure their timely and satisfactory realization. What remains amidst the censored, erased dialogue is a skeletal architecture of negotiation: the language of bargaining and compromise, the struggle for adequate funding and wages for labor, the limitations of inflexible institutional budgets, the conversational dead-ends and ultimatums that emerge under duress, the "bad news" email under whose weight the scope of an entire project can become unrealizable. Devoid of its particulars, the text points to the shape of propositional convention, contractual vagary, contingency plans.

The second part of the book is a slim index. Like any good index, it assists the reader as a search tool, but here, it also provides much of the key details lacking in the first part: dates, names of senders, receivers, and Cc'd correspondents, message subject lines, budgets listed by amount, institutional affiliations and job titles. With some effort, all these can be traced back to their corresponding pages and placed in chronological order. If you go through the trouble, their narratives—true and fictional—might be gleaned or imagined. The *blank* space of the censored text, covered in black redaction ink, can be actively reinvested.



Ulises Carrión: Gossip, Scandal, and Good Manners (explanatory diagrams of the theory of rumour), 1981. Images courtesy of Archivo Lafuente.

The Draw of the Absolute

Despite its many functionalities, the index has a tendency to read as an accumulation of abstract data which distills the nuanced concepts or rich histories referenced into a searchable set of core values. Barto takes advantage of the form of the index precisely to provide multiple points of entry into the work, just as the work itself produces multiple points of departure for the viewer. She is interested in the way in which the index welcomes a mode of reading or viewing that is necessarily abstract and abstracting. In this way, she enjoys causing a disturbance to the principle of referentiality that organizes the index, be it through the withdrawal of the visual or the erasure of the textual. In a small booklet titled *untitled (1)*²⁰ published on the occasion of the 2016 group exhibition *Habits and customs of _____ are so different from ours that we visit them with the same sentiment that we visit exhibitions* at Kadist in Paris, Barto collected the titles of works she produced between 2013 and 2016 (we might note, most if not all of which were absent from the exhibition). Each title has been numbered and placed in chronological order and two supplementary, superscript notations indicate, on the one hand, the year of production, and on the other, the “medium” and materials. *Untitled (1)* eschews external reference, instead pointing inward toward a self-enclosed and interlinked set of phrases and figures that produce the “object” itself—should there be one at all—as sheer surplus or excess. In other words, the artwork’s materiality, its physical presence, is presented as superfluous to the logic of cataloging.

The two key operations I have been tracing—the refusal of image reproduction and the frequent obstructions to found texts—are indeed synthesized in the interpretive apparatus that the artist develops and disseminates herself. Here, I am referencing what comes closest to the conventional form of the floor plan or checklist. In her hands, these generic formats become platforms and pretexts for

elaboration. For her 2016 solo exhibition, *to set property on fire*, which followed her semester-long residency at the Villa Arson in Nice, Barto overwhelmed the subtle interventions made by the works on show—often modest, somewhat destitute, nondescript, and dysfunctional objects—with a dense, numbered floor plan referencing all fifty-five works exhibited, one of which lives online, while two others are identified as “dispersed” throughout the show.

Buttonwood, for instance, refers to a tree of that species “planted in the garden [of the Villa Arson] for the time of the exhibition, before being moved to a public place determined by future investors²¹.” *Buttonwood* is also, you’ll remember, the name of her publishing imprint, which Barto specifies is “dedicated to a collection of 10 books each of which is based on the interpretation of an economic issue ensuing from its financial supporter²².” The name of course is a reference to the Buttonwood Agreement, dated May 17, 1792, which quoting Wikipedia on the press’s website, Barto notes “started the New York Stock & Exchange Board now called the New York Stock Exchange. This agreement was signed by 23 stockbrokers outside of 68 Wall Street New York under a buttonwood tree²³.”

This complex floor plan serves as the book jacket for her second Buttonwood Press publication, *L’Histoire des grands fourbes et du coupable absolu*²⁴ (*The Story of the Great Double-Dealers and of the Absolute Culprit*), a work in itself, as by now you have guessed, which she developed over the course of research during her residency. Both in its process of production and resulting aesthetic, the book operates midway between *All In* and *L’Abandon au profit*. It is made up of appropriated texts the artist found through various Google Book searches; specific phrases have been singled out against an otherwise dark background in the place they originally appear within the spatial configuration of the page. Each excerpted page has been erased or blacked-out, save for the sentence or paragraph that was spared.

