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## **The emergent artistic object in the postconceptual condition**

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# **The Emergent Artistic Object in the Postconceptual Condition**

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

#### 1. Introducing research subject & general analysis

This research project is an investigation into the fabric and the infrastructure of artistic production. The research question is: How is the contemporary field of institutional artistic production organised and how are the relations between its actors structured? The research considers the production of art as a process of selection and integration into the platforms on which artistic content is made public: the museum, presentation spaces and the extended infrastructure of art. This process of making public not only takes place through the presentation of art but also through the surrounding formation of artistic discourse that shapes the understanding and reception of art. The core question of this investigation translates thus as where the 'object' of art can be said to be situated in the current model of artistic production in contemporary art.

In the line of thought that runs from German philosopher Friedrich von Schlegel to Walter Benjamin, the role of the 'observer' is to complete the artwork, understood as the continuous productive interplay between making and perception/reception. Benjamin scholar Graeme Gilloch denotes this ongoing process of self-reflection as 'immanent critique':

Truth does not reside in the intentions of the author, but is continually constituted anew through the work of critique until, recognizing its relationship with other works of art, the artwork takes its rightful place within the pantheon of art, dissolving itself into the Idea of Art. The self-disclosure of the truth of the work of art occurs during its 'afterlife', conceived as ongoing criticism and final dissolution.<sup>1</sup>

This processual idea of art is therefore fully dependent on the way art is distributed and how art's attribution of meaning is organised. The organisation of the infrastructure of art, as its institutional make-up, comes to act as such as an observer-producer through which the encounter with art is organized. In this research, I claim that the wider chain of production can therefore be seen as a matter of co-authorship, putting the distinctions between the various

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<sup>1</sup> Graeme Gilloch, *Walter Benjamin, Critical Constellations*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2002



roles into perspective: the artist, the curator, the critical interpretation and the institutional mediation all participate in the networked and assembled mode of production.

Production within the model of contemporary art can be described as an assembled and hybrid process that is distributed between the different positions involved. Though fundamentally contingent, what can then be called the emergent 'object' of art is generated through this configuration of different positions. Developments in the field of art have led to the dissolution of its objecthood<sup>2</sup> (the dematerialisation of art), and further, there has been a widening of the set of contributors to art, who each observe and reproduce this object differently. The issue of their differentiations is one of the driving arguments throughout this examination and that which enforces this contingent nature of contemporary art practice. 'In particular, it becomes necessary to look at the infrastructure of artistic production to understand how this transdisciplinary character translates into a new form of authorship that is 'institutional' as well as, and perhaps more importantly, as I will argue, a form of 'political' authorship'.

My claim is that in today's context, what is known as 'cognitive capitalism'<sup>3</sup> traverses the multifaceted production processes of art, thereby affecting and shifting the conditions and agency in art-production. Within the condition of cognitive capitalism, where distribution, critical ability and creativity in production processes have, to a large extent, become subsumed in the economy at large, it becomes important to identify and (re)trace how production – which gives form to the co-authorship of a processual object and which defines its political authorship – is organized. This becomes especially relevant as it is language, communication and critical creativity that are the most important qualities, and that drive production in the current iteration of capitalism. It is this emphasis on language that hugely complicates the identification and location of authorship, understood as a means through which to trace accountability in this mesh of relations.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Fried. *Art and Objecthood*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1998 [1967]; Lucy Lippard. *Six Years: Berkeley: University of California Press*, 1997 [1973].

<sup>3</sup> See references to the work of Yann Moulier-Boutang in this chapter.

<sup>4</sup> See for a comprehensive analysis of the culture industry in the current conditions of production the critique phrased by Austrian philosopher and art theorist Gerald Raunig. Gerald Raunig, *Creative Industries as Mass Deception*, in *Critique of Creativity: Precarity, Subjectivity and Resistance in the 'Creative Industries'* Gerald Raunig, Gene Ray & Ulf Wuggenig (eds), MayFlyBooks, London, 2011

This allows us to refine our research question: How do the aspects of the authorial and the assembled mode of production, that are set by neoliberal and cognitive capitalism, play out in the model of interdisciplinary and multi-positional platform-formation in regards to the conditions in which it functions? Firstly, I will investigate what these conditions of production mean, in particular, for the artist position in this configuration, and what kinds of artistic practice and artist-roles can be imagined within these conditions. Secondly, a special focus will be on the position theoretical and critical production holds in the assemblage of artistic production. Attention is put on the way theoretical thought and the experiential quality of art (as the sliding scale between theory, aesthetics and *poiesis*) relate to each other and function in the current formation of the postconceptual condition. Furthermore, I will ask what this entails for the concrete organisation of positions between artist-curator-theory-institute with regards to this divide. My argument is that the position of theory should be included next to the already acknowledged positions of curator and institute, since these act as the medium par excellence – as channels of communication – through which the different positions in play are connected. They perform an essential function in the infrastructure of art production and are closely linked to the form of current ‘cognitive’ production.

The polemical proposition I take in my research, in acknowledgement of the expanded idea of artistic production, is that these positions should all be equally considered as *authors* within the infrastructural production of contemporary art. The question then becomes what such a notion of ‘extended authorship’ of art means within the framework of art’s resistance against the heteronomy of capitalism, as was famously phrased by Adorno.<sup>5</sup> This idea of art’s function remains dominant in contemporary discourse.<sup>6</sup> The form that Adorno envisioned for this resistance was that of the autonomy of art from which a critique could be phrased. The central concern of my research is what this means for the form of such autonomy when the complex of authorship expands. I will examine a series of case studies that I take to be exemplary of the development of assembled production in which artist, theory, and curation converge on the platform of production and presentation. I will closely analyse which new formats, institutional as well as artistic (seminar, conference, exhibition etc.), emerge from this convergence. The aim of this investigation is to investigate how the characteristics of the combination of neoliberal and cognitive capitalism, as the heteronomy of current conditions, and this platform model of art production are related, overlap and diverge.

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<sup>5</sup> Theodor Adorno. *Aesthetic Theory*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013 [1970].

<sup>6</sup> Peter Osborne, *The Postconceptual Condition. Critical Essay*, London: Verso London. 2018, p.68-69

*Context: from conceptual to postconceptual condition*

The research takes as starting point the framework of the *postconceptual condition*, as formulated by the British philosopher Peter Osborne. The latter lays out the way in which the infrastructure of art production is shaped and structured now, as a globalized network of institutions and artistic practices, and how it has developed out of the historical context of conceptual art. This lineage of the postconceptual condition can be traced back to conceptual art as it developed in the 1960s and 1970s. The artistic critical core of that conceptual era can be understood through its focus on the processes, systems and flows of information in our western capitalist bureaucratized societies, the roles of institutions and the manners in which these shape our world. This emphasis on the qualities and distribution of information, as the defining qualities through which lives in capitalism are governed, led to a more comprehensive notion of art that concerned both the making of art in the conventional sense of (museum) presentations of artefacts and installations, as well as the production processes involved in the reception, distribution and dissemination of art. For Osborne, this focus on production has led to the model of contemporary art production, in how this model conceives of authorship, temporalities and networks.

Regarding this first category of more object-oriented art, that remains more within the conventional productional frame of the arts, one can think for instance of Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner, Ed Ruscha and Sol Lewitt who all, variously, captured processes of communication and language in paintings, sculptures, installations and performances. Simultaneously, a second strand of artistic expression and field of interest developed that involved experimentation with modes of organization and production in areas other than the art context (often in a combination with the more object-oriented form of artistic expression), as for example can be seen in the practices of Seth Siegelaub, Robert Smithson and Joseph Beuys. As Osborne explains, while writing about Smithson, the ambition of the artist was to dissolve the separation of art from life and to make this the task of art. It is precisely the resistance against critical categorization that drove Smithson artistically.<sup>7</sup> Joseph Beuys famously developed his idea of the ‘social sculpture’ where artistic work is conceived as a

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<sup>7</sup> In Smithson’s practice this became expressed in the blurring between art, sculpture, architecture and landscape. This is most clearly epitomized in Smithson’s formulation of the *non-site*, that became central in his work, which stands for a negative dialectical responsiveness against categorization as such: space needs to be conquered each time sovereignly against categorical determination. Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not At All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, Verso, London and New York, 2013, p.108.

form of social construction, often set within a clear pedagogical frame.<sup>8</sup> The American curator/gallerist Seth Siegelau also, being both in touch with and promoter of the first generation of conceptual artists in the early 60s that would make it to prominence, was a pioneer in expanding the artistic vocabulary. He experimented by combining installation art, the commercial gallery space, the collection of art, the production of reflective writing and art publications into one practice.

British art theorist Jo Melvin, who describes an exhibition Siegelau organised in the British journal *Studio International* in 1969, explains how he aimed to unify the artwork and exhibition with its mediation and reception. Here the idea of the self-produced art publication as an integral and reflective mode of artistic production was established, one that was later furthered by lots of artists.<sup>9</sup> Artists like Ad Reinhardt, Donald Judd and Sol Lewitt also began to use writing, theoretically expounding their visual and material work, as integral compendium to their practices.<sup>10</sup> These artists and curators trans-categorically expanded the artistic field by integrating curating, education, architecture and knowledge production (reflection and theory) in their practices. The ‘artistic object’ thus became a much more comprehensive and complex object – involving space, process and artefact – that existed as translation of information, distribution and communication processes in practice.

Next to the proliferation of transdisciplinary practices, artist writing and the integration of different media and functions in artistic production, there was also the birth of the independent magazine for art-criticism that wanted to establish a cultural-critical voice via critique on art production and towards culture more widely. Some of these like *October*,

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<sup>8</sup> For Beuys art and creativity were integral part of the sociality and politics of life as is demonstrated by his involvement with the Green Party in Germany and projects with a distinct public political character like Office for Direct Democracy by Referendum at documenta 5, Kassel Germany in 1972. According to De Duve, Beuys adopted a clear positivist interpretation of Romanticist philosophy in which all fields of human activity are synthesized. See Thierry de Duve, *Kant After Duchamp*, MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts/London England, 1996, p. 290.

<sup>9</sup> Jo Melvin analyses the exhibition Siegelau produced for the journal *Studio International* in 1969. Siegelau asked eight artists to make work especially for the magazine as print form, simultaneously he asked eight critics to write a critique to be printed together with these works. This way artwork, carrier, mediation, documentation and its reception in the form of critique are brought together. Jo Melvin, *Seth Siegelau, Beyond Conceptual Art*, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Köln/Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Conceptual artist Sol Lewitt’s texts *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art* and *Sentences on Conceptual Art* that gained much recognition, must be mentioned here. In these texts, that are short explanations on conceptual art, the status of work, its documentation and its explanation coincide. *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art* first appeared in *Artforum*, 5:10 (Summer 1967), pp.79–84. *Sentences on Conceptual Art* was first published in 0 to 9 magazine, eds. Vito Acconci and Bernadette Mayer, New York, 1969 and *Art-Language* magazine, UK, 1969.

founded in 1976 by Rosalind E. Krauss and Annette Michelson, and *Texte Zur Kunst*, from 1990, were and are of high academic quality and, and though small in readership, became authoritative and influential channels through which artists and exhibitions were reviewed. These magazines in a sense began writing art history through critique, since they produced lasting bodies of reflection and offered a mode of critique that is more aligned with existing modes of artistic production. This meant that the production of meaning and of critique became temporally part of the actuality of production rather than as critical interpretation apart from it. This also meant that critique changed from a more centralized form of discourse to a more decentral form interwoven in and dependent on a local institutional economy of production. Richard Meyer describes the turn from art-history to art-criticism as constitutive activity to the time of the now, in contemporary art, when he talks about the two forms of writing Annette Krauss applies to ‘critique’ the work of artist David Smith. Meyer writes:

In the gap that opened between these two accounts of The Sculpture of David Smith, and in the far greater degree of professional attention that Terminal Iron Works received, we see one model of scholarship displacing another. We see art history becoming criticism. And we see art history becoming contemporary.<sup>11</sup>

These early examples of practices in which production was taken as the integration of both making and reflection were avant-garde efforts to radically critique the existing conditions under capitalism. The aim was also to supplant these with alternative models of production in which the qualities of communication, distribution and language were re-appropriated, as practices to shape lives more integrated (and hence more autonomously).

These simultaneous developments have not only shown an ever greater convergence of art making and reflection but are to be understood as attempts at questioning and eroding the gap that exists between making and reflection, between *poesis* and aesthesis. It is important to observe here that this was a movement coming from the side of artists as well as from the part of criticism and curating. This is in accordance with the central point French philosopher Jacques Rancière makes in his views on the interdisciplinary character of artistic production and on cultural formations of sociality as such, which requires an exchange of

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<sup>11</sup> Richard Meyer, *What Was Contemporary Art?*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2013, p.10

making (poiesis) and of reflection (aesthetics) in order to become truly political.<sup>12</sup> Arguably the revolutionary potential these efforts contain, has not materialized in an avant-garde sense: such an artistic promise has not been fulfilled in the daily frames of working-relations. It is a division of positions and the distance to the audience as partaker in these processes, that still exist in the operation of most of institutional artistic production today, and which can be said to be one of the professed artistic ambitions to overcome.

In turn, Osborne argues that the essential traits as developed in conceptual art have become the post-conceptual condition of art production now, as *contemporary art*; ‘the truth of conceptual art’, as he calls it. Following Osborne’s analysis then, and considering how the developments within the arts have expanded globally and the arts have materialized institutionally, I suggest we can extend that to the infrastructure of art and how it intrinsically relates to political systems. He lists six characteristics that define the postconceptual condition:

1. Art’s necessary conceptuality. (Art is constituted by concepts, their relations and their instantiation in practices of discrimination: art/non-art.)
2. Art’s ineliminable – but radically insufficient – aesthetic dimension. (All art requires some form of materialisation; that is to say, aesthetic – felt, spatio-temporal – presentation.)
3. The critical necessity of an anti-aestheticist use of aesthetic materials. (This is a critical requirement of art’s necessary conceptuality.)
4. An expansion to infinity of the possible material forms of art.
5. A radically distributive – that is, irreducibly relational – unity of the individual artwork across the totality of its multiple material instantiations, at any particular time.
6. A historical malleability of the borders of this unity.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Politics is for Rancière the constant renegotiation of the normative that results from political governance, this is what he calls the ‘policing’ of politics. A true politics is the arrangement in which the ability to come to an agreement can be made in freedom (the free arrangement between doing and making and the meaning this has). Such moments therefore, and thus true politics, are rare.

Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement : politics and philosophy*, translated by Julie Rose, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis USA, 1999, p.139

<sup>13</sup> Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not At All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, Verso, London and New York, 2013, p.48.

The postconceptual condition, then, entails that artistic production now, understood as the globalized manifestation of artist practices and institutional presentation spaces, is dominated by the conceptual as both the qualitative frame of evaluation and the institutional medium. If we take the wider realm of production at hand, when we zoom out and take the assembled formation of involved positions in total, this includes not only the obvious sphere of those directly involved: artist, curator and organizer of artistic platforms – the local sphere and scale of production – but also the realms directly outside the space of artistic production: governance, city councils and politics. As this is the scale of actors that defines the conditions for funding and working conditions, they also become involved in setting the formal conditions of artistic production. The issue then becomes what the mode of interaction is between the field of art and its political and economic context to which it relates and on which it is partly dependent.

In this dissertation, I argue that the production of art can thus be understood as processes of movement between concept, aesthetic materiality and distribution in the age of transnational exchange and global capitalism. Within this development and in respect to the above-mentioned importance of language and communication in artistic production, I argue that the author-position of the artistic object constantly shifts between artist, curator, theorists and museum/presentation space. Through this assemblage of positions and functions, artistic content is produced and shaped, by means of conceptualisations and ideas that circulate in its production network. Production in the assembled field of art-production, is now understood as the social and political organization of work and relations within it, and no longer knows a clear distinction between the actors, positions and functions involved. One can say that all positions become part of one big transdisciplinary infrastructure we call ‘art.’

While considering art as comparable to Bruno Latour’s Actor Network Theory, Francis Halsall warns that the dispersion of positions within the system of art leads to the further strengthening of capitalism’s hold. According to Halsall, these developments can even be seen as cognitive capitalism in its extreme form:

Both art and ANT are contemporary practices which emerge from the particular network effects of late capitalism. They not only describe but also exemplify the effects those conditions have on the subjects they create. So, the subjects constituted through the Network Society, contemporary art and ANT are distributed throughout

various systems of communication and control. They are dispersed subjects. [...] More significantly is the question of the role of practice in acts of critique. If, through acts of dispersion, cultural practices exemplify contemporary conditions of subjectivity then in what sense can this exemplification be seen as anything more than mere passive reflection in lieu of critique? Or, in what ways can the practitioners of both art and ANT respond to accusation that in celebrating dispersion they are complicit in the logic of neo-liberal market fundamentalism?<sup>14</sup>

As Osborne observes: the amorphous phenomenon of the ‘art project’ gives rise to the rotation of its authorship but also binds the authorial to the institutional, as site of its production. Osborne writes:

The contemporary, socio-historical forms of the general existential structure of ‘the project’ come to the fore, along with its situational conditions, organized by relations between individual and collective praxis, in which the once curatorial but increasingly directive role of the museum is of growing significance. (This is no longer ‘the artist as producer’, or even ‘the curator as producer’, so much as ‘the museum as producer’.) The existential and social structure of the project itself becomes the carrier of artistic reflection.<sup>15</sup>

Within this development, the importance of the role that discursivity and theoretical ideas have taken within the site of the exhibition and within production overall has grown significantly, a change Peter Osborne denotes as the *intellectual turn*.<sup>16</sup> This becomes clear in the practice of institutional presentation spaces where the presentations are evermore accompanied by texts, and thematically communicated through theoretical ideas, notions or references. Increasingly these projects are captured under big themes that are transdisciplinary and being developed in collaboration with different academic disciplines: art history, sociology, sciences, anthropology, city planning, ecology etc. They are presented through the lenses of these thematised and theoretical concepts. The topic at hand is most times a current

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<sup>14</sup> Francis Halsall, *What Can Actor Network Theory Learn From Contemporary Art?*, in *The Routledge Companion to Actor-Network Theory*, eds. Anders Blok, Ignacio Farias, Celia Roberts, Routledge, New York, 2019, p.842-843

<sup>15</sup> Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not At All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, Verso, London and New York, 2013, p.172-173

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Peter Osborne, *Moscow Art Magazine*, 69, 2008, pp.49-56



socio-political theme: pressing socioeconomic issues, the relationship between politics and citizens, multiculturalism, globalization, gender issues, urbane architectural space, migration and so on. Exhibitions are formulated as addressing these ‘problematic issues’ or as areas of investigation, whereby the visual artists, or the exhibition, investigate the topics presented, and are thus considered research tools. Next to discursive material in exhibitions, this reflective production is presented in symposia and stand-alone publications, so as fully-fledged elements of artistic production. These become in catalogues, documentary and archival forms (publications and online platforms), the art-historical depositories and archives of the institution. Archiving, distributing, disseminating and producing the ‘meanings’ and interpretations as forms of production.

From this model of artistic production then, a highly complex and interwoven network of positions within art production in total, or the promise of a shared, multi-authored enterprise emerges. The circulation of accountability between artist, curator and museum has found its structural place in the infrastructure of contemporary art production. It resembles in an ideal sense the notion of the *Text* as formulated by Roland Barthes, that departs from the idea of the social and common project (the authorless Text) that becomes established through contribution, re-writing, amending and re-scribing by anyone participating.<sup>17</sup> It is however, as Osborne observes, in practice firmly anchored to its institutional form, that binds the different functions, qualities, modes and values in production.

The transition from the conceptual era to the postconceptual, must therefore be understood foremost, within this context of the professionalized and institutional implementation (or its failures) of the core ideas of conceptual art. Within the given of this broad and extended authorship however, it becomes unclear how the differences between those actors who are partaking become negotiated. In order to become politically coherent and obtain agency, I claim that these differences need to be understood first in the context of the dominance of capitalism, that remains uncontested in the conceptual exchanges. These differences after all not only contain epistemological and operational differences but also material and economic ones.

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<sup>17</sup> Roland Barthes. ‘From Work to Text.’ In *The Rustle of Language*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986.

### *Artistic production in cognitive capitalism*

Especially the relation between knowledge production and art and the way it is structured are characteristic for the contemporary field of art, and this is problematically connected to the conditions and modes of cognitive and neoliberal capitalism that are replicated by art. The assembled mode of producing in art, based on the transference of communication between its layers and positions, is closely connected to how the organization of labour is ordered in the post-Fordist economy. In this economy, a categorical division between aesthetics, labour and politics can no longer be made, as analysed by Italian philosopher Paolo Virno,<sup>18</sup> French economist Yann Moulier Boutang<sup>19</sup> and others.<sup>20</sup> It is precisely the qualities of language, communication and of critical creativity, that are the prime qualities of production in the current iteration of capitalism. The *meta position* of discourse and critique therefore dissolves and becomes absorbed within capitalist economy as a whole. This absorption is reinforced through another characteristic of the institutional organisation: the division of labour as organized by neoliberal capitalism. At the same time, the role of the institution has become more central, as mentioned earlier in my analysis of Osborne, in the sense that it increasingly takes up a directive role and binds the workers and authorships involved. In my dissertation, the division of labour and its effects on the mode of organization are unpacked extensively in the chapter devoted to the Benjamin in Palestine Conference.

The institutional position, in its status as presumed central author, therefore becomes more problematic. The unity of artistic production in its assembled and institutional form is fundamentally fractured through a division of positions. As explained by German political theorist Isabell Lorey, it is the managerial division of functions that is governmentally arranged, and the threat of precarity that keeps the allegiance to the whole of production intact.<sup>21</sup> This division means there are several instances of transferences and translations at play in the chain of the artistic presentation- and production-apparatus: the curator explains that what the exhibition does, and what the selection of works/artists/projects means. Institutional communication and PR phrase the intentions of program towards the public in

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<sup>18</sup> Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude, For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, Semiotext(e)/Foreign Agents, MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 2004, p.50

<sup>19</sup> In *Cognitive Capitalism*, Yann Moulier Boutang details how, in the economy, there has been a shift from the exploitation of labour power to that of innovative and creative cognitive labour, qualities particularly key for artistic production.

Yann Moulier Boutang, Polity Press, Cambridge UK/Malden USA, 2011

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, the work of Angela McRobbie, Isabell Lorey, Gerald Raunig, Christian Marrazzi.

<sup>21</sup> Isabell Lorey, *Virtuosos of Freedom, On the Implosion of Political Virtuosity and Productive Labour*, EIPCP, 2008

terms of the decided topic and its societal relevance. Simultaneously, the institute phrases its function towards politics, governance and funders, in terms of contributing to knowledge and insights, having a societal function and purpose, and enhancing knowledge, on which its democratic value depends. This means there are several modes active in different registers that anticipate or project the reception of the institute's artistic output. At the same time the presented artists may propose forms of production that counter or contradict the political commission, the communications-strategy and the archival- and meaning production, that run through the institute's mode of operation in which they partake.

As mentioned earlier, what binds these positions and transferences in the contemporary form of production, is discourse and theoretical knowledge, by providing the theoretical backing that acts as justification to both curatorial program, artists' position and meaning and the institutional frame. Critical discourse and its derivatives also work in the communication with the bureaucratic realms of governance and politics, in terms of explanations of what the institute does, and in terms of what it does for its funding and material existence. Yet although critically worded output counts as a productive criterium on which funding is measured – it generates visibility and reaches audiences – it is however not measured by what it *does*. This way it remains connected with the economy at large and the conditions this sets for artistic production as well. Since institutes have to (partly) adhere to the requirements set by governance, not only is their mode of operation dictated and affected by it, their output equally is phrased through this conditional frame. Capitalist economy thus traverses, subsumes and affects in total the artistic expression of the assembled artistic production apparatus. This is why the diagnosis made above by Osborne is right in putting *art's necessary conceptuality* as the first characteristic on his list. A more direct scrutiny of what happens in the chain of exchanges is therefore needed

In this dissertation, I aim to develop a critical approach towards the transferences described. The inherent and distinct tensions of the multi-authored configuration remain unacknowledged and are seldom openly discussed. In the current situation these transferences are instances of contention, due to the separation of functions within the field and the absence or insufficiency of a structural dialogue and/or overarching model of implementation. Therefore, I contend, and extending on Osborne's analysis, that the positions of the critic and theorist – next to the already established position of curator – should also be considered as *authorial positions* of the artistic object. It may be clear that the term 'author' is not meant

here as personal or subjective recovery to demarcate or define one's place, but as a means to retrace how processual developments unfold. Or, the question of authorship should be understood in the way Walter Benjamin approaches authorship in *The Author as Producer*.<sup>22</sup> With the latter, it foremost indicates an orientation of one's place within the organisational form of production. The critic and theorist act as co-producers in the artistic field, through reflection, critical study and reading, adding to the organizational, distributive and curatorial functions in art production. Their positions participate foundationally, through their contributions and through subsequent feedback, in the cycle of production.

In the case studies, this research is focusing on the many instances of translation and transferences, projections of ideas of functions and of artistic identity vis-à-vis the assembly of production. The analysis of the institutional fabric of art provides a chance to critically review it for its political form. One question here is: how is authorship, as issue of accountability, and the place of the artist, to be understood in the infrastructure of production? Here Marina Vishmidt's notion of *infrastructural critique*<sup>23</sup> comes into play, in which the assembled field of production and the social relations within it are considered in their coherent unity. My intention is to take the assembled field and the notion of *infrastructure* here in an expanded sense and to incorporate the scales of politics and governance as explained before. Also, Rancière's ideas on the relation between politics, democracy and aesthetics are used to relate to authorship in production. Notably the concept of the *scene* he uses by which he means the assembly of, and interaction between art and theory, *poiesis* and *aesthesis*, as means for building a social community will be used extensively.<sup>24</sup>

### *Critique and Institution*

When artistic production becomes ever more transdisciplinary this leads to both an internalisation of the role of critique as well as a diffusion of roles concerning the function of critique, within the apparatus of artistic production. This means that the position of critique no longer holds an outside position (giving meaning to artistic production from an external position), but becomes drawn into the production processes. This evokes the idea of a

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<sup>22</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Author as Producer*, New Left Review 1/62, July-August 1970

<sup>23</sup> Marina Vishmidt In *Beneath the Atelier, the Desert: Critique, Institutional and Infrastructural*, in *Marion von Osten: Once We Were Artists (A BAK Critical Reader in Artists' Practice)* Eds. Tom Holert, Maria Hlavajova, Valiz/BAK Amsterdam and Utrecht, 2017, p.218

<sup>24</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, trans. Zakir Paul, Verso, London, 2013, XI.

complete and autonomous working model, which raises the question of the model's political ambition and agency that such autonomy would cater to. Italian philosopher Paolo Virno<sup>25</sup> asserts that any remaining autonomy within work is granted by capitalism as a sort of unproductive residue (as judged by capitalism's criteria). Such residual-space for autonomy than has to be thought through the assembled form of production and the mesh of dependencies and relations within it.

The consequence is that the authorial role for the institutional form grows, as it becomes the site of the organization of work and the platform that binds all these positions and functions, and brings together the ambitions and political aspirations of art production – as the promise of the Text formulated by Barthes. And the classic function of the artist therefore, understood as indexing the difference that exists between the conditions set by rules of control and a life in sovereignty, through the expression of subjective experience – formulated by Virno as the *dismeasure*<sup>26</sup> – can no longer be limited to the artist alone. The act of indexing the forces that the heteronomy of capitalism exerts, becomes a matter of the assembly of production, since it traverses all positions. The issue then of art's critical leverage, its possible agency in relation to capitalist subsumption, is deeply entwined in terms of the form and content and the way in which production, through positional configuration, is organised.

In light of the above any political agency has to be thought of in terms of an institutional (re)configuration, as Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt have suggested.<sup>27</sup> They argue that however problematic institutional formations are (as was the subject of Institutional Critique), they remain indispensable as they are the locations where resources and means aggregate. The institutional form therefore becomes the issue, as to be construed and malleable forms that organize resources and politics through. Furthermore, I agree with Osborne on how the institutional artwork can be seen in operation and the historic development leading up to this. The era of conceptual art, so I contend, in line with Osborne, contains productive leads in how the institutional is to be imagined as form of a future

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<sup>25</sup> Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude, For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, Semiotext(e), 2004

<sup>26</sup> Sonja Lavaert and Pascal Gielen, "The Dismeasure of Art, An interview with Paolo Virno". November 2009. Available online at <http://www.onlineopen.org/the-dismeasure-of-art> (accessed 2018-11-05.)

<sup>27</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Assembly*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

transdisciplinarity. The case-studies that are part of my examination – as will be explained later – represent different proposals for such a format.

## 2 Overall structure and artistic methodology of the dissertation

This research is shaped and informed through my own artistic practice in which I combine the functions of artist, critic, researcher and curator to address the conditions of contemporary art production. This amalgamated profile enables me to test the set-up of artistic-production by operationalizing the different functions in regards to the insufficiency of the artist's function to index *dismeasure*. The proposition I test through the research is to consider the 'artistic' as a quality that covers all positions and should not be solely attributed to an artist position. This also applies to my self-understanding as artist and aligns with the term *cognitive mapping* coined by Frederic Jameson in his essay *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*,<sup>28</sup> denoting the question of the place of the subject in an ever more complex fabric of economic production. Such a mapping and the question of place and of orientation within the fabric of production contains both an aesthetic and a political dimension. To quote Jameson:

I don't believe that people really think politically if they have surrendered to the idea that the system can't change in its overall dimensions, and that they can only attempt to modify the parts that they don't like. The question of social classes, the question about cognitive mapping, is that we are in a situation where the world is so complicated, and the capillaries of social power are so small, that it becomes very difficult for people to orient themselves as class subjects within this totality. I don't think for a minute that classes in and of themselves have disappeared.<sup>29</sup>

The issue, then, is what place applies to the artist position within such complex of opaque relations. Relevant questions are: What do these developments and conditions of current day art production mean for the position of the artist, and what form of artistic practice and artist-role fits these conditions? What is the role of the artist in a platformed production model that is characterized by a mode of conceptual and infrastructural exchange under capitalism in

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<sup>28</sup> Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, *New Left Review*. I (146), 1984

<sup>29</sup> Frederic Jameson, *Jameson on Jameson, Conversations on Cultural Marxism*, ed. Ian Buchanan, Duke University Press, Durham & London, 2007

which author positions constantly interfere? What ideological object is produced in this configuration and how does this set-up relate to its political authorship?

The methodological core idea of the project is to investigate the fabric of the current configuration of artistic production, and to study its infrastructural coherence. This will be done through participatory case studies and by critically examining formats of platform production in which theory, knowledge production, art and aspects of curatorial or formal dissemination meet. These different cases are considered for their institutional form and coherence of the assembled organization and by looking at how they organize the working positions and -relations in regards to the artistic platform and the artistic ambition as a whole. Special focus will be put on the intrinsic relations between artist, curator and institution, and on the role of language and text in the process of artistic production, and how these authorial positions function in regards to the artistic object that is produced. The form of account of the case-studies consists of a mix of viewpoints and positions, that represent the multi-disciplinary field of production. The accounts are broadly divided in two differing registers that allude to a division between ‘academic’ and ‘artistic’ as communicative registers in aesthetics. This division is analogous to the entanglement observed by Rancière between art and aesthetics, in which he considers both reflection and art (poiesis and aisthesis) to be linked. There is some ambivalence or even confusion built in, into what fits to what register, referring to the interdependency of both registers? The question is what comes first: ‘poiesis’ or reflection-translation?<sup>30</sup> The materials from the case-studies are processed in exhibitions, in conventional art-presentation settings, in academic research platform-contexts or public-political platforms. These materials consist of video-recorded interviews with the organizers and the lecturers on their ideas of their involvement and function within the platforms of production, photography and of critical analyses of the platforms and of literary impressions.

In the observations, the coincidence of subject and object – where I act as artist *and* describe the scene as well; an object of study as well as observer – resembles the position Velazquez pictures in his painting *La Meninas*, where he pictures the scene of himself painting, the painting being painted and the context of the commission to the painting. Thus, the objects of study, in a single image, indicate the relational links between these elements as

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<sup>30</sup> See Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis*.

complementary elements of a whole, constituting the whole.

Here I take the present conditions (the platform-production in the case-studies) as the conditioning frame, since there is no more single external commissioner but instead the cycle of production itself triggering a productive inquiry into itself. In this, I deploy the notion of the constitutive role of critique and reflection as formulated by Walter Benjamin, in reference to Romanticism, to the fullest, and integrate the consequences thereof in both my practise, by writing critique and present this as performative and argumentative postulation – via my artist position – affirming that the position of critique in the field is author in the chain as well. At the same time the problem between the poetic (as that what is made) and the conceptual (its instrumental translation) as lingua franca in the apparatus of production is a central focus in the research.

### **3 Cases**

#### *Introduction of case studies*

The case studies in this dissertation were selected because they represent exemplary assembled formats in contemporary production. They each include within their format of production art, artists, theoretical or reflective functions and curating which functions are captured under one institutional operation. The palette of choices further represents the different institutional formats operational in art-production, ranging from the museum-scale (Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven), to the para-institutional (Saas-Fee Summer School for Art), to a more activist production format (Benjamin in Palestine Conference) and the independent art-space (Rib). These cases aim to give an overview of the fabric of art-production, its changing conditions, and the different institutional responses and forms that occur in the field of art production. They each present different proposals in how to engage with the art-aesthetics relation in institutional form.

#### *The Autonomy Project, Van Abbemuseum*

The autonomy project was a three-day symposium held at the Van Abbemuseum (VAM), in Eindhoven, from 07-10-2011 until 09-10-2011. This symposium was organized in collaboration with, among others, Lectorate Art and Public Space, Amsterdam and Dutch Art Institute, ArtEz, Arnhem. Topic of discussion was how the notion of artistic autonomy should be re-thought in relation to art's position in society. The term served historically to position



art's place within society and politics, while autonomy now has become more a term that obscures art's relation to society. In a three-day program theorists, artists and curators gathered to debate this topic in lectures, workshops and discussions. It was prompted by the budget-cuts announced by the then government of the Netherlands that constituted a change in art-funding policies, representing an abrupt ideological turn from a welfare-state of financing to a neoliberal oriented model. The apparent weakness of the artistic field that could not resist this onslaught and failed to express its public relevance, was proof of the problematic nature that autonomy in artistic production, had become.

The venue demonstrated the position VAM holds in the artistic landscape. It is one of the foremost Dutch art institutions that thinks of the role of the museum as an activating platform and engine to public discourse and responsive to actual politics – as with the Autonomy Project –, rather than being a mere depository of culture's artefacts. It is self-critically disclosing the museum as a position of power that builds and is imbricated in cultural and ideological canon – as in the *Becoming Dutch* project and on a global and historic scale in *L'Internationale* (a confederation of seven major European modern and contemporary art institutions that research modalities of artistic production). Next to that it is concerned with developing strategies to engage the public more with the cultural and emancipatory function a museum can have. Programs as *Play Van Abbe* program directly addresses publics as curatorial agents and co-producers in cultural production within the museums program. With *Queering the Collection* the emancipatory role of the museum is emphasised put by maximizing the notion of inclusivity.

The VAM also stresses the innovative importance of knowledge production, reflection and artistic research as implicated elements in artistic and cultural production. Its director Charles Esche is the co-editorial director of *Afterall Journal* and *Afterall Books*, a contemporary art publisher. Esche is thus also involved in the production of artistic discourse, as well as being active in art and curatorial education (De Appel, Amsterdam and University of the Arts, London). Knowledge production also plays a direct key role in the VAM program *Deviant Practice*. Here resident researchers are invited to take the VAM archive as a starting point for their research and to make a connection between the archive, its function and publics. The results of these – mostly reflections in writing – are presented within and as part

of the institute's production.<sup>31</sup>

The symposium, then, can be seen as a form of the expanded scene of production, part of the integrated artistic apparatus, that notably deploys the art-aesthetics bind, as described by Jacques Rancière. Indeed, the main theoretical figure that served to anchor the symposium was Rancière, who gave a key-note presentation on the relation between art, politics and aesthetics and on the question of how autonomy can be understood in artistic production. The presentations of artists Tania Bruguera and Thomas Hirschhorn, artists who explicitly address art's political agency in their practices were publicly critiqued by Rancière. Alongside Rancière, Peter Osborne and Isabell Lorey were present, as well as Hito Steyerl and Andrea Fraser, artists that explicitly include intellectual reflection within their works. This set-up gave me the chance to witness and reflect on Rancière's proposition of the art-aesthetics bind within the infrastructure of artistic production, and to critically review the symposium as artistic object and how it was produced. As I participated in the symposium – as speaker in one of the debates and a workshop and attended most of the lectures and debates –, I could give an account from within the production.

### *Benjamin in Palestine conference*

The Benjamin in Palestine Conference (hereafter BiP), was a conference and workshop that was held in Ramallah and Bir-Zeit, Palestine from 06-12-2015 until 11-12-2015.<sup>32</sup> It was organized by Sami Khatib, a renowned Benjamin scholar. The five-day program was spread out over different locations: the International Academy for Art Palestine, the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Centre in Ramallah and Birzeit University in Bir-Zeit. It was supported by Goethe-Institut Ramallah (an internationally operating German cultural institution), the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Centre, Ramallah, Offices for Contemporary Art (OCA), Norway and the International Academy of Art Palestine. The conference consisted of intensive close-reading workshops (mostly on the work of Walter Benjamin), panel discussions and artist presentations, and a conventional one-day conference at the Birzeit University. Attendance to both the conference and workshops was free. Prominent theorist from the fields of aesthetics,

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<sup>31</sup> For this, see Nick Aikens, *Off-The-Way Deviant Practice: An Introduction*, Deviant Practice Research Programme 2016-17, Van Abbemuseum, 2018, p.8-9; [https://vanabbemuseum.nl/fileadmin/files/Onderzoek/Deviant\\_Practice/4788VAM\\_Deviant\\_Practice\\_def\\_HR\\_s\\_preads\\_2.pdf](https://vanabbemuseum.nl/fileadmin/files/Onderzoek/Deviant_Practice/4788VAM_Deviant_Practice_def_HR_s_preads_2.pdf) (accessed 08-02-21)

<sup>32</sup>For programme and information, see: <https://benjamininpalestine.wordpress.com/benjamin-in-palestine/> (accessed 22-09-2020)

philosophy, politics and culture were on the roster of lectures, keynotes and panel discussions, among them Slavoj Žižek, Rebecca Comay, Susan Buck-Morris, and Judith Butler.<sup>33</sup>

The aim of the conference was formulated in two ways. The first aim was to question the way the Humanities as academic practice, function in capitalism now, which was examined through the criticality and legacy of Walter Benjamin. Secondly, the aim was to politically demonstrate against the ongoing occupation of Palestine by Israel, by holding this conference in Palestine and more directly to make a case for the BDS-movement (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions), a campaign that aims to force a change in Israel's policy by promoting an international economic boycott. Artists, activists, scholars, and curators gathered to exchange viewpoints and information around these questions. The main premise proposed by Khatib was that the exploration of Benjamin's critical thought was best fitted to be conducted in a place of political oppression (Palestine) rather than in a neoliberal academic context.

Though BiP was in its aim not a manifestation that is directly related to the more direct manifestations in contemporary art, its structure can be recognized as aligned to the structural issues that define contemporary art production. Sami Khatib was a theory researcher at the Jan van Eyck-Academy, Maastricht, the Netherlands, which promoted research between academic thinking and the arts. Also, the relation to the infrastructure of contemporary art-production is demonstrated by the fact that the BiP conference was financed by institutions that are involved in contemporary-art production. Notably, the Norwegian Offices for Contemporary Art's presentation of a similar workshop in Norway the next year, shows the conference's entwinement with the contemporary art-context. This workshop was the second part of a bigger Benjamin project around Benjamin's *politics of translation*. It is a research on issue of translation takes in processes of artistic production. Next to OCA, the Academy for Art Palestine can be named as actively engaging with the global format of art-production in that it actively seeks connection to it, linking an international discourse with local production. Moreover, the way in which BiP was structured: its non-conventional

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<sup>33</sup> For a report of the conference, see this article written by Swiss philosopher Lucie Kim-Chi Mercier. [https://www.radicalphilosophyarchive.com/issue-files/tp196\\_conference\\_ramallah.pdf](https://www.radicalphilosophyarchive.com/issue-files/tp196_conference_ramallah.pdf) (accessed 22-02-2021)

duration, its transdisciplinary approach and its direct political claim, linked it to the issue of arts' avant-garde ambitions.

BiP offered a chance to both participate in and witness this form of aesthetic production, and to test the proposition of the art-aesthetics bind as form to imagine an answer as practice in cognitive capitalism. This form of production gave a chance to research the positions of curating, theory and art via the role that Khatib had as organizer, as practical and programmatic leader and as theorist. As Khatib defines himself more as educator-theorist, it gave me the chance to formulate the author position – and possible artistic – in Khatib's proposition within the condition of current day cognitive capitalism. Here, I draw on Walter Benjamin's framework of production in regards to the (un)translatability of poetry to reflect on BiP's set-up. Through Benjamin's *On the Task of the Translator* the issue of how to navigate and translate between positions in production processes, meets the issue of the politics of production qua its conditions as stipulated in *The Author as Producer*.

I recorded lectures, photographed workshops and lectures and took notes. My contribution was the presentation of *Inertia*, a publication I produced in 2012, that is situated in Palestine and that fitted the context and the conference. As artist I blended into the material texture of the conference. Afterwards I wrote an essay for the online art journal *Open!*<sup>34</sup> in which I reviewed the BiP conference within the context of platform-production, critically questioning the role of theory and the political ambition as expressed by BiP within the context of cognitive capitalism. The photographs I took were used by the organizers as documentation to the conference and are made available online.

### *Rib*

Rib is a project space in Rotterdam, The Netherlands. It was established in 2015 by Maziar Afrassiabi. It is a small-scale art space that presents exhibitions of mostly younger, internationally operating artists. Besides producing exhibitions, Rib uses other formats like segments that are oriented to writing and that are presented on Rib's website. The website acts as a presentation-platform of all of Rib's activities. It is financed largely through grants from the municipality of the City of Rotterdam and the MondriaanFonds, the Netherlands biggest

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<sup>34</sup> Jack Segbars, *Benjamin in Palestine, On the Task of the Translator in the Age of Platform Production*, Open!, Platform For Art Culture and the Public Domain, 2016  
<https://www.onlineopen.org/benjamin-in-palestine> (accessed 14-08-2020)

funding body for contemporary art. These grants provide for means of existence on a minimum level and are most-times awarded for a limited time (1-4 years). This makes the long-term survival of this category vulnerable and precarious.

As an art initiative, Rib is embedded in the Dutch infrastructure of art production. This category of art production, though broad, is driven by self-motivation. Usually it is referred to as ‘independent’, this means being programmatically and ideologically as independent as possible from politics or governmental regimes that may determine artistic production. This distinguishes it from official institutions that are, in the ways these are set-up, much more directly accountable to governance: such as the museums and Kunsthallen. As not-for-profit organisations, these small art initiatives are quasi-autonomous from the commercial market. They generally provide for the experimentation- and testing-ground for artists, free from market concerns. Yet they provide for the critical recognition of artists and artworks that this context provides, that subsequently translates as monetary valorisation in the market. At the same time, the model itself provides an ideological counterproposal to market-oriented production. So as one of the crucial actors in the infrastructure of art-production, art initiatives connect the fields of commerce, politics and art. Accountability exists towards its financiers and subsidizing bodies. The regime of accountability is quite loose though. The City of Rotterdam for example requires the initiative to engage with the local area, it’s residents and cultural fabric. This mode of production, then, as crucial part of the infrastructure of art-production, sets it automatically also in dialogue with its institutional political context.

Rib was methodologically approached by critiquing it. The text I wrote was commissioned by Rib and it is part of its online platform (on the online *Rib Unresolved Issues* segment). In this way critique is presented as an integral part of artistic production, and not as an external position. Since the text is also part of the dissertation, the positions of reflection, production, publication, art and academia are considered as integrated elements of a coherent artistic production process. In the *Documentation Section*, this is further explained in *Rib, Post Script*.

In the review, Rib’s model of production is structurally analysed via its exhibitions and formats it deploys, which are positioned by Rib as a critical response to institutional artistic production within the framework of cognitive capitalism. The theoretical notions that are deployed in my analysis are Yann Moulier Boutang’s analysis of cognitive capitalism, the

division of labour in capitalism, Paolo Virno's postulation of *dismeasure* as artistic tool, which I extend to the scale of the infrastructure of production, including knowledge-production. Lastly with the notion of Infrastructural Critique by Marina Vishmidt the similarities between cognitive capitalism and contemporary art production are highlighted, by which the artistic becomes considered as integrated and flexible practice, concerning different positions, within the whole of production, rather than as separate sphere of action.

### *Saas-Fee Summer Institute for Art*

The Saas-Fee Summerschool for Art in Saas-Fee, is a yearly summer-school that started in 2015. It was founded and is directed by Warren Neidich and co-directed by Barry Schwabsky. The students are mostly younger art professionals engaged in master studies or PhDs in curating, media- and cultural studies. The tuition fee is \$2,000 USD per student. The School does not have a fixed location, it is a nomadic platform. In 2015 it was organized in Saas-Fee, Switzerland, in 2016 and 2017 in Berlin, in 2018 in Los Angeles and Berlin, in 2019 it will be New York and Berlin. Its program is an inquiry in contemporary critical theory and aesthetics. Its faculty consists of prominent experts in the fields of philosophy, curatorial studies, academics in the fields of sociology, linguistics and economy, as well as artists and curators. It emphasizes an interdisciplinary approach. The different venues and years all have different thematic approaches, but start mostly from the question of artistic production (seen as multi-faceted system) in cognitive capitalism, and how the relation between art and politics can be re-configured. The 2015 edition, was centred around the historic concept of 'estrangement' (*Art and the Politics of Estrangement* was the title of the 2015 edition) and if or how this could be an artistic strategy to be considered in the present conditions. Next to the more theoretical input, the production of an exhibition is a prominent part of program. The summer school aims to attract artists, film-makers, poets, philosophers, architects, critical theorists, and curators, and offers a comprehensive update of theories and discourse concerning artistic production.

This summer-school is not per se exceptional in the artistic international institutional network, since there are more and similar formats that deal with curating, the practice of curating and theory in an educational setting. It is similar to The Summer School for Curatorial Practice Venice and Curating the Contemporary Summer School, Goldsmiths University, London, for example, as well as many others. What is special, is the position that the director Warren Neidich holds. Next to his practise as artist, Neidich also is an academic,

writer and tutor, as well as editor of publications. The idea for the summer school follows a line in the development of the arts – notably in conceptual art – in which production, reflection and education become intertwined and part of the artistic tool-set. Neidich’s exemplary role in which all the qualities and functions are combined that characterize the post-conceptual condition, and the explicit connections between theory and art in action in the summer school, gave me a chance to research the complex relations that make up the post-conceptual condition. The connection to the field of theory is particularly expressed in the fact that this production platform was initiated in its relation to the European Graduate School, a renowned school for critical thought, and active in the public discourse.

Though not stated conclusively, Neidich expressed the idea that the summer school itself might be considered an artwork.<sup>35</sup> This raises questions around the ontological status of the artwork, proposed as production in total, in regard to networked, globalized knowledge production and institutionalisation, and as to how its economic set-up sits in the context of production in cognitive capitalism. It specifically gave me the chance to research the issue of authorship in such complexity of production. For this case I took part in the program, I blended in with the activities whilst at the same time analysing it with the intent to process the outcomes to make work. I conducted interviews that were video-recorded with the main lecturers and the organizers: Anselm Franke (director of Haus der Kunst der Welt, Berlin); Dorothee Richter (head of the Curatorial Master-studies at Zurich University of the Arts and of the online magazine ONCURATING.org.); Warren Neidich, who organized and provided for the curriculum of the summer school; and Armen Avanesian (philosopher, curator and one of the main protagonists of accelerationism). The questions I discussed with them were on matters of how they found themselves within this constellation of production. In how far were they part of, or how far were they resistant to the set-up qua the condition that was critiqued: the production of critical theory in cognitive capitalism? The materials from this research, plus a text-work in which I reflect on the summer-school, were processed into an exhibition called ‘Politics of Estrangement-naught’, Tale of a Tub, Rotterdam, in 2016. This material is part of the *Documentation Section*.

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<sup>35</sup> In a private conversation and e-mail exchange with Warren Neidich (2015).

## Chapter 2

### The Autonomy Project, Van Abbemuseum

#### 1 Introduction

The ‘Autonomy Project’ was a three-day symposium held at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven in 2011 that sought to explore the current state of art production in relation to politics. The symposium was organized around the term *autonomy*, as the quintessential historic artistic idea and form of politico-artistic organization which has been fervently discussed the last decade. The idea of artistic autonomy – until then very much the accustomed idea in the practices of artistic production – proved in need of re-assessment, given the success of the political attacks on it in 2011 in the form of the budget cuts by the liberal-conservative government in the Netherlands.<sup>36</sup> These cuts shook up the supposed accord between the artistic population and politics and exposed its frailty. Now suppose we consider this through Adorno’s notion of the autonomous artwork. It can be explained by: art is that what separates itself from the order as it is in order to critique it, and it does so by negation, abstraction and through its form.<sup>37</sup> We could, then, say that either today’s society does not recognize or support such a function, or that maybe both art and society do no longer recognize or acknowledge each other’s forms, in order to sustain their critical and dialectical relation. The discord that became apparent exposed a maybe outdated positioning and self-understanding of the artistic field vis a vis the political, as the art world could not mobilize societal or political support for its position. The theme can therefore be considered a question of assessing the historic relation between art and politics and a search for a new form of art production, occasioned by a specific crisis, a rupture of this societal accord.

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<sup>36</sup> The budget cuts effected by the liberal-conservative government of cabinet Rutte1, amounted to 20% of the overall budget for culture. What was politically significant though was how these cuts targeted living production (the not-for-profit sector) specifically, leaving the bigger institutions and heritage relatively unaffected. The not-for-profit sector (individual artists and groups, smaller presentation spaces, project-based subsidies and post-academic education were cut by ca. 40%.

See: <https://merijnoudenampsen.org/2013/02/21/dutch-culture-wars-on-the-politics-of-gutting-the-arts/> and: <https://www.platformbk.nl/the-dutch-situation-2/> (accessed 07-02-2021)

<sup>37</sup> Josephine Wikström lays out the role of the artwork according to Adorno, and the meaning and implementation of autonomy in respect to its critical function in her text on the work of Yvonne Rainer. Josephine Wikström, *A Critique of Capitalism? The Mediation of Abstract Labour in Yvonne Rainer’s Task-Dance*, Parse Journal, Faculty of Fine, Applied and Performing Arts, Gothenburg Sweden, 2019

See: <http://parsejournal.com/article/a-critique-of-capitalism-the-mediation-of-abstract-labour-in-yvonne-rainers-task-dance/> (accessed 14-05- 2019)



In the symposium those working or involved in the field of art production – theorists, educators, artists and curators – gathered to debate this topic in lectures, workshops and discussions. The symposium clearly aimed to explore and present the relations between art and aesthetics, and between art and theory. As such the symposium fits the notion of the ‘scene’ as formulated by Jacques Rancière. This idea of the scene stands for the whole range of forms and disciplines that partake in artistic production as contributing to the aesthetics in case (this will later on be unpacked in this text).<sup>38</sup> It was therefore an opportunity to consider the relation between discourse and art, issues of authorship and the symposium as form in the infrastructure of art production. As the notion of the ‘scene’ by Rancière explicitly articulates the relationship between art and aesthetics it serves to shed light on the notion of multi-authorship in artistic platform-production, characteristic of the ‘postconceptual condition’ as formulated by Peter Osborne.

In what follows, the symposium will be analysed for its formal structure and artistic-political format. How did and does the Autonomy Project’s format act within the idea of art-aesthetic production? How are the relations between the organization and participants structured, and how are the relations between knowledge production, academia and art shaped through the binding platform of the conference? These questions are considered through the framework of Jacques Rancière’s conception of the relationship between politics, art and aesthetics: *the aesthetic regime of art*, notably to be found in his book *Dissensus, On Politics and Aesthetics*,<sup>39</sup> and through a critique on the practice of contemporary art production, as voiced by art theorists and educators Suhail Malik and Andrea Phillips via Rancière in their essay *The Wrong of Contemporary Art*.<sup>40</sup>

Rancière describes the philosophical convergences between art and politics via aesthetics, and also notes the limitations and specifics of art as a form of politics. Malik and Phillips, extrapolating on Rancière, critically expand on the shortcomings of contemporary art production and propose a reconsideration of the political in artistic production. They

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<sup>38</sup> In *The Politics of Art* an interview with Jacques Rancière on the occasion of the publication of *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art* (Verso, London, 2017), he describes art not as medium-specific and autonomous realm but as a form of heteronomous aesthetics-formation.

<sup>39</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus, On Politics and Aesthetics*, edited and translated by Steven Corcoran, London: Continuum, 2010

<sup>40</sup> Suhail Malik and Andrea Phillips, *The Wrong of Contemporary Art: Aesthetics and Political Indeterminacy*. In: Paul Bowman and Richard Stamp, eds. *Reading Rancière: Critical Dissensus*. London: Continuum, 2011, pp.111-128.

formulate how the quintessential characteristic of the absolute openness of art (its indeterminacy) constitutes art's meta-political programme. This begs the question of what possible form the consequential application of such politics could take. This discussion provides the lens for a critique on the political agency and forms of new artistic platform models. I will first describe the Autonomy Project conference – in particular the role and the place of Rancière as philosopher/critic in the conference in relation to that of the artists present – after which I will expand on Rancière's philosophy and on his mobilisation of the function of critique. After that I will continue to discuss the relevance of the Malik and Phillips essay. The considerations in these reflections will re-appear – sometimes indirectly – in other cases such as the Benjamin in Palestine Conference, chapter 3.

## **2 The Autonomy Project conference, form and actors**

The conference consisted of a mix of lectures by art theorists, experts on political governance, workshops, public discussion and artistic presentations. Among the theorists lecturing were Peter Osborne, Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, Gerald Raunig, Ruth Sonderegger, Isabell Lorey, Maria Gough and Jacques Rancière. In this text and for the purpose of the examination at hand, I will focus on the artists and art theorists that participated. The central editorial rationale and choice for this line-up was to provide a historical overview of the development and philosophies in the relation between art, aesthetics and politics, the genealogy of the political of aesthetics, and what possible routes out of the current situation, could be presented.

The artists Thomas Hirschhorn and Tania Bruguera gave extensive presentations about a selection of their own works. Both artists' practices are characterized by theoretical discourse as a substantial element in their works. As can be seen on Bruguera's website, her projects are mostly hybrid forms of research which combine participation, the specifics of locality (social issues), artistic interventionist forms and theoretical research which centres around the well theorized history of political art.<sup>41</sup> Hirschhorn's work also relates extensively to theoretical and philosophical notions. He uses the legacies and ideologies laid out by philosophy's major writers and thinkers to frame and conduct his on-site projects. The *Gramsci Monument* at Forest Houses, a New York City Housing Authority development in the Bronx, the *Deleuze Monument* (Avignon, France, 2000) and the *Bataille*

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<sup>41</sup> See: <https://www.taniabruquera.com/cms/> (accessed 16-02-21)

*Monument* (Kassel, Germany, 2002) can be named in line with the *Spinoza Festival* (Amsterdam, the Netherlands, 2009) which will be discussed here.<sup>42</sup>

Rancière, next to being interviewed by the organizers as main event of the symposium, was tasked to critically review the projects discussed by Hirschhorn and Bruguera. I will therefore specifically focus on their performances in the remainder of this text in relation to his theories. These artists' projects lend themselves particularly well to be critiqued for political-aesthetic considerations. Aligning with Rancière's notions of the artistic as interaction between aesthetics and discourse as in the scene, the artists voice their artistic practices as concerned with and aiming to produce political effects through the production and dissemination of aesthetics. Hirschhorn's *Bijlmer Spinoza Festival* (2009) for example, that was discussed, was a long-term installation in the Bijlmer, an area in Amsterdam with distinct societal problems. It is an area characterized by lower income and higher levels of drug related crime. It can be seen as a social intervention, since the project concretely addresses and engages with the local population. Its choice of location is an unconventional venue not connected to art's existing infrastructure and is a generic public space which does not directly address or accommodate an accustomed art audience.<sup>43</sup> One has to specifically travel to see this particular work and how it comes into being in its social environment.

In this project, as stated by Hirschhorn, he as artist aimed to reach the local community. He wanted however to address this community without being patronizing or with an educational intent. He also insisted his approach was not based on the notion of participation. Hirschhorn considers the concept of the artwork as a form of social interaction as too intrusive, colonial and paternalistic. It rather needs to be seen as autonomous without an a priori notion of its participative function.<sup>44</sup> One can observe here that all these considerations are still current questions on how to engage as artist with an audience that is directly addressed, and in what form without giving rise to power differences, and what the ethical and formal implications are of such an intervention. Seen this way, the artist comes with a distinct set of presuppositions and concerns, captured in certain traditions and

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<sup>42</sup> See <http://www.thomashirschhorn.com/exhibitions/>

<sup>43</sup> For an in-depth description see: <http://www.thomashirschhorn.com/the-bijlmer-spinoza-festival/> (accessed 16-02-21)

<sup>44</sup> The development of participation as defining element in art that rose to prominence within the so called *social turn* of art has been extensively discussed by art historian and critic Claire Bishop. She describes the pitfalls that collaborative authorship and the introduction of social frameworks within the context of art may present. Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells, Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, Verso London, 2012

discourses that are probably unknown to the audience as such that need to be considered.

In his talk Hirschhorn describes how he dealt with these differences and makes the negotiation thereof, part of the work. He does so by considering the festival itself to be a social sculpture and site through which the artist and audience may meet. Whatever pre-knowledges exist may then be exchanged.<sup>45</sup> He thus draws attention to the difference between the artist's mindset and discourse through which he acts and that of the audience. What becomes expressed through this approach is that meaningful exchange can only take place through interaction and negotiation of frames of understanding, and that there must be no a priori intended or projected outcome for it. The exchange must be open and based on the assumption of equality. The political agency of art consists here in the organisation of a common place and sensorium that is to emerge out of an open process, to which the artwork serves. Both the emphasis on equality and the generative processes of aesthetics leading to formations of the communal are quite recognizable as the concerns that Rancière also raises as I will explain further on. To quote Hirschhorn writing about this project:

This project can only be done in Coexistence. Coexistence with the inhabitants of the Bijlmer neighbourhood. Coexistence because it is their place, coexistence because it is with them, it is resolutely with and for the Bijlmer inhabitants. It is with and for the local inhabitants first – without exclusion of others. But it is my work. It is me – the artist – who assumes fully the responsibility, who takes the responsibility for this work, for the entire work, in all of its aspects. The work must consequently be made in co-operation. «The Bijlmer Spinoza-Festival» cannot be done without the help of the inhabitants. This work cannot be done without the help of the inhabitants because it is not me – the artist – who claims to be helping, who wants to 'help' or furthermore who 'knows' how to help – on the contrary – the inhabitants are the ones helping the work. The inhabitants are the ones who are helping «The Bijlmer Spinoza-Festival» to be carried out to completion.<sup>46</sup>

Rancière in public at the symposium also evaluated artist Tania Bruguera for the political-

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<sup>45</sup> This is also why the introduction of theoretical discourse, here the work of Spinoza, which was read during the festival is not to be understood as patronizing since it is an open engagement with the text, it in fact would be precisely patronizing to consider it too difficult or problematic.

<sup>46</sup> See: <http://www.thomashirschhorn.com/the-bijlmer-spinoza-festival/> (accessed 2019-05-31)

ness of her artistic strategy or artistic form. In her presentation she expanded on her project *Arte Útil (Useful Art)* and the ideas behind it.<sup>47</sup> As already expressed in the title *Arte Útil* she deliberately embraces the notion of instrumentality and purposeful intent to frame her art by. Coming from Cuba and a communist background, but working and living in the West, she combines the notions of a utilitarian art – a conventional attribute of art in communism – with the problematic notions of freedom in the liberal West under capitalism. In a sense she thus juxtaposes the two great histories of capitalism and communism and notions of art these have produced to artistically reflect on our current post-communist conditions this brings.

In her talk she presents several projects that have an activist-political character, like *Immigrant Movement International*, a project that combines direct social and political work with illegals and immigrants and the museum-context. As Bruguera states:

I feel that useful art has two ways to be experienced, one way is from the “art side”, which is, to look at how the artist structures the project and how they have developed the idea. If you experience the project from the user's side, then for me, it's more about, “what do I get from it?” It doesn't matter if it is art or not. It feels to me that depending on the intensity of your involvement in the project you can get to one side or the other.<sup>48</sup>

She hereby is an outspoken exponent of the direct political artwork – in the aforementioned debate around the notion of art's role. According to Bruguera art can be intentionally organized as in addressing a cause exterior to it, it can be instrumental. This vision was a polemical stance in the artistic climate until then and has been wholeheartedly backed and supported by the Van Abbemuseum.<sup>49</sup> In the Rancièrè-ian scheme the question here is not so much the direct political but whether its outcome as artwork contains a prescribed narrative

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<sup>47</sup> For information on this project at the Van Abbemuseum see:

<https://vanabbemuseum.nl/en/programme/programme/museum-of-arte-util/> and on the website of Arte Útil itself, see: <http://www.arte-util.org> (accessed 2019-05-16)

<sup>48</sup> Interview Tania Bruguera by Ashraf Osman on the *Immigrant Movement International* project.

*An Interview With Tania Bruguera*, ONCURATING website, December 2012,

See: [http://www.on-curating.org/issue-19-reader/tania-bruguera-interviewed.html#.XN\\_Toy2iFsY](http://www.on-curating.org/issue-19-reader/tania-bruguera-interviewed.html#.XN_Toy2iFsY) (accessed 2019-05-16)

<sup>49</sup> The museum has given her an extensive solo-presentation in the year 2013-2014 that consisted of a complete restructure of the museum into an activist platform for a period of three months. Bruguera The Van Abbemuseum has an ongoing cooperation and relation with Bruguera.

See for a description of the project at the Van Abbemuseum:

<https://vanabbemuseum.nl/en/programme/programme/museum-of-arte-util/> (accessed 2019-05-16)

which would negate the free play between *poiesis* and *aisthesis*, between making and the meaning attributed to it, and who controls or directs this meaning (this will be discussed extensively in the next section). Arguably Bruguera's work implies a pre-existing critique (on working conditions and the legal status of immigrants) yet what happens in the work itself with those who partake, she argues, is basically free. She also turns the question of art's predominance around by introducing 'utility' as equal critical category in relation to art. So different notions of the artwork and its politics arise.

In both cases the artworks were critically politically mustered for the result Rancière requires from artworks: whether these organize an effect of re-distribution of aesthetic notions and their political mode. The critique deployed by Rancière is not limited to expressiveness and formal reading of works within the tradition of art-making as said before, but is directly related to how works function and address a much broader aesthetic and political sphere of activity. Alongside these lengthy public critiques, Rancière was the interviewee in a keynote discussion with the symposium's main organizers Charles Esche and Nikos Papastergiadis. Through this the figure of Rancière and his thematic framework and conceptual set of ideas became the central axis around which the conference was constructed.

Here, in regards to the role of commentator that Rancière performs in the symposium, some remarks must be made about the style of production and hybridity of the figure of Rancière himself. Apart from publishing unequivocal philosophical books, analyzing politics and aesthetics, as in *Aesthetics and its Discontents* (or. 2004), his style of writing often also takes the form of literary critiques, through which he develops his arguments – like in *Aisthesis, Scenes From the Aesthetic Regime of Art* (or. 2011) for example. These critiques often contain elements of a speculative quality and are therefore not straightforward art-historical treatises or critiques. As political sciences scholar Devin Lefebvre explains, Rancière's style of writing is based on the notion of the fragment which would undercut any identification with any discipline, including the art-critical and that precludes the notion of finalisation. To quote Lefebvre:

If I suggest that Rancière be thought of as a thinker of fragments rather than as purely a polemicist, it is because the reconfiguration he brings about does not so much *find* itself in that which it reconfigures as it *establishes* itself. Much as how the stakes of the conflict brought about by the sudden appearance part of those who have no part

can be found in both a particular and a universal sense, the stakes of his writings are not themselves confined to any one particular intervention. In a way similar to the essay and negative dialectic in Adorno, Rancière's writings, while never a *total* account, are nevertheless *an* account. They still *want* to say and are still able to find a certain completeness despite never settling on the finality of this completion.<sup>50</sup>

The Romanticist emphasis on the fragment therefore results one can say, in an aesthetical technique that belongs to the notion of the aesthetic regime of art. The final element that runs through all of his work and that thoroughly binds it, is the fundamental notion of equality, which supposes that all can partake in the discussion on art, and which specifically acknowledges the pre-existence of knowledge in subjects. This well-known element in Rancière's thinking has been extensively put forward in his text *The Emancipated Spectator*.<sup>51</sup> The assumption of fragmented knowledge supposes a fundamental incompleteness of account which is open to being continued upon. One can say that Rancière undercuts a possible critical authoritative position by fictionalizing his aesthetical assessment of the situation.

### *Paradox*

This also means that his critique should not be understood as definite and authoritarian judgement, as judgment alone and that the critiques of the cases discussed as in the Autonomy Project conference – as critical objects – serve to develop speculative propositions. Which is done in the *way* Rancière discusses these. This modality as active ingredient of Rancière's aesthetic principle remained however, I argue, under recognized. In the symposium Rancière was attributed a central role as an expert and knowledgeable reader. This is contrary to what is at the core of his teachings and is against the grain of his manner of performance: there is no hierarchical distinction to be made in perception and in the formation of aesthetics, nor in the communication between participants. Furthermore: in Rancière's philosophy the sense of aesthetics that emerges through all that are present (what Rancière calls the optical lens of *the scene*) remains an issue of ongoing contention.

In the conference though, I claim, it was not this 'moment' itself – as the assembly of

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<sup>50</sup> Devin Alexandre George Lefebvre, *Rancière and Commitment, The Strange Place of the Politics and Style of Jacques Rancière in the Western-Marxist Tradition*, School of Political Studies, University of Ottawa, 2015

<sup>51</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, Verso London, 2014

all present – that was presented as the focus or motor of this event. Though the authoritative nature of expertise presented on stage, was emphatically denied, and though the discussion was to be a non-hierarchical exchange as specifically stated at the introduction of the talk with Rancière, this was not reflected in the structure of the wider symposium. This was because, as staged dialogue, it was the main event in the conference, conducted by its two main organizers: Charles Esche (also the director of the Van Abbemuseum) and Nikos Papastergiadis which gave it an unmistakable gravity. So, though a non-hierarchical (un-authored) conduct was presented for the course of the exchange between the protagonists, the central conceptual and idea-matic frame was set, around which the further dialogue would ensue and around which the other presentations, including those of the artists, in the program inevitably would come to relate.

This constituted a paradoxical situation where the form of the conference that was presented at the Autonomy Project conference with the expert-theorist put on display, served to critically comment on the artists, establishing an authoritative hierarchy between artistic production and theoretical reflection. Here the theorist arguably served to perform the expert-role contrary to his teachings, delivering an object in the form of a critique as reading. Subsequently the critique became the stand-alone object within the event. In a sense the critical format of Rancière which implies an enfolding of critique – and that is to *materialize* in social exchange – was transposed to the notion of critique perhaps more in line with a strictly philosophical or art-historical format: an object of thought as critical object. In this, a prospective object that these readings are supposed to constitute, implicated by Rancière's style as explained by Lefebvre, risks being missed: a speculative object that could have been produced in the exchanges as staged in this constellation. Here a potential deficit comes to light between the theorists who, besides Rancière, presented at the symposium, and whose reflections, manners of engagement and modes of critique may function differently. In the symposium such possible differences were not introduced or taken as point of departure for the ensuing discussion within the symposium.

In the next section I will extensively go into Rancière's ideas on the relation between art and politics and how he arrives at the crucial notion of the relation between art and aesthetics. This serves to explain the response Malik and Phillips have proposed, and how a politics of the arts can be understood differently from Rancière's position which yet departs from the same analysis.



### 3 Rancière's aesthetic regime of art

Jacques Rancière is well known for his notion of the *aesthetic regime*. For Rancière, this denotes our historic conception of art, which is constituted by the interplay and relation between art and life, politics and aesthetics. According to Rancière, art does not solely serve the representation of power but acts as a medium around which common fields of perception are organized. This is what Rancière calls the distribution of the sensible. This notion establishes art as an indirect political agent, since it interferes in or is in communication with the aesthetics of politics.<sup>52</sup> Politics for Rancière is a general principle of the struggle for recognition of a group or organization of subjects in the established order. This struggle involves aesthetics both in recognizing one's common perception of and place in the world (the identity of the group) as well as how this can manifest in the social order as it is. So this notion of the political is a broader concept than the mere representational forms of politics, and aesthetics is a wider concept tied to the political imagining and (re)ordering of the world. As Rancière writes:

If the reader is fond of analogy, aesthetics can be understood in a Kantian sense – re-examined perhaps by Foucault – as the system of a priori forms determining what presents itself to sense experience. It is a delimitation of [14] spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience. Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time.<sup>53</sup>

For Rancière the art-historical categories of modernism and postmodernism both fall within this same broad periodization of the aesthetic regime. Rancière, like Peter Osborne, locates the origin of our contemporary aesthetics in early German Idealism and Romanticism, where the basic premises leading to our modern form of art and aesthetics are founded.<sup>54</sup> It is especially in Schiller that Rancière finds the argument for the interconnectedness of life and art as structural political bind, as Rancière says:

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<sup>52</sup> Joseph J. Tanke, *What Is The Aesthetic Regime?*, *Parrhesia: A Journal of Critical Philosophy*, nr. 12, 2011, p. 71-81

<sup>53</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics, The Distribution of the Sensible*, Continuum, London-New York, 2004

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, p.27

...In a sense, the whole problem lies in a very small proposition. Schiller says that aesthetic experience will bear the edifice of the art of the beautiful **and** of the art of living. The entire question of the 'politics of aesthetics' - in other words, of the aesthetic regime of art - turns on this short conjunction. The aesthetic experience is effective in as much as it is the experience of that **and**. It grounds the autonomy of art, to the extent that it connects it to the hope of 'changing life'.<sup>55</sup> (emphasis in text)

### *Life and art*

For Rancière then, art is intimately entwined and in an ongoing relation with the organization of life. Yet at the same time, he distinguishes art as apart from life: it cannot coincide with it. This follows from Rancière's logic that says that art cannot require a unified reading or body of interpretation since it would be no longer poetic and heterogeneous and loses its meaning as an artwork as it would become a policing form. As Rancière writes:

Poetry is poetry, says Hegel, so long as prose is confused with poetry. When prose is only prose, there is no more heterogeneous sensible. The statements and furnishings of collective life are only the statements and furnishings of collective life. So the formula of art becoming life is invalidated: a new life does not need a new art. On the contrary, the new life is specific in that it does not need art. The whole history of art forms and of the politics of aesthetics in the aesthetic regime of art could be staged as the clash of these two formulæ: a new life needs a new art; the new life does not need art.<sup>56</sup>

It is important to see how Rancière understands art here as lodged within the historical formation of politics and the relations between citizens and power. The role of art in this is that what expresses the unsettling of the laws and rules of ordered life (poetry vs prose) as a form of Hegelian dialectics. Poetry in this dialectical relation is that quality that can identify the law because it is strange and external to it, and importantly, needs to remain so. At the other end of the interplay between art life stands an ideal of sovereign life, where art no longer is needed, since a perfect life (or the ideal notion of such a life) would not be in need of art.<sup>57</sup> For Rancière art therefore oscillates between these two poles, and leads to a third

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<sup>55</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus, On Politics and Aesthetics*, Continuum, London – New York, 2010, p.116

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, p.124

<sup>57</sup> And in the sense of the aim of emancipation of life as such stemming from notions from Romanticism to be found in Schiller, art strives to become life: 'art becoming life'. Here the aesthetization of life serves to fulfil the

scenario where art and life exchange their properties, which interrelationship also defines the relation between aesthetics and politics. Rancière:

These three scenarios yield three configurations of the aesthetic, emplotted in three versions of temporality. According to the logic of the *and*, each is also a variant of the politics of aesthetics, or what we should rather call its 'metapolitics' - that is, its way of producing its own politics, proposing to politics re-arrangements of its space, re-configuring art as a political issue or asserting itself as true politics.<sup>58</sup> (emphasis in text)

The definition of this third scenario 'aesthetics-art' is thus the continued negotiation of what the texture is that constitutes our world, through an ongoing assessment of what establishes a common sensibility without getting definitive or unified though. For Rancière art then is the moment of becoming that is prohibited from the onset to settle into an established form and therefore the constant play of renewing. This is best captured in what he defines as the *singular as arts*' defining quality. Rancière writes:

The aesthetic regime [33] of the arts is the regime that strictly identifies art in the singular and frees it from any specific rule, from any hierarchy of the arts, subject matter, and genres. Yet it does so by destroying the mimetic barrier that distinguished ways of doing and making affiliated with art from other ways of doing and making, a barrier that separated its rules from the order of social occupations. The aesthetic regime asserts the absolute singularity of art and, at the same time, destroys any pragmatic criterion for isolating this singularity. It simultaneously establishes the autonomy of art and the identity of its forms with the forms that life uses to shape itself. Schiller's aesthetic state, which is this regimes' first manifesto (and remains, in a sense, unsurpassable), clearly indicates this fundamental identity of opposites. The aesthetic state is a pure instance of suspension, a moment when form is experienced for itself.<sup>59</sup>

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human revolution. The human revolution would be realized through the fulfilment of the capacity to shape its own future, without god or state, egalitarian, sovereign and in freedom.

Ibid, p.119-121

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, p.119

<sup>59</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics, The Distribution of the Sensible*, Continuum, London-New York, 2004, p.23-24

The elevation of the singular as guiding principle results in a generalized and fundamental idea of political emancipation and the emphasis on that what is heterogenous (everything has the right to exist independent of recognition – and thus remains heterogenous –, sovereignty is not something that can be granted).<sup>60</sup> If we take this to be correct, and in principle I would agree, this means that any interpretation or an idea of art, can only be temporary and is in principal up for reconsideration.

The general rationale for this is deeply indebted to and founded in line with the principles of Romanticism. Rancière here points to a specific interpretation of Romanticist philosophy and aesthetics. Rather than emphasizing and elevating the artist figure as it is often the case or presenting art as the realm of the sublime, it means the fundamental impossibility to arrive at a determinate definition of what art is. What meaning art takes in the here and now in different times needs each time, to be considered and re-considered in the respective contexts of histories and times. This results in an unending assessment of the formation of aesthetics, by which even the demarcation of what art is, becomes undeterminable. This also means that these reconsiderations and re-ordering of the relation between art and life function as a mode for future actualizations as well. Importantly this also means that an idea of progress must be abandoned. This basic uncertainty becomes important when considering the symposium as site onto *and* from which art is discussed. As Rancière writes:

It is often thought that Romantic poetics involved a sacralization of art and of the artist, but this is a one-sided view. The principle of 'Romanticism' is rather to be found in a multiplication of the temporalities of art that renders its boundaries permeable. Multiplying its lines of temporality means complicating and ultimately dismissing the straightforward scenarios of art becoming life or life becoming art, of the 'end' of art; and replacing them with scenarios of latency and re-actualization. This is the burden of Schlegel's idea of 'progressive universal poetry'. It does not mean any straightforward

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<sup>60</sup> The logic that this politics of egalitarian litigation entails is a paradoxical logic of the 'singular universal'. Against the particular power-interests of the ruling elite and forms of privatization of speech, political speech, as Žižek puts it, 'involves a local instance that acts as a stand-in for the universal: it consists in a conflict between the structured social body where each part has its place and the "part with no part" which unsettles this order on account of the empty principle of universality- the principled equality of all qua speaking beings'. Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus, On Politics and Aesthetics*, Continuum, London – New York, 2010, Editor's Introduction, Steve Corcoran, p.6

march of progress.<sup>61</sup>

Rancière argues therefore also that in the encounter with art, a systematic integrity and coherent narrative can emerge that establishes a truth outside of art. Such narrative follows from the structural relationship between *poiesis* and *aisthesis*, it emerges out of that what is being made and the meaning that is attributed to it. The true political power of art however, Rancière stipulates, lies in its abstinence from any such organized narratives itself. Instead art instigates this process of contingent outcomes, of experiences into aesthetics. In other words: it must be the free formation of art and ways to experience it – and most importantly, the free attribution to its meaning alone – that can be called political. Only there an uncontrolled meaning – a free logos – can emerge. An(y) emerging sense of community via art therefore, as a politics of a *demos*, can only be through a contingent process. One can then say that, diametrically to a notion of the autonomy of art that is based on the notion of art's purposelessness (a notion that still holds sway),<sup>62</sup> art serves a direct socio-political function. And though art is separated from politics, as Rancière insists, one may say it serves a function.

The opposite of this is a politics that subordinates through direct management and control. Rancière distinguishes this method as 'policing': controlling any contingent meaning into a pre-existing mold of expectancy. This 'policing' is also exactly what characterizes regular politics, that prescribes an aesthetics through which to perceive meaning of what is presented, an ordering of the world and ethical coding, that subjectifies those in it. Yet he argues that politics is equally founded on aesthetics. To quote Rancière:

For aesthetics-art, the disestablishment of the account of the logos or the more general sensorium by the repartition of the sensible is assured not only by the 'free play' and 'gap' between *poiesis* and *aisthesis* but also by the absence of any narrative that binds these two aspects of the work to one another in any inevitable way.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid, p.125

<sup>62</sup> See for the discussion on art's use-value or function Stephen Wright's critique on art's *purposeless purpose* as formulated by Immanuel Kant. Wright claims that together with the notion of *disinterested spectatorship*, also a Kantian notion, these have helped to keep art depoliticised.

Stephen Wright, *Towards a Lexicon of Usership*, Van Abbemuseum, 2013

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, p. 115-116

This is also the logic with which Rancière expresses a skepticism of what is called ‘*critical art*’, where the artist – or platformed mediation – acts as the illuminator of conditions that are supposedly unknown to the spectator. This kind of art contains a pre-existing narrative of its supposed purpose or intent, which is conveyed to the audience. This critical viewpoint then also relates to practices as those of Bruguera whose projects most times contain a clear pre-formatted political framework. In the strict sense of Rancière’s reasoning, such a frame constitutes a possible pre-emption of meaning and intent. The question of what a just politics is then, in Rancière’s idea, is the principal and fundamental notion of the free interplay between *poiesis* and *aisthesis*. Rancière establishes art-aesthetics thereby as the political since its very quality and presence questions authoritative formation per se. The quest of art and its requirement of autonomy than lie precisely in the connection with politics, the art of life, yet by its fundamental abstention of policing and of a stable narrative that binds *poiesis* and *aisthesis*, its political instrumental form is a structural problem.

This is also a main point where Osborne and Rancière diverge in their definition of art and aesthetics. Osborne does not accept Rancière’s proposition of the *Aesthetic Regime of Art* as an historical category in the overarching manner Rancière does. Osborne does not share the broad temporalization upon which Rancière bases his particular notion of the aesthetic regime, which in the end is a postulation by Rancière himself.<sup>64</sup> For Rancière art-aesthetics is an act of assessing one’s place and perception of the world through art (made possible by the special place that art is), which as a fictionalized proposal can establish an exchange in communication; it acts thereby as a direct social agent. The premise of radical equality in this assessing of one’s place in the world *and* in relation to others contains a political demand. Radical equality here means that no pre-existing narrative that would describe a political or social unity can exist, if all can partake any outcome is contingent.

For Osborne the question of the relation between art and aesthetics is less unambiguous. He treats these more as distinct fields with overlapping and intersecting but separate genealogies; aesthetics is treated more as and remains an issue of philosophy in relation to art. He observes the drive towards transdisciplinary in the fields of art, philosophy, history and critique and the erosion of categories. In between these fields aesthetics is the

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<sup>64</sup> In a private conversation with Peter Osborne he explained to be unconvinced of the validity of Rancière’s conceptualisation of the Aesthetic Regime of Art, Symposium *Art and the Contemporary*, University of Surrey, Centre for Performance Philosophy, Guildford UK, 2018

contested object, so to speak. He observes for example how art comes to incorporate philosophical ideas and how art history becomes critique. From this general evolving historical situation the different -isms in art have developed, depending on the context of conditions. Osborne writes:

Yet works of art continue to require mediating interpretative categories, however negative, to acquire social objectivity – beyond the received conception of medium. There is no escape from the maze of categories – or, to switch metaphors, no option but to try critically to regulate the flow of their avalanche/rundown. In Kant’s terms, these are the logically conditioning elements of aesthetic judgements of art that make them judgements of art, rather than pure aesthetic judgements that could just as well be of nature. This logical conditioning of judgements of individual works of art is a process that remains, oddly, largely theoretically unelaborated, even today; perhaps because it requires a systematic philosophical mediation of the history of art of a kind only Hegel (positively) and Adorno (negatively) have risked. (Duve tried but failed to short-circuit the requirement, in his *Kant After Duchamp*, with the positivism of his Foucauldian version of the institutional theory of art.<sup>65</sup>

He adopts therefore the position by which the judgment of art is tied and dependent on its philosophical framework, a framework that is historical and that has to be constructed. It can however not construct or order a ‘distribution of the sensible’, a new sensible world-construct as his critique on Rancière goes.<sup>66</sup> This means that Osborne’s viewpoint towards art – as philosopher – is of a much more distanced nature than Rancière’s.

What is important in how I discuss both Rancière and Osborne is not to choose the one over the other, but rather to see how Rancière’s inclusion of aesthetics, as the faculty of discourse and of reasoning that is part of the sensible, relates to both current condition of cognitive capitalism and of interdisciplinary artistic platform production. Osborne, in contrast, maintains a distinct place for aesthetics in the constellation of artistic production. Osborne’s position would imply that an external observer exists (and remains distinct). The proposition I bring forward in this dissertation, is that such an idea in the current conditions –and notably

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<sup>65</sup> Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not At All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, Verso, London and New York, 2013, p.107

<sup>66</sup> Peter Osborne, *The Postconceptual Condition*, Verso, London, 2018, p. 62

considering the context of institutional artistic production – requires a closer look. These are the two models that contain different ideas on the place of authorship, the place for the object of art, and the place and function of critique in production.

### *Art-Aesthetics*

It is important to notice that Rancière's definition of aesthetic-art implies a fundamental inclusion of the 'receiving end' in the exchange between proposing and meaning.

Notwithstanding its essential open-endedness, it is the receiver (or participant) that is given an important and crucial role in the establishment of what the proposition entails or may entail as speculative object or endeavour. In this sense, the roles of interpretation and of mediation of the 'art-object' become indistinguishable of art itself. This is closely related to Walter Benjamin's ideas on the role of critique in *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism*<sup>67</sup>. In this text, he establishes the crucial role of critique as the completion of artworks, albeit not in a sense of offering a conclusive reading but rather as a means of opening up modes of re-visiting, re-reading and thereby reviving the artwork discussed. Readings and mediations can be said to be carriers, as well as trajectories or instantiations in which these 'art-objects', in themselves inconclusive, are produced. For Rancière then, the political mode of art is an open process that considers the viewer as an emancipated spectator in the experience of what is proposed as art.<sup>68</sup> Radical equality between all that partake in this process, is here the prime parameter and overriding, zero-sum principle. Rancière lays out the same importance of the role of critique and of theory in the processes involved in art, and even goes so far as to say that there is no fundamental distinction between art and its discourse.<sup>69</sup> Based on the notion of the aesthetic endeavour as an experience of exchange rather than the object itself, Rancière formulates art as an activity through which one can exchange a point of view, through readings of the object (taken in its broadest definition). Joseph Tanke explains that for Rancière communication is a process of co-creation by the 'willed' exchange of fictionalized thought and emotions.<sup>70</sup> This means I argue, that the sets of

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<sup>67</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism*. (GS I 65; SW I 151)

<sup>68</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, Verso London, 2011

<sup>69</sup> "Furthermore, I criticize the very opposition between art and discourse on art. Art does not exist in itself; it is an outcome of a complex set of relationships between what one is allowed to say, to perceive, and to understand. Events and objects only exist within the fabric of discourse, and are perceived as art, or a revolution in art, only within this fabric."

Interview Duncan Thomas with Rancière on his publication *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, date: 30-11-17

<https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2320-the-politics-of-art-an-interview-with-jacques-ranciere>

<sup>70</sup> Joseph J. Tanke, *What Is The Aesthetic Regime?*, *Parhessia: A Journal of Critical Philosophy*, nr. 12, 2011, p.88



references that come to light in reading and interpreting these, are a form of politics; and in the relation and positioning to this ‘object’ the political relation occurs.

Here another significant difference between Osborne’s and Rancière’s aesthetics comes to the fore in that Rancière implies a *folding in* of the critical position, in the processes of communication. There is no ‘object’ of art remaining that is to be the container of critique, it is rather the process of communication within the realm or space of art that sits at the core of the artistic endeavour. To quote Davide Panagia:

But Rancière has no interest in articulating political practices as somehow enabled or emboldened by capacities for making judgments—reflective, determinative, or otherwise. Instead his project is to articulate new forms of criticism that look to the workings of things. “The critic,” he says, “is no longer a person who compares a work to a norm and says if it’s well done or not. . . . The critic is the person who identifies what’s happening.” And this, for him, means “constructing the sensible world to which the artwork belongs or which a political act makes possible.”<sup>71</sup>

And though Osborne equally refers to the blurring of lines between the authorial aesthetic positions of archivist, critic, curator or interpret by which no singular critical position can be determined, he insists on the operation and the ‘criticality’ of the artwork versus its heteronomy. So though the demarcations of positions are sliding, the function of critique remains; and it remains tied to an external object of contemplation (be it artwork, art practice or even history). For Rancière we already are performing *in* a generative mode of communal space of which art is part, whereas for Osborne art remains distinct. For Osborne this critical position and moment – as an exterior – remains whereas for Rancière it is enfolded in the space of interaction. This constitutes a clear difference in how to perceive the role of critique in the project of art by and how aesthetic judgement as such is operational. It means coming back to the Autonomy Project that completely different epistemological viewpoints are at play within the same space of exchange in regards to the relation between art and aesthetics and their respective roles as constitutive parts of this space. This would have to mean that these differences need to be negotiated first. As each ‘observer’ constitutes its own aesthetical lens which again acts as co-authorial medium, each position needs to be made clear first.

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<sup>71</sup> Davide Panagia, *Rancière’s Sentiments*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2018, Preface viii

#### 4 Symposium as scene, fragment and form in infrastructure

Rancière explicitly includes intellectual labor here as a critical and communicative element in the social exchange. This he describes as an optical machine. This model takes the bind between art and aesthetics as the principle by which we can understand and talk of art. To do so he deploys a notion of aesthetics as follows, in the words of Davide Panagia again:

The aesthetic here does not operate as representative of anything...Rancière denies such purposiveness to his scenographies. For him a *scene* is “the optical machine that shows us thought busy weaving together perceptions, affects, names and ideas, constituting the sensible community that these links create, and the intellectual community that makes such weaving thinkable. The scene captures concepts at work, in their relation to the new objects they seek to appropriate, old objects that they try to reconsider, and the patterns they build or transform to this end.”<sup>72</sup>

The *scene* understood as a critical transdisciplinary gathering is therefore the political agent per se, in which cognition and poiesis are in a structural bind. It is here where the analogy with the Autonomy Project symposium becomes apparent. The symposium must be understood as the site of the scene in which the underlying principle of the wider assemblage of positions and fields contributing to the aesthetics and politics that are produced, is performed, as entering the arena of the *distribution of the sensible*.<sup>73</sup> Included are all participants, without hierarchical division of medium-specific qualities: theoretical discourse, curating, artists, publics and organisation that act in the symposium. They would be participating in a general cultural, though temporary and un-stable, form of community. Art in its direct bind with aesthetics, is here organized as sociality as well as production format.

Following Rancière’s logic, I would argue, this development concerning this institutional formation equally contains a political ambition. By bringing the forms of production and reflection together, as in the art-aesthetics bind, the notion of a more complete institutional body arises, that engages politically and aesthetically with the heteronomy of conditions (which usually also is expressed and identified as its societal ambition). Here we

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<sup>72</sup> Davide Panagia, the quote is taken from Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, trans. Zakir Paul, Verso, London, 2013, XI.