A narrative can be detected within these fragments. They tell of the drama of Pierre-Joseph Arson (1778-1851), a rich banker, merchant, and politician who gave his name to the Villa Arson, built in the 1960s as a museum and research institute for contemporary art. Arson’s encounter with the Polish mathematician Hoëne Wronski had a decisive effect on his life: he hired him as a private tutor and commissioned him to develop scientific research that would elucidate the secret of the *Absolute*. Arson’s fortune was spent on this patronage, which cost him exorbitant amounts and for which, once he became unwilling (and unable) to pay, Wronski pursued him in court, causing great social uproar. The story, which made the rounds in the local papers, was picked up by Honoré de Balzac as the basis for his short novel *The Quest of the Absolute* published in 1834. This historical and later fictionalized drama fueled Barto’s research and exhibition and constitutes a narrative thread through which the questions of patronage, property, loss, bankruptcy, and speculation are constellated.

85	<i>Offshore</i> , 1-120	111	<i>Single objects</i> , 1-162
86	<i>Ouroboros</i> , 4-7	112	<i>Single various paradoxes</i> , 1-168
87	<i>Ownership in crisis</i> , 1-8	113	<i>Slush fund</i> , 1-53
88	<i>Pas d'enjeu</i> , 2-158	114	<i>Sorry for plagiarism</i> , 2-128
89	<i>Patience</i> , 2-142	115	<i>sorry for plagiarism</i> , 2-129
90	<i>Patience</i> , 2-80	116	<i>Speculate</i> , 4-118
91	<i>Paysage partiel</i> , 1-58	117	<i>Step on</i> , 2-31
92	<i>Player</i> , 2-152	118	<i>Strategy</i> , 2-129
93	<i>Please help objects to resist</i> , 1-102	119	<i>Successful fauce</i> , 1-66
94	<i>Precision missing</i> , 2-16	120	<i>Support</i> , 1-98
95	<i>Pretend authenticity</i> , 2-147	121	<i>Survival</i> , 2-36
96	<i>Prolongement creux</i> , 1-59	122	<i>That person</i> , 2-40
97	<i>Promesse d'endettement provisoire</i> , 1-42	123	<i>The cababitation</i> , 1-87
98	<i>Promise</i> , ... -54	124	<i>The collector</i> , 1-10
99	<i>Protecting your conscience</i> , 1-78	125	<i>The contradiction</i> , 1-96
100	<i>Quit disorder</i> , 1-109	126	<i>The empty shell</i> , 1-17
101	<i>Regrets</i> , 2-88	127	<i>The evidence</i> , 2-165
102	<i>Regrets (twice)</i> , 2-90	128	<i>The evidence of control</i> , 4-133
103	<i>Repeat, increase</i> , 2-72	129	<i>The following contradiction</i> , 2-95
104	<i>Right to be forgotten</i> , 2-111	130	<i>The gamblers (Négociation)</i> , 2-172
105	<i>Samples for mimetism</i> , 2-46	131	<i>The gamblers (negociation)</i> , 2-170
106	<i>Sans valeur</i> , 2-44	132	<i>The increasing promotion of artists</i> , 2-168
107	<i>See you next week in Venice 1/3</i> , <i>Cultural events and fixed-term employment</i> , 2-37	133	<i>The infinite debt</i> , 2-164
108	<i>Self service</i> , 1-159	134	<i>The infinite debt</i> , 4-87
109	<i>Sign, own</i> , 2-89	135	<i>The invitation afterwards</i> , 2-60
110	<i>Signs</i> , 2-146	136	<i>The lonely player</i> , 4-79
		137	<i>The non-professional forger</i> , 2-171
		138	<i>The object of discordance</i> , 2-76

Eva Barto, untitled (2016) (Paris: Kadist / Castlemaine, Australia: 3-ply, 2016).