<sup>73</sup> In *The Politics of Art* an interview with Jacques Rancière on the occasion of his publication *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art* (Verso, London, 2017) he describes art not as medium-specific and autonomous realm but as a form of heteronomous aesthetics-formation.

immediately are confronted with the limits set by Rancière who precludes any predetermination for such a politics, since it again would deteriorate into a ‘policing’ structure that excludes and sets hierarchies etcetera. Such limitation would however, if self-critically applied, also immediately force issues of visibility and distribution of resources to the fore: who is able to take part in the space of production, this means, in short, the political organization of space.

### *The fragment in infrastructure*

This outcome of the inescapable transdisciplinary as argued by Rancière and with which Peter Osborne concurs, stems from the core philosophical notion of the fragment, developed through early German Romanticism. As the German philosopher Schlegel argued: since there is no possibility of a self-grounding principle of the whole, all knowledge therefore is necessarily fragmented, and the fragment is the fundamental object through which any understanding occurs. And though fragments may unite into collections that seem coherent, such coherence is fundamentally incomplete and temporary. Therefore, also, no subject position can have access or lay claim to an understanding of the whole. This gave rise to the notion of the fundamental incompleteness of any account, to seriality, the idea of the fragment as the ideal form and the transdisciplinarity that have come to define Romanticist philosophy and aesthetics.<sup>74</sup> It also means that through this profound philosophical understanding, the negotiation as a mode of communication (as aggregation and processing of incomplete knowledges and information), is a basic given and expression of this shared understanding and knowledge.

These are the fundamental principles conceptual art has picked up on, as observed by Peter Osborne in *Anywhere or Not at All*, his comprehensive study of the development of the field of artistic production. These findings, I claim, have also been furthered in the infrastructure of art production, in that the idea of the assembly of production is accepted: no single discipline or position contains or controls the whole, the whole is an assemblage of disciplines. As Peter Osborne describes, there is a direct link between these early Romanticist findings of the quintessential importance of the fragment, and how these result in conceptual art’s methodological approach and, importantly, how this generates the movement from *object to project* as form of production in the world of art. Osborne writes:

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<sup>74</sup> Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not At All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, Verso, London and New York, 2013, p. 58-61.

In the Athenaeum Fragments, ‘reason’ is the idea of a self-limiting totality; ‘unreason’ is the image of the hedgehog. This is what Schlegel was looking for in Romantic poetry (poetizing-philosophy, philosophizing poetry), what Benjamin sought from the dialectical image, and what LeWitt found in an art of series. It is in the priority of the process over the object or result here, which is the consequence of the ontological priority of the idea of the work – the virtual infinity of possible actualizations – that LeWitt’s conception of art in his Sentences approaches an early Romantic one most closely. Each involves the dissolution of genres into an artistic process of infinite becoming, and thereby a change in the fundamental status of works from ‘objects’ to ‘projects’.<sup>75</sup>

It is these aspects from this legacy that as I contend, have found a structural foothold in our contemporary worldview and that shape the infrastructure of artistic production. The prominence of the *project* as the basic understanding of form in artistic production (which includes considerations of dissemination and of reception), means that the institution as a structural whole comes into play since project as form requires the organisation of space and time, of production and of reception. This means that the transdisciplinary assembly of positions: curating, theoretical reflection, artist and platform are conjoined towards a mode of artistic production. This is how, as I argue, the current dissolution of roles finds its origins in Romanticism.

Reading Osborne and Rancière together, and especially with the emphasis on Rancière’s ‘scene’ as the fundamental egalitarian principle within this assembled idea of production, I argue that there remain problems of stratification in its execution. In the Autonomy Project as well there remains a clear demarcation between the artist-position and its context of production, contra the idea of the ‘scene’ by Rancière which would require a more fundamental interdisciplinary exchange, and a much wider comprehension of artistic authorship and the inclusion of critique as I argue. Also epistemological differences that may exist, even between participants of the same discipline as such (as I have demonstrated) need to be negotiated first. This in the end leaves it politically incoherent, particularly by remaining aligned and susceptible to the division of labour, where the boundary of artistic production

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid, p.67

meets that of the heteronomy of production as ordered by capitalism. It is here where the problem of political agency of artistic interdisciplinary production arises as an issue of form.

## **5 Co-authorship and agency within the complexity of current production**

It is important to note that ‘autonomy’ is formulated on the premise of the privileged position of the artwork qua aesthetics in the field of art, which is, I argue, channelled through the stratified and exceptional artist-function. This notion of the primacy of art holds sway as can be observed in the VAM symposium, I claim, in the sense that the artists contributions are treated as the starting points in the discussion. This contradicts a more fundamental notion of the scene as described by Rancière which would also include theoretical reflections as co-authorial moments in the emergence of the artistic. In *The Wrong of Contemporary Art*<sup>76</sup> Suhail Malik and Andrea Philips analyse the fabric and state of current art-production in contemporary art through Rancière’s ideas of aesthetics, and from their analysis plot and map its political potential and agency. In this text they focus on the form artistic production has taken in regards to the political ambition it expresses. They agree that in contemporary art the prime mode of operation is precisely that of aesthetic art of which the foremost principle is to demonstrate the fact of policing as such. This is done by deploying a general mode of artistic production, which allows for an indeterminate number of participants, forms and disciplines to partake in engaging in the production of aesthetics. So through total openness and accessibility policing is demonstrated precisely through the omission thereof. Any new form of policing would namely degrade into a politics of subjectification. Processing the effects and mechanisms of this policing is addressing the ‘*wrong*’ as mentioned in the title of the essay and frequently used by Rancière as well. This is the main political means aesthetic art holds. It is, however, politically undetermined, in that it does not propose a strong new politics or political form. It is necessarily indeterminate because it has to, in principle, accommodate all current and future (unknown) participants to maintain the space of art. But because both art and politics are forms of aesthetization (as in the principle of that which organizes that what is sensible), and aesthetization is the ordering principle of politics,<sup>77</sup> they both compete in supra-politics over what is a common sensorium. This is the meta-politics

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<sup>76</sup> Suhail Malik and Andrea Phillips, *The Wrong of Contemporary Art: Aesthetics and Political Indeterminacy*. In: Paul Bowman and Richard Stamp, eds. *Reading Rancière: Critical Dissensus*. London: Continuum, 2011, pp.111-128.

<sup>77</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: politics and philosophy*, translated by Julie Rose, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis USA, 1999

Rancière denotes in his tri-partition of scenarios in the aesthetic regime described earlier. It is only the underlying principle of radical equality and the abstinence of policing that distinguishes the politics of art from a policed aesthetics (of politics).

For Malik and Philips this holds consequences for how the field of art in relation to a politics should be conceived. It means that they would have to depart from the principle condition of equivalence to politics to begin with: the supra-politics of art. Malik and Phillips write:

It is as a supra-politics that contemporary art's claims to politics can be understood as being necessarily partial and generalized. It is the difference, in Hirschhorn's phrasing, between 'making political work' – a politics which has a particular subjectification as its 'cause' – and 'working politically' – an art that is political by virtue of its repartition of the sensible but which has no other determinations than that. In processing the police order as such as a wrong, aesthetics-art remains indeterminate with regard to the particularities of politics.<sup>78</sup>

This is a different take, from regular ideas on what the relation between artistic production and politics is, where a notion of art's autonomy, as a primary position, still holds sway. It is important here to note that this autonomy is formulated on the premise of the privileged position of the artwork qua aesthetics in the field of art, which is, I argue, channelled through the stratified and exceptional artist-function. This notion of the primacy of art holds sway as can be observed in the symposium, I claim, in the sense that the artists contributions are treated as the starting points in the discussion. This contradicts a more fundamental notion of the scene as described by Rancière which would also include theoretical reflections as co-authorial moments in the emergence of the artistic.

If the similarities between politics and arts are taken seriously, the distance that is normally maintained between them, and that preserves the arts as autonomous from politics, dissolves. In the discussion concerning art's autonomy, which is needed to relate politically to the heteronomy of conditions, this question of privilege becomes obsolete since art, as is politics, is concerned with organizing aesthetics, a heterogeneous given as such. British media

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid, p.122

studies scholar Nicholas Holm describes this through the disappearance of the distinction between autonomous art and art that aims at politics directly political art in Rancière's thinking. To quote Holm:

There is thus no contradiction between the purity of art for art's sake and the politicisation of art, but rather a deeper paradox which arises in the mode of aesthetic art itself, between the separation of autonomous art and its promise to transform the world: 'The work's solitude carries a promise of emancipation. But the fulfilment of that promise amounts to the elimination of art as a separate reality'.<sup>79</sup>

Again, this relates to Rancière's tri-partition of scenarios in the relation between life and art as mentioned before, where he warns for the absorption of the free formation of a communal aesthetics by the policing forces of politics. So though art ceases to be art when it has 'fulfilled' its operation, as art in general, it has this overall political emancipatory function. Malik and Philips specify what the autonomy of the artwork currently means by focussing on what has become art's most specific characteristic: its criterialess singularity. As explained before: this criterialess singularity is, according to Rancière, what stands for its most fundamental emancipatory characteristic: no criterion can be formulated to determine what art is. How this function is realized then becomes dependent of the quality of institutional handling and organization. The institutional infrastructure (and the socio-political organisation that designates such infrastructure) after all negotiates the place of art within society. In reading Malik and Phillips, following up on Rancière, I would therefore argue that the symbolic function is clear and the *criterialess identity* of art as only criterium becomes insufficient. In their words:

However, even despite Rancière's caveat, if politics is aesthetic 'in principle', if aesthetics in general is the condition for politics, then the politics of aesthetics-art has no particularity compared to politics in general (and the solace sought by contemporary art in Rancière's aesthetico-political logic is not only warranted but also provided). But it is then not only the 'pragmatic criteria for isolating [art's]

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<sup>79</sup> Nicholas Holm, review of Jacques Rancière's *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, Culture Machine Reviews, May 2010, <https://culturemachine.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/393-663-1-PB.pdf> (accessed 26-04-2019)

singularity' that is destroyed but also that singularity – its criterialess identifiability – which is destroyed with respect to politics.<sup>80</sup>

Malik and Phillips, thereby arrive at a critique on the practice of contemporary art, that builds on Rancière's scheme of politics and art and that dismantles some of institutional art's doxas: the *criterialess singular* quality of an artwork alone is in itself not enough (it is self-evident and when it holds no practical consequences it becomes a mere symbolic practice). It also means that there is a clear a priori component concerning art, in the formation of the political detectable: the deployment of the singular artwork serves the processes of formation of communal space (however instable and temporary). This puts a firm demand on how indeterminacy within the infrastructure of art-production needs to be installed or structured, I argue. In other words, the question that follows is: how to shape the supra-political of Rancière's third scenario institutionally?

Malik in his lecture-series in 2013 at Artists Space, New York, critiques the practice of contemporary art as being the mere 'meta-genre of indeterminacy'.<sup>81</sup> His critique goes that institutional contemporary art production merely colonizes the multiplicity of contemporary subjects by representing these in a general format, preventing a true politics via a consequential application of indeterminacy (the world of contemporary art directs too much how art is to be perceived, and thus becomes its police). For Malik this also means that art cannot be thought otherwise than as instrumental to its meta-political ambition.<sup>82</sup> Or stated differently: the issue of the avoidance of instrumentality as ontological criterium for art, dissolves all together.

The question of how to structure art production, then, remains centred around the conundrum of how to enable a non-policing and form of it that acknowledges its political form. This re-articulation of Rancière's ideas in the context of art production consequently phrases the need for a 'space for politics' as a fundamental aesthetic-political question. The

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<sup>80</sup> Suhail Malik and Andrea Phillips, *The Wrong of Contemporary Art: Aesthetics and Political Indeterminacy*, in: *Reading Rancière*, Paul Bowman and Richard Stamp, eds., London: Continuum, 2011, pp. 118.

<sup>81</sup> See: <http://old.artistspace.org/materials/on-the-necessity-of-arts-exit-from-contemporary-art> (accessed 2021-03-02.)

<sup>82</sup> Malik will later arrive to proposals to effectuate these ideas on artistic production, in which the political aim is clearly embraced from the outset of projects. And where the mere operationalisation of aesthetics-art: the proposition of anything as speculative medium, no longer is the end-goal, but is instrument to a much clearer political inquiry.



question of how to ‘install a proper space of indeterminacy’, that is captured in and follows from Malik’s and Phillips’s critique (continued on Rancière’s analysis), must, I contend, be considered through Rancière’s notion of the scene. The consequences of aesthetic art require us to look at the interdisciplinary character of production more deeply. It is in this wider and deeply imbricated constellation of positions, where the interplay between poesis and aisthesis is a multi-positional given, that the art-aesthetical object emerges. This would mean, in the context of the symposium as exemplary form of contemporary and institutionally binding production (however temporary), that all participants artists, theorists and organisation must be considered as equal and reciprocal authors in the establishment of the emergent object. This is, I argue, how *indeterminacy* would be taken to its consequential conclusion.

By taking the analyses of Rancière, Osborne and Malik together, allows me to draw to following conclusion concerning the organization of the contemporary system of art. These are the steps I have been tracing so far: 1.) art is to be seen as a mobile object of which many hold authorship. 2.) It needs to be seen as a mode of production of aesthetics in general as proposed by Rancière. 3.) It needs to be seen through the assertion of a *scene* that relates the contingent scope of participants. 4.) This implies that reflections on art as formulated in critical theory or philosophy serve as the active-receptive responses to the propositions of art and equally provide the conceptual guidelines by which it is furthered as well as the criteria for judgement. 5.) Therefore, the authors of such reflections can be regarded as co-authors. 6.) The same goes for the curatorial and institutional positions in play, that function in their respective as the distributive and platform agents, establishing in form and in action that what is proposed and how it is proposed (an aesthetical proposition). These contexts, the conditional elements and the management and mapping of these, therefore become equal formal elements - equal ‘fragments’ of the ‘work’, I argue. So, consequently this means there is no formal distinction to be made or left between the positions at play, complementary to that of ‘artist’: these are all author-artist. The role of the constellation comes to the fore as an assembled, meta-political, author.<sup>83</sup>

Working within the field, however, one finds that an assertion of artistic co-authorship is yet little recognized. The notion of the scene would require the integration of function and discipline more and the artistic content that is to be platformed (presented, displayed,

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<sup>83</sup> Peter Osborne, *Contemporary Art is Post-Conceptual Art*, Public Lecture, Fondazione Antonio Ratti, Villa Sucota, Como, 9 July 2010

published, interpreted and mediated) understood as function for all involved. While a basic message of interdisciplinarity is communicated, it is yet most times still the artist-figure that is attributed the position establishing the primary starting point of the ensuing discussion and course of events.<sup>84</sup> Furthermore, what can be observed is a limitation in the conversation between artists and the surrounding frame of production. Though artists are supposed to be critically responsible for the execution of the formal logic within their work(s) (this is the basic form critique takes in artistic production), such practices of accountability hardly extend to the conditions and frames of wider production in the art system. These are not understood as elements (fragments) of artistic production, but rather as accommodating conditions for art. One might say that there is no critical reciprocity between the artistic ‘objecthood’ – tied to the artist position – and the structures that support it and the politics the relation between these may contain.

The positions involved in institutional production, in total become implied towards the responsibility and accountability for it throughout the chain. In the symposium for example, the many philosophical and theoretical objects of thought, instrumental for ‘how’ to think of artistic production and how to think of practice as a model for working in general, are brought together. These constitute the generative aesthetical interpretations activating the communal exchange via art that is the symposium. The issues of communication that arises within this chain of positions then – as in the symposium – becomes of central importance. An important and first problem would be to map what problems arise for those partaking in a system of production when its ambition is based on communication between its positions? Normally in the category of critical thought on production, on politics and on aesthetics, these texts are transferred from the academic context of production to another system of economic logic. The artistic apparatus treats and organizes its materials in a manner different from the academic world where most of these texts originate from, and which are construed and conceptualized according the formal logic and milieu of academia. One can therefore say that in the interaction an epistemological displacement of authorship occurs that serves as a mediation between artist, institute, theorist, curator and audience.

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<sup>84</sup> See for instance how art theorist Thierry de Duve identifies the artist-figure as presented by Beuys as catalyst between objectivity and intuition in order to find the universal principle of human existence, the embodiment of the ‘creative artist’ in the Romanticist tradition. Or how Duchamp figures in his account as explanation of how the relationship between aesthetics and art is complicated, and reception has become pivotal. Yet the position of artist and critical observer remain categorically stratified.

Thierry de Duve, *Kant After Duchamp*, October Book, MIT Press, Cambridge Mass./London UK, 1996, p. 315-316

## **6 Editorial authorship, authorship as such, platform as author**

Where Rancière departs from: “art discloses the systems and mechanisms of domination without occupying such a position” this would also mean to critically self-reflect on the means of production put to use. In a sense the performance on stage, as an outcome of its structural artistic set-up – as scene – should have been the ‘object’ of reflection, or through which its recursive handling, a new ‘object’ would have been produced. The conference in its entirety, as the center of the site where the free play between aisthesis and poiesis is to be identified, needed to also consider its structural set-up. This mismatch indicates an unaddressed difference between the theoretical/academic, curatorial and institutional production methodologies, and the approaches of artistic art production. There is insufficient conversation between the different fields partaking and their epistemological languages and the political economies involved.

### *Spectres of authorship*

Despite the declaration of the event’s egalitarian quality and set up, the pre-conditions leading to its construction itself went under-exposed to its critique or were at least left out of the considerations of evaluation. Who were the editors of the conference’s line-up for example, what were the ideas behind its editorial set-up, who invited who on what basis to speak about what? Following the rationale of transparency and radical equality as basic keystones of egalitarian production, these could have been disclosed as starting-points. This becomes especially relevant since the participants in these conferences are co-producers of the institute’s production: the archival and documental forms of artistic production to which they have contributed. They equally produce in the economics of the institutes in which they work or are affiliated with, which produces a web of dependencies and attributions of values in different registers and fields.

What can be added here is that the theories and the model proposed in Rancière’s writings are already of enormous value in the production-model of museums and in the way these organize presentation and programming. Especially the Van Abbemuseum, in the Dutch context of museums, emphasizes and fosters the emancipatory aspects of cultural representation. See for example how the museum engages the public in building the cultural canon or opens its archive to produce more interaction with the public (the *Play Van Abbe* and

*Queering the Collection* program); these are all efforts to democratize the museum.<sup>85</sup> The notions that are developed in these ideas in relation to artistic production, namely how to configure presentations or how to think of engagement with the audience, are so powerful these could be considered of authorial quality in the sense that these facilitate distinct frameworks of production as such. In a sense Rancière – or better said an institutional derivative – therefore already was present way in advance of this particular event, foreshadowing the manner art was discussed. One can say that Rancière performed doubly: as a theoretical/conceptual influence, as well as an actor in his delivering and performative capacity. It becomes therefore important to properly disclose what the origins and considerations of the museums curatorial policies are and who performs those.

In this intricate knot of art, theory, performative, distribution and platform production, a reference can be made back to Hirschhorn's description of his artistic methodology and how he operationalizes the work as agent between himself and the audience. In his presentation of how he set up the *Bijlmer Spinoza-project*, he emphasized how he kept a middle-position in-between artwork, author and its audience. He was there during the whole period and engaged with the inhabitants of the area in which the project ran, but not to clarify 'the artwork' or to point to it. Hirschhorn insisted that it was not his job to 'serve' an audience. 'The work' – the project in totality – was to engage autonomously with its surrounding from which possible fruitful encounters could follow. This is how the gap between poiesis and aisthesis was kept open and a binding narrative between them avoided. Within this situation, though the relations between author, audience and participation within the 'work' were complex, it was still made clear that the final authorship for this set-up rested with Hirschhorn. His artisterly authorship was acknowledged. The author-function here served to preserve the special place for art.

This acknowledgment of authorship is distinct from how it was handled in the Autonomy Project conference, where an effort was made to de-author the whole set-up. In most of the introductions of the interviews this was stressed. The very notion of de-authoring in cultural and artistic production in Western academia is an evolution of Roland Barthes' and

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<sup>85</sup> *Play Van Abbe*, see: <https://vanabbemuseum.nl/en/programme/programme/questions-to-the-museum-of-the-21th-century/> (accessed 08-02-21)

*Queering the Collection*, see: <https://vanabbemuseum.nl/en/collection/queering/about/> (accessed 08-02-21)

Michel Foucault's critiques, in which the latter proposed to speak of an author-function rather than of an 'author', in order to depersonalize such position and to indicate the intricacy of conditions that any author finds itself and through which he/she functions. Peter Osborne equally follows such reasoning and proposes a fictional and collective authorship for artists, by which the conditions of trans-global capitalism and the institutional formation of global art spaces and artists' practices could be addressed. Fictionality would, in this argument, be the feasible format of authorship for the contemporaneity. According to Osborne:

For Foucault, the replacement of the concept of the author by that of the author-function was 'a matter of depriving the subject (or its substitute) of its role as originator, and of analyzing the subject as a variable and complex function of discourse ... [by] grasp[ing] the subject's points of insertion, modes of functioning, and system of dependencies'. The construction of an artist-function named 'The Atlas Group' is in many ways a precise application of the terms of this analysis to the production of artistic authority. Its primary characteristic is its dissemblance of a documentary practice. This dissemblance is dependent upon, first, its creative use of anonymity, within pseudonymity, via the 'Group' form (pseudonymity, one might say, is a condition of historical fictionalization); and second, the exploitation of the documentary, simultaneously, as indexical mark and pure cultural form.<sup>86</sup>

Whether such fictionalization of authorship serves the conditions now becomes questionable given the complexity of fields connected in production. This complexity requires a constant negotiation to understand what information is communicated and what it means, in order to retrace each layer of involvement in a system. Fictionality and amorphous authorship obfuscate such retracing, and it only points to its final object on display, not to the object's coming into being and conditions that define it. Rather than fictionalization, I would argue that a re-authorization is needed. As mentioned before the participants of the symposium come from different epistemological fields which ideally would need to be disclosed to begin with. As British art theorist and writer Marina Vishmidt explains: authorship can be used to retrace issues of accountability in the complex infrastructure of artistic production.<sup>87</sup> I argue

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<sup>86</sup> Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not At All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, Verso, London and New York, 2013, p. 33-34.

<sup>87</sup> Marina Vishmidt In *Beneath the Atelier, the Desert: Critique, Institutional and Infrastructural*, in *Marion von Osten: Once We Were Artists (A BAK Critical Reader in Artists' Practice)* Eds. Tom Holert, Maria Hlavajova, Valiz/BAK Amsterdam and Utrecht, 2017, p.218

therefore that authorship should be taken up as a means to shed light on the complexity of production. Vishmidt's ideas will be extensively discussed in the chapter 4 of the thesis.

The acceptance of the scene that Rancière proposes also means that the demarcation of the unitarian coherence of the art-object and the position of 'artist' (however fictional) – upon which Osborne's argument still insists – is impossible to make. One can say that Charles Esche and Nikos Papastergiadis as the conference organizers, editors, and curators of the program, and as the director of the host-venue and the prime conceptual theorist of artistic production as such, are the central authors. They stage, as editors of the whole line-up of theorists and artists, the performative exchange within the conference, the framework in which the artistic personae are to become productive. They, in an important sense decide, set, and author the artistic moment. There is a distinct editorial guideline, manifested in the palette of speakers and the topics discussed. So despite the open character and de-authored set-up that is professed, a distinct path towards an 'object' to be construed, is there. It then also becomes a question if there is a categorical difference to be upheld in relation to artistic position here. The director and co-editor both, as well as Rancière, perform doubly or even multiply, in the capacities of editor, organizer, provider, archive-to-be and live performers. And what than is the ontological definition of the artwork? This editorial platformed commission must be named as such.

This is also the place where the question concerning the concept of Adorno's negative dialectics returns. How can Adorno's idea of the autonomous artwork: considered as the permanence of critique, the negation, be imagined when the author is an assembled author, which underlying system does not depart from a notion of (positive) unification but rather is a constant of negotiations and (self-critical) assessments. So how can the dialectic the autonomous artwork contains – internally and outward – be made productive? In the end it is the relation and positioning to the heteronomy of conditions, that are to be addressed, the final vector and aim of the artistic ambition.

The indexical mark Osborne speaks about must take into account that there is no substantial difference to be made anymore between art and its discourse as Rancière claims, with which I agree. The idea that there is a relation between art and its discourse that can be seen as the artwork to which the discourse serves as its pedestal, so where the artwork would need its interpretative apparatus to negotiate and constitute its meaning, must be discarded. In

the present condition the situation is far too complex and comprehensive to differ between these anymore. So where Osborne still presumes an *object* available for its interpretation, I would argue that ‘the scene’ is the site of the ‘object’ as such as well as its interpretative apparatus. A critical position therefore must be considered as enfolded.

It is also there where we can begin to think of its supra-political form as Malik and Phillips speak of. The paradoxes and oppositions contained within its system of production, would need then to be navigated, in order to be coherently furthered to an outside. The site of production (whether in the shape of a symposium or any other form of artistic production), then must foremost be seen as the site where artistic production takes place as space of interaction, of space as a fundamental contingent exchange between positions. Following Rancière: full egalitarian access is a fundamental prerequisite for any ‘political’ in the site of art to occur. Which leaves space, as long as this access is safeguarded (even if this means to fight), to address specific political issues.

## Chapter 3

### Benjamin in Palestine conference

#### 1 Introduction

The Benjamin in Palestine conference (hereafter BiP), was a conference and workshop that was held in Ramallah and Bir-Zeit, Palestine from 06-12-2015 until 11-12-2015. The seven-day program was spread across three locations: the International Academy for Art Palestine, the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Centre in Ramallah and Birzeit University in Bir-Zeit.<sup>88</sup> It was organized by Sami Khatib, a renowned Benjamin scholar, together with artist Yazan Khalili, curator and scholar Lara Khaldi, scholars Paula Schwebel and Kelly Gawel and financially and logistically supported by Goethe-Institut Ramallah (the internationally operating German cultural institution), the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Centre, Ramallah, Offices for Contemporary Art (OCA), Norway and the International Academy of Art Palestine. The conference consisted of intensive close-reading workshops (mostly on the work of Walter Benjamin), panel discussions and artist presentations, and a conventional one-day conference at Birzeit University. Prominent theorists from the fields of aesthetics, philosophy, politics and culture were on the roster of lectures, keynotes and panel discussions. The conference attracted a diverse group of participants: artists, political and cultural theorists and activists from across the world who journeyed to Palestine specifically for BiP. Roughly 50 participants came to Palestine for the conference. This in itself was not an easy thing to do. Israeli travel policies are designed to frustrate those from abroad who wish to visit the West Bank. The conference was an alternative to a conference organized by the *International Walter Benjamin Society* which, despite the suggestion that it include Palestine as well, was held entirely in Tel Aviv, Israel.<sup>89</sup> Its exceptional duration, participative format, choice of location and focus on texts, raising the interrelation between aesthetics and politics made it specifically groundbreaking.

The Benjamin in Palestine conference is analysed, here, for its formal and artistic-political set up. This is approached through the broader framework of Rancière's aesthetic regime (see Van Abbe Museum chapter), which posits a direct relation between aesthetics and art, and his notion of the *scene*, which understands the interaction by the differing participants

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<sup>88</sup> <https://benjamininpalestine.wordpress.com/benjamin-in-palestine/> (accessed 22-09-2020)

<sup>89</sup> <http://walterbenjamin.info/event/international-walter-benjamin-society-conference-spaces-places-cities-and-spatiality/> (accessed 22-09-2020)



and positions as constitutive to the political community through the engagement with the artistic and aesthetics. This special constellation is figured in BiP and the way it has been designed. This multi-disciplinary setup is reflected both in its organization, which is informed by people from different fields and positions: scholars, artists, filmmakers, activists, writers and students, and its participants who also work in a mix of disciplines; they include artists, activists and academics. Equally, the distinct focus on the combination and the exchange of art and aesthetics that drove BiP, points to the Rancière-ian focus on the relation between art and aesthetics as political agent. From this setup namely, following Rancière, a (political) community can emerge in the contribution of an exchange of aesthetics – or through a shared aesthetic space – by participation in this communality. To quote Rancière:

The scene is not the illustration of an idea. It is the optical machine that shows us thought busy weaving together perceptions, affects, names and ideas, constituting the sensible community that these links create, and the intellectual community that makes such weaving thinkable. The scene captures concepts at work, in their relation to the new objects they seek to appropriate, old objects that they try to reconsider, and the patterns they build or transform to this end.<sup>90</sup>

Though Rancière utilizes the term ‘scene’ to explain his writing in his book *Aisthesis*, the underlying principle can also be applied as a principle of social interaction, he claims. To quote:

Aisthesis is subtitled “scenes from the aesthetic regime of art”, but the function of a “scene” is not illustrative. On the contrary, I insist on effacing the distinction between illustration and theory. The concept of blurring the boundary is fundamental to my idea of the aesthetic régime of art, which is polemically opposed to ideas of art autonomy or medium specificity. That is why I selected examples where an aesthetic régime of art establishes itself by blurring the boundary between art and not-art, or high art and popular art. Furthermore, I criticize the very opposition between art and discourse on art. Art does not exist in itself; it is an outcome of a complex set of relationships between what one is allowed to say, to perceive, and to understand.

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<sup>90</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, trans. Zakir Paul, Verso, London, 2013, XI.

Events and objects only exist within the fabric of discourse, and are perceived as art, or a revolution in art, only within this fabric.<sup>91</sup>

The unconventionally long duration and the intensity of interaction at BiP indicate that this event contains elements to be understood as a social proposition or a proposal for an aesthetical or artistically informed life enabled through the interaction between art and aesthetics. This means, in short, that it can be understood as an enactment of Rancière's art-aesthetics. Though Rancière himself does not consider the question of the relation between art and aesthetics as informing social or political forms of organization directly – the bind rather, as explained in the VAM chapter, is a form where art and life exchange their properties<sup>92</sup> –, a distinct projection towards the framework of the political as form is constantly present in his work.

There is a distinct address formulated by BiP. It is phrased as a general contestation of the contemporary neoliberal and capitalist condition and the effects it exerts on the criticality of academia and which diverts from political engagements with those who deserve it. The BiP website states:

Today Walter Benjamin has arrived in the official pantheon of global humanities. His writings belong to the canon of Modern German and European philosophy and literary criticism. There are countless international conferences celebrating his legacy. But can this academic appropriation of Benjamin's thought do justice to his 'critical life' and to the 'tradition of the oppressed'<sup>93</sup> that his writings invoke? Given the uncritical if not

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<sup>91</sup> Interview Duncan Thomas with Rancière on his publication *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, date: 30-11-1

See; <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2320-the-politics-of-art-an-interview-with-jacques-ranciere> (accessed 22-09-2020)

<sup>92</sup> This is the third scenario that Rancière defines in the art and life relation: art and life exchanging their properties, by which he means that in the current age in how to conceive of life in general, there is a constant interplay between art and the organization of life, see chapter VAM.

<sup>93</sup> Benjamin's notion of the "tradition of the oppressed" stands for the historical political struggle that is kept out of official discourse and historicized narrative. For Benjamin this is an ongoing movement: there are always going to be repressed classes and their detection is the critics task. Sami Khatib: "For Benjamin history is not based on a progressive flow of "homogeneous, empty time" directed to the future but on a disruptive constellation of the present and the past. The past is not simply gone; it can never be fully historicized. The medium in which the present is connected to all lost causes and struggles of those who lost their histories is called the "tradition of the oppressed." Against the continuous temporality of the humanist idea of cultural heritage, "the tradition of the oppressed" forms a fractured medium the dialectics of which Benjamin discussed in two fragmentary notes."

Sami Khatib, Walter Benjamin and the "Tradition of the Oppressed", in *Anthropological Materialism*. See: <http://anthropologicalmaterialism.hypotheses.org/2128> (accessed 22-09-2020)

ideological role of the humanities in today's neo-liberal capitalism, a merely academic discourse on Benjamin does violence to his thought. Speaking of the legibility of Benjamin's oeuvre, the question of time and place matter to both the text and its reader.<sup>94</sup>

Though the choice for Ramallah as site for the conference has a clear political dimension, that of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, I will not so much go into that conflict directly. I will focus rather on the underlying structural frame of production as the context of BiP: the condition of capitalism, which relates to the origin and sustenance of this conflict, arguably is but one of the many symptoms.

In the quote above, the agency of the Humanities is depicted as oppressed by the current conditions of production in the academic world, a world that is aligned with the overall socio-economic conditions of our times, directed by and subsumed under capitalism. As the Italian philosopher Antonio Negri argues,<sup>95</sup> we need to understand cultural and critical production – along with all other activities of life – to be subordinate to the present form of capitalism in its present technological development, because it has turned all social productive forces into production for capitalism. These concerns about the condition of life under capitalism mirror the concerns Benjamin addresses in many of his works. The claim made by Khatib qua BiP is therefore substantial: the realm of academia is captured by the workings and ideology of capitalism, and thus serves to sustain it. The specific ambition of BiP is situated within the critical legacy of an iconic cultural theorist, Benjamin, can therefore be reformulated; and the way this legacy is operational in the Humanities, as academic practise, can be recuperated and reimagined from neoliberal capitalism.

So the question is how justice can be done to Benjamin's thought *now* – how it can become 'legible' – as stated in the website. Equally, the choice of Palestine as the location for the conference, resonates with how Suhail Malik has indicated a more direct political address might be possible in art production (as discussed in the VAM chapter). In this context, I will focus on how the proposition of the art-aesthetics bind can be understood as offering a

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<sup>94</sup> See: <https://benjamininpalestine.org/benjamin-in-palestine/> (accessed 22-09-2020)

<sup>95</sup> Antonio Negri argues that artistic production, that aims to picture our worlds, can only do so from within an absolute *inside-ness* of the world as it is, in which the synthesis of man and the capitalist machine is completed. Antonio Negri, *Metamorphoses: Art and immaterial labor*, in *Art and Multitude*, Polity Press, Cambridge UK, 2011

counterproposal to neoliberal capitalism (notably vis a vis cognitive capitalism, which specifically pertains to the academic context) and how it might be considered meta-politically as an artistic platform. Taken together: through BiP, art is enacted as a social form of life and the political ambition presented proposes a new figuration of the production of art and aesthetics, production understood here as the manner in which to organize life as such.

The analysis will distinctly focus on the relation between art and aesthetics and on how this relation is designed and made operational in the way BiP is structured. My questions are: how are the relations between organization and participants organized; how are the relations between the participants coming from the different fields of knowledge production and academia, political activism and art structured; how does the conference act as a binding platform by the way positions and participants within the platform interact; and, finally, how is the *optical machine* that Rancière speaks of organized? In other words, my proposition in reading BiP is, how to understand the principle of the ‘scene’ upscaled into that of social interaction and as a form of production?

In addition to a Rancière-ian frame, I will use Walter Benjamin’s ideas and elaborations on the role of translation and communication in *On the Task of the Translator* and *On Language* to consider the key role that communication plays in the organisation of BiP and how this can address differences between disciplines and fields that meet in BiP. This question of the organisational form of communication also relates to the conditions and time in which (artistic) production takes place and what form is needed to contest these, questions Benjamin addresses in *The Author as Producer*. Put differently: how can a new form of interaction be envisioned in the organisation of labour, in regards to the role of the knowledge worker vis a vis the division of labour that is organized in capitalism?

Expanding on the logic of Rancière’s scene, allows us, I propose, to consider the role of Sami Khatib and his team, within the constellation of artistic production in cognitive capitalism, for its authorial function. As the structural difference between art and theoretical reflection within cognitive capitalist conditions, a central premise of my argument, collapses, the designation of terms of artist and theorist merge and therefore need reconsideration. Though the idea of inter- and transdisciplinary production has become quite accepted, professed equally in the contexts of the arts as in those of the sciences, this change and structural shift – of cognitive capitalism – necessitates a closer look at how this idea of the

transdisciplinary now functions in institutional contexts, in the infrastructure of production. This is why I will uphold, at least for now while discussing BiP, the separation of disciplines in order to retrace this development, though this upholding of disciplines may, in some respects, appear as something of a regression.

BiP will therefore be considered in two ways. I will look at how it was designed – what forms of production and presentation were chosen and present in the conference –, and also at what this design constitutes for the issue of the author-function and the position that can be attributed to it in the art-aesthetics relation, between artist, scholar and organisation. My hypothesis is that the scholarly, artistic and organisational position, in reading BiP, must be considered to overlap with one another. My argument is that we can understand what is designated as art, to be emergent – as a practice model – from this constellation.

## **2 Production in cognitive capitalism, Benjamin in Palestine as working model for the art-aesthetics bind, countering the division of labour**

Throughout this thesis I argue that a conglomerate of positions and their subsequent authorships form the assembled author in contemporary art production and that this figuration leads to questions concerning responsibility and/or issues of relegation of accountability. The makeup of platform production that has emerged in the wider and general context of production and that we find back in the model of contemporary art as laid out in the introduction, are equally reflected in the structure of BiP. It is also characterized by the assembly of fields and positions that together would produce a more integral, complete and (subsequently) sovereign authorship. BiP claims to arise out of the need to reconsider production as a whole and aims to find agency in the current conditions of neoliberal and capitalist subsumption. Although the setup of BiP structurally resembles that which we find in contemporary art, its direct point of departure and frame of reference stems more from the academic realm and context. Still, the underlying conditions are arguably the same and the focus and aim is a synthesis of the arts, the Humanities and theory, a movement that can be seen to be working both ways. BiP represents, I propose, the viewpoint and practical critique of how the academic realm (institutional aesthetics and theory) functions within the conglomerate notion of Rancière's *scene*.

The question of how to find agency within the realm of academia in the condition of subsumption is particularly addressed through a consideration of the arts; this is evidenced in the involvement of artists in the conference and the specific and substantial participation of academics who have worked with artists or are working in the field of aesthetics. Additionally, academics who had clear conjoint projects in which this link between art and theory was explored were brought to the table. And vice versa: artists with distinct interest in theoretical formats, either as quintessential or constructive parts of their work, were part of the programme too, including the artists Patrizia Bach and Udi Aloni, whose contributions will be unpacked later. The substantial injection of the arts, as the core constituent of the conference, clearly demonstrates that the bind between making and reflection is a fundamental bind to consider, and particularly that the arts are improperly omitted in the current conventions and modes of academic production. I consider this emphatic configuration of art and aesthetics to be a significant part of its architecture and politics.

In an e-mail exchange some months after the event, the conference's main organizer Sami Khatib explains BiP's aim to work interdisciplinarily. From these words, distinct notions of the idea of the interdisciplinarity and the collective emerge as the bearers of how to operationalize and revolutionize collective production. Khatib states:

If you think of the format (collectively organized, democratic process, no clear distinction between art, politics and theory, no lip service to authorities, less paper presentations and more collective process-oriented reading sessions) it was meant as an antithesis to regular academic conferences.<sup>96</sup>

Khatib also emphasises the conference's format as mode of politics and the issue of sovereignty in production. Though it was originally a response to another conference being organized in Israel, BiP sought to establish a non-reactionary cause for its being. The conference needed to be formulated sovereignly and taken out of any relation of dependency or resentment to the object of critique. As Khatib stated:

In other words, boycotting the Israel conference was not enough – so much was clear from the beginning, there was too much at stake. I wanted to create an event that

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<sup>96</sup> Private e-mail correspondence Sami Khatib, August 2016

stands for itself and for something else. I even insisted until the end that our date is before the other conference and will not stay in competition to it (for that reason we didn't conceive BiP as a counter-conference and did not chose the same date as the other event). With BiP we gave other readers and scholars of Benjamin the chance to choose themselves. The result was really overwhelming, our event was bigger, even though we had no substantial funding and traveling to Ramallah was more difficult than traveling to the other event. To this extend, BiP is also the kickstart for a different scholarship on Benjamin that refuses to sell Benjamin on the global market of ideas and normalize him in a neoliberal-authoritarian economy of knowledge. Again, it's important to understand that the other conference was neither organized nor attended by right-wingers but by "normal" academics who have internalized the neoliberal imperatives of today's academia.

It is noteworthy to observe that a number of scholars, firmly established in academia, attended the conference: Judith Butler, Ray Brassier, Slavoj Žižek, Oxana Timofeeva, Susan Buck-Morss and others. Most are held in high regard in academia, yet, at the same time, presenting in Palestine at the Birzeit University does not yield a big spin-off in value in the economy of academia.<sup>97</sup> To attend the conference therefore appealed clearly on a different level (not merely that of professional advancement). By assembling activists, artists and theorists as participants and having these all present and interact in the program, the implied potential of critical and theoretical-artistic production as a collaborative model became clear. Channelling this critical production through the figure and legacy of Benjamin further heighten this as Benjamin embodied in his persona all these different qualities<sup>98</sup> and also emphasised the integral connectedness of these qualities: theory, art and politics (or in the ideal reconfiguration of these qualities). It is this interconnectedness that was specifically made operational in BiP.

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<sup>97</sup> The Birzeit University is not ranked high on the global lists of academic excellence through which academic production is measured.

<sup>98</sup> See for example how Gyorgy Markus identifies Benjamin as philosopher and cultural critic who understood the spiritual life of man to be fundamentally determined by the development of capitalism and how this shaped culture. As a commentator on the culture of capitalism through his essayistic writing, Benjamin was able to account for and give expression to how capitalism influences the philosophical, psychological and spiritual life of man. His specific fate: of having to flee Nazi-persecution for his intellectual work, and to die from this persecution, added to his image of the embodied critical life.

Gyorgy Markus, *Walter Benjamin or: The Commodity as Phantasmagoria*, *New German Critique*, No. 83, Special Issue on Walter Benjamin, Spring - Summer, 2001, pp.3-42.

It is important to mention this because it illustrates the bigger aim of developing a model of production that has the ambition to formulate and test alternative constellations and modes of production instead of just critiquing the capitalist condition and mode of production. The aim is to overcome a mere critical and reactive relation and to examine and propose new and independent (in the sense of being sovereignly formulated) forms of production, also considering the *time* of living. This is also what Benjamin argues for: our perceptions of space and time are determined by capitalism, which need to be wrested away from this domination in order to arrive at a more sovereign life.

### *The fabric of production in cognitive capitalism*

The idea for such a liberating practise is proposed by BiP to be one of interdisciplinarity between the different elements of production under capitalist subsumption. This notion of perceiving life and production in coherence – as the economical and structural organisation of life – resonates strongly with Italian philosopher Antonio Negri's formulation of life under capitalist subsumption in the current condition of cognitive capitalism. As the American scholar Harry Cleaver writes in the introduction of Negri's book: *Marx Beyond Marx: Lessons on the Grundrisse*,<sup>99</sup> Negri convincingly explains how, with the success of a capitalistic mode which manages to increase output by automation and rationalisation and thus increases the free time available to its subjects, the capitalist principle is extended to the sphere of social circulation as social capital. This means that while the subject under capitalism works to have his needs satisfied under the guise of semi-autonomy, the surplus value of his labor is organized to flow back to capital itself. Furthermore, he explains that capitalism not only builds and shapes its subjects, it also needs this subject to survive for its own survival. It maintains its subjects for its own benefit.

Extending on this, in her review of Dave Beech's, *Art and Value: Art's Economic Exceptionalism in Classical, Neoclassical and Marxist Economics*<sup>100</sup> critic Josefine Wikström explains how the notion of 'production' in Negri's critical theoretical thinking has come to embody life in total:

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<sup>99</sup> Antonio Negri, *Marx Beyond Marx: Lessons on the Grundrisse*, Autonomedia US, Pluto Press UK, 1991, Translators' Introduction Part I Harry Cleaver xiv-xv

<sup>100</sup> Art's Economic Exceptionalism, Josefine Wikström, Mute, 12 November 2015

<http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/art's-economic-exceptionalism> (accessed 22-09-2020)



In his 1978 seminars on Karl Marx's Grundrisse Antonio Negri famously constructed an expanded concept of 'production.' Not restricted to Marx's understanding of it as a specific historical mode through which capital reproduces itself, production, in *Marx Beyond Marx: Lessons on the Grundrisse*, comes to mean something more akin to a creative productive force of life in general. Transposed onto the context of art in his later writings, art – like life in general – is understood to be as subsumed as all living labour under capitalist production.

Since creativity, knowledge production and autonomous actions have become incorporated within work processes and made productive for and within capitalism, one can say that no outside position exists. From this analysis, made by Italian philosopher Paolo Virno, it follows that because of the imbrication of knowledge production within the capitalist model, the division between labour (as production), work (as poiesis) and action (as aesthetical reflection and assessment, as activist politics) as construed by Hannah Arendt, no longer holds. According to Virno, the qualities particular to communication, social organisation and adaptability, normally regarded as qualities for politics, have become part of labour-activities and subsumed in capitalism. This also means that the demarcation between these positions and the boundary between work and life disappear. As Virno states:

My reasoning is opposite and symmetrical with respect to that of Arendt. I maintain that it is in the world of contemporary labor that we find the "being in the presence of others," the relationship with the presence of others, the beginning of new processes, and the constitutive familiarity with contingency, the unforeseen and the possible. I maintain that post-Fordist labor, the productive labor of surplus, subordinate labor, brings into play the talents and the qualifications which, according to a secular tradition, had more to do with political action.<sup>101</sup>

In *Cognitive Capitalism*, French economist Yann Moulier Boutang details how, in the economy, there has been a shift from the exploitation of labour power to that of innovative and creative cognitive labour, qualities particularly key for artistic production. This affirms the structural similarity and the 'internalized condition' between the realms of the artistic and academic humanities: capitalism's ideology, in its neoliberal and cognitive guises, is the

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<sup>101</sup> Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude, For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, Semiotext(e)/Foreign Agents, MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 2004, p.50

ideology of our time, subsuming life.<sup>102</sup>

Where the production of knowledge conventionally is regarded as mostly a reflective function, such separation is no longer tenable. Any chance of formulating a critique to existing conditions, to index the *dismeasure*, when speaking about art's or culture's tasks, between the metrics imposed by capitalism and those wished for (and how this could change production), as formulated by Paolo Virno, must be reasoned from within the total inclusion of the situation. 'Cognitive capitalism' (as a critical term and a notion of production in itself) is therefore a particularly adequate form through which to address the condition of subsumption within artistic production as a system, as this system is characterised by precisely this indistinction between labour, work and action. The relation of knowledge-work to artistic production is thus a dynamic of critical importance. The significance of the role and place of the knowledge worker within artistic production stresses the relevance of the knowledge-worker's position within the ambition of BiP. As Professor in Media Philosophy Mateo Pasquinelli has shown, it is the element of knowledge production within capitalism that is used to calibrate the capitalist system, which also organizes the division of labour. To quote Pasquinelli:

'What distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax.' This is Marx's recognition, in *Capital*, of labour as a mental and individual activity: the collective division of labour, or labour in common, however, remains the political inventor of the machine. A process of alienation of skill and knowledge starts as soon as machinery appears in front and in place of labour. Tools pass from the hands of the worker to the hands of the machine, and the same process happens to workers' knowledge. 'Along with the tool, the skill of the worker in handling it passes over to the machine.' The machine is but a crystallisation of collective knowledge. Marx condemns this alienation of the human mind, seconding Owen: 'Since the general introduction of soulless mechanism in British manufactures, people have with rare exceptions been treated as a secondary and subordinate machine, and far more attention has been given to the perfection of the raw materials of wood and metals than to those of body and spirit.'<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Yann Moulier Boutang, *Cognitive Capitalism*, Polity Press, Cambridge UK/Malden USA, 2011

<sup>103</sup> Matteo Pasquinelli, *The Origins of Marx's General Intellect*, *Radical Philosophy* issue 2.06, winter 2019

As capitalism functions through measurements (or framework of qualitative and quantitative evaluation) made possible by knowledge, it therefore becomes important to distinguish how knowledge is operable within production and what constitutes the *machine*. This also points to the necessity of locating how the knowledge worker functions with regard to work in general. This location has been defined by Gerald Raunig, for example, who has analyzed the effects of neoliberalisation on both the fields of academia and the arts in his publication *Factories of Knowledge, Industries of Creativity*<sup>104</sup>. Here he describes how knowledge and artistic production have become administered under the metrics of neoliberal economic profitability. As art critic and philosopher Ewa Majewska observes in her review of Raunig's publication<sup>105</sup>:

The questions formulated by Adorno and Horkheimer in their analysis of the culture industry resonate with Raunig's critical observations concerning the recent neoliberal transformations of the university, in which quantitative measurements emphasizing immediate effectiveness replace qualitative criteria and the long perspective of the early days of the university. The so-called Bologna Process, which aims to unify university programs and measures of evaluation across EU countries, results in a highly technical approach to knowledge production and reduces the student- professor exchange to brief moments of grading rather than discussion, which prevailed before. The public mission of universities is replaced by the *modus operandi* of the factory, in which quickly measurable products and their "parameterization" replace debate and processual approaches.

Majewska concurs with Raunig's critique that education has become a matter of quantifiable short-term output rather than a meaningful exchange of experience and knowledge. She specifically observes how the productive interaction that takes place in the dialogue between student and professor has been replaced by 'parameters' set by the production-model of neoliberalism. Where she exemplifies it here as the interaction between student and professor, this dynamic pertains equally to all transactions that occur in the workplace and wider infrastructure. The division organized between positions in production that serves to uphold the division is managerially structured via different systems of financing, control and regimes

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<sup>104</sup> Gerald Raunig, *Factories of knowledge, Industries of Creativity*, Intervention Series 15, Semiotext(e), 2013

<sup>105</sup> Ewa Majewska, *The Common in the Time of Creative Reproductions: On Gerald Raunig's Factories of Knowledge, Industries of Creativity*, e-flux journal #62, February 2015

of efficiency and accountability. As observed by political theorist Wendy Brown, it is through governmental managerialism and the politics of efficiency and productivity that the neoliberal regime is instituted in the workplace.<sup>106</sup> This solidifies the division of labour through which the condition of precarity for workers and structural austerity, following the neoliberal doctrine, is effectuated. This frame affects, in short, all social relations in the chain of production. These economic substructures also inform the separate fields and disciplines differently, keeping them not only epistemologically separated but also economically stratified; epistemes and economic structuring go hand in hand.

Khatib assesses how the practices of critical theory, how they uncritically operate within the existing context of production and conduct themselves, produce only more commodities in line with capitalist production. In this situation, he says, any theoretical production, including the figure of Benjamin and the critical legacy he stands for, is only ever sold on the global market of ideas, normalized within a neoliberal-authoritarian economy of knowledge and thus unable to critique or perform what it professes to do. It therefore cannot change anything. So constrained and framed, the qualitative interaction between professor and student, and thus all interaction, is subsumed. A dialogue within the chain of production, between the different hierarchical positions within it, but also between different fields which interact, is needed to counter the regime of managerial production.<sup>107</sup>

BiP aims to address what is deemed a normalized ‘neoliberal’ ideology of production – the political inventor of the machine, as suggested by Pasquinelli – that obstructs proper critical production. In the Rancière-ian vein the bind can, in its utilisation in social relations, reflect critically on the existing condition. It can be used to calibrate the *dismeasure*, the division that exists between the desired formation, which flows from social interaction in production, and the system that obstructs this, that is the demands defined by capitalism. This also makes it clear that the organization of artistic production is immediately tied to its context of political economy. It can re-examine the difference between self-stated ambition and the conditions of heteronomy. I take it that these issues were exemplarily deployed and addressed during and through BiP both by critiquing the existing situation, in the relation between the realm of knowledge-production and production in a general sense.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. New York, NY: Zone Books, 2015

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> In the Rib chapter, the condition of cognitive capitalism will be unpacked further.

BiP provoked the question of what the position of the intellectual is in the formation of a political community, and how this community comes about through the aesthetization of art, something that Walter Benjamin raises in his essay *The Author as Producer*.<sup>109</sup> In this essay, Benjamin firmly locates the place of the intellectual next to that of the worker in general. But equally important, he also provokes the question of the *organisation of production* as such since, according to him, production must be addressed in totality for it to become revolutionary, that is, for it to obtain agency for change. Since in capitalism the means of production have become amalgamated into a dispersed authorship, to retrieve this authorship, I argue, must equally be thought from the amalgamation. To quote Benjamin:

In other words: the only way to make this production politically useful is to master the competencies in the process of intellectual production which, according to the bourgeois notion, constitutes their hierarchy; and more exactly, the barriers which were erected to separate the skills of both productive forces must be simultaneously broken down. When he experiences his solidarity with the proletariat, the author as producer also experiences directly a solidarity with certain other producers in whom earlier he was not much interested.<sup>110</sup>

Here Benjamin points to *'being in production'* as a prerequisite to experience solidarity in the first place, as the site of revolutionary production, and the (political) site of production as an organisation of labour, through the experience of others and the interest this evokes. So, in a generalized scheme, he proposes the social organisation against the division of labour as ordered by capitalism. The dialectical relation that arises from this situation (the index of dismeasure) is set up through what Benjamin calls *the concept of technique*. I read this idea of technique as a reference to and question of design: how to set up this space in which this dialectical change may occur? Here the underlying structure of Khatib's position as both participant in and architect of the conference becomes clear. As intellectual he co-partakes; as producer/organizer he structures the site of production.

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<sup>109</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Author as Producer*, *New Left Review* 1/62, July-August 1970

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid*

### *BiP's set up of art-aesthetics*

If we consider the problem of the division of labour as an important problem that is characteristic of capitalism, which constitutes its fabric and affects social relations, the question of communication in production becomes pivotal.<sup>111</sup> The issue of the division of labour implies the problem of translation and appropriation, subordination and instrumentalization (knowing or unknowingly) in the chain of exchange within production, a problem that stands in the way of an egalitarian – or, phrased better, sovereign – mode of production. (REF Rib-text) It is in this sense that Benjamin's thinking offers a way to rethink the instances of appropriation through communication that occur in the cycle of production, which is captured under the regime of managerialism of neoliberal politics.

BiP takes on this task and does so in total, firstly by setting up the site of encounter (the conference as site of the 'scene') and secondly by mobilizing Benjamin's ideas of communication, where language is the basic medium that shapes the relations within the cycle of production. Benjamin's language theory – his idea of *pure language* – provides a basis for a fundamental notion of equivalence via the notion of non-instrumentality. The mobilisation of this notion of equivalence would act as means to traverse the differences that exist in the configuration of participants in BiP.

As I observe this, BiP operationalises its critique and shapes its form of production, the structure of its technique so to speak, by setting up a tripartite structure in which art and aesthetics meet. Firstly: through the intensive reading sessions in which the space and potential for a shared knowledge (a communal frame of aesthetics) is generated from social exchanges in which a text is the prime material for reflection and interaction. This mode provides for the emergence of such a frame. Secondly: by having multiple combined artist-theorist presentations whereby there is a live exchange between theorists and artists on artistic production. This is a form of presentation where the exchange between art and its reception is organized and where there is recursive feedback between the two. Thirdly: by questioning the conventional form of the academic production, here the symposium format. This last point may not have been an intentional proposition, but it resulted from this set-up in my opinion. This will be unpacked in the Buck-Morris and Emily Jacir cooperation, later on.

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<sup>111</sup> See Isabell Lorey, *Virtuosos of Freedom, On the Implosion of Political Virtuosity and Productive Labour*, EIPCP, 2008  
<http://eipcp.net/transversal/0207/lorey/en> (accessed 22-09-2020)

Such an approach towards the active role of language in social exchange, accommodating the processes in between positions involved, stands in contrast with the exchange of concepts by which institutional communication takes place, in the economy of regular production (artistic as otherwise). This is how I identify the design of the BiP, its concept of technique.<sup>112</sup> It is notably the issue of translation operative in these crossings between the different languages present (as fields), personified by the different participants, that is at the focus of Benjamin-ian thinking. The theme was intensified first by the setup of forms of presentations and, secondly, by Sami Khatib's choice of texts for the Benjamin in Palestine Conference. These texts were provided to the participants in advance and provided the framework for the conference, the material to start off with, and the material around which the ensuing discussions would come to gyrate. Included were *The Task of the Translator*, *Kafka Essay*, *The Destructive Character*, *Critique of Violence*, *Thesis on the Concept of History* and others. These texts give an overview of the central and typical Benjamin-ian notions of time and history in relation to the subject and revolution. This is best illustrated by Benjamin's essay *Thesis on the Concept of History* in which he argues that history is written by the victors against which the need arises to counter their claim to history and to recuperate it for the oppressed, which constitutes a clear political vector under all activities.<sup>113</sup> The emphasis on history for Benjamin stems from his analysis of how capitalism has come to determine our notions of space and time. The power of the commodity has led to the dominance of the capitalist's mode of production, which leads therefore to the subsumption of capitalist time over that of the people, what Benjamin calls *homogeneous empty time*. It is the measure set by capitalist logic that culturally determines human existence. This builds on Marx's analysis of how the commodity acts in capitalist society. Benjamin distinctly focuses on how the form of the capitalist commodity works through and shapes culture. As a result, in the end capitalism dominates the space to develop a sense of meaning through art (the production of meaning subsumed under capitalism). To quote Benjamin:

The antinomy between the new and the ever-same ... produces the illusion with which the fetish character of commodity overlays the genuine categories of history.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> So this is also how the importance of how flows of communication are arranged in the infrastructure of artistic production in the postconceptual condition, which is characterized by communications via concepts.

<sup>113</sup> Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* [translator H. Zohn, editor Hannah Arendt] Schocken Books, New York, 1968, p.392

<sup>114</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Letter to Horkheimer*, 3 Aug. 1938, GS 5.2: 1166.

The capitalist technological machine therefore is unhindered, since without interruption of history there is no new space to move in.

In Benjamin's work, literature, art and philosophy are joined together in a constant battle of re-ordering, since for Benjamin the assessment and recognisance of history takes place in the now, and history is the recognition of the relevance of past events in this now. This would act as leverage against the dominance of capitalism by perceiving history as structurally open, as a constant process of rereading and re-figuration which thus could possibly be retrieved from the political claims of capitalism. Benjamin especially emphasises the importance of history here as that which captures and mobilizes the forces that shape life. This is also why he writes that history ought to be kept from becoming 'a document of barbarism' in *Thesis on the Concept of History*.<sup>115</sup> It is through interference with the time set by capitalism that the machine could be interrupted. Benjamin also elevates the power of the image – and therefore art – in this process to the highest level, claiming that a truly historical awareness comes about only through the encounter with the image. This is how the past is connected to the now, and it is only the image that can act as dialectical carrier, and by that the demonstration of dismeasure. It is what Peter Osborne defines as Benjamin's logic of the relation between the image and historic awareness. As Osborne states:

It is not an arbitrary connection – the method of what Walter Benjamin called the construction of 'an image at the now of recognizability', or what we might call the experimental method of montage as the means of production of historical intelligibility. This is the basic method of a post-Hegelian philosophy of history.<sup>116</sup>

Benjamin notably develops these ideas in *The Arcades Project* (which also will be unpacked later), as below:

It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, an image is that wherein what has been come together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a

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<sup>115</sup> Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* [translator H. Zohn, editor Hannah Arendt] Schocken Books, New York, 1968, p.392

<sup>116</sup> Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, Verso, London and New York, 2013, p.55



standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural [bildlich]. Only dialectical images are genuinely historical ... The image that is read ... [is] the image in the now of its recognizability [das Bild im Jetzt der Erkennbarkeit] ...<sup>117</sup>

This is where we must consider what the image is in the contemporary that Benjamin speaks of, that must be considered dialectically. The dissolution between making, work and reflection and its subsumption in the cognitive capitalist condition after all, empties the possibility of a fixed critical position from which an assessment could be made. Homogeneous empty time, I stress, is organized through the chain as a whole. The question that presents itself then becomes: where to imagine and locate the dialectical image? For that, it is my contention, we need to look at the communication in the cycle of production.

In Benjamin's theory on language he points to the non-instrumental nature of language as such in its deepest level. This refers to the problem of the authoritative in social and political relations (and that of extraction in an economic sense and indeed what occurs under capitalism as general mode of production), the recognition of which may alter the relation between those involved, since there is a mode of being – through communication – that unifies us all and which stands apart from capitalism's domination over historic time. It is in this process of establishing the relation to history and the world that language and text become of imminent importance, since it is through language where these re-figurations get (or can get) shaped as social constructs of meaning. These in turn become the material and carriers of social interactions, and thus political. These are the critical ideas postulated in Benjamin's texts that become the material with which the BiP works. It is notably the combination of close reading, in which a text is taken as source material and the different modes of interaction between the artistic and the aesthetical manifest themselves, that defines BiP's effective structure and by means of which Rancière's art-aesthetics relation is fully deployed. Together they provide an aesthetical lens on how the time in BiP will be entered into. The communal reading of a text and the navigation of the historic aesthetical reference it provides, offers the potential of a communal aesthetics, and thus as political space, and a time of production to be arrived at through reading. The same goes for the artistic presentations,

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<sup>117</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts/London, UK, 1999, p.463

where communal processing – and the exchanges of historical, subjective and local modes of reading – creates the possibility for a joint aesthetical space. There is an element of radical equality in this: the total openness in and accessibility to this process, a most important aspect according to Rancière, provides and warrants this space its political dissensual frame.

### **3 Close reading, workshops, politics of translation, the task of the translator**

#### *Reading sessions*

As said, a substantial element of the conference consisted of intensive close-reading sessions in which topics developed and addressed in Benjamin's texts were probed via lengthy discussions and exchanges. The admittance to the reading sessions followed the same format as the conference in general in that they are non-hierarchical and open for everyone to participate and contribute. Each of the Benjamin-ian titles mentioned above – mostly essays or selections of chapters and essays – were allotted ample time: a full morning or afternoon, two to three hours per text (in some cases even a full day as with *The Task of the Translator* session). These close reading sessions were conducted over three full days and took place at the spatially modest premises of the International Art Academy Palestine (IAAP)<sup>118</sup> in Ramallah, which gave these discussions an added element of crowded and intense conditions. I will continue to unpack this format to point to the importance it played in BiP and how it acted as a space and time of interaction.

On the first morning of the program, at the *Task of the Translator* workshop, people trickled in to find a space to sit. The capacity of the room was stretched. People found themselves cramped in the small space. Close to the walls on either side, rows of seats were fully filled and people had to remain standing near the entrance and along the walls. Some even had to sit on the floor in the middle. The workshop started with fragments of *The Task of the Translator* that were being read out loud by people from the organizing group, who then proceeded to each give an interpretation of the section that was read. Through the demonstration of the diversity of interpretations, interaction with the group was opened up. It was easy, from an audience perspective, to personally identify with the readers – and thus unlock one's potential as interpreter – because the possibility of a multitude of viewpoints

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<sup>118</sup> The IAAP started in 2006 on the initiative of Palestinian artists and has been trying to connect the Palestinian context with the international artworld. It is funded by the Norwegian Foreign Ministry. See: <https://electronicintifada.net/content/launch-international-academy-art-palestine/687> (accessed 22-09-2020)

was introduced into the communal space of this encounter right at the start. The same rationale of presenting the variedness of readings was applied throughout the whole week, in which a form of interpretation or different forms of address (so-called ‘interventions’) accompanied the texts that were discussed. The atmosphere was intense, energetic, focussed and attentive, the minds of all present occupied with the extensive reading session. In a dialogical and argumentative fashion consensus was sought, though this was not the required and anticipated outcome. Discussions broke out over the precise meaning of expressions, words, sentences, translations; the space to disagree was built into the set-up of the sessions. Quite often these disagreements (direct linguistic issues aside) centred on issues of political agency: what are the possible political ramifications and relevance for the current political context, and what are the relevance of the interpretations given within the context of this meeting and conference as platform to the wider field? The differences in anticipation, backgrounds, ideas and discourses among the participants became apparent. A distinct epistemological difference between academics, artists and activists became manifest. The discussions continued, and, for the most part, Khatib took the lead, trying to shift the focus back, via the discussions that emerged, to Benjamin’s texts.

A problem that presented itself in this was the difference between expertise and non-expertise. Whilst it was the distinct intention to admit anyone to the conference and to not apply any curatorial criteria based on professional background, knowledge, political affiliation or geographical origin, throughout BiP, conversations had a distinct academic calibre and participation was dependent on having particular, in-depth knowledge of Benjamin’s work. Navigating the texts that were at the centre of the workshops relied therefore on an awareness of the issues of expertise and of epistemological knowledge. As said before, the participants of the conference came from diverse backgrounds, roughly divisible into three types: academics, artists and activists. Some of the participants had scholarly training in cultural theory and were variably trained in Benjamin or similar scholarly texts, others were less acquainted with his – or similar – work and had a more general interest in the format and intention of the conference. This points to the obvious risk of the dominance of scholarly expertise in the exchanges at the conference, and the question becomes how to process this disparity. If unchecked it risks leading precisely to a ‘partition of the visible’ as theorised by Rancière, where academics become the ‘policing order’ (REF VAM) in the space of aesthetic exchange, by sheer dominance of the space of discussion, and thus in political control. This was generally countered by giving everybody ample time to

explore the point they wanted to make, and let the group dynamics take its course, only to be centrally retaken after the discussions fizzled out.

Besides these differences of expertise and knowledge there is the difference in viewpoint, related to how knowledge is used, between the positions or fields of activism, academia and the arts concerning the political potential of BiP and the role of art and aesthetics. Some came from a more politically-informed background, others more from an artistic or activist background and training. Each field considers the relation between knowledge production, politics, art and aesthetics differently and each considers their specific potential contribution and agency differently. One can say, generally, that for an artist an eventual political effect would arrive through the aesthetical shift his or her work establishes, whereas an activist departs from the assumption that his or her actions would produce a concrete social and thereby political effect, and for academics, agency is usually channelled through the tradition and infrastructure of formal knowledge production. This problem between fields is here manifest in the artistic platform itself as the site for transdisciplinary production, rather than as a problem between audience and makers in artistic production, where there is a formal distinction between producer and observer. Here there is no immediate outward address or output towards a spectator, rather an inter-subjective address amongst participants. Since BiP stated a political aim (a novel way of production) it required a platform on which all are considered equal in participation contributing. Thus the matter of overcoming the methodological and epistemological differences that exist becomes the primary task at hand.

It is also important to acknowledge the way that the supposedly binding figure of Benjamin, as the source figure through which this discussion was to take place, has become diversely interpreted in the different discourses and schools in which his writing and legacy have become of critical importance. These different discourses have emerged historically and geographically, and this is also how Benjamin, as an object of theory and knowledge (as the object through which discourse is captured), has become part of the different histories and education of the participants. These differences first had to be explored in order to produce a meaningful dialogue.

As Niklas Luhmann argued, since there is no *a-priori* exchange of meaning possible when the particulars of one's own system aren't negotiated, a multidisciplinary production

model needs the exchange of the epistemes that govern the subsequent fields in order to become mutually understandable. Art theorist Francis Halsall, commenting on Luhmann, stated:

Communication is the manifold of information, message and understanding. Thus a communication is an occurrence, specific to a particular system at a particular moment, which generates meaning within that system from the unity of a message as well as its communication and reception. Different systems generate communication according to their particular codes of self-reference. For example, the science system is ordered by a coding of differences between true/false that produce meaning by simplifying the complexity and contingency of the world to communications on truth and falsehood.<sup>119</sup>

Luhmann also observes that communication within each field creates unified and stratified ‘meaning’ particular for each field, through processes of reduction and simplification, by which other concepts or notions of meaning become excluded. Again, as stated by Halsall:

Communication facilitates the production of meaning by reducing complexity and contingency. It creates some possibilities whilst excluding others thus reducing the complexity of its environment to terms intelligible to the system while reinscribing the distinction between itself and its environment.<sup>120</sup>

This also means that, contrary to the processes of disciplinary formation, intra-disciplinary communication can only occur in the exact moment of the exchange between the different fields, on the provision that the codes of these fields are recognized and opened up as the filters that need to be traversed. This is where the manner in which communication is organized within BiP becomes of crucial importance. The lengthy time awarded and taken, are needed to accommodate these processes. The task would be to arrange a setting in which these different fields are allowed to communicate, accommodating the event of contingency and complexity against the tendency of fields to organize themselves into separates, by simplification and reduction, and where the different modes of meaning-production could be

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<sup>119</sup> Francis Halsall, *Niklas Luhmann and the Body: Irritating Social Systems, The New Bioethics, A Multidisciplinary Journal of Biotechnology and the Body*, Vol. 18 No. 1, May, 2012, 4–20

<sup>120</sup> Ibid

exchanged freely and equally. As described earlier, these differences result from the different epistemological, local and temporal conditions in which they originate. Expertise, as such, can therefore also be understood as a resultant and part of a certain local epistemic formation. The lengthy discussions were therefore needed to bring these differences to the fore, since these differences, as effects of reduction and thereby exclusionary of other fields, only show themselves as differences in the exchanges where they meet the other systems of knowledge. A wish to recognize other fields is based upon the acknowledgement (or presupposition at least) of the existence of epistemic differences which are yet unknown.

This brings us back to the earlier mentioned *Author as Producer* text by Benjamin, in which he states that an experienced solidarity goes hand in hand with an expansion of interest in the other worker, and with that an expansion of the order of the other. Such desire or willingness to be interested is therefore a prerequisite. It is also a prerequisite to get a better understanding of the other and move towards a greater social understanding: solidarity. To quote Benjamin:

When he experiences his solidarity with the proletariat, the author as producer also experiences directly a solidarity with certain other producers in whom earlier he was not much interested.<sup>121</sup>

### *Pure Language and the issue of translation*

The necessity, derived from Luhmann's observations, for a negotiation between fields in order to arrive at a meaning other than that which the separate fields generate for themselves, sits at the core of the text with which Khatib chose to start the reading sessions. It serves as the text that sets the frame for BiP as a whole: Benjamin's *The Task of the Translator*. I contend it is the manner in which Khatib operationalizes the text that connects it to its content. In this text Benjamin argues for the notion of language as a pure medium, devoid of instrumental intentionality, something he describes as Pure Language. To quote Sami Khatib:

(A) Language: Already in his early essay on Language as Such and on the Language of Man (1916), Benjamin introduced the idea of an a-teleological pure means in linguistic terms: "name-language" (SW 1, 66) is language deprived of all its

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<sup>121</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Author as Producer*, New Left Review 1/62, July-August 1970

communicating, instrumental and transmitting qualities. Generally, language does not only serve communicative ends but designates the pure medium of the “mental being” of man. The various contents of the latter (we might say in linguistics: the “signified”) are not communicated through but in language as the pure medium of language as such. “All language communicates itself” (SW 1, 63).<sup>122</sup>

Also as observed by the Belgian-American literary scholar Paul de Man in his analysis of Benjamin, it is because of the assessment of a fundamental lack of objectivity at the heart of all language that all meaning in communication has to be construed as an act of translating. This lack is the basic alienation that exists between objects and their signifiers, which therefore is also the situation of normalcy and point of departure.<sup>123</sup> One can also say that man already is alienated per se and there exists no non-alienated state to return to. This provides Benjamin with the idea of the freedom of translation: since language can never fully be synonymous with what is referred to begin with, all communication necessarily requires translation. Rather than focussing on the original nature of poetry or literature the ‘translatability’ itself is the characteristic that needs to be operationalised. To quote Benjamin:

For this thought is valid here: If translation is a form, translatability must be an essential feature of certain works. Translatability is an essential quality of certain works, which is not to say that it is essential for the works themselves that they be translated; it means, rather, that a specific significance inherent in the original manifests itself in its translatability.<sup>124</sup>

Benjamin here presents us with a notion of communication and language that sits as the basis of all communication: that because it is a-teleological (has no a-priori meaning by which it strives beyond itself), it can be considered as non-instrumental. Such a notion of a non-authoritarian and general medium becomes of importance if we take the idea of platform production as an attempt to jointly perceive and operationalize the platform as a site of the

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<sup>122</sup> Sami Khatib, *Towards a Politics of ‘Pure Means’: Walter Benjamin and the Question of Violence*, Anthropological Materialism, A Collective Blog for Critical Inquiry and Social Research, 2011 See: <https://anthropologicalmaterialism.hypotheses.org/1040> (accessed 22-09-2020)

<sup>123</sup> Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory*, Theory and History of Literature, Volume 33, University of Minnesota Press, London, 1986, p.84

<sup>124</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Task of the Translator*, in *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings Vol.1 1913-1926*, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, US, 1996

communal, where it can operate apart from the sphere of capitalist mode of production. It offers a mode of producing (and a notion of language) in which the inevitable moments of exchange that evoke issues of translation (and thus of power), can – must, logically speaking – be navigated.

For Benjamin, this principle of translatability and the ‘freedom of translation’ also extends to art, since art, according to Benjamin is also attributed with language and is therefore equally part of the cycle of translatability:

There is a language of sculpture, of painting, of poetry. Just as the language of poetry is partly, if not solely, founded on the name language of man, it is very conceivable that the language of sculpture or painting is founded on certain kinds of thing-languages, that in them we find a translation of the language of things into an infinitely higher language, which may still be of the same sphere. We are concerned here with nameless, nonacoustic languages, languages issuing from matter; here we should recall the material community of things in their communication.<sup>125</sup>

Translation then offers an idea of an apparatus that (whilst being made up of multiple actors, positions or elements in the chain of production) can aggregate voices, which (if we accept Benjamin’s proposition in this respect) also extends to the encounter with art. This equality provides the basis through which to understand the translation Benjamin speaks of as the transformation that takes place between art and aesthetics. It is this meaning that I propose to read within the notion of the scene as formulated by Rancière. Much like Benjamin, Rancière doesn’t draw a clear demarcation between reasoning (cognition) and the sensing; aesthetics is a matter of cognition or reasoning and the sensuous together. As Rancière explains in *Dissensus*, it is precisely the entwined relation between the two that, according to Rancière, not only establishes our notion of art and the artistic as the aesthetic regime of art, but also informs the way we conceive artistic production’s complex of forms.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Walter Benjamin, *On Language as Such*, in *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings Vol.1 1913-1926*, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, US, 1996

<sup>126</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus, On Politics and Aesthetics*, edited and translated by Steven Corcoran, Continuum, London/New York, 2010, p.211-213



The necessity of seeing artistic production as the interrelated interplay between practice – the modes of production and of reception together – has been observed and expressed by the Austrian philosopher Armen Avanessian as a politics of form, in his essay *Aesthetics of Form Revisited*. To quote:

The discussion of form manages to bring together the two constitutive fields of knowledge of the discipline of aesthetics: theories of the production of the various arts on the one hand, and theories of their perception and reception on the other.<sup>127</sup>

Avanessian argues that the aesthetic form can be understood as the transformation, the dynamics that occurs between the singular – the artistic proposal – and its reception. Any artistic presentation intervenes in the perception of time and space. This means that any artistic presentation contains a proposal to observe space and time differently. Through this, the aesthetic appreciation of space and time, as such, changes with it. This implication of the reader and of participation, in the processual establishment of such ‘form’ clearly has political implications, since no hierarchical interpretative position exists anymore. With the dissolution of artistic genres and media the authoritative reader also dissolves. Building on this, I argue that such theories must be extended to the whole field of production and the act of production as such. And it is this constellation as a politics of form that is expressed in BiP’s architectural set up. Overall, it becomes a model to bridge and disassemble the division of labour as mentioned before (in which both the mutual processes of poiesis and of aisthesis meet), which, totality in the final instance now, is authored by capitalism, and which needs to be contested. Here we need to return to the actual conditions of BiP and look at the way in which the close-reading sessions were run by Sami Khatib.

#### *Khatib, task of the translator on site*

As described before, the venue was crowded, and those performing as ‘interventionists’ (delivering the texts or acting as moderators) were in close contact with the participants. Equally, these participants were also a contingent of ‘experts’, knowledgeable readers of Benjamin (and of critical theory) that acted as equals in the discussions (Žižek, Buck-Morss, Timofeeva, Brassier etc.). There was thus a mix of levels of expertise, a mix of fields of

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<sup>127</sup> Armen Avanessian, *Aesthetics of Form Revisited*, in *Aesthetics and Contemporary Art*, eds. Armen Avanessian and Luke Skrebowski, Sternberg Press, 2011, p. 33

knowledge and modes of operation gathered and present. Sami Khatib, actively moderating the close-reading, argued for the validity of the arguments in the texts by Benjamin. In a very detailed fashion, the exact phrasings of Benjamin were examined. The text was scrutinized and analysed in an almost hermeneutical way for its meaning, content and relevance in our times. This relevance came about in the moments of exchange with the group, as a matter of contingency, and during the communal processing of the text. This processing took place through feedback from the group, how the text under discussion (phrases or segments, or interventions) were understood by respective participants, read and connected to respective contexts and conditions brought in by the participants. In this processing, different fields offered up their readings, were countered, probed for further elucidation, affirmed or contested by participants from other fields. In this recursive exchange the accounts met their epistemological counterparts, forcing one to explicate oneself or to self-critically examine one's mode of expression or assessment. This critical self-examination, geared to adjustments and corrections of previously held assumptions, perhaps the hardest exercise to perform, was welcomed and accommodated by the group.

The way in which Khatib acted in this as the moderator captures the essence of what Benjamin denotes in *The Task of the Translator*: he acts as an intermediary between text and the group, accommodating the opening-up and navigation of the different fields and epistemes. Benjamin arrives at this notion of the primal importance of the act of translation through his theory on language as mentioned before:

In this pure language [...] all information, all sense, and all intention finally encounter a stratum in which they are destined to be extinguished. [...] It is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language which is exiled among alien tongues, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work. (SW 1, 261)<sup>128</sup>

So, the function of translation is to bring out, in a different language, the essence of a work, which through its translation might be brought closer to this potentiality (without it being a copy). As Benjamin strives to tap into a layer of language that precedes the form language has taken following its Babylonian diversification into fields, expertise and epistemes, he points

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<sup>128</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Task of the Translator* in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn; ed. & intro. Hannah Arendt, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1968

to the generality of language, and, as such, points to the communal base of communication to take place via translation.<sup>129</sup> Translation here is as a form towards communication, and the platforms' task is to provide the space that makes this possible. In the context of BiP, this means that each participant's contribution and the episteme or discourse in which it sits, must be given space for expression and recognition. This in turn resonates with the gap between information and communication, as observed by Luhmann, that needs to be accounted for, both in the act of self-recognition and of social communication.

The text and its reading thus became the primary source or driver of exchange between the members of the group and in which a reading of Benjamin's writings would be arrived at *through* these discussions (the transformation between text and its reading as aesthetic form). This renders the text itself empty, obtaining its differentiated and transformed social meaning – as aesthetical lens – in its reading only. As Luhmann cautions, epistemes – and the subsequent difficulties in communication between fields – are formed by the reduction of complexity and contingency. Instead, at BiP and in this reading of the texts in the workshops, by reversing this process, it precisely begets its communal meaning contingently and through the production of complexity: the added information from different epistemes, captured and voiced in the participants' comments, causes a temporal overload. Here the shared exercise of reading became the performance of communality. The communal production, though temporary, non-definite and unstable, also became the shared cultural object. The paradoxical situation is, then, that through the communal exercise and despite the finalized character of the Benjamin text, the authorially-defined character of Benjamin itself or the almost exegetical reading, the reading can turn into a sociality. One can also say that text here serves as material to art-aesthetically arrive at this transformation. It is through the encounter with the text, regarded as a proposition to arrive at a reading, that a communal yet diverse and temporal sovereign space is established, marked by the suspension of hierarchical authority.

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<sup>129</sup> Language, and in it a mental entity in it, only expresses itself purely where it speaks in name-that is, in its universal naming. So in name culminate both the intensive totality of language, as the absolutely communicable mental entity, and the extensive totality of language, as the universally communicating (naming) entity. By virtue of its communicating nature, its universality, language is incomplete wherever the mental entity that speaks from it is not in its whole structure linguistic-that is, communicable. *Man alone has a language that is complete both in its universality and in its intensiveness.*

Walter Benjamin, *On Language as Such and on the Language of Man*, in *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings Vol.1 1913-1926*, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, US, 1996, p.65-66

Such an effort – translation as communal act – was also exercised through the workshop that dealt with Benjamin’s 1931 text *The Destructive Character*<sup>130</sup>. This text was read aloud after which three separate interpretations were delivered live to the group, which was followed by a discussion. This text stands out compared to the rest of Benjamin’s oeuvre (apart from the *Arcades Project*) in that it takes a much more literary and even lyrical stance. In the rest of Benjamin’s works a much more theoretical, analytical and critical way of writing is deployed. As Benjamin’s writing covers the fields of political theory, culture, literature, art and philosophy, his texts usually fit the registers of the sciences and of critique (Benjamin sustained himself largely by writing critiques for newspapers and journals). As a much more lyrical and poetic text, it invites and leaves much room for interpretation, though it equally implicitly and explicitly refers to terms and concepts that were known in theoretical and literary discourses of the time. In the text, poesis and aesthesis are interlocked in a dialogue. In accordance with Benjamin’s preoccupations, it deals with notions of history and of politics. It expresses the necessity to destroy all that has gone before to be able to arrive at a fundamentally new position, only to start anew by restarting the cycle of destruction. These ideas of continuous undercutting and of renewal, are voiced in the text through a fictional character: *the Destructive Character*. It radicalized the idea that all historical formation of culture or politics occupies a space that excludes others, and that therefore the complete and radical conditions for contingency must be created, which even means, ultimately, to do away with oneself. It evokes a sense of the depersonalization needed to go beyond the subjective. As Benjamin writes and argues in this text:

The destructive character is young and cheerful. For destroying rejuvenates, because it clears out of the way the traces of our own age; it cheers up because every clearing away means, for the destroyer, a complete reduction of his own condition, indeed the extraction of its root.<sup>131</sup>

And:

The destructive character sees nothing lasting. But for this very reason he everywhere sees ways and means. Where others come up against walls or mountains, there too he sees a way. But because he sees a way everywhere, he also has everywhere to clear the way. Not always with brute force, sometimes with its refinement. Because he sees

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<sup>130</sup> The text was published originally in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* on the 20th November 1931.

<sup>131</sup> Irving Wohlfarth, *No-Man's-Land: On Walter Benjamin's "Destructive Character"*, *Diacritics*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (Summer, 1978), Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, pp.47-65

ways everywhere, he himself always stands at the crossroads. No moment can know what the next will bring. He reduces the existing to rubble, not for the sake of the rubble but of the path that extends through it.<sup>132</sup>

The readings of this text at the workshop, by the three different interpreters, clearly showed distinct and different modes of how it might be approached: either by means of literary analysis, political-historical analysis or a more general philosophical approach. Critical theorist and Benjamin and Adorno scholar Jacob Bard-Rosenberg for example, gave an elaborate response of literary quality. Stylistically his response somewhat mirrors that of Benjamin in the *Destructive Character*, while connecting the text to the condition of Palestine and the wider oeuvre of Benjamin.<sup>133</sup>

In contrast to this, another respondent, Dustin N. Atlas, gave a much more philological examination of the text. The multi-disciplinary and multi-genre character of the text, which combines philosophy, political theory and literature, was mirrored in the ways it was read, exposing the different registers and languages. The readings by different observers processing a singular text thus exposed the reception of a work through these epistemological registers in their fullest. Irving Wohlfarth, a literary theorist and expert on Benjamin, observes that the multi-registered character of the *Destructive Character* text prevents each of the registers from ballooning into a sole, dominant interpretation.<sup>134</sup> This is also expressed in the narrative of the text in that its fundamental expression is to pre-empt each form it takes on and the authority that comes with it.

In the workshop, then, the performances of reading were submitted to the same depletion of hierarchy as the writing demonstrated, which also leaves the political order and hierarchy that could be derived from it, undecided. This annulment of the hierarchic order applies equally to the poesis and aesthesis relation, in that the sequence between the two, in

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid

<sup>133</sup> The text *Six Notes on Reading 'The Destructive Character' in Palestine* Prolapsarian, 2016, can be read here: See: <https://prolapsarian.tumblr.com/post/135107926127/six-notes-on-reading-the-destructive-character?fbclid=IwAR2FBEB2YRkOMQNoIcdvvSTjiTkSEVnsuA7qvysEVBvVralytUwF7tGbO2Y> (accessed 6-6-2020),

<sup>134</sup> See a registration of a lecture by Irving Wohlfarth at the at NIHILISM, DESTRUCTION, NEGATIVITY symposium, Jan van Eyck Academy, Maastricht, the Netherlands, December 2012

See:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IU2g2bsWT4I&fbclid=IwAR31yNLZhsHUvrg7biqcospTqxz\\_i02WG8ZJ6Mxkq0ytJgRYI\\_edroeVAG4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IU2g2bsWT4I&fbclid=IwAR31yNLZhsHUvrg7biqcospTqxz_i02WG8ZJ6Mxkq0ytJgRYI_edroeVAG4) (accessed 29-10-2019)

the sense of which comes first, does not matter and is interchangeable. Art may inform aesthetic assessment and aesthetic assessment may inform art. This, I argue, rings close to how Rancière thinks of the communal political space as one of permanent contestation and negotiation. No single subject can claim authority from it. The performative quality of reading the original text aloud and the subsequent responses and exposure of the differences between them amidst the participants and of the constant transformation between aesthetics and art, turned the space into the tangible political space of dissensus.

#### **4 Art-aesthetics forms and directions, poiesis and aisthesis settings**

The productive and generative function of *translation* returns as the general feature of the structure of BiP in the exchanges between art and aesthetic processing, as forms to bring these two together, per se. In the total structure and in different constellations, in which the close reading sessions, as one of the forms, were the centre of gravity, the exchanges between aesthetic reflection and art were organized in a diversity of forms and directions between them. I will demonstrate this diversity by discussing the cases in which the circularity of the relation between art and aesthetics becomes expressed. This overview of the diversity of forms, laid out by the organizers, in which art and aesthetics reciprocally meet is, I argue, the overall political design of the program, as a politics of form. This exposition of forms, maps and critically addresses the present mode of production and our notion of interdisciplinarity as discussed above. These will be unpacked later on in section five, in which I will discuss a response from the arts vis a vis the academic form of cultural production (Patrizia Bach). In section six I will go into the mode of academic production and presentation itself as a form to be contested (Susan Buck-Morss).

#### *Haytham El-Wardany*

In the close reading sessions described above, the performative quality of an interchangeable relation produced the tactile space of interaction. Another form to mention, in which the art-aesthetic relation was operationalized, was the presentation by Egyptian writer Haytham El-Wardany.<sup>135</sup> His contribution to the conference was an account of how he got stuck at the

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<sup>135</sup> In 2005 El-Wardany received the Best Newcomer of the Year Sawiris Prize for Literature. He has participated in a number of art projects in Berlin and in Cairo, including “fast umsonst” for the gallery of NGBK, Berlin (2006). He began his career as a freelance journalist for *Akhbar al Adab* and other media outlets in Cairo. He currently works as an editor with both the Arabic news service of Deutsche Welle and [egyptvotes.com](http://egyptvotes.com).

border between Jordan and Israel; the border he had to cross to get to the conference in Ramallah. This account was an intimate narration of his discussions with the officials and his feelings of being trapped in the instrumentality of language. Due to a minor administrative error in his visa, the Israeli border guards detained him there, preventing him from travelling further. The argument for his detention was a missing stamp or reference, which could have been simply remedied had the guards made a phone call to verify the veracity of his visa. Wardany's intimate and thoughtful account, in close proximity to the participants in the workshop, detailed the singular experience of being kept in the non-place between being recognized as a legal person and the state of exception in which he was denied such legality.<sup>136</sup> Furthermore, it was an account that resonated with the experiences of most others present: border crossings into the West Bank are not only thoroughly scrutinized by the Israeli authorities, but the policy to frustrate entry also acts to negate the West Bank. As such, it reflected on the general experience within the totality of these conditions and broader geopolitical conflicts of which the Israeli-Palestinian one is but one example. Wardany's singular account interrupted the logic of *time* as set by the condition defined by occupation, an equally *homogeneous empty time* in a Benjamin-ian sense. The time of his performance not only took away time from this occupation and established a different temporal quality, it also presented in itself – as a counter demonstration – the time of occupation as tactile and relatable form. This demonstration of both the negative and the positive conditions determining the shared experience heightened the sense of communality.

His presentation took place in the context of *The Task of the Translator* reading workshop and his narration was complemented with (or was brought into dialogue with) the theoretical exchange that had been going on which dealt with the notion of Benjamin's Pure Language. This was mostly through comments by Khatib, and followed up by others. The gap inherent in the promise that general language entails, – the assumption of a shared communicability outside of the different languages and his factual account which contradicted or denied such a promise – heightened the effect of the combined presentation. Emotional affect from the performative account was grounded in and recursively informed by cognitive reflection. And vice versa: rational thought was embodied by factual experience. One can also

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<sup>136</sup> Travelling to the West Bank, I had a similar experience. Being detained and questioned by the border-authorities at Ben Gurion Airport, I found myself submitted to the discretion of these authorities and the uncertainty of whether they would or would not allow me to pass.

say that the singular account (as art's form, per se) here dynamically relates to the form of artistic production, as the art-aesthetics form of the social.