To Own, to Borrow, to Steal

Appropriation, and the ensuing processes of erasure and censorship to which Barto subjects texts, are at once authored and anonymizing operations. Authored, in that a large degree of agency and intent is maintained in the selection of materials and the further specification of passages to be left visible or occluded. Yet the process also engenders a certain degree of anonymity and desubjectivization²⁵. Texts, and by extension, the associated book and work, are rendered largely authorless, their indexicality doubly destabilized through the removal of the referent and the formal logic of erasure.

Or authorship is radically relocated, when a primary source has been significantly appropriated, usurped, even plagiarized. See the bicycle parked outside of Primo Piano during her 2015 exhibition, *truthful*, in which Barto copied, with a slight modification, the work *battlefield #101/bikes* (2014) by Jérôme Leuba, installed in Steinfelsplatz in Zurich. Barto's copy of this already unassuming and inconspicuous object took the photographic documentation of the "original," vandalized bicycle as a model. As a result, Barto's bicycle, *The Thief*²⁶ (2015), only exhibited the appearance of Leuba's on one side, the other remaining intact. Testing the conceptual limits of the illicit copy, Barto simultaneously issued the generic letter, "*Sorry for plagiarism*,"²⁷ an unprompted apology addressed to unnamed authors or artists, in which she admits to her imposture, lack of originality, and theft. The letter has since been frequently republished, its addressee each time left unknown.

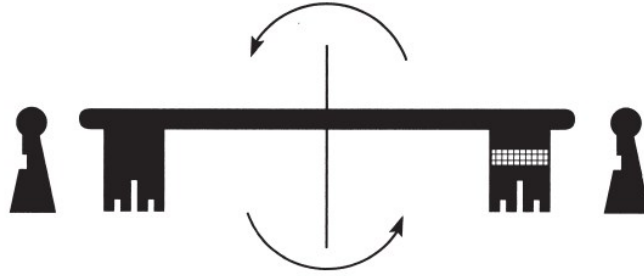
This negotiation of authorial claims, on the one hand, and reframing of authorship through copy and plagiarism, on the other, complement Barto's investigation of the conditions and consequences of patronage and ownership that traverse the work of art. The work *Temporary Debt Promise*²⁸ (2016-) has become an important touchstone for the artist since its development for the gb agency

exhibition in 2016 and further elaboration, for instance, at Kadist the same year. The work interrogates the act of collecting by establishing a contractual relationship between the artist and the signatory. According to the document, the institution or private collector engages Barto to produce an artwork of equal value to the amount of financial support they provide to the artist—an amount which also determines the date of delivery of the work to the collector²⁹. The collector's possession of the work is assured but also displaced, delayed³⁰. In the intervening time, the artist is, for all intents and purposes, indebted to the collector, while the work accrues interest in relation to the number of signatories of individual contracts. There are a number of important claims made by this work; namely, that the contract makes explicit the dynamics of patronage and their effects on the conditions of artistic labor and production, by tailoring the artwork to the specific terms of its own monetization, and that the ultimate value of the artwork derives from the speculative accumulation of capital and debt³¹.

Barto's interest in the social, political, and economic dimensions of debt are influenced in part by Maurizio Lazzarato's important theorizations on the matter in *The Making of the Indebted Man*. Lazzarato's discussion of the asymmetrical relations of creditor/debtor aims to rephrase the paradigm of the social away from the concept of *exchange* and toward one of *credit*. Debt comes to define all social relations. And in the same way that time has already been speculated on in the *Temporary Debt Promise*, in a debt economy, one is deprived of the future: "time, time as decision-making, choice, and possibility," writes Lazzarato, has already been bought up³².

It's interesting to trace how these central works move through Barto's various projects and exhibitions. At gb agency, the *Temporary Debt Promise* appeared, for instance, as a draft within another work titled *To Borrow, to Steal*³³ (2016). It was inserted within the inner cover of a book which had been borrowed but never returned to the public library in Clignancourt. The slightly altered book was, unsurprisingly, a French copy of Lazzarato's essay, *La Fabrique de l'homme endetté*. To own *To Borrow, to Steal* is in fact to inherit a stolen book and partake in the illicit logic of acquisition of the object in the first place; it is, in effect, to value and compensate theft.

Many works indeed resurface across Barto's work, while others echo each other in their parallel logics. At gb agency, the motif of the *ouroboros* provided another important direction and dynamic. The *ouroboros* is a snake, endlessly reaching for its tail to bite. It is the image of a reptile fixed in a perpetual, devouring cycle. A symbol of circularity and circuitry, the *ouroboros* is the mascot for a game of circulation that only ever moves internally. In the work *Ouroboros*³⁴ (2016), Barto sent mail that had been addressed to the gallery to a fictional offshore company of her invention named Trust³⁵. The shell company was theoretically registered to the gallery's address, but was in no way operative³⁶. Thus, the mail, released back into circulation through the postal service, was returned to the gallery, addressed to *Trust*.



The Berlin Key in: Bruno Latour, *Petites leçons de sociologie des sciences*, 1993. [1996 Pocket edition: *Petites leçons de sociologie des sciences*, Points Seuil, Le Seuil, Paris; 2006 new Pocket edition by La Découverte] See online PDF.

How to Do Things with Gifts

This cyclical logic returns in the motif of the Berlin key, the subject of a case study by Bruno Latour, that takes the curiosity of the key's two-sided, symmetrical design, as a starting point for a discussion of technology's social operations³⁷. The key was in use in West Berlin before the fall of the Wall; in the scenario he describes, the key serves a regulatory social function, binding tenants, visitors, and property owners through the negotiation and restriction of access to residences. Due to its design, the key paradoxically only grants entry on the condition that it also encloses. The key must be pushed through the lock to enter and turned in the lock once more, thus locking the user inside their property. Conversely, to leave the space, or remove the key from the lock is to leave the door unsecured.

Latour's diagrammatic rendering of the Berlin key featured in his essay served as a basis for Barto, who recreated it as one of the many components making up the work *Free Gift*³⁸ (2017), perhaps the most incongruously and brazenly sculptural work in Barto's repertoire³⁹. *Free Gift* is an unwieldy thing, first on view at the Fondation d'entreprise Ricard, and modified for the group show *Mechanisms*, curated by Anthony Huberman at the CCA Wattis in San Francisco. Its very thingliness, its cogent materiality, might have in fact provided ample cause to discuss it in this text's closing remarks: we might have ended on solid ground. Yet by now we have learned to anticipate Barto's thwarting of such forms of closure.

The work references, on the one hand, the paradoxical formulation, "free gift," often employed in Japan, where the artist has spent some time. Barto takes interest in the reciprocally binding social effect and affective charge of the gift economy within the neo-liberal art market by probing the inherent contradiction in this apparently tautological phrase, "free gift." In this work, she highlights the interplay of the increased privatization of financial markets and the paradoxical demand that certain *commodities* remain (or be identified) as free. The object's materials are many, ranging from Greek coins, to other obsolete European currencies, and discarded metal scraps the artist accumulated or purchased during her time in Athens in 2016-2017, as austerity policies were intensified in the country. Various engravings on the external surface of the "machine" reveal the object's components while other parts and internal mechanisms are hidden

from view.



Eva Barto, *Free Gift*, 2017. Photo: Aurélien Mole / Fondation d'entreprise Ricard.

Free Gift purports to function according to an intricately outlined protocol: only installed in a private or public institution which grants access free of cost, the machine supposedly *devalues* the coins inserted in its slot by the visitor as temporary payment for their time spent in the space (later to be refunded), while accumulating a profit from this material depreciation. *Free Gift*, then, claims to make gains through dispossession, signaling the partial interests of an ambivalent mechanism whose alignments—be they institutional, or motivated by the artist—remain unknown to the viewer.

Eva warns me not to take the protocol completely at face value. Its mechanism is inoperative, dysfunctional, predominantly fictional. Narrative contradictions plague the object; it can't keep its stories straight or live up to its instruction manual. The interpretive apparatus once again overwhelms the object: description and detail proliferate even as the machine's processes prove impotent, devolve. The scope and ambition of the object exceeds its technical

ability, while the image and information disseminated about it is at best discrepant, and at worst, misleading.