### *Slavoj Žižek and Udi Aloni*

Yet another form of the interplay between art and aesthetics and the crucial conjunction they sit in was illustrated by the combined presentation of Udi Aloni and Slavoj Žižek. Aloni is an American-Israeli filmmaker, writer and political activist. He worked at the *Freedom Theatre*<sup>137</sup> of the Jenin Refugee Camp in Palestine as head cinema coach. The focus of his filmmaking has been on the issue of nationalism and the conflict between Israel and Palestine. Besides filmmaking, he also writes in forms strongly connecting practice to theoretical thinking.<sup>138</sup> Slavoj Žižek hardly requires an introduction. The Slovenian philosopher is well-known for his public engagement in matters of politics and of cultural production as connected parts of the ideological fabric of our time.

At the conference, Aloni's film *Local Angel* was screened. It investigates the possibility of the binational Israeli-Palestinian state through the prism of politics, religion and ideology and featuring interviews with politicians such as Yasser Arafat and Hannah Ashrawi. Aloni also questions his own personal history which leads him to return to Israel-Palestine to retrace the ideological undercurrents affecting his personal psychology, as well as the overall psychology of the Israeli situation. The film culminates with the altercations he has with his mother: the well-known Israeli peace activist and politician Shulamit Aloni who was the Israeli Minister of Education from 1992 to 1993. In the making of the film and in interviews with her, it becomes clear that they fundamentally differ politically vis a vis the issue of the right of Palestinian refugees to return back to what is now Israel. Though she initially shows herself an ardent supporter of the Palestinian rights, she cannot bring herself to the position of accepting their return. It presents an intimate insight into the personal life of Aloni and the emotionally troubled and political schisms present in it. In his presentation, he also elaborated on his political-activist work as filmmaker at the Freedom Theatre, which was interspersed with contributions from Palestinian artists present and the subsequent altercations on copyright which arose concerning film-material of students he supposedly used while

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<sup>137</sup> For information, see: <https://www.thefreedomtheatre.org> (accessed 22-09-2020)

<sup>138</sup> He has worked in this respect with Alain Badiou, Judith Butler and Slavoj Žižek. In his book: *What Does a Jew Want: On Binationalism and Other Specters* he has these philosophers reflecting on his films *Local Angel* and *Forgiveness*.



working at the Jenin Refugee Camp. These exchanges between the public and Aloni were substantial and heated, drawing in others into the debate.

This was followed by Žižek who submitted the work of Aloni to his well-known format of cultural reading to arrive at a broader analysis of the ideological context that is present and shows itself in the work. The direct reading of Žižek attached itself to the effect the film evoked. Here the work of Aloni is treated as an aesthetic object and translated into a, one can say, Žižekian interpretation. The performance of Žižek thereby produced another artistic object, a ‘work’ in the line of reasoning of Benjamin (and followed up on by Rancière)<sup>139</sup>, according to which the reading of artwork, concludes and continues it. As mentioned in the Van Abbemuseum chapter, Benjamin in his work *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism*, building on German philosopher Friedrich Schlegel, considers the artwork to be established each time it is read. This reading, this *critique* in vivo, is a creative co-creative act, a continuous process in which the artwork is permanently open to its interpretation and its processual becoming, and thus is a temporal entity. In the interaction with the audience, which contributes equally to the reading in the exchange with both Aloni and Žižek, the authorship and becoming of this communal ‘work’ becomes dispersed and fluent as the interchange between all attending: public, theoretical reflection and artwork. The principle of Rancière’s art-aesthetics model is here elevated into a live political exchange that enables the interpretative mode, the social meaning and altercations thereof and the political consequences of such assessment, either binding or unbinding the existing social agreements between those partaking.

## 5 Patrizia Bach – The Arcades Work, dialectics and the objects of discourse

*Aesthetic response to the form of academic knowledge, academic discourse as dialectical object*

In this section I will unpack the contribution by artist Patrizia Bach’s<sup>140</sup> at BiP. This contribution comments critically on academic practice, and the way this practice has become a problematic form in the art and aesthetics relation in the context of visual arts. Bach’s critique therefore represents the artist position in Rancière’s *scene* within BiP. Bach, who

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<sup>139</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism*. (GS I 65; SW I 151)

<sup>140</sup> See <https://patriziabach.de>, accessed 29-10-2019

lives and works in Berlin and Istanbul, did so by presenting her work, the *arcades work*. It is a multi-layered work consisting of drawings, notes, a web-publication and a print publication. In her presentation she details how her work engages with Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*, and how Benjamin's text informs the making of her work. *The Arcades Project* is considered to be one of Benjamin's most important and acknowledged works, and notably considered and valued as a work that bridges art, aesthetics and (historical/cultural) knowledge. It is, therefore, a seminal work in the history of the propagation of an interdisciplinary vision of the humanities: in the artworld as in the humanities it is considered a key work. Bach explains how her response should be considered as a critical assessment of the ways in which Benjamin's work has been understood and figured in both academia and the artworld. It is a response and critique on the form that academic production and practice has taken throughout history (as a mostly metatheoretical reflective practice).

Bach presents and approaches the field of aesthetics through the qualities and aspects of art, customarily primarily defined as a field of the sensuous. This attribution of the sensuous warrants a more detailed discussion. Taken as a problem defined by the division of labour between fields, and of production being subsumed by capitalism (an argument which serves as the central premise of the text) she is able to shed light on the art-context of production. As most of the contributions in BiP stem from the context of the scholarly realm, she completes the scope of positions in production. And, understood as the problem between fields of expertise and of knowledges, aesthetical fields (as discussed through Luhmann), she offers a contribution to the form of knowledge and the aesthetical lens, by way of the artists perspective, as part of this imbricated condition.

Bach's main artistic medium is drawing. Through this practice, she deals with themes such as archiving, collecting, and rearranging. Her drawings often derive from the city which is taken as a site of memory, history and storage. By creating a system and re-ordering the visual and conceptual categories of the original work by Benjamin's *Arcades* manuscript, which she approaches in a similar manner to her engagement with urban sites, she offers a reconfiguration of Benjamin's (unfinished) *The Arcades Project*. Her work was shown hanging on the wall of the International Art Academy Palestine (the venue housing the workshops) and was the permanent backdrop for the intensive reading/workshop-sessions which took place there. It formed one of the injections of the visual arts into the conference.

Later in the week, she gave a discursive presentation about her work while standing before it in the hall.

To explain how Bach deals with Benjamin's work, I will first discuss the original. *The Arcades Project* is a work that Benjamin left unfinished. He began working on it in 1927, intending to write an essay on the Paris of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a city in which he had lived himself. After his self-chosen death in 1940, at the border between France and Spain (on the run from the Nazis and fearing deportation and incarceration), the unfinished manuscript survived and was kept at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, hidden by George Bataille. It was first published in German<sup>141</sup> in 1982, edited by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser with the help of Theodor W. Adorno and Gershom Scholem. In 1999 it was translated into English and has received substantial intellectual and artistic recognition for its bridging of literary criticism, history, and critical theory, and importantly, for the ways in which visual and textual materials are related and arranged within it. The original manuscript consisted of a massive amount of notes, photographs, images, cards and papers, amassed over a period of 13 years, which are arranged in 'convolutes' that cover themes, times and figures like: 'Boredom, Eternal Return of the Same', 'Fashion', 'Jugendstil', 'Marx' and 'The Streets of Paris'. Textually, it consists of a staggering 4521 quotes, originating from a diverse range of sources: from high literature to low culture, and from different fields such as journalism, science, history. Benjamin took the arcades in the Parisian streets and shopping centres to be the place where the spheres of public and private space and of consumerism merge. It was research into the imaginary of the transformation of European culture, the forthcoming civil life, urban expansion and commodified consumerism. As such, it gave insight into how the phantasmagory of capitalism and the fetish-character of the commodity that Marx speaks of shape the architecture of urban space: in short where the new culture of capitalism took shape. To quote Benjamin:

Capitalism was a natural phenomenon with which a new, dream-laden sleep came over Europe, and with it the reactivating of mythical forces.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Walter Benjamin: *Das Passagen-Werk*. In: *Gesammelte Schriften*. Band V; published Rolf Tiedemann und Hermann Schweppenhäuser, with the help of Theodor W. Adorno und Gershom Scholem. Suhrkamp-Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1982

<sup>142</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Passagen Werk*, GS 5.1: 494.

According to philosopher Frank Vande Veire, it is this phantasmagorical character of capitalism that Benjamin strove to address, and which, importantly, becomes apparent through the *style* of *The Arcades Project*. Vande Veire calls this a *montage-technique*: scenes and descriptions are short, and the combinations between them and the imagery produce an impressionistic collage. He writes that the use of this style, with its mimicking of *the dream-laden sleep*, points to both the recognition of the phantasmagorical character of capitalism, and also to the possibility of awakening from its spell, since it is identified as a spell.<sup>143</sup> Benjamin himself called this, stylistically and conceptually, a *narration*, and claims that there was nothing for him to historicize; his task, rather was to show situations and to re-narrate it as yet another history as image. This is in accordance with how Benjamin assesses the image as the true carrier for dialectics, only the encounter with the image can produce a true historical insight – and therefore a critical awareness – as explained above. Seen this way, the *Arcades* contains a template model for critical production: it both locates and identifies an object of critique, and points to the potential of another outcome, in that it demonstrates history to be open for reconsideration and reformation. This is the dual operation of identifying and critiquing the fetish character of the commodity and the rise of capitalism as the dream-laden sleep. How this work, *The Arcades*, transposed in academia, subsequently functioned as a critical object, becomes therefore of eminent importance. Just how Benjamin's idea of the image as dialectical form functions in the way it does, this then is a process that deserves critical scrutiny.

Whether the unfinished nature of *The Arcades Project* is the result of the impossibility to finalize it due to circumstances in the author's life or because of the difficulty of finalizing its manifold theoretical framework, or whether it was a (semi-) deliberate attempt by Benjamin to find a form of permanent openness – by wilfully keeping it uncompleted and resisting theoretical closure – cannot be known, and has to remain undecided.<sup>144</sup> The fact that Benjamin never managed to finish it, and that its closure remains an interpretation by others, inadvertently adds to the mythical character of the work itself. How to deal with this incompleteness has therefore also been a point of critique. It was after all a *certain* edit, a

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<sup>143</sup> Frank Vande Veire, *Als in een donkere Spiegel*, p.191-192, SUN Amsterdam, 2002

<sup>144</sup> Vande Veire characterizes Benjamin's efforts as driven by the desire for a world which is totally transparent and that would present itself without intellectual processing. The world however needs intervention, since access to the totality of information is preserved to the divine. It is therefore a desire which cannot be fulfilled and must thus therefore be understood a materialist limit-experience. Ibid. p.192

certain selection and sequence, decided by its editors, that gives the work its form, character and expressive power now as Benjamin did not offer any instruction, or fully developed theoretical framework, on how to edit the work or apply to it a structure.<sup>145</sup> The sequencing applied by Tiedemann can therefore be said to be a specific reading, interpretation and edit, by which Tiedemann must be labelled an author of this version of an otherwise, in principle, multi-editable body of work. This fact – that it is completed by an interpreter – demonstrates the de-authored nature of the original and adds to its character of potentiality. It is a work that, in its deepest meaning, awaits its re-ordering, its re-reading per se. It is my argument that *The Arcades Project*, as a form of the editable enacts Benjamin's own view of history: it serves as the moment in the now, with dialectics at a standstill, the now has to be grasped, as mentioned before.

If its potentiality is to be guarded, it needs to be assured of the undetermined-ness of its status, of its processual nature. As the Tiedeman edit should be considered, in line with Benjamin's style, a montage, the potential for other montages is part of the essential operation of the work, which must be considered as such in Tiedeman's translation. This sits delicately uncomfortable with the fact that the Tiedeman edit for a long time was the only one, and from that, the singular authoritative form of Benjamin's Arcades Work operational in academia.<sup>146</sup> It is this potentiality – to re-read and to (re-)establish its principle nature of openness – that drives Patrizia Bach, as becomes clear in her talk about her project at the BiP conference. She explains how for her the Tiedemann *Arcades* version falls short when compared to the original manuscript. According to her it is the tactile qualities (Benjamin's miniscule handwriting, the texture, feel and colour of the pages, the manually colour-coded convolutes)

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<sup>145</sup> It draws its authority from a book that was never written, the *Passagen-Werk* (Arcades project), the unfinished, major project of Benjamin's mature years. Instead of a "work," he left us only a massive collection of notes on nineteenth-century industrial culture as it took form in Paris—and formed that city in turn. These notes consist of citations from a vast array of historical sources, which Benjamin filed with the barest minimum of commentary, and only the most general indications of how the fragments were eventually to have been arranged. Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, the MIT Press, Massachusetts USA, 1989

<sup>146</sup> Rolf Tiedeman, editor of the original German edition of *Das Passagen-Werk*, published in 1982, explains meticulously in the English translation published in 2002, how his editorial choices took shape. These were based on three texts Benjamin had finished which should be read, according to Tiedeman, as the conceptual framework to the work. He explains he deduced the importance of these texts from earlier drafts and correspondences Benjamin had with others on the project. He also excluded parts of the materials since these were mere drafts. So, though the explanation of choices is communicated, it for a long time constituted the only edit available, in which form it gained its academic importance. This conceptual framework, and the assessment leading to the edit were contested by, amongst others, Susan Buck-Morss who argued that the methodology behind the Arcades demands that the text be read more interpretatively, and to be delved for its relevance in the now, something she set out to do in her book *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*.

which show the signs of re-working that inform the more intimate qualities and, importantly, the conceptual basis of the work. It is precisely through observation of the reworked notes that the reader encounters and understands the text to be an open and unfinished work. Her encounter with the original – the singular experience of it – points to the aesthetic in relation to knowledge; she describes how she studies the physical and compositional aspects of the original manuscript, and details how she observed that Benjamin constantly re-ordered his notes. The colour-coding that defines the bind between image, notes and theme of the convolute constantly gets re-ordered by Benjamin, which is tactile proof that there was no conclusive editorial guideline given by Benjamin. It is this material, perceptual and experiential encounter that leads to the overall conceptual assessment of the unfinished quality of the work and its subsequent openness and the malleability of its meaning. These are however the qualities she finds lacking in Tiedemann's purely academic edition, which consists of text only. One can say it provides information based on cognitive processing only. In this vein, working through and studying the manuscript, she arrives at the re-ordering of the colour-coding system of the manuscript which she then transforms through her production of drawings and a website. She arrives at new works that recombine elements using the open code in Benjamin's work, by which this code is demonstrated. This operation of demonstrating the open code requires, paradoxically for it to be re-authored again by Bach.

Next to the manuscript itself, she also takes the sites described in the *Arcades* as objects of study. In her talk, she guides us through her project and tells how she spent a year in Paris revisiting the scenes described by Benjamin in order to make the drawings. She hereby combines the information of her reading of Benjamin's manuscript, the historic references he provides for these localities (which by now have become obscure and changed over time) with the experience of these places in the now. In the end this leads to a new body of work that is grafted on to Benjamin's *Arcades* by temporal re-examination, which honours its open-endedness, creating a new temporal reconfiguration, and arrives at a new expression by ordering and emphasising themes differently. As philosopher and art critic Knut Ebeling, describing Bach's project, explains: by taking up the invitation laid down by Benjamin to 'use' his system of encoding as such, Bach has revived the critical potential that Benjamin offers. Ebeling says:

Her digital system of symbols suggests something beyond the previous order of the convolutes without exceeding the framework of *The Arcades Project*; they exist

outside the book but very much within Benjamin's own project. This makes possible transversal orders and readings of *The Arcades Project*, as Benjamin presumably imagined them, as he conceived them and laid them out in his final drafts, and as they exceeded the framework of the linearity of the book time and again. The stroke of genius of Bach's project is that the new coding results from a simple operation: by reversing the approach to *The Arcades Project*, which Bach treats not philosophically and scientifically but rather visually and graphically: Bach approaches *The Arcades Project* not like generations of humanities scholars before her by way of Benjamin's unordered metatheoretical reflections in the infamous Convolute N. Rather, she opens up *The Arcades Project* by way of the systems of symbols that necessarily escaped the view of humanities scholars blind to design.<sup>147</sup>

Taken this way, it can be seen as a critique of the methodology and practise of academic humanities in that both miss out on aesthetical qualities they need to consider, which are sidelined or misinterpreted as mere 'design' information but which contain aesthetical clues that need to be recursively revisited. Rather than limiting oneself to the metatheoretical assessment of a work – as is done in academic practice that solely takes text as material of reflection –, one also needs to consider the necessary encounter with what is critiqued, and the material and temporal information this provides. Bach here performs a double operation, both critiquing a form of inquiry, and building on this critique. In doing so, she re-examines the initial subject of inquiry. The Tiedeman work here is the material form of discourse, as prevailing narrative, that falls short in academic practice in its failure to offer the necessary information that Benjamin tries to communicate and which forms the critical core of his teachings. This critical potential has become stultified in the academic practice and in the form Benjamin's *Arcades* was operational, as was postulated in BiP by her presentation. One can also say that Bach's operation is an attempt of restoration of the potential in Benjamin's work: that of the dialectical relation between history and the now via the image. This critical potential became fixed in the Tiedeman *Arcades*, against the grain of what it formally contained as an open code. The 'image' as the dialectical carrier that Benjamin spoke of, then, is not so much an artefact or instance but an image of a complete history of academic practice and discourse within the current capitalist context in which the Tiedeman edit figures. The

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<sup>147</sup> See Knut Ebelings reflection on Patrizia Bach's *Passagen Werk*: <https://patriziabach.de/Projekte/Walter-Benjamin-Passagen/research/> (accessed 3-11-2019)

singularity of Bach's re-authorization, undercuts the authorship the Arcades had begot in the academic context, and the form thus becomes contested.

Bach thus pries open again the scope and nature of the input of what constitutes 'history' in Benjamin's sense: the many voiced and forgotten or hidden histories, overpowered, neglected and forgotten by the prevailing historically produced narrative. Here this means the formation of academic discourse and the place of the Arcades in it. As artist, she confronts the object of discourse that the Arcades has become in academic practice (a form where it does nothing to contest the way knowledge production follows the parametrization of neoliberal capitalism) by returning to the Arcades as a sensible object. Through Bach's work, the Arcades Work is, speaking in Benjamin's own terms, awakened from its dream-laden sleep, awakened from subsumption in capitalism as form of discourse.

As part of the Rancière-ian scene relevant to the situation of BiP and the setup of disciplines, Bach provides and re-introduces critical information from the artist-position to the same scene. In this sense, following Benjamin's assessment of art as being part of the same fabric of language in general, the dialogue is phrased here from the artwork and/or artist's position in the spectrum of production as a whole. The division of labour – as the gap between those involved in production – is countered by the artistic assessment of an object of discourse (Benjamin's Arcades Work in academia) and this critique is again brought forward as an object to discuss. In the scheme of the discussion between fields and epistemes, (Luhmann) Bach offers the perspective of the artist vis a vis the form of knowledge-production in academia. The re-articulation (Bach's artistic response) and the direct communication of this 'aesthetic critique' with the group present at BiP, defines both a new object of critique and inaugurates the potential to achieve a communal aesthetics. The space that enables this situation, the space provided by BiP, is one where the translation necessary between the different fields – also comprising the realm of the visual as language –, that Benjamin speaks of in Task of the Translator, is the task for BiP as platform. The discussion between poiesis and aesthesis, art and aesthetics, artists and academics goes uninterrupted here – against the interrupted dialogue between professor and student the neoliberally ordered working relations in academia, as mentioned before – in order to accommodate the discussion.



## 6 Symposium, Susan Buck-Morss and Emily Jacir, academic practise as dialectical object

The last setting of the many forms of production that were deployed in the BiP conference and its architecture that I want to discuss (through the prism of the art and aesthetics relation) is the presentation by philosopher, historian and scholar Susan Buck-Morss. In her presentation at BiP, she addresses and critiques the regular mode of academic production and demonstrates how Benjamin's thought could be effectuated in it. In doing so she demonstrates the needed dialogue between making and reflection, between art and aesthetics from the academic viewpoint, in parallel to Bach who does so from the artistic perspective. Working in academia (she teaches at the City University of New York as professor of Political Science and as expert on the work of Walter Benjamin), she has published books on Benjamin, *The Frankfurt Schule and Adorno* which are regarded as modern classics,<sup>148</sup> and strives to accentuate and apply the principles in Benjamin's work in the context of her work. I want to unpack this just as was done with Bach in order to show how both perspectives are working within the same objective and how these perspectives communicate – against the division of labour –, and from within the same shared space of production at BiP as event over several locations. Where Bach addresses how an object of discourse could be reconsidered, Morss does so by addressing the conventional mode of production in academia as its practise.

The site where the examples I have discussed so far took place was the International Academy for Art Palestine. The Academy provided an intimate space of interaction where everyone (experts/non-experts, academics/artists/activists) mingled, and where interactions, interruptions and discussion were natural. The keynote lectures, however, given by Buck-Morss, Slavoj Žižek and Rebecca Comay, were held at The Birzeit University, located near Ramallah, one of Palestine's foremost universities. Here the setting shifted from a situation in which there was practically no physical distance, to that of the conventional academic setting, meaning that the lecturer or panel of lecturers, and eventually the moderator, sat behind a table or lectern separated from the audience. It is the customary setting where academic production is presented and exchanged; it is the showroom and the place of production itself in the economics of academia. In such places, there is a wall between audience and stage that separates the audience from the site of production, making their participation passive only.

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<sup>148</sup> *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute*, 1977 and *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, 1989, both the MIT Press, Massachusetts USA, must be named here as standard-works in the field.

In her presentation Buck-Morss spoke about how Benjamin's ideas could be understood as a beginning, and even seen as methodology to arrive at a more egalitarian philosophy of history (and how a just writing of history would fit a philosophical idea of living).<sup>149</sup> This is an argument that is especially pertinent in the Israeli-Palestinian context, where the rule of the most powerful rule decide which histories are heard or told, and also provide the political narrative and legibility through which the oppression of other histories and presents are legitimized. This is also the main rationale that Buck-Morss develops and which permeates all of her writing: the formation of the historical narrative is always connected to the formation of power.

In her talk she discusses this through the relation between image and caption, unpacking Benjamin's methodology in *The Arcades Project*; how these are interlinked, and how an interpretation of an image captures the image – and thus comes to determine its historic meaning. Countering this she points to how captions are changeable and the links which bind them are also adaptable. She illustrates this by pointing out how, in the cooperation between Benjamin and the artist Paul Klee, Benjamin's text *On the Concept of History* eventually comes to overdetermine Klee's artwork *Angelus Novus*. Famously, the angel came to stand for the desperate angel of history who, being swept away by the storm of progress, can only see wreckage piling up through time.<sup>150</sup> Benjamin uses this artwork in his text to clarify the relation between history and the idea of progress which, in his reasoning, in the end proves to be a fatal idea. I will leave aside for now the question how the angel figure itself should be interpreted within the text itself. I will focus more on the interrelatedness between image and text. For some it depicts the witness to the catastrophe, for others it's precisely the bourgeois politician causing the catastrophe as progress. For her part, Buck-Morss points to the fact that both Benjamin and Klee have used more angels in their respective writing and artwork on many occasions and that, in their respective contexts and forms, they mean fundamentally different things.<sup>151</sup> The iconic meaning this particular combination begot depends on historic contingency while many other combinations exist and are available.

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<sup>149</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, the MIT Press, Massachusetts USA, 1989

<sup>150</sup> Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* [translator H. Zohn, editor Hannah Arendt] Schocken Books, New York, 1968, p392

<sup>151</sup> Emily Jacir & Susan Buck-Morss, 100 notes-100 thoughts-Nr.004, dOCUMENTA(13), Hatje Cantz Verlag, Ostfildern Germany, 2011

Buck-Morss uses this to critique how ideas can become isolated, calcified and authoritative, and how these become irrefutable through their historical confirmation and practise, even in critical theory which arguably warns against the defining nature of historic assessments. The dialectics surrounding an image can however never be exhausted, which she argues, is an image's true political meaning. This however needs constant checking, she warns. To quote Buck-Morss:

In contrast, Benjamin's dialectical images are neither aesthetic nor arbitrary. He understood historical "perspective" as a focus on the past that made the present, as revolutionary "now-time," its vanishing point. He kept his eyes on this beacon, and his interpreters would do well to follow suit. Without its constant beam, they risk becoming starry-eyed by the flashes of brilliance in Benjamin's writings (or in their own), and blinded to the point.<sup>152</sup>

During her talk, which followed the regular format of a lecturer speaking in front of an audience aided by a Powerpoint presentation, she refers to Palestinian artist Emily (Amalia) Jacir who was seated in the front row at the conference room. She mentions, expanding on the argument she made before on the interchangeable relation between image and caption, and how this constitutes history and the powers vested by its writing, a project in which they worked together. It was a booklet they produced together commissioned by dOCUMENTA(13), Kassel, Germany in 2012, one of the world's major exhibitions on contemporary art. It is part of the *100 notes-100 thoughts*-series, accompanying dOCUMENTA(13)<sup>153</sup> and consists of a series of photographs taken by Jacir with accompanying handwritten short diary entries by the artist that look like notes or captions. The photos depict the former Benedictine monastery of Breitenau, near Kassel as well as other photographs from the vicinity. The monastery functioned as correctional facility between 1874 and 1934, was used between 1940-1945 as a concentration camp in the Nazi era. After the war it became a girl's reformatory. It now houses a memorial that commemorates and researches the atrocities committed there by the Gestapo in WW2. Jacir's text-image combinations comment on the history and specifics of the place, firmly embedded

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<sup>152</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, the MIT Press, Massachusetts USA, 1989, p.339

<sup>153</sup> For the *100 notes-100 thoughts*-series, see: <https://www.artbook.com/documenta-13.html> (accessed 3-04-2020)

in the Nazi ideology, which are connected to post-war facts and observations about how these relate to the Palestinian context. Her artistic practice is characterised by a direct engagement with archives and documentary forms of artmaking. One can describe it as a practice directly concerned with how history is a matter of aesthetics, both in art as in politics.<sup>154</sup> As an artist of Palestinian descent and actively involved in the situation there, Jacir is particularly concerned with notions of how states exert power by deploying the means to dominate historical narratives. As such it is an historiographic account by the artist that visually and textually bridges histories and geographies.

The other half of the booklet is a text by Buck-Morss in which she reflects upon the delicate act of history-writing responding to Jacir's photos and in conversation with the artist. Her contribution consists of several types of texts. In some of these she deploys an analytic historians' style (the problem of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* in relation to Benjamin's use as mentioned before), in others she uses fiction: she describes a fictional dialogue between Walter Benjamin and his contemporaries and intellectual colleagues Theodor Adorno and Gershom Scholem, both of whom have been of importance to the development and reception of Benjamin's intellectual ideas.<sup>155</sup> This fictional dialogue is written in an almost poetic, theoretically ultra-condensed style, which immediately refers to the fact that history as such – so art-history also – is based on interpretative selection and speculation.<sup>156</sup>

The function of the text clearly follows a different register than we are used to seeing utilized by the art historian or critic, reflecting on the artist's work. It expresses a non-hierarchical relation between picture and text, artwork and caption, original and interpretation, object and reflection, author and reader, fiction and study. Buck-Morss had already been occupied with attempts to bridge art and aesthetics within her own oeuvre as academic writer, namely in her book: *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and*

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<sup>154</sup> See how art-historian Marc James Léger describes Jacir's contribution to the dOCUMENTA 2012 as documenting the left artefacts and proofs of lives which are represented, thereby recombining and unearthing hidden histories.

Marc James Léger, *Dialectics of the Real, On the Art and Politics of Emily Jacir*, Third Text, 2016 Vol. 30, Nos. 5–6, p.311–329

<sup>155</sup> Adorno and Scholem were of influence to Benjamin's thinking and with whom he had personal relations, which can be defined as the dialectical materialism (Adorno) and the Jewish tradition (Scholem). Together these can be seen as fundamental to Benjamin's particular Marxism.

<sup>156</sup> Here we may return to a similar approach Rancière adopts in his writing, as discussed in the VAM chapter, in which he conceives communication as a process of co-creation by the 'willed' exchange of fictionalized thought and emotions (see Van Abbe Museum chapter).

*West*.<sup>157</sup> In this publication she combines and montages contemporary and historic images, history and theory into a hybrid form, not unlike that of Benjamin in *Arcades*. As philosopher Lieven de Cauter explains: she produces a new – formerly hidden – historic narrative of the histories of both the US and Russia through the use of imagery.<sup>158</sup> Here, in the cooperation with Jacir, she – as theorist, who customarily in institutional artistic production, is the privileged reader – takes on the role of the co-narrator, whose so-called objective function as interpreter is given up for a statement of the critic’s or art historian’s own interpretative reading. In doing so, she levels their positions and annuls the object-subject relation, which is the normally conceived relation between artist and interpreter. It hereby becomes a duo-work in which the defining distinction between artist and interpreter (art as object to interpretation) becomes annulled – a gesture that presses for a fundamental openness between the two. Critically it also endeavours to not let a single historic interpretation and meaning, in the exchange between art and aesthetics, have the final say. Art and aesthetics work interchangeably, for each other, permeate each other. Here the methodological principle of the structure of *The Arcades Project* was used as a template for their cooperation, in order not to have a text overbear the image. In Rancière’s terminology: not to maintain a distinction between art and aesthetics, between poiesis and aesthesis. This shows the holistic approach characterizing BiP as platform, operationalizing what Benjamin’s texts both do and propose. BiP enacts Benjamin’s work as new praxis regarding the art-object in production.

#### *The discursive morphology of the stage setting*

The same basic logic, I argue, can be found back at Buck-Morss’ keynote lecture when she asked Jacir to join her on the stage. Here though it is extended to the setting of academic production and the set-up between maker, interpreter and observer. Buck-Morss interrupts, and simultaneously upends the conventional relation between art and aesthetics as the academic practice. Although Jacir, who was seated among the audience, declined, the invitation in itself is meaningful in the context of this text, in the sense that it contains a response to and critique of artistic and theoretical production and the relation between positions in it. Here, the same principle of the art-aesthetics exchange becomes enacted during

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<sup>157</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe. The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*, MIT Press, 2000 (Cambridge, Massachusetts / London).

<sup>158</sup> Lieven de Cauter, “Utopie en macht in de twintigste eeuw. Over Susan Buck-Morris’ ‘Dreamworld and Catastrophe.’” Brussels: De Witte Raaf. 2001. <https://www.dewitteraaf.be/artikel/detail/nl/2317> (Dutch) (accessed 22-09-2020.)

the live lecture by Buck-Morss, but extended with the audience, which, as I will point out, gets (in)directly drawn in as a participant.

What I have described so far in this chapter, through the works of Buck-Morss and Jacir, are formats that each challenge the art-aesthetics division as it is present in the artist Jacir's own work as well as in Buck-Morss' academic production. The latter's complete oeuvre could be seen in this manner, as object of production in which the bond between making and reflection is explored from which it obtains its critical and public character. Equally, this interplay between art and aesthetics is present, as I laid out, in their cooperative project of the DOCUMENTA booklet. These forms however do not constitute a direct live and social exchange between participant, maker and reflection. Publications are read, exhibitions seen and experienced – works as well as exhibitions as objects of mediation – but there is distance between maker, reflection and participant (observer/reader) without direct feedback.

On stage, the presentation by Buck-Morss can be seen as an exposé of an object of study, and though Buck-Morss makes clear how much of her work-process must be seen as an act of creation and, most often, as co-creation, the presentation itself is discursive and a barrier separating audience and presenter remains. This seclusion between audience and presenter does not change even if there exist an artist and theoretical interlocutor together on stage for a duo-presentation or interview. Such a format of presenting is not something new or extraordinary and has become quite common. The discursive nature of the presentation dominates, since not only is it mostly set-up towards the artist being the object of inquiry for which the critic or theorist acts to obtain the knowledge, but also by the fact that there is no active recursive feedback going on between the different actors. This runs contrary to what is presented by Buck-Morss' in the lecture, and that which sits at the core of her thinking.

At the precise moment of asking Jacir to join her on the stage, Buck-Morss breached the distance between stage and audience.<sup>159</sup> Though it was merely a fleeting moment, I argue that because of this interruption, the audience now could identify with Jacir, who was asked to take part in the discussion on the project Buck-Morss and she did together, and was invited to do the same. To put it differently: Buck-Morss arranges a jump between the audience and stage, breaching the wall of discursivity, drawing in the audience as active observer in the

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<sup>159</sup> Buck-Morss, in private e-mail correspondence, 02-04-2020

triangle participant, making and reflection. At that moment Buck-Morss relinquishes, not only on being the sole voice to comment on something that was made cooperatively in the first place, but also to relinquish the voice to determine its relevance and meaning in the now in favor of making a significant gesture towards the communal.

Buck-Morss hereby introduces the dialogue between the aesthetical assessment and art together as the form to discuss artistic production. Since in the line of reasoning, in the interchange between making and reflection, the audience, like Jacir, can be that active listener, the observer who concludes the work. Here however, almost as an impromptu intervention, by puncturing the format and unsettling even one's own position, it in a sense becomes a performative critique, in order to make everyone 'recall' that all are equal and participate in this process. At the risk of stating it too dramatically, this is analogous to Benjamin's *On the Concept of History*<sup>160</sup> where he explains that meaning presents itself and has to be actively grasped and captured, in order for it to not be forgotten. To quote Benjamin:

Articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it "the way it really was." It means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to hold fast that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to the historical subject in a moment of danger. The danger threatens both the content of the tradition and those who inherit it. For both, it is one and the same thing: the danger of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. Every age must strive anew to wrest tradition away from the conformism that is working to overpower it.

The dialectical moment that presents itself in a flash and that has to be seized as memory that Benjamin speaks of here is to give up on the authoritative of the stage, in favour of the potential of the equality in social interaction, which is meant to counter the relations set by the division of labour, which in the end is, as I have argued, structured in the logic of managerial neoliberalism.

#### *Dismasure – the artistic moment*

Buck-Morss, on the go, relinquishes her authoritative position (yet affirms her presence) and affirms she is co-narrator in a joint effort between interpreter and provider. In fact, one can

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<sup>160</sup> Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* [translator H. Zohn, editor Hannah Arendt] Schocken Books, New York, 1968

say Buck-Morss positions her own role here as problematic in the dialectics that exist in academic production that claims a status of critical agent versus its lack of recursive adaptability. The conformism in service of the powers that be, clearly is the form of division of labour in the conventions of academic production, exemplified by the discursive and the authoritative position of the theorist – that is undercut by the academic herself, in this case. Here I would say that the transformation of information in order to arrive at communication, requires a mode of self-critical awareness because no a priori understanding of what meaning is, can be communicated. Buck-Morss pokes Luhmann's principle into the barrier that keeps the audience separated from the stage, forcing an interaction – qua artistic authorship – which isn't there naturally. The idea of the scene that Rancière speaks of, is mobilized by her as the community between making, reflection and participation. This can be seen as the artistic moment, in which the subject (Buck-Morss here) shows how commonly held perceptions and aesthetics that appear natural, can be demonstrated to be overbearing and how these can be interrupted. To come back to Virno, this is the moment in which the *dismeasure* becomes demonstrated; how the conditions as they are experienced are those of the heteronomy overbearing sovereign subjectivity.

## **7 Author as Producer, author as platform, upscaling of recursivity**

One can say the whole construction of BiP is set up as a platform to accommodate the exchange between making and reflection as a communal activity and site of production, as a space in which the division of labour, the mode of production as ordered by capitalism is first staged and secondly contested. The principle of Benjamin's ideas on the role of language and translation as the general mode of communication, to be understood as egalitarian mode of interaction, as formulated in *On Language* and in *The Task of the Translator*, was transposed to the wider scale of the conference in total. It does so by providing space for different disciplines and bringing these, and the already existing hybrids between them, together to interact on the same platform. This pairing of adapting the academic format with the mobilisation of aesthetics, was the architectural axis that formed BiP's platform-idea of production. A circular rotation between aesthetics and art was set up. As shown by the last two examples, this intimate relation between art and aesthetics was regarded as mutually informing, reciprocal and non-hierarchical.



It is important to note here that the platform itself emerged processual, rather than as a conceptual or methodological prefigured format functioning within the system it aims to dislocate itself from. Once the idea to hold a conference in Palestine took hold, after a suggestion to do so was rejected by the official Benjamin Association, the formation of the Benjamin in Palestine conference took off in an organic and networked fashion, fuelled by the support that came from a divergent and wide circle of fellow-practitioners in the cultural field. Coming from and informed by the field of academia, education, curating as well as from the arts, the program was decided, venues and partners organized, and a call for contributions and participation was issued. So, there was no pre-conceived conceptual theme, or idea of the outcome of the structure, no ends, to which it would serve. After the call was issued, no further curatorial guidelines were applied and everyone interested was admitted to present at the conference. The emphasis on the more integral connectedness between art and aesthetics followed from the circle of those involved themselves.<sup>161</sup> This again refers back to the importance of the notion of the generality of language that Benjamin identifies as the basic notion of communication, and also the generative function of the art-aesthetics exchange as radical egalitarian political means by Rancière, which was taken up as the premise of the set-up. Yet as a coherent program and platform it provided for a form that shields, and that houses the potential of contingency. Importantly, this structural openness also provides for the space in which a direct political address, here the direct address of the political situation in Palestine, becomes possible. The politics of production is addressed through the space of interaction itself. The total openness in artistic production – the *indeterminacy* as defined by Suhail Malik in the VAM chapter – becomes a means rather than an end, and is the meta-political agency of BiP as platform operationalised.<sup>162</sup> The allegiance to the underrepresented in the politics of aesthetics – as is the case with the Palestinians – is both in itself expressed as principle and by the choice of location.

Coming back to the questions and task laid out by Armen Avanesian as to what form artistic production must address in order to be relevant in this time, BiP manages to unite issues of interdisciplinarity and the organization of labour as a form of platform-production into a politics of aesthetics and of production. To quote Avanesian:

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<sup>161</sup> Private correspondence Sami Khatib and Yazan Khalidi

<sup>162</sup> Malik and Phillips argue that when art and politics are taken as comparable, the distinct operation of aesthetic-art disappears, and aesthetic-art becomes politics.

Suhail Malik and Andrea Phillips, *The Wrong of Contemporary Art: Aesthetics and Political Indeterminacy*. In: Paul Bowman and Richard Stamp, eds. *Reading Rancière: Critical Dissensus*. London: Continuum, pp.118.

Aesthetic form and politics are therefore related to each other in at least two ways. First, the reason for, and the necessity of, a political discussion of form lies in the fact that it is through form that art appears connected to areas generally understood as non-artistic. This is also why a politics of seeing has been proposed time and again with formalist arguments. In the discussion of form, not only do aesthetic questions and themes intermix with epistemological ones, they also mix with political ones.<sup>163</sup>

As I have laid out, the architecture of the conference shapes the ambition to a different kind of production as such, and it is specifically structured to undercut the division of labour, especially with the role of the intellectual and academic in mind, who in the vein of Benjamin's *Author as Producer*, becomes directly drawn in production in the interaction between making, reflection and participation. This was done with the specific characteristics of academic production in mind, as was exemplified by the presentation by Buck-Morss and the role of Khatib. With the close-reading workshops, academic production, in the form of Benjamin's texts, was mobilized and used to create a temporal sociality through the direct and recursive exchange between art and aesthetics. Text is treated not solely as material and information to be delved for its political-historical, philosophical or literary meaning, as academic meaning. It is rather the medium and material through which a socio-communal experience can be achieved, in its processing. Equally, aesthetics is presented in conjunction with the object on which it reflects, but in a setting of equivalence and in the presence of, by which the act of reflection becomes instantly tied to the object of reflection, as in the Žižek - Aloni setting. Bach's presentation interrupted the assumed logic of the academic toolkit, recursively adding the necessity of sensible confirmation to academic aesthetic discourse. Initially coming from the side of the academic, it also, in the end, also reflects on the dissolution of the demarcation between art, theory and form of production, not only as an end to the ongoing debate and question of the autonomy of art, but also to a start of a form of politics. This where the notion of the transdisciplinary is not intended as an empty definition but as a necessity stemming from the need of a politics on the work floor and phrased out of the necessity of communication.

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<sup>163</sup> Armen Avanesian, *Aesthetics of Form Revisited*, in *Aesthetics and Contemporary Art*, eds. Armen Avanesian and Luke Skrebowski, Sternberg Press, 2011, p. 45

## *Time*

The *homogeneous empty time* that Benjamin speaks of, as the time and history ordered by capitalism, was undercut not only in the different elements of the conference, as in the close reading groups or in the separate presentations, but by the totality of the conference. The time produced in the interactions, is a different time than that regulated by the parameterization of the managerial neoliberal order. The division of labour was undercut by the direct and laborious negotiations of epistemes between the different categories of participants, which produces its own time and history. The same happened in the keynote presentation of the academic setting by Buck-Morss. This set-up organized a circulation between the positions and fields involved – through the recursive activation of language and social interaction – in which the difference between production and participation was short-circuited. This stands in contrast with the mode of interaction that we find in the *postconceptual condition*, the system of art production as described by Peter Osborne (see Introduction), the organization of which is structured mostly through conceptual communication that, when recursive activation of social interactions is not built in into its system, remains inert and thus aligned to the neoliberal order. By actually providing an overview of the different forms of exchanges in the mode of production that we have now, and mobilizing these in a more sovereign, dialogical and recursive manner, both the condition that we find ourselves in is demonstrated, as well as the possibility to socially mobilize against it. Here we could go back to Benjamin's formulation that '*image is dialectics at a standstill*' and change it to 'the image of the sociality of interactions, presents a dialectics in constant motion'.

As I demonstrated in the close-reading of Buck-Morss' presentation, the demonstration of dismeasure – as the artistic moment – can be produced by theorists as well. Here authorship means the subjective account within the social context of production. This equally means that the task or function to do so, originally beholden to that of the artist – to demonstrate the dismeasure – belongs just as much to the organizer, theorist or the artist, as all are imbricated in the production of the conditions from which the artistic emerges, as the demonstration of the dismeasure. The author or author-function can be understood here as the organizing principle of the conference, personified by the organizing team. The organizing principle can therefore also be understood as that of the translator, as the principle of arranging the space of interaction, the exchange of fields, and the subject that is discussed, against the current mode of cognitive capitalist production. This principle organizes mutual interest as described in *The Author as Producer*, with *interest* understood in the broader sense

of organizing exchanges of epistemes and their economic substructures. This defines authorship, then, as the provider for the structure that allows a sociality to emerge, as a space of potentiality.



## Photo documentation

Benjamin in Palestine conference



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These images are the documentation of the Benjamin in Palestine Conference as described in chapter 5 Bridge / supplement, section 3.2 Benjamin in Palestine conference supplement *Photo-documentation*.

Images 1-6 are from the workshops held at the International Academy for Art Palestine, Ramallah.

Images 7-13 are from the conference Birzeit University in Bir-Zeit.



## Chapter 4 Rib

### Mirroring productivism

#### 1. Introduction: modes of production, Rib and context

In this chapter I will examine the artistic practice and working model of Rib, a project space for art, and how the practice proposed by Rib can be understood as a critique of existing institutional forms. Rib is a small, independent platform based in Rotterdam that organizes, produces and presents art. Rib enacts a different mode of artistic production that counters these forms. At Rib making, reflecting and presenting are organized more integrally than other institutional forms through which, as I will argue in this text, a critical institutional response against the division of labour is formulated. This division of labour under the current mode of production is, as I will lay out, characterized precisely by the problematic institutional separation of positions and functions: artist, curator and reflection. This text, like the other chapters of the thesis, will take as its point of departure the idea of the assembled author (artist-curator and reflective mediation) in artistic production, within the context and characteristics of contemporary capitalism in both its neoliberal and cognitive iterations. It takes the notion of the *scene* and of the relation between art and aesthetics as formulated by Rancière<sup>164</sup> as the basic formula for considering forms of labour in the arts as a fundamentally interdisciplinary interplay between all positions involved in production.