Barto's projects follow a number of itineraries which begin in the work's research phase and extend to its reception and distribution. Some of these trajectories chart movements of devolution, devaluation, loss, and failure, fueled in equal measure by a drive for risk and recklessness and a reliance on the stability of contracts or a speculative mode of forecasting. Other works gyrate, their cyclical and repetitive motions—letters returned to the sender, phrases reliant on tautological reasoning, keys that open the door only to lock it again—each time inflected by a set of shifting social and economic relations. It's difficult to imagine any single framework that could contain the many propositions, discussed here or active elsewhere, that her work advances. But then Eva Barto makes no claims for such projections of unity. Instead, she suggests that we might pick up a thread here, another there, yours different from mine, and all equally worthwhile.

Textwork

Published in November 2017

1. Stefan Zweig, *Twenty-Four Hours in the Life of a Woman* (Insel-Verlag, 1927), excerpted from Eva Barto, *All In: An Anthology of Gambling* (Buttonwood Press, 2016), 28.
2. *All in, An Anthology of gambling*, 2016, 392 pages, black and white. Graphic design: Spassky - Fischer. Financed by Mécènes du Sud. Book production cost: 5240 Euros.
3. *All In: An Anthology of Gambling*, is the first publication released on Barto's imprint, Buttonwood Press. The project was also presented in an exhibition at the CNEAI Chatou in 2015.
4. Antonia Hirsch, Introduction to *Intangible Economies*, ed. Antonia Hirsch (Vancouver: Filip, 2012), 15.
5. Eva Barto, in conversation with Jacob Fabricius, *978-87-91409-88-2*, (Copenhagen: Pork Salad Press, 2016), 10.
6. Alan Shapiro, "The Chance Event at Whiskey Pete." *Alan Shapiro. March 24th, 2011.* <http://www.alan-shapiro.com/1996-the-chance-event-at-whiskey-pete%E2%80%99s-casino/>
7. *Speculate*, 2016, All in counterfeit documents stored inside the wall.
8. Marshall Goldsmith, *What Got You Here Won't Get You There: How Successful People Become Even More Successful* (New York: Hyperion, 2007.)
9. Though of course I did, in due time, see installation shots and other documentation of works I had not seen in person.
10. Note, for instance, her visual presence in the documentation of the show, *Nothing Belongs to Us: Offer* curated by Flora Katz and on view at the Fondation d'entreprise Ricard from March 27, 2017 to May 6, 2017. Barto's piece, *Free Gift* (2017) is represented by a photograph of the welcome desk at the Foundation. Though the work protrudes slightly from behind the imposing, white counter, it remains largely out of view. The photograph was approved by Barto as documentation of the work which could be circulated.
11. See, for example, Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).
12. Peter Osborne, "Contemporary Art Is Post-Conceptual Art," lecture, Fondazione Antonio Ratti, Villa Sucota, Como, July 9, 2010.
13. David Joselit, *After Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 15.
14. Others too, like Lee Lozano, famously withdrew from the art world altogether. For recent overviews, see Martin Herbert, *Tell Them I Said No* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017); Chris Sharp, "The Concert Was Not a Success: On the Withdrawal of Withdrawal," *Filip* 18 (Spring 2013): 94-100, 140-42. On Lozano, see Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer, *Lee Lozano: Dropout Piece* (London: Afterall, 2014).
15. Monika Szewczyk, "Investing in the Blank," in *Intangible Economies*, ed. Antonia Hirsch, 51-68.
16. Joselit, *After Art*, 21.
17. *L'Abandon au profit* (Give way to profit), 2016, book, 180 pages, black and white. Graphic design: Bureau Roman Seban. Financed by the Biennale de Rennes. Book production cost: 2880.50 Euros.
18. Importantly, a copy of the book (with a black cover) was also available *in full* for sale at the Biennale de Rennes, while the two-part book was distributed freely but more difficult to find.
19. See Sarah Hamerman, "Case Study: Gossip as Communication System," *Are.na Blog*, July 11, 2017, <https://www.are.na/blog/case%20study/2017/07/11/sarah-hammerman.html>.
20. See the floor plan in Eva Barto, *L'Abandon au profit* (Paris: Buttonwood Press, 2016).
21. See the floor plan in Eva Barto, *L'Abandon au profit* (Paris: Buttonwood Press, 2016).
22. See the floor plan in Eva Barto, *L'Abandon au profit* (Paris: Buttonwood Press, 2016).
23. "Buttonwood Agreement," Wikipedia, [wikipedia.org/wiki/Buttonwood_Agreement](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buttonwood_Agreement)