In order to situate Rib's way of working I will juxtapose Rib to one of Rotterdam's most prominent art institutions, Witte de With, Centre for Contemporary Art (hereafter WdW).<sup>165</sup> I take WdW as representative for institutional art presentation spaces. The choice of WdW must be understood in a twofold way. Firstly, WdW is in a general sense an institution that represents a division based on scale and size in the artistic field. As an example of one of the larger institutionalized forms of art production – WdW is one of the six institutes awarded a place in the state-supported infrastructure of art presentation spaces – it embodies many of the general traits that characterize contemporary art production. One of these traits, that of professionalization, will be looked at in detail in this chapter. This offers the possibility of a comparison with Rib's smaller operation, which allows me to analyse how

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<sup>164</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis, Scenes From the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, Verso, London, 2017

<sup>165</sup> In 2020 Witte de With Centre for Contemporary Art was renamed as Kunstinstituut Melly. I will use the name Witte de With here, since that was the name of the institution in the period that is discussed.



scale plays into the structuring and composition of art institutions. Secondly, I will focus on traits specific to WdW's mode of production in the period 2008-2017 which were related to the increasing introduction of knowledge production as a theme/focus within the institutional organization. It roughly concerns the period of the directorships of Nicolaus Schafhausen (2006-2012) and Defne Ayas (2012-2017). It is this combination of scale and of the introduction of a mode of work that follows the general development of contemporary capitalism – the iteration of capitalism marked by the synthesis of creativity and cognitive labour in work – that offers the basis of the critical analysis concerning art production set out in this text. My claim is that Rib critically addresses, via the means of its own artistic practice, the manner in which artistic practices currently function under the hegemony of capitalism. Rib proposes, through how it operates and notably in how it organizes working and articulates artistic labour, a way to resist this hegemonic condition. This text reconstructs a certain historic constellation within the institutional composition of the field of art, focusing on the first years of Rib – 2016 to 2018 – which I read as a reaction by Rib to how the field of art functions. Since then Rib has developed and motivated its way of working and its mode of operation more independently. Equally there are developments in the field of bigger art institutions, concerning the mobilisation and understanding of knowledge production within artistic institutional forms, outside of the time period I am considering. This text is thus temporally demarcated in a specific time.

As indicated in the title, I will show how Rib adopts a strategy of *mirroring*, in order to counter the current form of production in the arts. I plan to do so by discussing some of its projects, formats and strategic positioning within the field of the arts. The main argument I will make is that the multidisciplinary form of institutional artistic production is critically vulnerable to the division of labour that presents itself in the condition of contemporary capitalism. This vulnerability allows capitalism to permeate the institutions and undercut their critical potential (both as model of production and as form of critique). This subsumption under capitalism is indicated by the term *productivism* in the title. This refers to the ways that processes in production under capitalism are inherently geared to maximize output, even if their intent was otherwise. In short, I will assess the efficacy of Rib's form of critique on how organizational coherence is effected in the current forms of institutional formation in the arts.

In the *Autonomy Project*, *Van Abbemuseum* chapter, the issue discussed was that of how the site of knowledge production is active in the scene of artistic production. In the

*Benjamin in Palestine* chapter the issue was how the interdisciplinary mode of labour was approached through the field of academia. In this chapter I will focus on the configuration of institutional forms within the artistic field, and for that I will take Rib as an exemplary case in which, notably, the issues of interdisciplinarity and the notion of ‘work’ as an integrated totality and as a form of artistic practice – as a form of *curating at large*<sup>166</sup> – is articulated in opposition to its bigger institutional counterparts. The two scales and forms of institutional formation, respectively Rib and WdW, will be considered in a dialogical sense for how labour and the role of curating is organized within them. In addition, the role of text – as the crucial form of communication in production – shaping this organisation, will be discussed. From this arises the necessity to consider art production from an *infrastructural* angle, a term coined by British educator and scholar Marina Vishmidt.<sup>167</sup> Taking an infrastructural angle means considering art production from the perspective of its set up and the inner relations within the chain of production. I extend on this definition by taking it to also include an engagement with how art production relates to funding and governmental policies; these constitute the wider conditional context through which art is framed and enabled.

#### *Context of production & material conditions*

Founded in 2015 and located in the south of Rotterdam, Rib is a small player in the institutional fabric of museums, medium-scale presentation spaces and small-scale ‘independent’ spaces.<sup>168</sup> The Netherlands has a long tradition of independent art spaces that constitute a field of alternative artistic production parallel to the more institutional forms of artistic production. Rib is housed in a former butchers’ shop, in a relatively poor area of Rotterdam. Rib, like many more artists, small galleries and creative initiatives, settled here because of cheaper rent and house prices, though the effects of gentrification can increasingly be felt. Rib was founded by artist Maziar Afrassiabi, who acts as the programme director and who is solely responsible for the overall conceptualisation of Rib’s working model. Rib works with a regular graphic designer; and works with a set of volunteers and interns who receive

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<sup>166</sup> *Curating at large* is borrowed from the conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth. It’s a term he used to describe the activities of curator-gallerist-publicist Seth Siegelaub with, meaning a comprehensive approach in artistic production covering its multiple aspects: production of art, its dissemination and its discourse.

Joseph Kosuth, *Art After Philosophy*, in Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, MIT Press, 1999, p.177

<sup>167</sup> Marina Vishmidt In *Beneath the Atelier, the Desert: Critique, Institutional and Infrastructural*, in Marion von Osten: *Once We Were Artists (A BAK Critical Reader in Artists’ Practice)* Eds. Tom Holert, Maria Hlavajova, Valiz/BAK Amsterdam and Utrecht, 2017, p.218

<sup>168</sup> See Rib’s website: <https://www.ribrib.nl> (accessed 12-09-2020)

fee according to regulations for unpaid work. Rib remunerates artists according to the guideline for artists' fees.<sup>169</sup>

As a small artist-run art initiative Rib finds itself on the 'independent' side of an ideological dispute of what can be defined as an institutional divide in most of the Western art world. This divide can be characterized as the issue of institutionalization itself, in which the ideological question of autonomy in artistic forms of organization is addressed differently depending on an institution's scale, funding, ability to claim institutionality and more. As independent artistic platforms are structured and organized on the basis of their own ideas, they are able to critique the prevailing mode of production. This idea of the function of art follows the famous Adornian notion of the arts as the form that dialectically frames and exposes that which obstructs art's free formation.<sup>170</sup> As Adorno writes:

Much more importantly, art becomes social by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position only as autonomous art. By crystallizing in itself as something unique to itself, rather than complying with existing social norms and qualifying as "socially useful," it criticizes society by merely existing, for which puritans of all stripes condemn it. There is nothing pure, nothing structured strictly according to its own immanent law, that does not implicitly criticize the debasement of a situation evolving in the direction of a total exchange society in which everything is heteronomously defined. Art's a-sociality is the determinate negation of a determinate society.

For Adorno, art's relation to society must be understood as a full and necessary separation of art into its own sphere, through which it is in dialogue with society. Arts' exposition of its autonomy constitutes its ontology. Translated into a Rancièrian frame, art concerns itself with that which interrupts the free exchange between *poiesis* and *aisthesis* as discussed in the thesis (REF Introduction).<sup>171</sup> Though most artist-run spaces, like Rib, are funded, or are variably reliant on governmental resources, the level of accountability towards

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<sup>169</sup> This guideline for artists' fees (*kunstenaarshonorarium* in Dutch), is a recently established guideline (2017) to counter the structural underpaid position of artists working in the field of art.

See: <https://kunstenaarshonorarium.nl/en/for-whom-by-whom/> (accessed 05-01-2021)

<sup>170</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, Continuum, London – New York, 1997, p.225-226

<sup>171</sup> For *aesthetics-art, the disestablishment of the account of the logos or the more general sensorium by the repartition of the sensible is assured not only by the 'free play' and 'gap' between poiesis and aisthesis but also by the absence of any narrative that binds these two aspects of the work to one another in any inevitable way.* Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus, On Politics and Aesthetics*, Continuum, London – New York, 2010, p.115-116

funding bodies and the economic politics and ideology these represent, is low. Some initiatives even desist from applying for funding and choose to be financially independent. Artistic autonomy, I argue, is therefore structurally in critical dialogue with its heteronomy; which means these organisations hold a political position per se. Through varying modes of attachment or detachment, the initiative positions itself in relation to governance and society. I take Rib's participation within the system of funding, and subsequent involvement with the issue of institutionalization, as an expression of active engagement with these conditions rather than as an Adornian evasion from the system and the economy it represents.

The bigger institutions, because these are amply funded, can provide a consistent and broad reaching output. At the same time, they are more bounded by and accountable to bureaucratic and governmental guidelines with regard to organisational structure and are, in general, held more accountable for their output than smaller scale institutions. Governmental criteria define the outcomes to which the institutions are held, and these outcomes extend to the level of professionalisation expected within the structure of the organization. These institutions must have a well-defined communications apparatus, financial administration, a developed human resources plan, and these institutions are also expected to perform public and educational functions. These are the components that are regarded as instrumental and necessary for proficient institutional performance. One can say there is (in the Dutch context) a gradually increasing level of accountability expected, and coupled to this an increased influence on production, relative to the scale of the institution in its wider field. Both the level of accountability and framework of work that leads to a stratification of labour, affect the general mode of production that the institution operates by. These conditions therefore, affect the self-commissioned function or aim of the institution.

As subjects of examination, I take 1) the combination of the conditional frame of governmental funding and 2) the political economy this contains and creates in regards to institutional formation, to consider how this conditional frame structures the artistic-political ideas concerning the institutional form of operation. In particular, I will discuss the role of knowledge production, as it simultaneously acts as a reflective and a productive element within institutional formations, but is equally at play within the frames of governmental and institutional accountability. This will be unpacked in the final section where I discuss the pivotal role *text* plays in the exchange between institutional art, governmental politics and the political economy.

Comparable Dutch institutions in the category of WdW are De Appel and Framer Framed in Amsterdam, and BAK in Utrecht. As well as being significant players in the cities in which they are based, and from which they receive a substantial part of their funding, these medium-sized institutions are also key players in the national framework of artistic production in the visual arts. In the Netherlands this governmental-political body is called the *BIS (Basis Infrastructuur)*, a subsidizing body that funds institutions every four years. Each round more institutions apply than can be awarded, which creates competition amongst institutions for funding. This category of artistic production – as is Rib – is labelled as ‘presentation institutions’ (presentatie-instellingen in Dutch); they are set up as platforms to promote visibility for the arts by organizing exhibitions, lectures and debates. A specific characteristic regarding their position is that they don’t have, preserve or acquire collections themselves.<sup>172</sup> As such their economies are different and set apart from those of the commercial market and those of museums whose economies are substantially dependent on their collections. Although there are many differences between these institutions and how they approach the organization of work, they all operate within an overall governmental frame that defines their scale, institutional form and subsequent funding. Smaller initiatives can and do apply for a place in the BIS, and this allows them to grow, but space is limited. Funding is allocated based on qualitative criteria and takes into consideration the proficiency, artistic relevance and plans of these institutions.<sup>173</sup> To give an idea of the levels of funding: in 2020, WdW received € 550,000 from the national BIS and € 450,000 from the City of Rotterdam; a funded total of € 1 million, whereas Rib and smaller initiatives, contend for small grants of up to € 80,000.

All these institutions are well connected to the global network of art presentation spaces, museums and *Kunsthallen*, and also the commercial market in which there is a great interchange between artists, curators and knowledge producers. They thus contribute to a globalized form of practice and discourse of art and take part in its economy of production. Though they are not-for-profit institutions, they – as validating nodes within in the chain – play a big part in establishing and confirming the value of art, curators and artists. They validate an artist’s artistic qualitative value – which mostly must be read as critical of the existing conditions – and this in turn increases the artist’s value in the commercial and semi-

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<sup>172</sup> See; <https://www.cultuursubsidie.nl/subsidies/beeldende-kunst/presentatie-instellingen> (accessed 24-10-2020.)

<sup>173</sup> <https://www.raadvoorcultuur.nl/bis-2021-2024> (accessed 24-08-2020)

commercial art market.<sup>174</sup> (REF PARSE text). This makes their position in the Adornian sense ambiguous: on the one hand these initiatives claim independence from the market, whilst at the same time they function as a form of endorsement and valuation for this market. The attributed quality of authentication at the same time constitutes the value of these initiatives and it confirms their position of importance in the chain of production. These markets are interlinked: the value of monetization and that of exposure are coupled. One can therefore say that all participants in the spectrum ranging from not-for-profit to commercial market, and from bigger or smaller scales of institutional artistic formations, are entangled in an overall field of artistic labour and operate in relation to each other.<sup>175</sup> This constellation and the economic logic of production it contains, is addressed by Rib.

As mentioned above, I claim that the mode of production of bigger institutions is affected by the structural feature of the stratification of labour. The smaller institutions on the other hand, because their operational staff is often limited to just a small number of people, sometimes even as few as one, can (or inevitably must) maintain a closer oversight on their programme and operation. Or, and this happens regularly, the staff themselves perform the tasks of communication, building, grant applications, curating, contact with artists, archiving and documenting and so on. Contact between those involved in the work that has to be done is thus direct. These smaller budgets for the initiatives are meant to cover the whole personnel and operational costs of the institution (rent, payment of work, materials etc.). Continuation of funding, on which the continuation of the institution depends, is uncertain and has to be applied for on regular intervals. The workers in the smaller initiatives therefore, in general, are (very) poorly salaried, have to do most of the work themselves and have to, for a big part, rely on volunteers. This results in precarious and poor working conditions; and it leads to a cycle of exhaustion and burn-out in this field. The lower level is, one can say, structurally underfunded and precarious.

While there are huge differences in the ways in which institutions are organized and have access to resources, these different forms of artistic production, as said, are tied together

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<sup>174</sup> The constellation of this imbricated economy is described in more detail in the essay I wrote for PARSE included in chapter 5.

See: <https://parsejournal.com/article/artistic-production-in-the-context-of-neoliberalism-autonomy-and-heteronomy-revisited-by-means-of-infrastructure-critique/> (accessed 2020-06-30.)

<sup>175</sup> See Lise Soskolne's (artist and W.A.G.E.-organizer) excellent article *On Merit* for an analysis of the interdependence between art's not-for-profit sector and the marketized form of artistic production  
See: <https://artanddebt.org/artist-as-debtor/> (accessed 15-07-2020)

in a supposedly shared idea of the market. Most funding bodies refer to the small-scale institutional segment as the breeding ground for the more professionalised market, for which the stimulus of funding actually is intended. Furthermore, stimulus is presented as offering space for experimentation for artists presenting apart from the constraints of the market. In so doing, these funding structures indicate that stimulus is needed not for not-for-profit artistic production as such, but for their potential to become self-sufficient and independent in the future.<sup>176</sup> This then comprises all involved: the institution as such and staff working in them, as well as artists who are commissioned by institutions to make exhibitions and who gain exposure from presenting there.

This sits in concordance with the overall vector at the heart of neoliberalism – and more or less in the general make up of contemporary politics – that aims for less state funding (austerity) and towards increased marketization of the cultural field (as it does towards education, healthcare and social arrangements, the other categories formerly covered by the welfare state). This is to be achieved through the further economization of these societal functions and the promotion of a mode of work that is emphatically entrepreneurial and rewards profit-driven structures. Simultaneously though, any prospect of success in the commercial market is extremely limited and most artists and cultural workers have to rely on multiple careers and forms of employment, and the not-for-profit segment of artistic production – financed by subsidies – is for them, a substantial part of the ‘market’ in terms of their income and promotion.<sup>177</sup> As British scholar Dave Beech explains, the idea of state funding for the arts, came out of the development of what we understand as the welfare state. After the patronage of feudality and church and with the emergence of democracies, the exceptional economy of art became the responsibility for democratic governance. Art in the welfare state is framed as a common and public good, which requires that conditions must be arranged for a mode of production that is not dictated by the rationale of the entrepreneurial market alone, which thus requires the arrangement of national support. Generally speaking,

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<sup>176</sup> See for example how the Mondriaan Fonds the principal grant giving body in the Netherlands, phrases its goal for subsidies: *All contributions reinforce the production or presentation of art and heritage from the Netherlands, both at home and abroad, where the market doesn't do this (yet): precisely there, art and heritage prove themselves as valuable havens of the imagination. The fund stimulates the public commitment and the development of these havens.*

See: <https://www.mondriaanfonds.nl/en/about/> (accessed 2018-11-01.)

<sup>177</sup> In the field research *De Hybride Kunstenaar* it is explained how the changing labour conditions for artists in Post-Fordism and neoliberalism lead to an increase of hybrid careers and professional pathways. Camiel van Winkel, Pascal Gielen, Koos Zwaan, *De Hybride Kunstenaar, De Organisatie van de Artistieke Praktijk in het Postindustriële Tijdperk*, Expertisecentrum Kunst en Vormgeving, AKV|St.Joost (Avans Hogeschool), 2012

we can say that politics on the right aims for a system that embraces the entrepreneurial market (art as capitalist commodity) and against the welfare state form while the left embraces the welfare state system. The question of art's funding and the issue of art as commodity, is a highly politically contested issue, that depends on what ideas prevail concerning the relation between state, market and production.<sup>178</sup>

Such a neoliberal idea in the economy of artistic production is in contrast to the ideas of many workers in small-scale and not-for-profit institutions. They work for the quality of artistic labour as such and often denounce or critique how artistic production functions in the economy at large. The labour that is invested by these workers (artists and personnel), regardless of their ideas, is subsumed under the political economy of austerity and the commodification of art in which the system of funding is imbricated. Seen this way this labour, I argue, expresses how the workers find themselves ambiguously imbricated within the whole infrastructure of artistic production, which already implies a political idea towards a 'market' and the arrangement of material and working conditions towards such a market (including funding), and the tensions this provokes. The organization of labour, *work in totality*, then becomes the object of critique against the prevailing order of labour conditions and political economy within which they sit. This enhanced notion of work – the critical co-optation of work in initiatives and institutions – can be seen therefore as a 'performance of work', as a living critique, I claim, in accordance with the Adornian idea of the criticality of art in relation to society.<sup>179</sup>

A common trait further regarding the place small-scale institutions occupy in the market, apart from their role in the formation of the artwork as commodity, is how they function within the fabric of the economy of city planning, in which they are instrumental in policies of gentrification. Reduced rent is usually offered as a temporary arrangement after which market prices are charged. As a result, artists are increasingly unable to uphold their practices because of increased rent and cost of living. This means that the exceptional economy of artistic production which requires support, collides with the politically ordered

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<sup>178</sup> Dave Beech, *Incomplete Decommodification: Art, State Subsidy and Welfare Economics*, PARSE, Sweden, Issue2, *The Value of Contemporary Art*, 2015

See: <https://parsejournal.com/article/incomplete-decommodification/> (accessed 27-10-2020)

<sup>179</sup> <sup>179</sup> The notion of work I propose as critical and comprehensive notion is described in more detail in the essay I wrote for PARSE.

Jack Segbars, see: <https://parsejournal.com/article/artistic-production-in-the-context-of-neoliberalism-autonomy-and-heteronomy-revisited-by-means-of-infrastructural-critique/> (accessed 2020-06-30.)



economy by which it is both sustained and exploited.<sup>180</sup> This presents us with a wider context concerning their position in regard to the politics of the cultural infrastructure. For an in-depth insight into the link between the criticality that the independent and not-for-profit art segment produces and the monetized art market, see the analyses of artist and researcher Gregory Sholette<sup>181</sup> and of artist and activist Lise Soskolne, founder of art-labour-advocacy organization W.A.G.E.,<sup>182</sup> or my own analysis,<sup>183</sup> where the different ideas of values simultaneously at work within the field of art production, and subsequent tensions, are observed. (see *Parse* text in Documentation)

*The scene as a field of production.*

The tensions, mentioned above, become very clear and accentuated, I claim, in the development of institutional formations (presentation spaces, biennales and non-commercial museums for contemporary art) in which productive, reflective and distributive functions are integrated. Bigger and midsize institutions have in fact become more complete, by the inhouse production of reflection, debate, symposia and critical theory. Reflexivity in the forms of critical reading of its archive, research exhibitions and trajectories, and the production of discourse are presented and communicated as institutional artistic output. This is mostly done through a hybrid form of promotional communication and critical production, which counts as productive output. The incorporation of knowledge production that organizes its own reflexivity and mode of meaning-production, extending the institution's aesthetic toolkit and shaping its own reception, leads to a potentially greater autonomy and institutional ambition. Through this integrated combination of the presentations of art and reflection, their

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<sup>180</sup> Quite often housing corporations, or official governmental arrangements of cities themselves (Broedplaatsen), provide for temporary lower housing-costs. Favoured for their cultural value, they act as frontrunners in gentrification-processes, attracting wealthier citizens to the areas in which they are located. These arrangements for lower housing costs are temporary though, with the idea that, as businesses, they have to conform to real-market costs. At the same time the stress of increased costs – while being not-for-profit initiatives -, makes their existence structurally precarious.

<sup>181</sup> As Gregory Sholette observes, there is a discord between the art-market, the economy in general and those wanting to work in it, leading to an oversupply of artists. Which means there is a structural mismatch between the economy at large and the idea of cultural work and the way this is formatted within the cultural infrastructure. Gregory Sholette, *Dark Matter, Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture*, Pluto Press, New York, US, 2011

<sup>182</sup> W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy)  
See <https://wageforwork.com/home> (accessed 2018-11-05.)

<sup>183</sup> This is the rationale how I argue the art advocacy of W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy) to be an artistic form of labour, as 'a performance of work'.  
Jack Segbars, see: <https://parsejournal.com/article/artistic-production-in-the-context-of-neoliberalism-autonomy-and-heteronomy-revisited-by-means-of-infrastructural-critique/> (accessed 2020-06-30.)

potential as platforms is seemingly enhanced.<sup>184</sup> These adaptations of a more comprehensive idea of production, comprising that of discourse production as well, can in part be retraced to the effectuation of a legacy formulated in conceptual art, where the aspects of mediation, distribution and of information dissemination are taken up, in a binding form of artistic production. This institutional artistic form could in a sense be seen as an attempt at the institutional realization of that artistic ambition. In such an expanded form of production these functions of mediation, distribution and of information dissemination need to become institutionally and artistically coherent, this also means that the wider realm of positions involved in production become of importance: the director, curator, communications department, archival functions and board are all and equally involved in shaping institutional production. The history of artists' experimentations with production as issue of collective and (semi)institutional organization, dates from early on in the modern epoch of art, starting with the Russian avant-garde as attempts to synthesize art and life, think for instance the group UNOVIS which even rivalled the political party as source of political design, founded in 1920 and lead by Russian artist Malevich<sup>185</sup> It is an artistic ambition that continues to be tested for its organisational realization and runs as a red thread in art history parallel to the history of art based on the works of singular artists. Think for instance of Joseph Beuys' efforts in establishing his own alternative educational platform at the art academy Düsseldorf Germany, the art collective General Idea in which collective work and especially media-oriented art production were combined, American artist Donald Judd, one of conceptual art's frontrunners, who combines archival and educational projects in a famed multi-disciplinary complex in Marfa, Texas, US, the Black Mountain College, the American art college that developed a holistic and anti-authoritarian style of teaching and that attracted many famous artist to teach or more recently the efforts of Cuban artist Tania Bruguera.<sup>186</sup> These examples, diversely oriented in their political allegiances and how they tie into economies of production,

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<sup>184</sup> See for instance the introduction of the Venice Biennale 2013 by curator Massimiliano Gioni in which he states: "*Blurring the line between professional artists and amateurs, outsiders and insiders, the exhibition takes an anthropological approach to the study of images, focusing in particular on the realms of the imaginary and the functions of the imagination.*"

See: <https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2013/introduction-massimiliano-gioni>

<sup>185</sup> Philosopher and historian Susan Buck-Morss explains in reading UNOVIS role in 1920, how in the early days of the Russian revolution art and politics, art and labour were considered joint forces striving for the communist ideal.

Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe. The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*, the MIT Press, Massachusetts USA, 2000, p.55

<sup>186</sup> In Tania Bruguera's practice educational, political, activist and artistic considerations and forms intermingle. See the website of Tania Bruguera:

<http://www.taniabruquera.com/cms/395-0-Artist+Statement.htm> (accessed 05-01-2021)

are characterised by a critique of capitalism and as the commodity status of production. This double art history and the relevance of the non-marketized status of art is reflected equally in the character of presentation institutions and the rationale of funding for it, as non-commodity based artistic production.

However, in the present situation, with the incorporation of critical and discourse production as aesthetics production, the artistic field becomes imbricated with the fields of academia and knowledge production and their subsequent economies of circulation. And as also described in the BiP chapter: the working conditions in the field of academia equally suffer from this mutual subsumption under neoliberalism. In addition to these entanglements, there are the structural effects on the institution that result from the demands set by professionalisation, in which the overarching governmental demands are captured. The different functions in production that make up the institutional organisation: the director, curator, communications department, archival functions, board, critical and theoretical reflection and the discursive programmes, though bound by a unified institutional commission, pass through different sets of objectives and criteria belonging to different modes of production and evaluation.<sup>187</sup> The complex interplay between externally determined accountabilities and internalized ones, results in a total set of accountabilities that multiply and obfuscate rather than streamline and support. This means that not only epistemic differences pertaining to these fields need to be negotiated, following Luhmann's theory of communication I extensively described in the BiP chapter (REF BiP), but also that the economic contexts of each of these fields, and subsequent accountabilities, need to be taken in consideration in order to realize an institutional politics that can resist the politically-ordered economy of production we find ourselves in.

Pertaining to the problem of bridging epistemes and the role of the museum, I want to briefly mention the critique made by German philosopher and political theorist Jürgen Habermas here. With the introduction of critical and discourse production as artistic function, the museum stands the risk of overstepping its competence, Habermas warns. According to him such an ambition, to arrive at a new aesthetical framework, requires the input of all life's

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<sup>187</sup> In our bureaucratized societies, the different strata of production are structured through different sets of criteria aligned with different ends, designated to each stratum. This is how Dave Beech identifies the theories of Max Weber to effect art-production. Dave Beech, *Weberian Lessons: Art, pedagogy and managerialism*, in *Curating and the Educational Turn*, eds. Mick Wilson and Paul O'Neill, Open Editions/De Appel, 2010

domains (science, politics and law) to become complete. By setting up art and theory in an ordered aesthetic experience, and to see this as its cultural privilege, the museum stands the risk of becoming an authoritative spokesperson. This of course would thwart the emancipatory educational and representational function of art.<sup>188</sup> This critique points to the absolute necessity and task of organizing institutions in such a manner that they can accommodate the different domains and fields of knowledge and spectator without being directive.

As mentioned before, on the one hand, the expanded form extends the institution's autonomy by extending the institution's aesthetic toolkit and shaping its own reception. On the other hand, this autonomy remains conditional and tied to a wider frame of structures and dependencies (professionalisation, the internal differences pertaining to the variety of fields and the governmental frame of funding), which, if not properly negotiated, results in a weakening of autonomy. Arguably such a notion of the assembled character of art is susceptible to the division of labour, which is enhanced in the professionalized institutional form. Here the heteronomy of the political economy may interfere with the ambition of the institution. Its internal organization becomes the boundary of its claim to political action, whilst at the same time representing its accountability. This is then also where I argue institutions can be critiqued for their output.<sup>189</sup>

The way an art institution arranges its own organization of *poiesis* – *aesthesis* in regards to the meta-political ambition, becomes therefore of great importance in relation to the issue of a free politics of the institution. This ties the organization of institutions to the notion of the 'scene' as formulated by Jacques Rancière.<sup>190</sup> The 'scene' can be understood, as

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<sup>188</sup> In his analysis Habermas specifically criticizes postmodernism in which, he argues, *critique* is introduced as institutional function within artistic production without concerning itself adequately with the life of the spectator. He calls this *the false sublation of culture* through *the false sublation of art and philosophy*. Such function can therefore not be the sole privilege of the arts, nor can it be reclaimed by its institutions. An attempt to institutional recovery leads to a separation between museum and spectator (since it can only be partial), thwarting the function of education and representation through art.

Jürgen Habermas, *Modernity, an Unfinished Project*, in *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity: Critical Essays on The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, eds. Maurizio Passerin d'Entrèves and Seyla Benhabib, The MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 2009, pp.49-50.

<sup>189</sup> In the format of Contemporary Art-production as formulated by Peter Osborne in *Anywhere or not at all* (London: Verso, 2013), it is the amalgamation of the different functions in its totality: curating, distribution, the institutional platform, discursivity and -according to me- theory, that acts as author-producer.

<sup>190</sup> In *The Politics of Art* an interview with Jacques Rancière on the occasion of his publication *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, Verso, London, 2017, he describes art not as medium-specific and autonomous realm but as a form of heteronomous aesthetics-formation.

I argue, as the wider assemblage of positions and fields involved in cultural production, which, as Rancière suggests, contribute not only to the enabling of the works but also to the aesthetics of those encountering the work *as community*. As Rancière explains:

Like researchers, artists construct the stages where the manifestation and effect of their skills are exhibited, rendered uncertain in the terms of the new idiom that conveys a new intellectual adventure. The effect of the idiom cannot be anticipated. It requires spectators who play the role of active interpreters, who develop their own translation in order to appropriate the ‘story’ and make it their own story. An emancipated community is a community of narrators and translators.<sup>191</sup>

As British art historian and critic Claire Bishop explains, this means that the emphasis lies not with the presumed autonomy of the artwork but with the autonomy of the experience of art. The site of the encounter acts as the communal site of aesthetic exchange, and thus a site of political exchange in how the world is perceived: the space of dissensus.<sup>192</sup> This shifts the task of the institution from the artworks that need to be presented to the organization of the encounter, to the accommodation of the reception and to the setting of the conditions for the spectator as active and autonomous interpreter. How this ‘scene’ is internally and infrastructurally organized then, providing for these conditions that warrant the autonomy of experience, and becomes both a politics of organization and an organization of politics. If we see art as what emerges in a processual manner *and* via the social relations involved (as contained in Rancière’s idea of art, which extends on the core of Romantic thought and is an idea shared by Walter Benjamin as well), then the cycle and the conditions of communication between these positions becomes pivotal. This is especially the case when most of the notions of the artistic object – that usually remain unauthored as ‘projects’ – are transported along in the chain of institutional artistic production, from artist, to curator to institution as a whole as Peter Osborne observes. In this constellation of production accountability (in the sense of traceable authorship) is obfuscated. The question of institutional organization becomes even more politically pressing if we also consider Rancière’s notion of radical equality, which defines equality as the principled political demand of full access to processes of cultural formation, to be valid. Institutions would need to be structured in such a manner as to be able

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<sup>191</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London/New York: Verso, 2011), p. 22.

<sup>192</sup> Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, London/New York: Verso, 2012, p. 27

to accommodate the contingent exchange of those wanting to participate in a communal effort to do so. Regimes of national funding for the arts, distribution of resources and the conditional effects these have on the organisation (institutional curation and mediation) of artistic production (and the general effects on cultural production) are therefore politically entangled. The tension that is evoked through this is the arc along which I examine Rib and Witte de With.

*Infrastructural Critique approach / work, as political-aesthetic object*

The artistic apparatus in its totality, as an infrastructural coherence, is defined by British educator and scholar Marina Vishmidt as Infrastructural Critique. Rather than focussing on the institution as an end form of artistic production, as Institutional Critique did, Infrastructural Critique aims to look at the conditions and processes from which the institution emerges.<sup>193</sup> Infrastructural Critique emphasizes the ‘what occurs’ in a material, temporal and spatial fashion and takes into account the social relations in which labour relations and value exchanges are captured and expressed. Vishmidt’s approach herein focusses on the material aspects of the organization of infrastructure that carries the relations that occur, instead of observing these as mere abstractions governing the processes in production.<sup>194</sup> The post-conceptual analysis postulated by Osborne here becomes grounded in the concreteness of social relations and factuality of interactions in artistic production. Where Vishmidt applies the notion of an infrastructural critique foremost as a means to demarcate a place for art in its institutional context and heteronomy of conditions, and remains concerned with the artistic field itself, I propose an extension to this approach. I argue that the infrastructure of art production must be understood in an expanded fashion as it is the conditional ground from which art emerges. Authorship in the artistic apparatus today is an assemblage that is imbricated in a wider sphere of production, and is emphatically both material and embodied. The notion of authorship, as described by Vishmidt as a means to map the modes of valorisation that occur between different positions, can also serve to trace these processes (and accountability) in a wider sense. This needs to be extended to the broader set up of art production and its relations to governance and politics, which in no small part shape its form.

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<sup>193</sup> Marina Vishmidt In *Beneath the Atelier, the Desert: Critique, Institutional and Infrastructural*, quote “A move to infrastructural critique represents an attempt to mediate some of the closures of this position both discursively and pragmatically, with infrastructure focusing the link between the material and ideological conditions of the institution of art in a way that de-centres rather than affirms it.” In *Marion von Osten: Once We Were Artists (A BAK Critical Reader in Artists’ Practice)* Eds. Tom Holert, Maria Hlavajova, Valiz/BAK, 2017

<sup>194</sup> That also means a shift away from communicating and using theory as abstract knowledge in the cycle of production, but rather handling theory for how it functions socially.

From this follows that the institution of art, in a more general and schematic sense, as the sum of its functions, can thus be critically considered as an ‘object’ under scrutiny.<sup>195</sup>

In their book *Reproducing Autonomy, Work, Money, Crisis, and Contemporary Art* Vishmidt, together with German professor of art theory Kerstin Stakemeier, argue that ‘work’ has become the pivotal subject of inquiry and the focus of artistic attention.<sup>196</sup> Since the conditions for the production of meaning in art are determined and subsumed by capitalism, the conditions through which this control of work are defined becomes the object of aesthetical-political contestation. Their argument follows the rationale that it is only there, in the recognition of the generality of subsumption, that a remaining notion and potential of reclamation and recovery of a life from capitalism is to be re-imagined. The activity of work, and a critical resistance against the systems of control over its conditions, becomes the locus of a remaining notion of autonomy. The complex conditions of production that accommodate commodification then become art’s basic object of concern and its point of departure. In reading Italian philosopher and politician Mario Tronti, an important figure in the Italian Workerism (operaismo) movement, Stakemeijer and Vishmidt argue that autonomy in capitalism can only be identified from within the determination of labour conditions. (REF PARSE) I quote:

Where Adorno locates autonomy in the realm of the aesthetic to construct a maximal distance from the reproductive brutalities of capital, Tronti argues that autonomy cannot be won at any distance from the production process but can be anticipated only as an autonomisation from within divided labour.<sup>197</sup>

They suggest here that it becomes impossible to consider artistic work without asserting the fact of its co-option by the complex that makes up capitalism. So in an artistic sense ‘work’ (or the potential to autonomously arrange conditions via the organization of production) becomes what needs to be wrested away from the current position art production finds itself within life under capitalism. This means, I argue, that the function of the Adornian object

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<sup>195</sup> This also means that a less defined ontology of art should be at the centre, as relations are interdependent so would a notion of art develop out of these relations and fields.

<sup>196</sup> Kerstin Stakemeier & Marina Vishmidt in *Reproducing Autonomy, Work, Money, Crisis, and Contemporary Art* theorize the notion of ‘work’ as the base object in artistic production under cognitive capitalism, and they lay out a strong foundation to the idea of solidarity between all sort of work as precarious condition, under capitalist subsumption. Mute Publishing 2016, London/Berlin

<sup>197</sup> Ibid, p.28.

shifts to the realm of the organization or structure that shapes ‘work’. Or, it re-orientates the ‘objects’ produced in art; they become not indications or expressions of estrangement (or in Paolo Virno’s terminology: *dismeasure*), but rather are produced within an inherently estranged or entangled condition.<sup>198</sup> In short: since capitalism manages even the criticality of any artistic production – under the semblance of autonomy – under its own regime of production, which is in turn aggravated by the imposed political economy of austerity, this regime becomes the base ‘object’ of critical address. This then is where an infrastructural critique differs from Institutional Critique. The latter remained focussed on the site of art production only (for which the art institution was synonymous) whereas it is the economy at large and its institutions, of which the artistic field is but a subfield, that dictates all of life. An infrastructural approach therefore avoids the entrapment of self-referentiality, as it is not limited to nor focussed solely on itself: the field of art is the subject of scrutiny. It also allows us to define ‘institution’ in a more fluent and contingent fashion, since in an infrastructural sense the different institutions and positions that make up the infrastructure are interdependent.<sup>199</sup> Following the notion of the infrastructure *work*, as I propose, can be understood in an infrastructurally expanded sense and as part of a wider entanglement (including the fields of governance and politics). As argued before *work* can be conceived as a form of performance of *critique*, as the container that captures the social relations in it and the conditions by which it is shaped.

As curating and text writing are the symptomatic elements of communication and of the division of labour in cognitive capitalism, these are the quintessential elements to be considered in regards to the notion of ‘work’ in art production. These aspects therefore are specifically addressed in Rib’s and WdW’s modes of production. In the following I will analyse a number of Rib’s projects with such an infrastructural approach in mind, and I will contrast them with the more institutionally customary mode of production as observed at WdW in the period 2008-2017. The organization of work was at the forefront of conceptual art of the 1960’s and 1970’s as much as now. I consider the institutional contemporary form a continuation of that legacy, and as the aspects of communication and of institutional form of organization are mobilized and revisited in some of Rib’s projects, I will use examples from this legacy to illustrate this historical development.

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid

<sup>199</sup> The nodal points where these positions and institutions meet: communication within the infrastructure therefore becomes the focal point of attention.



## 2 Rib: program, time and space, conventions, curating platform

The general mode that defines Rib's operation is a mix of interrelated forms. There are conventional presentations that follow the temporal conventions of the white cube, programmed in the commonly adopted timeframe of 6 weeks cycles. Equally there are programmes that have a longer arc and that happen over months and even years. Longer and shorter projects are programmed simultaneously and woven into a diverse fabric of temporal lines. Within this programming there is a consistent line and recurring element of cooperation or hosting involved. The curatorial position is handed over to the invitee – who may be a student, publisher, curator or artist – who can use the space as they wish, or the work presented results from a request to participate in a collective installation. Sometimes the programming is a continuation of an earlier cooperation in which the roles of curating, participation and of production were already tested, as is the case with Rib's cooperation with Sam Basu.<sup>200</sup> Sometimes the project involves the introduction of a complete body of work, including its prior curatorial framework, as in the appropriation of the Hans Walgenbach archive and the *Art by Telephone*-catalogue. It is this project that I will focus on further, in order to discuss the relevance of a notion of curating in an expanded sense.

In the exhibition *Walgenbach, Faysal, Isabelle, Micha, Robin Hood and 100,000 past exhibitions* at Rib (May-July 2017) the topic of curating was explored in depth. Three contemporary artists were invited to take as their starting point the collection of invitations sent to Hans Walgenbach, former director of Centrum Visual Arts, Rotterdam. Walgenbach received the invitations over the course of the years he was the director of the city's institution. These invitations are the archival proof of work done, and are the material embodiment of professional mediation between the field of artistic workers and the head and manager of an institution. A manager in our times can be said to act as the curator analogous to the curator in the field of art: they select, contextualize and re-distribute work. The collection itself is the archive of this function, and because this is a selection, a doubling of curatorial work occurs. By asking three new 'workers' – a curatorial gesture in itself – to process and select from this archive, the curatorship of cultural production is multiplied. The project also links the fields of governance and of the arts into a general field of production in

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<sup>200</sup> As in the ongoing and continued cooperation with Sam Basu head of *Treignac Projet* for example. This is an art-residency space in France organised by Basu with whom Afrassiabi has been involved in projects before with. Both can therefore be seen as hybrid between organizer, artist and participant. See: <http://www.treignacprojet.org/artistsprogram/ArtistsFrameset.html> (accessed 29-08-2020)

which the act of curating traverses both. In so doing, the in- or exclusionary effects of this curatorial function, in overproduction, become blurred or irrelevant. The cyclical responses of curating as such, which span the fields of governance and art, are the subject of this work.

Another example of Rib's modus operandi is that Rib hosts other initiatives, as is the case with *Books at Rib*. The mobile bookstore by Australian artist Matt Hinkley is inserted as mini-platform within Rib, and performs at regular intervals. In contrast to the conventionally guarded division between artist, director and curator in the professional field of art, Afrassiabi (as director) also sometimes partakes in both exhibitions and in discursive presentations, and is engaged in projects with artists, blurring the line between organizer and artist. So too, he also extends the position of the director – partially – to artists, in inviting artists to contribute to decisions around programming.

*Time and space, Ghost Stories of the British Museum (2018)*

One long-term project that was realized as a co-production and was unconventional in presentation format, is *Ghost Stories of the British Museum*. Initiated by British writer and researcher Francis Gooding and British artist Noah Angell, this research project's results were shown at regular intervals over a period of a year at Rib. The project researches the strange and supernatural, even ghostly (hence the title) phenomena that employees of the British Museum (stewards and other staff) experienced during their work guarding the halls, cleaning and conducting maintenance work in the museum. The project will be concluded as a publication rather than a definitive sculptural form or installation. The documentation of the steps in the research serves as material for this ongoing artistic work. The accounts of these sightings, in the form of interviews with these employees, were presented as audio-works at Rib. As it was the lower-waged and more precarious workers that were approached for these interviews, the project provides a counter-account, to the official and canonized art history the British Museum was founded to present and uphold. This official history is normally established and communicated by the official directorate, art historical department and curators of the museum. The accounts of these workers produce a parallel alternative history, presented here within the form of an artwork. Their history is established through the time and work in the vicinity of art history's official artefacts, and in these objects' service. These are the artworks that constitute the material body of official art history, collected and presented in the museum. The work invested by these labourers, as abstract labour performed in the service of a museum that is the accepted informal author of the nation's grand narrative

becomes the source of a new narrative. The British Museum is, after all, the privileged custodian of the British nation's cultural canon, akin to the Rijksmuseum in the Netherlands. The workers' accounts of the supernatural, ghostly manifestations that were used to construct this new narrative in *Ghost Stories of the British Museum*, are channeled through official, canonical artefacts. Through this, the project points to the ambiguous character of history as such, and its ability, if not necessity, to be contested. The work that was originally performed by these labourers in service of a host or master that maintains the museum's operation and thereby the museum's authorial position, is reclaimed into an alternative history or account that challenges the museum's claim on history by virtue of existing in the world. It is an artistic strategy reminiscent of Institutional Critique's artists like Hans Haacke or Andrea Fraser, who instrumentalize and appropriate the actual sites of cultural production to critically reflect on the conditions of these sites, and question the rationale leading to their hegemonic authority and the ideology to be found under these manifestations of authority.<sup>201</sup>

Channeled through an artistic project, these originally non-artistic voices become artistically expressive, eroding the difference between labour and art. At the same time the (societally) perceived insignificance of maintenance- or service-work here is elevated and included as cultural and art production work, emancipating and giving authorship to the class that originally is without voice. Here though, it is not so much that an alternative to the official history is sought, nor is the project aiming to supplant its art historical, curatorial and institutional authorship. Rather it seeks to destabilize such a fixation of singular authorship of history at all. The ghostly and supernatural nature of the accounts cause an unstable effect of estrangement and dislocation. The scope of authorships in the production, involving Rib, the museum workers and the artists<sup>202</sup>, and the ambiguous final form of the project, undercut the possibility that the exhibited presentation can become a stable, commodifiable cultural or historical artifact. It is not commodifiable within the current market of exchange, in which art objects function as rare commodities that can unequivocally be attributed to an artist as author. The production of *Ghost Stories of the British Museum* as a total project, by virtue of

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<sup>201</sup> See for example Hans Haacke's work *MomaPoll*, 1970 where plexiglass containers acted as ballot boxes on the issue of the Vietnam war and the politics of Governor Nelson Rockefeller, founder of the museum. This way the sculptural quality of the and site of the museum (MoMa, New York) were turned into modes of public artistic-political inquiry. Or Andrea Fraser's video *Little Frank and His Carp*, 2001, which is situated in the Bilbao Guggenheim Museum where Fraser can be seen performing a parodying critique on the Guggenheim's mode of communication, and how this is related to its expansion as global museum franchise and the architectural shape this takes.

<sup>202</sup> See: <https://www.archive.ribrib.nl/events/opening-ghost-stories-of-the-british-museum> (accessed 03-03-2021)

its form as work of art, has an unstable status. It is not embedded in a gallery setting or an art institution nor printed by a renowned publishing house. Tenderbooks, where the publication was published, is a small enterprise, and the publication can be cheaply purchased. This publication was independently produced – with minimal resources – by Francis Gooding and Noah Angell themselves. As said before, its artistic form is to capture and document the research, the presentations and its unfolding over time, and to follow the logic of the project’s making process.<sup>203</sup> As a co-producer Rib acted as a platform for the production and the presentation, and so it participated in the unfolding of this *work* of art. The processual and integral unfolding is stressed as part of and as the character of the work, including the publication. Though it is authored (by a collection of authors), it does not function in the art market as a commodity. Rather, it is the product of communal labour, representing and documenting the time of its making. This is an example of how Rib takes a different approach within the field of art, in which it is not solely oriented on internal circles of production and display, but aims for a broader and general address, accentuating the time of production and labour as de-commodified time.

The direct connection between the format of the publication and its broader function as part of the work itself, sets it apart from the practices of most art institutions that produce publications as part of their platforms (including WdW, who produce several publications each year). Mostly, these publications are catalogues of artist presentations within institutions, and act as extended production platforms that advocate both the institution and artist. In these, the division between the artist, institution and curatorial team is upheld and the artwork remains an artist’s authored commodity. See for instance, conceptual artist Willem de Rooij’s *Character is Fate: Piet Mondrian’s Horoscope* published in 2015 by WdW.<sup>204</sup> This publication, conceptualized by De Rooij, is a meticulous piece of research into Piet Mondrian’s horoscope of 1911, that pre-dates his ascendance as an artist. The publication was produced and conceptualized in conjunction with De Rooij’s installation at WdW, *Character is Fate* (Jan – Dec 2015), which also deals with Mondrian’s horoscope.<sup>205</sup> This installation is site specific, based on the spatial specifics of the WdW building. It is characteristic of De

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<sup>203</sup> Noah Angell and Francis Gooding, *Ghost Stories of the British Museum*, Tenderbooks, 2018  
See: <https://tenderbooks.co.uk/products/ghost-stories-of-the-british-museum-noah-angell-and-francis-gooding?variant=13597425303645> (accessed 30-08-2020)

<sup>204</sup> See: [https://www.fkawdw.nl/en/our\\_program/publications/character\\_is\\_fate\\_piet\\_mondrian\\_s\\_horoscope](https://www.fkawdw.nl/en/our_program/publications/character_is_fate_piet_mondrian_s_horoscope) (accessed 30-08-2020)

<sup>205</sup> See: [https://www.fkawdw.nl/en/our\\_program/exhibitions/character\\_is\\_fate](https://www.fkawdw.nl/en/our_program/exhibitions/character_is_fate) (accessed 30-08-2020)

Rooij's work, which are often site-specific installations commissioned by institutions. With the publication priced at the higher range of €30, it is, one can say aligned with the conventional price category of art catalogues. Though this is a complex conceptual production that taps into the dematerialization of the artwork, accentuated by separating the sculpture/installation and historic/textual compendium, problematizing the commodity-form as artistic critique, the overall project remains within the logic of the commodity form of the artwork as we have it in the field of art. This is also demonstrated by the fact that gallery Buchholz, who represent De Rooij commercially and are one of the foremost commercial galleries in the world, co-financed this book. This production connects WdW to the (perceived) most affluent echelons of the art world and their economy of production. What is of relevance to stress in this constellation, is that funding from the not-for-profit sector becomes injected into and entangled with the commercial market. Means intended for non-commodified production (WdW's resources acquired through funding) become deployed towards the marketized mode of production. Within this economy the artist is emphasized and recognized as the singular author of this conceptual installation artwork. In this arrangement the creative exceptionality of the artist is maintained and confirmed – De Rooij is the conceptual author and the one privileged to be best able to comment on and traverse the complexity of the art system. The critical singular quality of the author-artist establishes the monetary value of art: as captured through the figure of the artist, De Rooij and the value of his works. The address of the artwork furthermore is limited and remains firmly within the milieu of the arts: the publication is too expensive and distributed only through acknowledged artistic channels to become widely circulated; and it is tied content-wise to the installation. In brief, the rationale of the rare commodity is not contested. This aligns with the critique put forward in 1973 by American writer and art critic Lucy R. Lippard. As expert chronicler of the development of conceptual art – she coined the well-known phrase 'dematerialisation of art' – she observed that the ambition and efforts of many artists to arrive at a truly transdisciplinary expansion of art with social, scientific and academic disciplines, and related efforts at decommodification, were mostly failing. Her conclusion was that the artwork remains a commodity, confined to its own milieu. She however clearly identifies arts' ambition to escape the capitalist system and to connect to life in a more general sense. She also identifies the role of the art system itself – which has an interest in maintaining high prices despite the ambition of the work – as instrumental to this failure. Lippard writes:

Hopes that “conceptual art” would be able to avoid the general commercialization, the destructively “progressive” approach of modernism were for the most part unfounded. ... Three years later, the major conceptualists are selling work for substantial sums here and in Europe; they are represented by (and still more unexpected—showing in) the world’s most prestigious galleries. Clearly, whatever minor revolutions in communication have been achieved by the process of dematerializing the object (easily mailed work, catalogues and magazine pieces, primarily art that can be shown inexpensively and unobtrusively in infinite locations at one time), art and artist in a capitalist society remain luxuries... Conceptual art has not, however, as yet broken down the real barriers between the art context and those external disciplines—social, scientific, and academic—from which it draws sustenance.<sup>206</sup>

With the project *Ghost Stories of the British Museum* Rib tests what such a decommodified mode of artistic production could be. Rib has joined the recent surge in presence of the (semi-) independent publication as an extra-artistic platform and alternative to both conventional publishing and exhibiting models.<sup>207</sup> Since it has become practically feasible and cheap to produce and publish independently, independent publishing is able to address production issues that represent these issues of commodification in the economy at large. In independent publishing, forms of production experiment with de-locating, de-institutionalizing and questioning issues of authorship, and yet offer an objectifying distance as they are bound in a single, unifying form: a published object. This development has evolved from artistic practices of the 1960’s and 1970’s, like those of gallerist and collector Seth Siegelaub and American artist Lawrence Weiner. Both Siegelaub and Weiner were looking for new ways to produce and distribute ideas and art in order to escape the commodity aspect of art and the limitations of art’s milieu, and aimed through this escape to expand the notion of art to include and be integral part of daily life. The task at hand then becomes to find new pathways of artistic production and of distribution to reach new audiences. As independent publications are mostly modestly priced – as indeed is the *Ghost Stories* publication – they resist the hyper-commodification of the conventional marketed art commodity. They also escape from

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<sup>206</sup> Lucy Lippard, postface to *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object From 1966 to 1972*, Praeger, New York, 1973, pp. 263–264

<sup>207</sup> To name some of many: Mousse, After All, etc. In the Netherlands alone there has been a big expansion in recent years of independent initiatives or institutions that produce publications and in conjunction with exhibitions each other or separately and independently: Printroom, Publication House, Onomatopee, Walter, PietZwartInstitute, WdW Review or that focus on aesthetics, and the sociological and economical aspects of art production: Valiz, Octavo and MaHKUscript.

customary economic circulation as they most times have their own means of distribution (alternative book fairs or independent publishing houses). In general, one can say they find their own audience outside of the customary logic of the art market which does not define all parameters or objectives for their practice.

This mode of independent publishing has proven to be a productive model to address conflicting issues in artistic production in regard to the autonomy of self-determination of subjects and methodologies. These elements can be researched and experimented with through self-organized editing, selection and dissemination. Generally, these may contain equally, as described in the section about institutional formats, a set-up by which art and aesthetics exchange; text and critical commentary are elements of the art. By taking up production in a comprehensive (comprising most steps in production) and independent way, authorship becomes more autonomous. This form of artistic production is something that could be called *publication as platform and instrument of critique*. The publication in a sense becomes an alternative mode of production, an attempt to reclaim a notion of life as an artistic strategy, by appropriating the means of production we find in the contemporary bio-political condition: a critical 'documentation' to life as Boris Groys terms it.<sup>208</sup> Documentation has become an important artistic instrument and method, Groys claims, because it provides a means to contest the claim to life exerted by capitalist subsumption. Since capitalism dominates the means of production and shapes life, and turns it artificial as such, this bio-political artificiality can be reclaimed by means of narratives through documenting that provide for a new position and relation to the existing political and historical hierarchy. I argue that the Ghost Stories publication must be understood in such a way: as a means of reclaiming a life through documenting its (a life's) process of becoming. Groys writes:

Art documentation, by contrast, marks the attempt to use artistic media within art spaces to refer to life itself, that is, to a pure activity, to pure practice, to an artistic life, as it were, without presenting it directly. Art becomes a life form, whereas the artwork becomes non-art, a mere documentation of this life form. One could also say that art becomes biopolitical, because it begins to use artistic means to produce and document life as a pure activity. Indeed, art documentation as an art form could only develop under the conditions of today's biopolitical age, in which life itself has become the

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<sup>208</sup> Boris Groys *Art in the Age of Biopolitics*, in *Art Power*, 2008 MIT Press pp.54-55.

object of technical and artistic intervention. In this way, one is again confronted with the question of the relationship between art and life—and indeed in a completely new context, defined by the aspiration of today’s art to become life itself, not merely to depict life or to offer it art products.

In the case of *Ghost Stories of the British Museum* a different assessment of one’s place in history is arrived at through research of the historical narrative and, importantly, constructing a working arrangement through which to do so (the co-operation with the workers as subjects within the project). The arrangement and documentation of these processes provides a platform for a different subjectivity. Though publications do not escape commodification, and some publications intentionally play with this tension, they operate with a condensed scale of production in which the relation between idea and value is one of malleable and identifiable relations. As this form of publication commonly contains a mix of discursive text and theory as well as visual and literary art, as the material of critical mediation and aesthetics, it makes clear that the wider infrastructure of relations is of relevance in production as a whole. These different registers and voices are in dialogue, and partake in production rather than exist as an outcome of them, as singular artists’ artefacts mostly do. Seen this way, the complex organization of labour involved in publications (as a working practice) can be seen as a mode of infrastructural organization of labour, and as an organization of *work* in a critical and extended sense. Importantly differing from the case of the De Rooij/WdW publication, this kind of publication also means to do so from within: it is aimed at the conditions of precarity and austerity (the world at large other than the milieu of arts), and it acknowledges the conditions that dictate our mode of production and life, and the social implications that derive from these conditions.

*Time and space, 24/7 (2017)*

Rib’s 2017 project *24/7* is another programme segment that responds to the current conditions of production. It is an outlet of Rib where artists present work that can only be witnessed online and that is broadcast 24/7 or during times the gallery is closed. It is sent from a small location within the space of Rib that is inaccessible and invisible to its regular gallery visitors; one could say it is a non-space. The works shown range from context and site-specific performances and installations, to existing videos. All in some manner address the idea of 24/7, the notion of constant temporal occupation by capitalism’s economic regime. 24/7 is an oft-used numerical phrase that stands for 24 hours a day, 7 days per week. Scholar and art



critic Jonathan Crary in his book titled *24/7*,<sup>209</sup> describes how the development of capitalism into an around the clock continuous production cycle has led to life being subordinated to the constant mode of work. Capitalism's temporal pace now dictates the biological and psychological cycles of humankind. By broadcasting 24/7, Rib expands the time of production and of visibility, whilst also diluting these. Observing has become completely unstructured and open, and thereby incidental. 24/7 relocates the consumption/reception of works to the homely and virtual realms, realms that have almost become synonymous. One of the works produced within this format is *Tête à tête* by Clementine Edwards which was a performance programme performed from the 24/7 location in Rib, live-streamed daily from 10 to 12 AM, over a three-week period and outside of the regular opening hours. The subject addressed by Clementine Edwards in the performances (communication and routine in the face of trauma), was captured through the lens of work: the artist could be seen performing labourious exercise of repeated acts: writing, talking to the camera, testing the small space and settling. It is likely that very few people saw these performances, yet they were rigorously executed regardless. This kind of work relocates the realm of production to the delocalized and seeming unproductive space of the virtual and to the fragmented public's time of engagement. It leans towards an idea of negative production: time and labour are wasted, invalid at least in a capitalist sense. It can be seen as negative production that contradicts the regular modes of production that rely on visibility and the effectiveness of communication. As a mode of de-production of these elements, this kind of work critiques the production modus of our times. The performance was a form of self-precaritization as an internalized condition, brought on by the economic regime in which we exist, that forces us to perform under precarious conditions of uncertainty and risk, where the distinction between private time and work has dissipated. As argued by German political theorist Isabell Lorey, the neo-liberal economy and austerity policies are constituted and maintained by regimes of working conditions where mechanisms of self-valorization and internalization are instrumental to exploitative modes of producing. The effects these mechanisms exert onto subjects was expressed through Edwards' performance.<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> Jonathan Crary, *24/7, Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, Verso London, 2013

<sup>210</sup> Isabell Lorey, *Governmentality and Self-Precaution*, EIPCP.net, June 2001, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1106/lorey/en> (accessed 05-01-2021)

The deliberate split between Rib's regular opening hours and 24/7 programme, mimics and comments on the regime of current labour conditions we find ourselves in. The regular opening hours seem to claim that a division between working time and free time still exists, whilst the 24/7 programme confirms that we are in fact firmly within the non-stop work regime of the globalized digital economy and network capitalism. 24/7 stresses the fact that we are constantly producing through processes of seemingly autonomous self-valorization that extend into our free time. (One can think here of how social media uses our social life for production and profit, or how the hobbies to hustle ethos pushes us to value our creativity and self-esteem on the basis of how productive we are in these areas).

As Italian political scientist Christian Marazzi explains in his book *Capital and Language*, subsumption to the mode of capitalist post-Fordist production is now organized through communication and language. He calls this shift in capitalist production: *semio-capitalism*. In an update to Marx he argues that whilst capitalist production previously was arranged through the instrumentality of scientific and technical knowledge (what Marx calls *General Intellect*), it is now performed by the workers directly via the current means of production: communications and language, which they themselves embody. This internalization of instrumentalization is an important observation, as now a political stance would have to start with the recognition of how one is oneself (already) imbricated through language itself. Political philosopher Michael Hardt writes in the introduction of Marazzi's book:

The role of language in the newly dominant forms of labor and production is even more direct. Whereas factory labor was in many respects mute, as Paolo Virno says, the social labor outside the factory typical of post-Fordism is loquacious. Labor in service jobs, the media, health, education, and increasingly all other sectors of the economy is characterized by the centrality of language and linguistic capacities. Language and communication are crucial for the production of ideas, information, images, affects, social relationships, and the like. Marazzi analyzes how, as labor becomes increasingly defined by linguistic performance, worktime has generally increased and, in fact, the traditional barriers that divide work-time from nonworktime, that divide work from life, are progressively breaking down, a fact which carries with

it a series of important consequences. Labor produces social life and, in turn, all of social life is put to work.<sup>211</sup>

By making or performing work, for Rib's 24/7 programme, with its poor working conditions and poor return of investment in terms of public exposure and audience visibility, the importance of how we are compliant to formats (notably via self-administration) in production is emphasized. As performing equals making here, the difference between work and art is annulled. The works in this programme could easily have been executed in the gallery space and time, and in opting to not programme them as such, Rib, both through its programming format and through the works programmed, unpacks the notion of alienation through contemporary working regimes. In this sense the format can be seen in correspondence to the work *Closed Gallery Piece* that conceptual artist Robert Barry made in 1969.<sup>212</sup> I mention this work in particular because it directly questions and addresses the space of art itself as the site of possible artistic agency against the conditions it finds itself in. This work consists of several iterations in gallery spaces whereby the gallery really is closed off for the exhibition-period, illustrated by a sign saying: *During the exhibition the gallery will be closed*. In this work the subject is the tension in artistic production between the ideology of the dematerialization of the artwork versus its commodification. Lucy Lippard's critique on how conceptual art – and the dematerialization of art – failed to subvert or resist art's commodification was already became a critique on art's handling at the time of Barry's work. This problem is presented here as an issue between the artwork and the gallery, which is the space of its commercial dissemination. Ironically, this act of negation produces a new object of commodification. It can be re-installed, collected, commissioned and purchased, leaving an object of critique intact as well as the division between art, artist – as author of the artwork – and space of production, the gallery. The dematerialization of the artwork as a strategic attempt to resist commodification apparently fails in an economy that is based on communication, as Marazzi demonstrates.

In contrast, Clementine Edwards' work, in taking the 24/7 format, leverages this critique through using the gallery space itself as a platform and materialization of production

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<sup>211</sup> Christian Marazzi, *Capital and Language, From the New Economy to the War Economy*, Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents Series, Semiotext(e), Los Angeles, USA, 2008

<sup>212</sup> Camiel van Winkel, *During the Exhibition the Gallery Will be Closed, Contemporary Art and the Paradoxes of Conceptual Art*, 2012, Valiz, Amsterdam

which cannot be commodified and remains singular. There remains no commodified object, only labour. She acknowledges the subsuming conditions set by the digital economy and its all-pervasiveness and occupation of time. This totality of subsumption furthermore also pertains to the involved positions in production. In post-Fordist production, as argued by Paolo Virno, the traditional categorical division of labour, politics and intellect become blurred, as is discussed in the BiP chapter (REF BiP). Consequently, the division between labour (as production), work (as poiesis) and action (as aesthetical and activist politics), in respect to the human as political actor, as laid out by Hannah Arendt, no longer holds. As Virno writes:

So then, this ancient tripartitioning, which was still encysted into the realm of common sense of the generation which made its appearance in the public scene in the Sixties, is exactly what has failed today. That is to say, the boundaries between pure intellectual activity, political action, and labor have dissolved. I will maintain, in particular, that the world of so-called post-Fordist labor has absorbed into itself many of the typical characteristics of political action; and that this fusion between Politics and Labor constitutes a decisive physiognomic trait of the contemporary multitude.<sup>213</sup>

This also means that no effective distinction between artist and curator remains when they work jointly and as co-authors in the site of production. The space of the gallery is both the site for reflective criticality and of production in post-Fordist production, and has been absorbed into the economy at large. This means that this depletion of critical resistance becomes an issue for both the artist and curator equally. Counter to the Robert Barry piece, the quality of dematerialization has now been absorbed into the economic circulation in general, both in art as well as in cognitive labour. The conditions of production for both artist and curator are equally fraught and problematic now. The conventional gallery space, having lost its potency as a locus for critique, only functions in a zombie-like fashion. At Rib, the 24/7 programme stresses the institutional practice as a whole, rather than the individual artist, as was the case in the era of conceptual art. To uphold a gallery practice as Rib does, despite the depletion of the potential of phrasing an alternative through it, indicates both a critical mirroring, in Rib's referring to the tradition of conceptual art, *and* an insistence that *space* is a necessary quality to insist on. This also means that the difference between artist, organizer

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<sup>213</sup> Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude, For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, Semiotext(e)/Foreign Agents, MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 2004, p.50.

and curator dissipates in a political artistic sense. One can therefore say that the insistence on space and its organization is an artistic act in semio-capitalism. This is how Rib's artistic endeavor relates to and remains in dialogue with an artistic tradition which in its origins had a political ambition, as well as insisting on space for (art) work as political demand.

*Institution, none the less*

Even though the conditions of a classical mode of presentation in art production have since long been contested, the vast majority of cultural institutional production is still formatted according to this pattern. Exhibitions are programmed in time, organized, thematised and shaped by curators. The public partakes – from a distance – in the exhibition as onlooker, without having a curatorial say in how or what is presented. A persistent critique against this, as popularised by the movement and term Institutional Critique, questioned the authorial structure of this model and called for the involvement and engagement of the public in a non-hierarchical and co-authorial fashion. This kind of critique has by now become a permanent feature of exhibition making, subsumed into the very structures it sought to upturn. The question of the democratization of the museum, of how to format the curatorial function in an egalitarian and non-hierarchical fashion, or how a public can even define itself, is now considered a permanent self-critical issue in artistic production. This is something Fraser also observes in her essay *From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique*,<sup>214</sup> in which she describes the transformation of critique from that of artists towards institution to an internalized critique of the field of art as such. Yet despite a continued mode of criticism in institutional artistic production, the traditional idea of the function of the cultural institutions as a public place where society reflects on itself via the ideological (read: capitalist) conditions in which it finds itself, remains. The (public and private) institution still holds the authoritative and curatorial lead in formatting the cultural institution as the machine or lens that accommodates processes of self-representation and self-authorization of 'a people', however fraught or illusive such a task now is – especially in the increased virtualization of space and time that renders all space abstract and homogenous.<sup>215</sup>

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<sup>214</sup> Andrea Fraser, *From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique*, Artforum, New York, Sep 2005, Vol. 44, Issue1, p.278.

<sup>215</sup> Evolved out of the emancipation of the bourgeoisie and higher and middle class in the early 1800's after the French revolution, the ideal notion of the museum-space is the space where humankind would educate itself through discussing the art displayed. This emancipatory ambition, ideally applicable to all classes, comes under pressure in the age of capitalism and the commodification of culture as argued by Adorno and others.

The problem of the form of the museum itself, as a space and site of production that contrary to democratic demand and the emancipatory development in general, inadvertently generates exclusionary effects, is an ongoing issue that remains to be solved. It is in this sense that Institutional Critique likewise finds its limitation as argued by Marina Vishmidt, in that it cannot exceed what it is part of, part of what is critiqued: the institute of art and the ways in which it manifests and formats itself.<sup>216</sup> Art of this kind positions itself critically without changing the problematic structure itself, it does not challenge nor alter its essential mode of institutional representation, since ‘showcasing objects of critique’ reaffirms an authoritative curatorial position and leaves untouched the workings of capitalism and the function of a museum that uphold the very condition art sought to critique.

In response, artists, like Andrea Fraser and numerous others, do not limit themselves to these institutions and carry their efforts into fields outside of these. They adopt strategies to obstruct art from becoming a commodity, by, for instance, limiting the work of art to its documentation only, as Fraser does (though this does not prevent the commodity form per se, but it provokes a new economy of production outside that of the conventional one). They also engage with groups and fields of activity other than only the field of art. Still an institution, with its higher degree of organizational structure and resource, is better equipped (as a form) to organize production and visibility due to its greater resources. This is why self-managed artistic organizations with the ambition of playing the role of critical societal agents of meaning in cultural production, and critical of conventional institutional formation, consistently run into issues of institutionalisation and of organization (including the organization of resources). The question then becomes, as the heteronomy of the political economy forces precaritization and subsumes self-determined forms of institutionalisation, what form the institution should take and in what manner it operationalizes its ambitions. The German artist Hito Steyerl observes that there is still the need for such an ‘institutional space’ comprised of a self-determined constituency, that goes beyond the existing framework of institutional and contemporary art. To quote Steyerl:

If the first wave of institutional critique, criticism produced integration into the institution, the second one only achieved integration into representation. But in the

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<sup>216</sup> Marina Vishmidt in *Beneath the Atelier, the Desert: Critique, Institutional and Infrastructural*, in Marion von Osten, *Once We Were Artists (A BAK Critical Reader in Artists' Practice)* Eds. Tom Holert, Maria Hlavajova, Valiz/BAK, 2017, p.218

third phase the only integration which seems to be easily achieved is the one into precarity. And in this sense, we can nowadays answer the question concerning the function of the institution of critique as follows: while critical institutions are being dismantled by neoliberal institutional criticism, this produces an ambivalent subject which develops multiple strategies for dealing with its dislocation. It is on the one side being adapted to the needs of ever more precarious living conditions. On the other, there seems to have hardly ever been more need for institutions which could cater to the new needs and desires that this constituency will create.<sup>217</sup>

The role of the institution therefore is and remains crucial in how these efforts – the economy of production and the issue of participation and representation – are disseminated and are critically resolved. This is also how I think the politics of Rib must be seen, in respect of its performing as, and looking for a form of institution, and wanting to do so through the modus of work-and the form of self-constituency that Steyerl speaks of in which the art-aesthetics exchange is integrated. These forms allow Rib to begin exploring – both in theme and structure – how institutional scales are of relevance in regards to the politics of institutions and the forms these institutions can take.

*Time and space, curator, artist and platform, 4 works, 55 artists, one drawing (2016)*

In the show *4 works, 55 artists, one drawing* I want to focus on the role of the curator in production. The *4 works, 55 artists, one drawing* exhibition consists of several elements, brought together in an installation setting. One of these elements is an iteration of Sol LeWitt's *Equivalent of No. 26*, a conceptual work by one of the masters of conceptual art, which was executed by Rib's director Afrassiabi himself. It is to be made by following a set of instructions provided by the artist. These specify the drawing of a defined and measured grid of lines within which a degree of freedom of execution is left for the person performing the work. The instructions refer to the one performing the work as 'local draughtsman'. The 'local draughtsman' refers therefore to the one locally present to execute the artwork by performing the job.-This follows the specific logic of this type of conceptual art where the instruction becomes the central aspect of a work of art rather than the subjective expression of the artist. As art it is a critique that mirrors contemporary capitalist production characterized

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<sup>217</sup> Hito Steyerl, *The Institution of Critique*, published at Transversal Texts weblog, eipcp – European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies, Switzerland, 2006  
See: <https://transversal.at/transversal/0106/steyerl/en> (accessed 16-07-2020)

by communication and curation. By showing the mechanisms of production as art, our mode of production is showcased as an object of critique. This is now a well-known idea that aims to present art as a demystified, de-authored general act of labour that is independent of the authorship of its maker and available to all. This kind of art is seeking and performing a more democratized form of art but as already observed and following the critique of Lippard, this conundrum has not been solved.

The specific iteration of this work at Rib is informed by another reference in addition to LeWitt's instructions. The extra source used is an exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago (MCA) in 1969 in which the work was executed as well. It was part of an exhibition that was never finalized due to technical problems that prevented its realization. It was to have been an exhibition of conceptual works executed strictly through instructions given by telephone. Though the show remained unrealized, it resulted in a catalogue containing all the intended works for the exhibition. The catalogue hereby became an archive of the exhibition's failure to materialize, documenting intended but never realized projects: an archive of failed speculative objects and maybe even the failure of the project of art as such. On the other hand, apart from being a mere catalogue of works, it can be regarded, I propose, as the pinnacle of conceptual art, the apex of dematerialized art in its unrealized state, by remaining in the form of idea and potential. This catalogue: *Art by Telephone*, 1969, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago was exhibited centrally in the exhibition space at Rib during the exhibition of the LeWitt work. Here Groys' notion of documentation can be referenced again. The catalogue as a binding documentary form, is an attempt to enter life as art, offering a new idea of such a life in which failure to reach productivity is deemed valuable.

A final reference in the Rib installation, in the same orbit of thought as the conceptual instruction being the artwork itself, was yet another rendition of the LeWitt work, this time by David Platzker, Specific Objects/Publications and drawings curator of MOMA. The e-mail exchange between Afrassiabi and Platzker, that took place concerning this work, is posted on the announcements page on the Rib website of this show. It speaks of Platzker's admiration of the work's constant quality of renewing itself. Though it is repeated, it will always be different in each performance and context. The work thus appears in multiple re-iterations, that refers to its historic origins in practice. It is revived again, paying homage to the conceptual legacy. Yet, with the range of contextual and historical forms of re-appearance, the



work likewise demonstrates the hiccups of its, and conceptual art's, legacy. Its failure to definitely critically resolve the issues it set out to contest is equally affirmed.

As with the *Closed Gallery Piece* by Barry, Sol LeWitt's *Equivalent of No. 26* work can manifest both as critique *and* as productive work, as Camiel van Winkel notices in his analysis of Barry's work.<sup>218</sup> It is both an expression of the impossibility of the realization of its immaterial value in the market of commodification, and it simultaneously can establish itself as precisely the fact of unique and singular object of production via each manifestation of it, via its conceptual instruction. Here, by how this binary of its effectuation (as expression of choice in production) is framed through the curatorial (Platzker and Afrassiabi) and documentational (as information of these considerations on the promotional website), the importance of the conditions of production now are stressed. In so doing, the binary is resolved through the choice to emphasize the curatorial and informational propagation and dissemination of the work. It is an act of updating the condition of production, so to speak. In Barry's work – the symbolic closure of the space of production – the artistic expression entailed an interruption and a negation of the production process by its almost total dematerialization: this takes the conceptual gesture to its logical limit. Yet because it is a symbolic closure, it becomes a quasi-negation of the production process it itself is established in. This is the limit that also becomes clear in the critique that is evoked through the 'instruction' of LeWitt's conceptual art. Both the limit and the instruction remain abstract and symbolic if not acted upon. Seen as an attempt to de-commodify the work of art, its subsequential economic handling should be considered as well. The extended processes of validation should be subject to the same artistic scrutiny that aims for decommodification. This then requires the notion of 'artistic work' to be extended beyond the limited scope of the art object's making as well.

The negation as symbolic gesture – a quintessential trait of conceptual art – has become the commodity after all; though often problematic, ways have been found to valorize and market conceptual art. This is the same *representational* act that Steyerl speaks of as the second wave of Institutional Critique. This conundrum is accepted in Rib's project by acknowledging that the physical space and condition that needs to be negated is also still needed or cannot be overcome. The space as a repository from which to formulate a potential

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<sup>218</sup> Camiel van Winkel, *During the Exhibition the Gallery Will be Closed, Contemporary Art and the Paradoxes of Conceptual Art*, 2012, Valiz, Amsterdam, pp.67-69

critique is paradoxical in its dependency and centralization of the space as source of critique. Here with the inclusion of the curator, discussing the work and its communication on the website announcing and promoting the project, space and labour are acknowledged as inseparable from communication as such. Importantly, in so doing, curating and artist become exposed as inseparable in an overarching idea of work. This act also implies that the symbolic value produced in art, cannot leave the economic and conditional framework from which it emerges. The condition of cognitive labour is laid bare so to speak, as an organization of work and of communication. This is where Marazzi's notion of semio-capitalism – and of communication and language as materiality of production – as the contemporary production mode – becomes very apparent. In the Rib *4 works, 55 artists, one drawing* project the conceptual legacy is revived as work; in this case as a practice of work. It can thus be understood within Osborne's framework of the post-conceptual condition by 'working through' this legacy. By updating the conditions that exist within working practice, the tensions that arise within the institutional line of production in contemporary art are addressed. Barry references the relevance of space and LeWitt emphasizes that of the instruction, as an analogy of the organization and division of labour. These are the basic and interconnected elements Steyerl argues need to be recuperated or reconfigured, when she references the need for a *space for constituency* after the negation of such space through capitalism.

*Time and space, After Julie de Graag, Studieblad met kippen en kuikens, 1877–1924 (2016)*

The reappraisal of the central role of curating that is historically channelled through the conceptual legacy, and the blurring of the difference between artist and curator, is also expressed in another work in the same show, titled *After Julie de Graag, Studieblad met kippen en kuikens, 1877–1924*. The result of this project is a drawing made by several renowned and established artists mixed with young and unknown artists from the direct social and professional network of Rib. These artists were invited by Afrassiabi to respond to an existing drawing by Julie de Graag. This is the work that is referred to as *one drawing* in the overall title of this exhibition. The original work by De Graag is part of the collection of the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam and is a sketched study of chickens. The invited artists were each asked to draw a single chicken based on the De Graag drawing. A courier on a bicycle was used to transport the drawing to the next participant. The result is a divergent, messy composition, made out of non-related, different styles. This new drawing is installed on one of the exhibition walls, neatly framed and behind glass, thus mimicking and

affirming conventional modes of art presentation, and seemingly parodying the commodity form. One of the ideas that prompted this endeavor, was the fact that the conditions of Rib's presentation space excludes the presentation of art historical materials and artworks like the Julie de Graag drawing. This directly severs the realm of small exhibition spaces, which cannot provide insurance or the right climate control, from the bigger institutional presentation spaces that are equipped to show and archive these materials. The smaller spaces lack the resources and infrastructure to do so.

This structural lack of resources and the working conditions in this field equally structurally obstruct or negatively affect this segment to play in or enter the same market of commodified artworks. The response set up by Rib, as a form of cooperative and social production in the present, can therefore be seen as a critique of the capitalist commodification and of value attribution that separates the historic from the present. The abrasiveness of use would diminish the canonical artefacts' attributed value, so they remain guarded as scarce commodities that cannot leave our museums. In turn, these museums become the financialized vaults guarding their accumulated value within a wider capitalist structure. How they might function and be of value as artefacts in present and living conditions, in use, as sensible objects and social artefacts, has become a non-question for those guarding and structuring these modes of artistic production. This economy of extraction from the social realm than also becomes of importance in regards to what politics governance aims to foster in allocating subsidies and supportive arrangements in the field of art.<sup>219</sup>

On the one hand, the *After Julie the Graag* work discloses the omission of art as a sensible object and the gap that exists between the financialized and valorized status of canonized cultural artefacts and that of the production and labour conditions in non-marketed contemporary art. On the other hand, even 'sketches', actually exercises or try-outs for future realizations, have become commodified and do not escape the average course of affairs. The idea of the address of life and history that contemporary art ideally is said to undertake and

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<sup>219</sup> An interesting case to mention here is the *Picasso in Palestine* project by Khaled Hourani, in which precisely the financial hyper-valuation of the culturally canonized artefact was put in contrast with its use as spatial-experiential object. By transporting a Picasso from The Netherlands to Palestine the juridical and conservational conditions of the subsequent localities were exposed as normative for such artefacts to be presentable in the first place.

<https://vanabbemuseum.nl/onderzoek/bronnen-en-publicaties/artikelen/picasso-in-palestine/>

take as its canvas and material<sup>220</sup>, becomes only possible for value-less artefacts – that is: not yet commodified at the time of being *used*. It also shows how the not-for-profit realm of artistic production is subsumed by the frame of production nevertheless. Referencing Steyerl’s analysis once more: the commodity-status of art leads to the mere representational act of critique. While art spaces of this kind provide for the ‘experimentation’, ‘innovation’ or a laboratory function for the market in totality, they are severed from the end-form of this line of production: that of the scarce object and valorized commodity. The idea of the role of the museum as an amplifier engine to estranging, guarding and enabling the *auratic* quality of the artwork<sup>221</sup>, is a mere chimera that covers up the iron economic logic behind it, that is demonstrated by the subordination to the logic of the law of the market. In the end the qualities of ‘innovation’, ‘creativity’ and of ‘experiment’ are therefore geared to the subsumed position within the whole of the infrastructure.

This is understandable within the homogeneous empty time that Walter Benjamin<sup>222</sup> speaks of; an unhampered continuation of capitalist time, in which the capitalist domination over cultural meaning is structural. This is also voiced by Hito Steyerl as a means of critique on the hyper-capitalist condition we find ourselves in. She describes how the financialized cultural objects are not only separated from our tactile surroundings but are even taken out of the common economy, through the practice of storing cultural objects in free-ports that are exempt from taxation. Cultural artifacts serve as a depository of wealth for the few, who separate them from our experience and the common good. Here we can see an upscaling of effect of the commodity form of the artwork in a neoliberal economy. This is a negative and instrumental implementation of *the distribution of the sensible* Rancière speaks of, at a global economic scale.<sup>223</sup>

In this light, the element of ‘instruction’ in the *After Julie de Graag* work is a telling component. The instruction is not only a quintessential and critical element of conceptual art,

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<sup>220</sup> This encapsulates the critique that Peter Osborne phrases in regards to the meta-politics of contemporary art. The *contemporary* as defining label of contemporary art means that it would have to be specifically suited to represent the contemporary by juxtaposing, arranging different times and geographies in one fictional time. Clearly the commodity form of art prevents such ambition.

Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or not at all*, London, Verso, 2013, p.15

<sup>221</sup> This is the idea of the function of the artistic object as focal point of the tension between commodification and value - the artworks’ *auratic* decline-, as framed by Benjamin and Adorno.

<sup>222</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘*On the Concept of History*’, Selected Writings Vol. 4, 1938-1940, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England

<sup>223</sup> Hito Steyerl, *Duty Free Art: Art in the Age of Planetary Civil War*, Verso, 2017

but it is also an elucidation of the power mechanisms in our world, when we consider informational distribution as value production. Self-administration has become the tool and symptom of contemporary labour, since workers are put to work as autonomous creative and communicative labourers<sup>224</sup>. The ‘instruction’, as such, becomes a critical marker of delegation of responsibility within these division of labour. The conceptual masterpieces (as any other artwork) after all are equally monetized and canonized as cultural artefacts – as rightly observed by Steyerl – through the creative labour performed by the workers, by the same self-instruction. By reproducing this work according to the existing mechanisms of production, in the sense that the invited artists let themselves be instructed towards their work, but by also critically recognizing the centrality of the instruction’s role in the conventional institutional handling and economy that is different from the one at Rib, the instruction becomes visible – mirrored – as political object. This is the central point Rib brings to the discussion, how all workers are involved in the infrastructure of art and imbricated in the expanded notion of production.

Afrassiabi as initiator (as director and curator), together with the artists (as co-producers) mix up the assumed functions in production, towards the realization of this expanded notion of production. The curatorial and institutional space of Rib is turned into the realm of the artist’s, the supposed division of function in positions is overturned, and the assumptions of autonomy and heteronomy are revisited. The responsibility and accountability of its totality is seemingly taken up by Afrassiabi, as he is not only the inventor of this project but also the one responsible for the space of production and the relations within it. Seen in dialogue with the Sol LeWitt work – in which the director sets himself up to be put to work by an artist, as a performative act of self-administration and self-instruction to work, the exceptionality of creativity as the artist’s privilege is annulled. Questioning and blurring the difference between art and curating, it is made clear that it is only through the totality of all involved, that the autonomy of instructions to a life *if at all* is to be reclaimed. Rib’s project acts, through aesthetic practice, as a critique on capitalism that is now hampered by the institutional, in which external instruction becomes internalized and curatorially automated and in which a critique on the conditions of production has precisely become absorbed by

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<sup>224</sup> This is how, according to Isabell Lorey, through the division of labour and segmented, managerial working conditions, the overall workings of neoliberal capitalism go uncontested. Isabell Lorey, *Governmentality and Self-Precarization*, EIPCP.net, June 2001, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1106/lorey/en>

capitalism. The semio-capitalist cycle of production – as the cycle of communication within the different positions – is short-circuited.

*Curating institutionally; or not*

The curator holds an exemplary role in the system of contemporary art. He or she is the nodal position through which the institutional commission and that of the artists is translated. In establishing the selection of artists and that of the theme or subject of the exhibition or program, the curator becomes an author of institutional expression, in their own right. Following up on Paul O'Neill,<sup>225</sup> who argues that with the development of the expansion of 'the exhibition' where it becomes a general site for critical production, I propose that the curator also becomes an author through defining and designing the site of exchange. This is rarely acknowledged or expressed as such in the field of art. Generally speaking, through institutional communications – even by what should be considered institutional frontrunners in this respect – the role of curating is carefully mentioned separately, aligning production within the known division of artist as author, and the curator as mere accommodator or enabler towards the realization of the work. This also goes for WdW, which in its online communications speaks of:

For over twenty-five years, the institution has both engaged with and provoked developments in contemporary art across the world. Since it was first established in 1990, the center has hosted many internationally acclaimed artists their first solo exhibitions, and has introduced numerous non-European artists to the Dutch and European art scenes. Seminal exhibitions by Hélio Oiticica (1992), Ken Lum (1990), Frederick Kiesler (1997)... Qiu Zhijie (2012) Alexandre Singh (2012) and AA Bronson (2013) stand as a bold reflection of this commitment.

And though it speaks of 'forging new ways of exhibition making' by the respective directors and mentions the presentations of discourse as intricate part of its institutional output, *art* and *aesthetics* – understood here as the production of knowledge and discourse through various

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<sup>225</sup> The ascendancy of the curatorial gesture in the nineties also began to establish curating as a potential nexus for discussion, critique, and debate, where the evacuated role of the critic in parallel cultural discourse was usurped by the neocritical space of curating. During this period, curators and artists have reacted to and engaged with this "neocriticality" by extending the parameters of the exhibition form to incorporate more discursive, conversational, and geopolitical discussion, centred within the ambit of the exhibition. Paul O'Neill, *The Curatorial Turn: From Practice to Discourse*, Intellect, Bristol, 2007, p.241

formats as symposia and debate – are presented as separate qualities within the institutional whole and line of institutional artistic production. The division of labour within artistic production, the division between the functions of artist, aesthetics and curating is hereby instated. This is where Rib demonstrates a new approach in communicating through its programme and the ways projects are set up. *Being* in production regardless of one's position and discarding categories of labour altogether, is the more decisive politics vis a vis the division of labour. Afrassiabi's personal engagement as a nodal entity bridging and accommodating the processes in Rib is something that is rare in the modus of production in contemporary art. More common is that the professional division of labour defines positions and keeps all aspects of production separate. By stretching the notion of curating in time and place, notions of curating and producing are constantly introduced and transposed from elsewhere and else-when, within the broader sphere of operations of Rib, through which the ambivalence towards and problematic importance of curating as an authorial principle, are expressed. This is where WdW can be critiqued in that it kept the separation between the different positions and the act of curating too much intact. It facilitated too little reflection about its own imbrication in the economics of art production.<sup>226</sup>

### **3 The issue of text, medium of the wider infrastructure**

#### *Squirting Wound—A peer-writing environment*

The last example of Rib's production segments I want to discuss within this examination is *Squirting Wound—A peer-writing environment* which is broadly directed at the same general theme of artistic production and its conditions. This project is predominantly approached by means of text.<sup>227</sup> It touches upon the oft-overlooked role that texts holds in the configuration of contemporary production. I claim that text is introduced intentionally in such a central manner in this project and in Rib as such, in order to indicate and criticise the relevance text has as a medium of institutional communication within the field of art. As indicated at the start of this examination, I will go into how *text* plays a multi-registered role in the infrastructural communication between institutional art, governmental politics and the

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<sup>226</sup> Especially in the period of Nicolaus Schaffhausen, WdW showed itself as a centrally curated institution. Under Defne Ayas there already was more interaction and input from a wider circle and were programs more interactively organized. Yet, because of the multi-layered mode of production that was mainly curated and exhibition-based premised on presenting end results rather than processes, the issue of the complexity of authorship remained obfuscated or under explored.

<sup>227</sup> See: <https://www.archive.ribrib.nl/other-formats/squirting-wound> (accessed 02-09-2020)

overarching political economy. At the same time, text is recognized as artistic medium itself. This relates to the recognition of the importance of communication in contemporaneity. Text functions, needless to say, as a medium par excellence, in the critical discursive production of theory, which is a core part of contemporary artistic production. This also refers to Marazzi's analyses of how language has become the instrument of capitalism embodied by the workers, and how it has become permeated in the chain of production.<sup>228</sup> Text thus traverses the fields that constitute the conditional, the reflective and productive fields of art, as a binding supra-medium. This is also how my use of text should be understood; as a multi-registered quality.

For *Squirting Wound*, specific authors/artists were invited to take part, some of whom also participated in earlier exhibition presentations. The works that are presented on a specially designated part of the Rib website, are either fully poetical texts or texts that often contain self-referential and critical reflections on acts of 'making' or of becoming. These works demonstrate that text, following the idea of the dematerialization of art and the loss of medium specificity, has become part and material of artistic production and how it equally has become a medium that can reflect on the wider structure of artistic production. This follows from the dissolution of the different positions between maker and reader thought necessary in order to become truly revolutionary, as already postulated by Walter Benjamin<sup>229</sup> and others. It consequently also means the dissolution of genres and media, as the essay, critique or novel which all can be understood within a more general idea of art. Simultaneously text thus can be a final result, or part of the process in which the result is the reflection itself. As a self-critical medium of art commenting on art's coming into being (and as such re-instating its autonomy in heteronomy)<sup>230</sup>, text as a medium may contain and evoke moments of a discursive, as well as critical, interpretative and poetical nature, depending on what contextual situation it is situated in. Structurally this binds art and aesthetics in a general conversation where genres and viewpoints overlap and become reciprocal. These aesthetical conversations represent the moments in the artistic process in which the work is continued as a conversation between the different elements that assess, suggest, invoke direction and aim and address a speculative viewer, and that propel and circle around each other, without any of these taking the final lead or have a decisive say – as described in the BiP chapter (REF BiP).

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<sup>228</sup> Christian Marazzi, *Capital and Language, From the New Economy to the War Economy*, Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents Series, Semiotext(e), Los Angeles, USA, 2008

<sup>229</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Author as Producer*, *New Left Review* 1/62, July-August 1970

<sup>230</sup> The claim to the autonomy of art here understood as following and proposing its own rules and logic of its construction. This is how Adorno explains art's ontology as political.