25. Another example of Barto's relationship to authorship can be traced in her interest in the figure of the *cheater* or *trafficker*. In her 2015, two-person show with Lola González, *Présage*, at gallery Marcelle Alix, Barto did not correct the typo to her name in the vinyl affixed to the window of the gallery. This misidentification only contributed to the sense of mystification and fictionalization in the works on view. (*Écorché*, 2015, error in the surname, on purpose. Vinyl on entrance door.)
27. *Sorry for plagiarism*, 2015, false apology letter for plagiarism published in various printed matter, with recipient name adapted consequently.
29. At Kadist, a clause was added that the work produced would relate specifically to the collection of the foundation—in this case, to a collection partially housed in a Freeport. (*The untaxed collection*, (ongoing), research and production for upcoming unseen object dedicated to a part of Kadist Art Foundation's collection stored in a Freeport.)
31. The financial support destined for production of the object is also discussed by the artist in terms of wage labor (technically, a diversion of funds).
33. *To borrow, to steal*, 2016, borrowed book from library, never returned. Front cover gathers copies of the book's annotations added by the library services. Back cover: draft from *Temporary debt promise*.
35. For more on *Trust*, see the fictional character *T.I.N.A.* discussed in Flora Katz's textual contribution to the exhibition, *The Infinite Debt*, gb agency, 2016.
37. Bruno Latour, "The Berlin Key or How to Do Words With Things," in *Matter, Materiality, and Modern Culture*, ed. P. M. Graves-Brown (London: Routledge, 2000), 10-21.
39. A reproduction of this key supposedly opens the door to the machine.
20. Eva Barto, *untitled* (2016) (Paris: Kadist / Castlemaine, Australia: 3-ply, 2016).
22. See her website, www.buttonwood.press
24. *L'Histoire des grands fourbes et du coupable absolu* (The Story of the Great Double-Dealers and of the Absolute Culprit), 2016, book, 80 pages, black and white. Graphic design: s-y-n-d-i-c-a-t. Financed by Villa Arson. Book production cost: 4805.05 Euros.
26. *The Thief*, 2015, attempt of plagiarism from a photograph of an artwork by Jérôme Leuba, modified bike, cut, rewelded, one side only. Jérôme Leuba, *battlefield #101/ bikes*, 2014, Installation, 10 fake broken and stolen bikes installed at Steinfelplatz in Zürich. Gastr.umen 2014 / Art in Zürich, Art in public space, with annex14 gallery, Zürich.
28. *Temporary debt promise*, 2016, contract operating on a funding / time equivalence basis.
30. This in-built production of delay was also integral to a recent project at Sergio Verastegni's studio in Saint Ouen, France in 2017, *WE DANCE AROUND A RING AND SUPPOSE*, in which Barto sent work to be exhibited, but the package intentionally arrived too late. All that could be shown was the proof of mailing, in the form of a registered letter. In an expanded iteration of this project, Barto replaces one hurdle to the expedition of the work with another: rather than the work be delayed, she sends it to the wrong address, inverting the street number on the package so that it never arrives at its intended destination. (*Delayed*, 2017, post content sent deliberately too late for an exhibition. Proof of sending sent separately to the recipient.) (*Failed to attempt a loss*, 2017, envelope with no content sent in the intent to never reach its recipient.)
32. Maurizio Lazzarato, *The Making of the Indebted Man: An Essay on the Neoliberal Condition*, trans. Joshua David Jordan (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011), 8.
34. *Ouroboros*, 2016, 27 re-used envelopes, recycled post mail sent and received by gb agency.
36. Another such offshore company was developed for the Royal College of Art's group exhibition, *Turn the Tide*, in 2017. Barto installed a permanent mailbox in the mail room at the RCA, to which messages to the company could be sent. (*The shell*, 2017, Post box facade created for the offshore company TTT (created by MFA graduated students, RCA London, June 2017) permanently installed in the mail storage room of the building, non accessible to visitors. Send letters to: TTT post box - "goods-in" storage, Royal College of Art, Battersea. Dyson Building. 1 Hester Road, London SW11 4AN.)
38. *Free Gift*, 2017, paying free system, under conditions. Impotent machine conceived out of scrap metal and obsolete currencies.