An example of such a work is Nick Carr's work: *I Can Help You Remember*.<sup>231</sup> Here a protagonist can be heard, speaking through the interface of computer-code language. The address coming from the work is not only an effort to establish contact with a potential viewer, it also raises the question of the language that establishes the protagonist's reality. The work seems to postulate that position and subjectivity are speculative mediations channeled through technology and language. The same can be said about another work on *Squirting Wound*, Daniel Vorthuys' *I am not Hyacinthus*.<sup>232</sup> This is a performance, executed in Rib and documented on its website, in which Vorthuys adopts the myth of Hyacinthus to his performance in which he voices a protagonist, a speculative narrator. The text proclaimed by Vorthuys speaks through the myth of Hyacinthus, the symbol of beauty who was unintentionally killed by his lover Apollo. His death was indirectly caused by an intervention of the god of the west-wind Zephyrus, in an act of jealous competition over the love of Hyacinthus. Through this mythical narrative beauty is pictured as accidental victim of both reason and logos (Apollo) and of desire and the acknowledgment of love, which subsequently constitutes the unfolding of drama. Vorthuys here uses the historical narrative as an aesthetic lens to his performance: poetry negotiated through aesthetics, laying out the interrelationship between *poiesis* (the time and experience of performance) and *aesthesis* (the intelligibility that is produced through historical frame and reference). The works in this segment emphasize the value of text as part of artworks, and as part of the generative site of artistic production.

The notion of text as artistic medium can be traced back to the ideas about art formulated by early Romanticist thinkers like Fichte and Schlegel, onto whom Benjamin expanded his ideas of criticism as part of art. For Benjamin, reflection itself is the inherent motor driving art. As scholar Graeme Gilloch, reading Benjamin, writes:

Through reflection, the individual work of art neither seeks nor attains completion, but rather fulfils itself in dissolving itself. As the work of art is unfolded through reflection, it comes to point beyond itself, to suggest and disclose its relationship with all other artworks. Reflection in the medium of art ultimately reveals the contiguity

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<sup>231</sup> See: <https://www.ribrib.nl/squirting-wound/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/ICANHELPHYOUREMEMBER-NCARR.pdf?fbclid=IwAR38HQc8FQ0kCiWiHdl9GIP0HG0pYJg99OkZpQ29H3XoMEzr5cMU0QxL5GU> (accessed 05-01-2021)

<sup>232</sup> See: <http://www.ribrib.nl/squirting-wound/daniel-vorthuys/httpswww-youtube-comwatchv6evl-cwavek/> (accessed 05-01-2021)

and interconnectedness of all works of art, a continuum composed of all individual examples, genres and forms: namely, the Idea of Art.<sup>233</sup>

In this vein Vorthuys' artwork can be seen as the continuation of the idea of using the performance of reflection as the bridge between different times to channel the interconnectedness of all art. In the documentation of Vorthuys' performance this is especially clear. Audience and performers can be seen closely packed and interacting, and Rib is shown to be a site where audience and artist can interact through the bind between art and aesthetics.

On the Rib website, *Squirting Wound* is presented as a long-term part of the programme, and thus as substantial continued branch of Rib. This is presented as follows:

*Squirting Wound* is directed towards new voices in literature within the context of the plastic arts as an arena that gives a unique perspective from which to explore the politics of poetry, poiesis, and linguistic ontology. The writing platform seeks to expand on the relations of thought to the invention of new language games with special attention to their relation to the World and not only as reflection and critique.<sup>234</sup>

In my reading of this declaration and of the installment of this segment, Rib aims to explore the potential of text to go beyond and critique the customary deployment of text in art production, here formulated as the mere *reflective* and *critical* production of text that can be observed in most institutional practices. The statement clearly assumes the use of text is often limited to a passive-receptive, critically discursive position, and lacks the required *poiesis* in institutional artistic production which works such as Vorthuys' attain. The critical argument is that art's institutions and their communication should be thought of in line with the logic of art itself – as *poiesis*, and should not be severed from it. Institutional aesthetics is negatively pictured by Rib as instrumental to the institution's self-declaration and as an instrument for its hierarchical position (with critique and reflection as assumed artistic values within this). What is expressed in the institutional use of text in its critical and merely reflective address does however not produce *new worlds* or new ways of producing, Rib's statement suggests. Rib as

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<sup>233</sup> Graeme Gilloch, *Walter Benjamin, Critical Constellations*, Polity Press, Oxford, UK, Malden, US, 2002

<sup>234</sup> See: <https://www.archive.ribrib.nl/other-formats/squirting-wound> (accessed 02-09-2020)

such suggests that the institutional form undercuts the promise or ideal of institutionally produced art: that of producing *new worlds*. Following Rancière, the poetical is missing in institutional production in the ‘productive’ altercation between aesthetics and poetics.

The production of theoretical and public discourse has become an important institutional asset: with the introduction of the need for discursive knowledge in societies based on knowledge production, this has led to a need for new discourses in which critical-theoretical discourse are prominently present.<sup>235</sup> Institutions have actually thus begun building their own archives through aesthetic production that is often self-commissioned and self-produced (self-produced online archives or publications). Hereby the production-interpretation divide – or the *poiesis-aesthesis* divide – is cut short, and appropriated institutionally. One can say the institution produces and presents its own privileged reader/viewer (an expansion of the aesthetic toolkit, as mentioned before). This is an arrangement that subsequently becomes serviced through self-management.<sup>236</sup> In taking up and offering a frame of reading, the authorship of the institution becomes more pronounced and directive. This is the critique as voiced by Habermas as mentioned before, where the institution claims the ways the art-aesthetics exchange is to be ordered or understood. How such a pre-emption of meaning (or what stands the risk of being perceived as such) is furthered to a participant thus becomes a crucial question.<sup>237</sup> Rancière’s insistence of the free *formation* between poiesis and aesthesis, as a precondition of a free politics, then suggests that this requires the unrestricted input of all those participating and a negotiability of predetermined mediation, in order to facilitate the emergence of communal processes.

It is however imperative to first define further how and where the political economy as it is, interferes in and affects the institutional context. These forms of discourse production act as the extra outlet platforms of institutional production, by which they – partly as a side effect following the formal logic of production and opening up to the public, but partly out of opportunism – also guarantee themselves of the audience requirements stipulated by

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<sup>235</sup> The last decades have shown a big expansion of curatorial courses and with the introduction of notably the master-structure in education after Bologna, the need for theoretical discourse has grown extensively.

<sup>236</sup> See for example the numerous publication- and/or platform-formats in the higher educational-presentational-curatorial fields, to name a few: Afterall, On-Curating, E-Flux, Mousse, BAK etc. that all produce their own archives instantly, as these produce knowledge. As seeming strategies to reclaim autonomy, these produce their own modular isles of production.

<sup>237</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Modernity, an Unfinished Project*, in *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity: Critical Essays on The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, eds. Maurizio Passerin d’Entrèves and Seyla Benhabib, The MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 2009, pp.49-50.

governments for continued funding. Views of these discursive productions count as visitor numbers and visibility. These are therefore accountable as production targets. Furthermore, institutions use the element of knowledge production to craft and enhance their institutional profile. Discourse production and criticality become part of the economy of institutions, and are imbricated in the larger economic constellation. This also means this formation of knowledge production becomes instrumental in the competition for scarce resources. Again the notion of the infrastructure Vishmidt speaks of as a critical pathway, becomes of crucial importance: how should one assess the totality of relations in production? Critical theory is part of the institution's production value and theorists partaking in this mode of production become co-authorial co-workers. The incorporation of critical discourse – *critique* – therefore contributes to the institutionally-produced aesthetic framework of the institution's outward aesthetics, the public productions (its front-end), and also the bureaucratic entanglement with governance and politics (its back-end).

Here (in the back-end) texts – or one can say the bureaucratic critical-theoretical derivatives – serve to formulate programmes and to define the identity of the institution. Subsequently they become and serve as critical sites through which funders (part) decide on whether to grant a continuation of funding.<sup>238</sup> The frameworks for funding set by governments and funders inform and provide direct feedback on the operation and logistics of institutions: these frameworks of funding structure the institutional timeframe and production, and define the accessibility to and deployment of resources. Furthermore: content that is formulated (in applications for funding) for which the institution is subsequently accountable (production criteria is judged both pre- and post-production) predetermines the programme and the unfolding of content. This type of text production is thus multi-registered in its institutional use. Bureaucratic communications that designate and manage functions, and text as critique, as critical content that is partly absorbed into the first register, blend into a diffused authorship. In an infrastructural sense, the institutional deployment of text becomes a multi-folded curatorial instance in its own right: despite its critical exterior, it is translated into bureaucratic register and is imbricated in how the framework of means and ends in production are allocated, directed, selected, and established. Obviously this affects the unrestrained exchange between poiesis and aesthesis Rancière speaks of, and hinders the ways in which a free exchange is possible. In short, this is where critical artistic ideas on

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<sup>238</sup> This is of course not the sole criteria on which funders base their assessment. I mention it here to indicate what form it has taken in the imbricated economy of exchange in the back-end of production.

production meet the sobering and controlling administrative order of bureaucracy and the managerial effects what Adorno and Horkheimer have called the ‘totally administered society’.<sup>239</sup> Or what Armen Avanessian defines as *pre-emption*, the closure of time caused by the projective hold capitalism and political governance exert over the free emergence of meaning.<sup>240</sup>

The dynamic described above has resulted in a proliferation of text that is diverted and disseminated in the different registers of the art institution: the artistic presentations, the archival, the administrative, the critical, the public and commissioning instances. In this ‘*complex of text production*’ it becomes extremely hard to detect or retrace the relation between what is critically or analytically asserted, how such assertions can be made operational (put to work), and how the production itself is operational in the conditions in which it is produced to begin with. In this diffused complex it becomes almost impossible to have control over or claim autonomy over one’s segment in production. The division of labour enforces a mode of self-administration, given the numerous regimes of accountability in the other segments and fields of production. This is the trajectory Rib aims to undercut with its close-knit organizational structure as this is the manner in which the effects of the political economy may be countered. Staying with the trouble<sup>241</sup> as they become manifest in the field, Rib performs critique as work.

The underlying mechanism of competition, ordered by the political regime of neoliberalism enforces the division of labour.<sup>242</sup> Under the financial pressure caused by the general trend of austerity and a decline of funding towards the arts, competition for scarcer resources among institutions has grown significantly. This puts pressure on every worker to perform optimally. The tension that exists between the outward communication and the lack

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<sup>239</sup> Dave Beech, *Weberian Lessons: Art, pedagogy and managerialism*, in *Curating and the Educational Turn*, eds. Mick Wilson and Paul O’Neill, Open Editions/De Appel, 2010

<sup>240</sup> See Avanessian’s book *Miamification* in which he describes how one moves as subject through a jungle of projected and customized pathways laid out by big media tech-corporations based on your collected data and preferences.

Armen Avanessian, *Miamification*, Sternberg Press, Berlin, 2017

<sup>241</sup> The term *staying with the trouble* refers to Donna Haraway who uses it to describe the art of life as an art of making together, of *sympoiesis*. Here it would mean to regard ones form and mode of operation – of Rib – in relation to other fields and institutions: governance and political bodies.

Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble, Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2016

<sup>242</sup> Under increasing neo-liberalization and precaritization, this has meant that the institute accommodates and allocates a greater part of its operation towards financial self-sufficiency, entrepreneurship and market, yet it has to maintain – in public communication – its artistic societal purpose.

of communication of its internal considerations, articulates a shift in operations enforced through governmental politics. The lack of communication constitutes a black hole; a missing exposition of the tension between an institution's supposed autonomy and artistic functioning and that of its external commissioning instances, its heteronomy. Throughout the layered structure of artistic production – organised by the division of labour – ideas of function and operation become translated in fixed concepts that stand apart of what really transpires in the interactions and relations they (come to) represent. If not structured non-hierarchically and in recursive feedback where the addressee (a worker in the chain) has a say in how communication in the sphere of work was perceived, these communications become independent or stand-alone formulations of ends. Information of how these uncontested ends effect production, and could possibly be amended to fit a communal intention, is lacking.

This lack, I argue, is also *a lack of text*. Opening up this lack of text – as an issue that need to be overcome in order to critique anything – may halt or disturb the regime of production, or at least makes the political shift that affects (or may affect) the production's public. This may draw in an audience as participant, and with that the participant's contingent presence may become part of the communal artistic effort.<sup>243</sup> I propose therefore that it is imperative for an institution to disclose the conditions that support and define production, in order to become politically intelligible. Failing to do so, the institution is ultimately compliant with the normative production regime of wider neoliberal capitalism, and thus operates within the regime of subsumption, regardless of the political content of the artworks on display or the critical discourse that is published.

The textual outlet *Squirting Wound*, as a structural part of Rib, is one I interpret as responding to this imbricated institutional practice of the use of text. Most texts that are presented interlace poetics with the conventional form of institutional production or use the forms of quasi-scientific art historical or theoretical/aesthetical texts to evoke activating or outward aesthetics. *Squirting Wound* counter-mimics and addresses the discursive, informational and recruiting mode of texts of institutional artistic production. They are accounts of the fabric in which we find ourselves. At the same time this platform is also a

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<sup>243</sup> *Casco Art Institute* in Utrecht can be named as initiative that concerns itself with how the art field is structured, how it connects with politics and how this affects work and community building in art production. See for instance the project *Elephants in the Room*, 2018, in which the trope of 'unlearning' was operationalized to investigate the (re)distribution of power. See: <https://casco.art/en/archive/elephants-in-the-room> (accessed 02-09-2020)

means to build a space for autonomous poetic production. It does so through an act of (over)identification. This allows the platform to demonstrate the dominance of the more conventional mode of production used by institutional forms that are better equipped and have the resources to produce these extensions. Next to *Squirting Wound* Rib has also developed many more forms of production where exchange (of meaning and interpretation) are central. These include workshops and other forms of participatory artistic research characterised by an intimate and informal mode of exchange, and that do not aim for academic or scholarly valorisation.<sup>244</sup> Neither do these efforts aim to be introduced into and valorised by the existing artistic institutions. They are intended as live productions, as work on location. With them, Rib identifies text and the objects of knowledge production as the generic material of validation, and the ways these function as material in artistic production. The way the multi-disciplinary artistic production produces its own obfuscation and opaqueness of accountability is countered by the way in which Afrassiabi was present and visible in all stages of production in Rib as platform. This personal engagement with all aspects of production equally teases out the distancing that occurs in the transitions in the chain of production. It is performative labour against the division of labour.

In capitalist production, the division of labour is organized via expertise pertaining to the specific functions designated in the chain of production and ‘creation’ is linked to ‘production’ as labour’s gratifying reward.<sup>245</sup> This division of functions acts as accelerant to production. Here, this personal engagement likewise acts as an artistic agent in Rib’s model, and counters the institutional logic of production. The man on the floor, the LeWittian ‘local draughtsman’, who performs work non-expertly and emphasizes the notion of the non-exceptional of work at hand, here encompasses all stages of production, and is performed (mostly) by Afrassiabi and his team, without hierarchical division. Equally the proximity in working relations generates in itself a local relation to space as indicated by the notion of the *local*. This notion of performance, rather than that of creation also emphasizes the demystification of artistic labour, this time in a form of infrastructure of production that is structured through proximity and closeness of operation.

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<sup>244</sup> See for instance the program *Horror Vacui* at Rib, which was a long-term program together with Haseeb Ahmed interspersed with presentations and workshops, like with Belgian artist Michèle Matyn; <https://www.ribrib.nl/projects/taming-the-horror-vacui?slide=2> (accessed 02-09-2020)

<sup>245</sup> Isabell Lorey, *Governmentality and Self Precarization*, EIPCP, 2006  
<http://eipcp.net/transversal/1106/lorey/en>

#### 4 **To conclude: countering and mimicking – estrangement as institutional opposition**

If we are subsumed under capitalism and partake in its distribution and its historicization (even if this means an absence of history), there is no centralized origin of work or singularly identifiable commissioning instance. If we also can and must consume/produce all the time, then work has become continuous, we have become continuous workers (regardless of being paid or not, as consumption is productive labour too). The recognition of this condition is the strategic core that Rib performs. As such, we can understand Rib's artistic proposition as the total *dissolution of curatorship*. This is a proposition that is also one of the main underlying tenets of conceptual art. Such a proposition of dissolution honours the fact that in capitalism communication and language have become the material of production, regardless of the position that is taken within the subsumed chain of production. This means, following Virno and Marazzi, that the difference between artist, curator and organisation evaporates, exposing the curatorship of capitalism as totalizing hegemonic form. The formal notion of distribution within capitalism needs to be addressed in artistic production, since this has become the overriding principle that integrally organizes all. The expression of the *dismeasure* between the hold capitalism exerts on the forms of life and those subjected to this rule then becomes the task for the assembled institutional author. The operational authorship shifts to the infrastructure of organization, by which it becomes political. In that sense, I argue, it is a re-appraisal of the term '*Curating at large*' that Joseph Kosuth used to describe fellow artist Seth Siegelaub's practise, linking the historic line of conceptual art of the 1970's to the contemporary conditions of network capitalism.

The *dismeasure* that Virno speaks of, as an image of the infrastructure of social relations skewed by the measures set by capitalism, is put on display in Rib *as and in work*.<sup>246</sup> By appropriating the institutional set-up of art production and through the mimicry of the institutional format and the effects of alienation these produce, Rib engages with alienation as structural given in order to both reveal, unpack and confront it. As in Brechtian theatre, where classical theatre with its distancing between audience and play was used as a model from

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<sup>246</sup> Such approach also resonates with the accelerationist notion of embracing alienation as fundamental state, which can be used to address issues of organization. This strategy of *xeno-fication* is developed amongst others by Laboria Cubonics who radicalize and absorb the notion of xeno-fication towards praxis and in aesthetical practices. See for example Laboria Cubonics, *Xenofeminism, A Politics of Alienation*, [www.laboriacuboniks.net](http://www.laboriacuboniks.net) or Armen Avanessian, introduction in *Perhaps it is High Time For a Xenoarchitecture to Match*, Sternberg Press, 2018



which to formulate a critique towards the commodification produced in capitalist economy, in Rib the institutional set-up of artistic production is used as a mirror-object to bring about an awareness of the alienation that is produced in these institutions, in which we partake as consumers-producers.

In Rib's constellation of production all relational functions are re-organized. This critically demonstrates how these all function under the current form of subsumption. Rib takes up estrangement as an institutional instrument by addressing the issue of *time* in which we produce. The 24/7 programme extends the depth and width of address that is sought: production takes place out of the accustomed focus of attention – the gallery as presentation-place – and outside of the frame of regular working hours; and thereby permeates into the tissue and duration of life as such. All our time is work, is working, is producing, and is consuming. Rib further mimics the complication brought on by the closed cycle of criticality and *overlap of functions*, in both producing the objects *and* the critical reflection on them. This pairing of making and reflection, of poiesis and aesthesis, needs to be considered in its conditional frame of production, in order to prevent the institution to become the directive authority (as Habermas warned). There is an overlap between the formats: artists that have presented in one of the formats, such as the regular presentation format, may also perform as author in the writerly *Squirting Wound*. And as said before, the idea of the division of labour is further undercut by Afrassiabi's presence in production. The idea of poiesis is put forward as a referential cycle between production and reflection, and of a continued time and discussion with itself (the community that produces). The Rib website is used as a platform to continue this principle of generative production: archive, artists, production, aesthetics, experience and documentation are bound together. This addresses the necessary and generative interaction between inside and outside, it demonstrates the bind of autonomy and heteronomy in producing. This is done by way of a conflation of the two, akin to a Brechtian theatrical annulment of the difference between making and reflection, production and consumption. The platform-*idea of* mediation that has become the overall *form* in which the much of the institutional communication have been turned into, is critiqued by Rib by turning Rib into a space of experience and of de-commodified production.

Coming back to Rancière's art-aesthetics bind in this respect: the politico-aesthetical component, in the Rancièrean art-aesthetics bind, is infinitely compromised if each and every epistemological translation – which comes with each their own economic logic of production

– is not negotiated. This is the unrestrained exchange between aesthesis and poiesis that Rancière speaks of, which requires the space and arrangement of free play between them in order to produce a true political space. This means that the organization of production comes to depend on the level and quality of communication amongst those partaking, in order to be able to speak of a coherent and transparent whole. Or, so that one can begin to speak of an open, egalitarian and inclusive artistic model. This is the *lack of text* that I mentioned earlier, which therefore is an infrastructural issue.

### *Infrastructure and space*

An infrastructural approach puts an emphasis on the relations that occur in the infrastructure of organization, how these are situated in the wider sphere of production. An infrastructural approach focusses on the ‘what occurs’ in the social relations, and attends to these differences of temporal and spatial relations, rather than identifying and (conceptually) analyzing the system that leads to eventual miscommunications, since such theoretical production again feeds into the system of critical production and remains abstract. Such an approach would therefore necessarily take the issue of artistic production outside of the confines of its institutional manifestations since these are embedded in a far greater constellation of production. So, as for text, for instance, the question becomes: what happens in communication when positions, layers and fields mingle? How do art institutions, as spaces, function in the larger economy of spatial urban planning, and what is an institution’s role in, for example, processes of gentrification? Or even more fundamentally: how do flows of financing within the commercial/non-commercial artistic infrastructure affect institution’s individual agencies as critical actors? Such integrated approach would require a method of mapping that considers the different categories of institutions, fields and registers of function and the interlinks within the infrastructure of production. This would consider *artistic practices* as mobile, flexible working modules that can adapt to situations, irrespective of their formal field: as malleable institutional formations. In a sense this is what Rib does as aesthetic practice. Rib demonstrates the closeness and interaction between those involved in production; it adopts an institutional form to investigate how forms of production and social relations within these can become relevant to a mode of self-determined production. As such it insists on occupying space as a site for work. This insistence on the spatial dimension of practice is therefore paramount, as becomes clear through reading Rib through the theoretical framework that Vishmidt postulates.

The underlying premise Vishmidt applies to the rationale of an infrastructural approach is informed by Kant's assertion that cognition (our perception and action in the world) is a function entangled with time. To quote Vishmidt:

Recalling the Kantian argument that space and time are the intuitions that make cognition in general possible, it seems that time could be defined both as an infrastructure and as something made of an infrastructure. (...) Time is an infrastructure because it is a condition of possibility for conscious perception and action; infrastructure is made out of time insofar as infrastructure is that which repeats.

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So, cognition as a form of abstract labour production in capitalism, becomes intimately related to the infrastructural organization of space and time in our societies. Through this, a notion to counter the capitalist domination of the infrastructure of time and space arises, in so far as the regular mode of conditions can be interrupted.

This resonates with the notion of space in Sami Khatib's extrapolation of capitalist production in relation to artistic production.<sup>248</sup> Since all time is subsumed under capitalism, and time has become irrelevant in a sense, since all conditions repeat themselves (in an update of Benjamin's terms: the occupation of homogeneous empty time has become a matter of self-administration), history has come to an eternal expansion of the same. Capitalism's next territorial expansion has transferred into the arrangement, occupation and division of space, as speculation and investment in spatial development and re-distribution is a more stable form of capitalization. Here the equation or transferability of labour = time = capital = space emerges. And in the total occupation of capitalism, that yet leaves time (though unequally increasing for some and decreasing for others, and more unproductive at the same time in a general sense, in an increasingly more automated world) to its subjects, this time may be taken up against its system of control. This is why the notions of space and time cannot be separated since these are interlinked in production.

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<sup>247</sup> Marina Vishmidt, *Between Not Everything and Not Nothing: Cuts Towards Infrastructural Critique*, details the particularities of an infrastructural critique in *Former West, Art and the Contemporary after 1989*, eds. Maria Hlavajova and Simon Sheikh, MIT Press, 2017

<sup>248</sup> Sami Khatib, in *No Future, The Space of Capital and the Space of Dying*, in *Former West, Art and the Contemporary after 1989*, eds. Maria Hlavajova and Simon Sheikh, MIT Press, 2017

In almost all of Rib's projects the continuation of engagement in real terms (time and space are operationalized through work), stresses and updates the persistence of the paradoxes that exist in art as means to tackle the present tense of conditions and the occupation of space. Rib tackles these issues as an aesthetics operation which mirrors our condition. The exhibition program (as the core function and activity that conventionally structures the institutional presentation platform, the exhibition space), acts as the narrative of Rib, the narrative of the production machine. Its format of production on the other hand, its structural model as presence – which is in dialogue with the conventional production formats – is Rib's real artistic-political action. Independency is not organized action in the pursuit of freedom, it is a dialogue with the promise of the institutional, as constitutive form of political space. This aligns with the high ambition of art: as a tool equal to that of politics, that aims towards the political arrangement of all space.



## Entwinement of academic and artistic production

### *Introduction*

In the following I will summarize my artistic position and the way in which my artistic position is deployed in constructing the thesis. The thesis is structured through a purposeful partition and juxtaposition between *academic* (chapters 1-4) and *artistic* (documentation section) production. This artificial division aims at highlighting the interdependence of these two forms of production. The relationship between the two categories will be reconsidered. The entwined condition of art, critical theoretical production and curating within the political economy as well as in artistic production, has been extensively discussed in the previous chapters. It is precisely this entwinement that is the central topic of my research project.

While I emphasize the entwinement of textual (academic, discursive) and artistic production, and perhaps paradoxically, I uphold the distinction between the two forms of production (similar to the way the interdisciplinary character of artistic production was approached and researched in the *Benjamin in Palestine and Van Abbemuseum* chapters). Precisely by upholding the distinction, the positional interrelatedness and the multi-registered role text performs, can be investigated. This analytic methodologic approach of a separation of positions is reflected in the structure of the thesis in total. By deliberately dividing it into an analytic style of writing (the academic section) and more artistic way of presenting (the documentation section) the model of the art-aesthetics relation as phrased by Rancière is put to work, as an investigative tool within the thesis as such. The position of artist that I bring to the thesis as author is mobilized and becomes part of the research. The artistic and performative critical construct of academic and artistic production addresses the condition of cognitive capitalism in an infrastructural sense.

### *Immanent critique and assembled position*

Through this artifice of a structural academic/artistic division and my own artistic production, the multidisciplinary make up of artistic production of which I am part myself is revisited. In doing so, I operationalise the notion of what could be called an *immanent critique*, a critical approach developed during the Romantic period and made explicit by Walter Benjamin. Immanent critique discards a clear-cut object/subject distinction, as it understands that observation alters and is itself part of the aesthetic assessment. Every step in the artistic chain of production is considered both as an act of reception as well as of production, mutually

affecting each other. This means that no unequivocal demarcated function exists for the positions within the chain as these are all involved in the processes of aesthetics. To quote Graeme Gilloch, a reader of Benjamin in this respect:

In other words, the truth of the work of art is both constructed and discovered by the critic. Immanent criticism, then, privileges neither the object (the artwork) nor the subject (the critic); or rather, it privileges both. For the Romantics and for Benjamin, this 'problem' is pre-empted or circumvented by dissolving the subject-object distinction altogether - the critic simply facilitates and partakes of the self-knowledge of the artwork. Nevertheless, it is a tension which is unresolved - indeed, one which, articulated in terms of the figure of the 'engineer' (the principle of construction) and the notion of 'afterlife' (the principle of decomposition and disclosure) lies at the heart of Benjamin's work.<sup>249</sup>

As this tension inevitably remains unresolved, authorship within the artistic field becomes a matter for all parties involved: artist, curator, theorist alike. It is a matter of shared authorship in production. Therefore, the way in which the artist positions himself becomes a matter of politics, as every function and position involved is co-creator in the processes of production: it is an assembled position. This assembled authorship is deployed in my artistic practice, in which I mix visual arts, art criticism and curating, as is demonstrated in the Documentation section.

#### *Play of positions, artistic positioning*

My artistic profile must be understood as a mobilisation of critique, addressing the interconnectedness of art, criticism and curating. It is my claim that when this interconnectedness is insufficiently recognized, this will lead to a structuring and accommodation of the division of labour. The mobilisation of my artistic profile within this research project must therefore be understood as analogous to that of the *engineer* as mentioned in the quote by Gilloch. The mobilisation through the role of the artist – the role I strategically occupy – is shaped through a technique of deconstructing the qualities that make up the field of art (i.e. the supposed separation between artist, critic/theorist and curator) and of (re)constructing an artistic position.

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<sup>249</sup> Graeme Gilloch, *Walter Benjamin, Critical Constellations*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2002.

The central place and weight of the first four chapters within the thesis as a whole, that are written in an analytical and critical style, is counter to what usually is expected from an artist. This undercutting of expectations is instrumental to questioning the respective roles conventionally performed in the assembly of artistic aesthetics. The reconsideration of functions – in this case performed by me – is not only the task of the artist; it is equally a task for the curator, organizer, critic and platform. In fact, one of the tenets in this dissertation is that the exceptional position of the artist is a problem that needs to be solved. My insistence on the artist-position does not aim at recuperating a special place for the artist, but rather as a means to address the obfuscated entwinement we find ourselves in and to critically reflect on the role of the artist. The notion of the aesthetic engineer is equally at play in Benjamin's *Author as Producer*<sup>250</sup> where he argues that the place of the *intellectual* to be indispensably linked *with* production. The quintessential notion of aesthetic engineering we also find in the conclusion of chapter 3 – the Benjamin in Palestine conference – where the organisation of the conference is identified in terms of such an engineer. I hope to have demonstrated that aesthetic engineering is the central principle in Rancière's art-aesthetics relation. Whereas Rancière starts with this relation as the basis for politics in general, I use it to investigate the hiccups that occur in the current fabric of artistic institutional formation and politics.

*Style of writing in regards to the academic section, prose as art, appropriation of theory*

The analytical viewpoint and style of writing in the four case studies in the academic section are in line with Romantic thought where critical prose is actually considered closest and essential to art. Gilloch writes:

It is only in critical prose that the poetic work of art is reflected, brought to self-consciousness and dissolved into the Idea of Art, that the Gesamtkunstwerk is infinitely reconstituted. Hence, though it may appear paradoxical, the Romantics came to see prose rather than 'poetic' writing itself as the fundamental basis or 'creative ground' (SW1, p. 174) of the 'idea of the poetry' (SW1, p. 174), the Idea of Art. For Benjamin, 'The conception of the idea of poetry as that of prose determines the whole Romantic philosophy of art' (S W1, p. 175) and points unequivocally to the critical sobriety and austerity of the Romantics' thinking.<sup>251</sup>

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<sup>250</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Author as Producer*, New Left Review 1/62, July-August 1970

<sup>251</sup> Ibid.



Here I want to refer back to chapter 2 and the Autonomy Project at the Van Abbemuseum, where I used a quote by Rancière in which he describes that prose contains a poetic quality. Following Hegel, Rancière claims that prose in regards to aesthetics can open up to what is *other*, or to what is unknown. At the moment when this othering quality decays, the text becomes *mere* prose and normative, and will come to serve politics as it is. Rancière, through Hegel, suggests that this enables a dialectics in how we perceive heterogeneity and also, I argue, how we may perceive the potentiality of prose. To quote Rancière:

Poetry is poetry, says Hegel, so long as prose is confused with poetry. When prose is only prose, there is no more heterogeneous sensible. The statements and furnishings of collective life are only the statements and furnishings of collective life. So the formula of art becoming life is invalidated: a new life does not need a new art. On the contrary, the new life is specific in that it does not need art. The whole history of art forms and of the politics of aesthetics in the aesthetic regime of art could be staged as the clash of these two formulæ: a new life needs a new art; the new life does not need art.<sup>252</sup>

### *Performance of writing*

Throughout the readings of the cases I applied an analytical style, appropriating the medium and the position of theorist. This interrupts the logic of the convention of the ‘artist’ as one who is supposed to bring original and new insights exclusively through experientially based aesthetical expressiveness (a poetics), rather than through reasoned judgment, which is usually reserved for the critic and excluded from the artist’s task. I deploy the figure of the artist to ward off the decay of prose as writerly performance. The deliberate negation of what the artist is supposed to bring to the art-aesthetics relation serves to emphasize the art-aesthetics bind and the structural interdependence between the two. Here my artistic intervention is particularly aimed at the roles reflection and communication have as the pivotal media connecting the fields of artistic production. The four platforms that I explored as case studies were thus ‘read’, and in these readings the cases were considered for their production model. Considering these readings in the logic of immanent critique then, means that these readings should not be seen as a conventional critique that maintains a distance between subject (I as interpreter) and object (the case), but as a critique that reads along and with the potential of the cases to be understood, *and* subsequently how this critique can be

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<sup>252</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus, On Politics and Aesthetics*, Continuum, London – New York, 2010, p.124

conceived as potential object for new readings that provide a new aesthetical exchange. The readings of these four chapters through the essayistic academic format are therefore intended as generative aesthetical objects, as potential artistic propositions. This way, the role of the critic can be considered as existing on the same level as the role of the artist.<sup>253</sup> As stated before, it is my claim that this more holistic and recursive approach, geared against the division of labour (which is the condition of heteronomy we found ourselves in), would enable a clearer political position for art production and the role of the artist. This also entails that my readings of the cases have political consequences, as they are concerned with the mode of production and are, in themselves, forms of production – as discourse.<sup>254</sup> The appropriation of the analytic style serves to emphasize the role of reception, and therefore the role of the critic (as generative and artistic author) in the positional chain of production (in the life of production as social construct). In a sense these texts oscillate indeterminately between art and aesthetics, an oscillation that I also enact in my position as critic and/or artist.

As said, the first four chapters have a distinct academic and essayistic style, which is juxtaposed with different forms of writing and presenting in the Documentation section. The subjects that are discussed in the Documentation section refer to the composite art-aesthetics nature of art production in the Rancièrian sense. This section consists of varying elements: projects, documentation of exhibitions and installations, and additional texts, each of which will be discussed and introduced separately. These supplements are to be understood in the vein of an Infrastructural Critique formulated by Marina Vishmidt, as discussed throughout the thesis.

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<sup>253</sup> This also explains the conceptual distinction I arrived at in discussing the manners in which Peter Osborne and Jacques Rancière positioned themselves in the Autonomy Project at the Van Abbemuseum in chapter two. Osborne maintains an assessing distance to an object under scrutiny, while Rancière takes on a more imbricated position and becomes a more fully-fledged *author* himself.

<sup>254</sup> This refers back to the argument made by Malik and Phillips in chapter two, in which they imply a meta-political position for the arts.



## Conclusion

### *Assembly*

The two central topics of inquiry addressed in this thesis are, firstly, an examination of the field of artistic production and the assembly of, and relations between positions involved, and secondly the role of the artist within this assembly. In this dissertation, I have demonstrated how both topics need to be understood in the context of, on the one hand, the increasing role of institutional mediation and, on the other hand, the central role of text as medium of information within the infrastructure of contemporary artistic production. My research focused on the condition of production in *cognitive capitalism*, within which according to Paolo Virno a categorical division between aesthetics, labour and politics no longer can be made. As textuality and criticality become a shared medium and modality for all actors and registers involved (from curator, to artist, to institution) this means that the role of critical theory and reflection becomes material in, and part of the economy of institutional production. My proposition is that the subjects involved in these positions function, and should be considered as, actors and as co-authors in the assembly of artistic production. The assumption put forward is that the political economy easily permeates the institutional form, especially now that in the condition of cognitive capitalism the demarcations in roles in artistic production (artist, curating, reflection and organization) have become diffuse, and authorship therefore must be understood in a broadened sense.

The emerging, contemporary constellation of the network of production I identified in the analysis of three contemporary case-studies is captured by the title: *The Emergent Artistic Object in the Postconceptual Condition*. The juxtaposition of *object* and *emergent* in the title is used to define art as a form of activity that takes shape (or that congeals itself in temporary institutional and para-institutional formations) but that also is contingent and in movement. Crucial in this analysis is my use of Rancière's conceptualization of the art and aesthetics relation which is extensively deployed in the case-studies, and runs as a red thread throughout the thesis.

In Rancière's art-theoretical and broader philosophical frame, the conditions and the processes of the exchange between art and its meaning (the poiesis- aisthesis relation) determine the cultural and political community that emerges out of this exchange. This frame is used to analyze the cases for their political and social organization (or institutional form).

The overall claim is that these changing conditions (of the changing constellation of the assembly of production and media of communication under cognitive capitalism) affect the nature of artistic production, and that these changes impact the role of artistic production in a political sense. Questions then are: What does this mean for art production in relation to its societal role and how is art able to critique the conditions of life under the conditions dictated by capitalism?

Following Rancière, I explore how the field of fine art and that of the artist are recent phenomena of the last three centuries, that have developed analogous to that of capitalism. They may even be considered symptom of capitalism's development. This research retraces that development, furthered by the reconsideration of the art aesthetics relation. Capitalist subsumption now is organized through a dissolution of disciplines and positions in production. A response can only come from an acceptance and reconsideration of this dissolution.

### *Institution*

Regarding the question of art's political role, the institutional constellation of artistic production takes on great importance. In particular, this issue relates to how institutional art production is – as English art theorist Dave Beech has formulated<sup>255</sup> – the disputed object between the liberal ideologies of the market and politics, within which it is conceived of as a function of the state. The general context in which art is related to both the market within a now 'cognitive' capitalism and a state redefined by its role within a global, cognitive and financialized capitalism, is vital for the understanding of the emerging assemblage of actors that are now constitutive of the artistic object. Importantly, this also involves the site of artistic production in its relation to the economy at large and to the political constellation this entails. This question materializes in the art institution, where the different actors meet against the backdrop of the political economy, of which the institution is an expression.

As said, the institutional constellation is taken as the site of organization connecting the different actors. My argument is that the governmental and administrative regime is shaped as the division of labor, and is active on the work-floor that furthers the neoliberal

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<sup>255</sup> Dave Beech, *Public Museum, Public Funding, Public Sphere*, GIANT STEP, Vessel Art Projects, Bari, Italy, 2013

order (Lorey). A special focus is put on the role of communication (language and text), and its privileged role in structuring the inner organization of art-production, and how this is related to the wider economic constellation of production (especially observing the characteristics of cognitive capitalism). I argue that although the division between disciplines has become a much more hybrid interplay of positions (as Virno's analysis shows), this division is still structurally upheld in institutional operations. Together with the underacknowledged role of critical/theoretical production as institutional author, a view on the working relations, i.e. who participates and who is subsequent accountable, becomes obfuscated. This leads to an institutional weakness, since the workings of capitalism, and especially that of neoliberal managerialism, might go unhindered. As a consequence, I argue, a more infrastructural approach (Vishmidt) is needed, through which the relations across the field of art and the connection between the site of art with governance and politics are examined. My central argument, which has been examined in the case studies, is that authorship in the artistic field has to be taken up much more profoundly as a case of all parties involved, as the authorship of capitalism traverses it in a novel way, necessitating a reconsideration of the relations between positions.

### *Cases*

In *Chapter 2 The Autonomy Project, Van Abbemuseum*, the tri-angulation between artists, theorists and organizers at the Van Abbemuseum symposium was analyzed. As my analysis of the symposium shows, the structural relation between art and aesthetics, as argued by Rancière, supposes a fundamental and reciprocal equivalence between all actors involved. In this analysis, and extending on Rancière's thinking and combining it with Luhmann's theory of communication, I consider how the epistemological differences present at the symposium were insufficiently recognized. A close reading of the symposium shows how the fields of academia and the arts differ in operation in regards to their contribution to the site of the symposium. I conclude that these differences remained unaddressed. In the exchanges, artists were primarily addressed as practitioners, whereas theory mostly remained considered as a purely interpretative praxis. This hierarchical arrangement disregards the structural reciprocity in the exchange between art and aesthetics. Also, I argue that the role of the organizers of the symposium was kept underexposed as architects of the site of artistic production (the poiesis-aisthesis structure). This means that the division of labor and disciplines between artist, reflection/reception and organization, active at the site of social production (the symposium), remains uncontested.

In *Chapter 3 Benjamin in Palestine conference*, the negotiation between fields and positions (art, theory) was operationalised during the event. The conference was mostly analysed through a close reading of the relationships between artists and academics and the way it was organized. I argue that the set-up of the generative interchange between these fields demonstrated a politics of aesthetics. I described how artistic and theoretical presentations intermingled in collective and cross-categorical readings. Walter Benjamin's notions of the role of language and of the organization of work were used to focus on and detail the multi-positional exchanges that took place. Rancière's model of the art and aesthetics relation was used to frame the social proceedings of the participants in the conference

*Chapter 4 Rib* is a close examination of the mode and organisation of artistic work of art space Rib. Rib's small-scale operation is compared to the bigger art institution Witte de With, which provides a chance to examine how institutional scale effect modes of operation. I argue that the politics of governance and neoliberalism is furthered through a multi-registered use of language that traverses artistic production and I demonstrate how this particularly affects bigger institutions. Here especially the role of text was examined, and how it is part and medium of the wider institutional infrastructure of artistic production, where it touches the realms of politics. I argue that the art institution needs to discern, negotiate and disclose where and how the political economy effects its operation. The not-for-profit character of Rib was related to the theoretical critique of Vishmidt and Stakemeier, who have contextualized artistic labor as a critique of work in general. The close-knit operation of Rib enables a tighter integration between the positions of artist, curator and of communal processes of meaning, which enables a mode of constantly translating the artistic as a matter of work. My argument is that Rib thus has found a way to formulate and enact a model of work that critically addresses the condition of capitalism.

### *Institutional field*

These three cases are exponents of the segment of contemporary art that aims for non-commodified forms of artistic production. Together they present a cross-section of (semi-) institutional forms of contemporary artistic production that offer a critique on the conventional economy (by no means this is presumed to be a complete account). The Van Abbe's Autonomy Project is situated within an acknowledged institutional format of the museum, the Benjamin in Palestine conference was an independent initiative, initiated

primarily by the academic and knowledge segment of the art-aesthetics combination at the centre of this examination. Rib is part of the institutional artistic field and represents the independent not-for-profit art institutions. Witte de With is part of the bigger institutions in the not-for-profit artistic field. Together these present the different forms in which artistic production proposes an alternative mode of production and the manifold ways in which these are embedded and relate to the economy at large.

In this overview and diversity of institutional formations I set out to map and investigate the constellations of roles in production: of the artist (also considered an institution), of curating, of theory and institutional form. It is my claim that these roles should be reconsidered in their close entwinement. As the functions of aesthetics, labour and politics no longer can be clearly differentiated, an infrastructural mode of survey is needed to identify how the art-aesthetics exchange (Rancière) is structured, how it is related to the forces that determine the conditions for it, to begin to understand what constitutes the art-object.

#### *Artist position, authorship and accountability*

I have used my own position as visual artist to denote the equivalence between these positions. By stepping away from a position of adding to the situation – I limit myself to the function of documenting, of analysis and of mapping – the conventional disciplinary artist position is undercut. This artistic position demonstrates the entangled constellation and calls for an interdisciplinary approach. The appropriation of the role of critic by the artist (me) serves to highlight the role of critical reception as generative author. Both movements are to be understood as a *critique of creativity* in the current economy of precarity that sets the conditions for art and labor. My thesis throughout is marked by the notion of accountability, which is linked to the notion of authorship. In the case studies the different positions – next to that of the artist – are identified in terms of their authorship (the organizer, the curator, the critic, the platform). The combined notion of accountability and authorship, is aimed at identifying the structure of the operation: as *cognitive mapping*, as an act of orientation in order to understand one's place and the conditions in which one finds one's self. Next to this notion of orientation, I think I have offered the beginnings of an alternative way of thinking that moves beyond critique only and beyond a confrontation with the conditions as they presently are. A fundamental recalibration of positions – and of subsequent authorships – is needed in order to think of an unrestrained poiesis - aisthesis flow as stipulated by Rancière. In this dissertation I argue that Benjamin's language theory, in which translation between



positions is key, offers a way to enter into the contemporary art-aesthetics relation on its most fundamental level. Thought together, the notion of the live art-aesthetics exchange (adapted from Rancière's position) and the notion of an epistemological recursivity (contained in Luhmann) may provide a tool to counter the shift as ordered by cognitive capitalism, that was observed by Virno as a shift in labor positions. This may provide the building blocks for a model of artistic work. This then entails a re-orientation of the position of the artist as well as institutional organization which needs to be thought of as a mode of constant negotiation and orientation. To engage with this question as a permanent ground zero, is a critical approach I believe to be pertinently necessary.





## Documentation Section

### 1 Post-Script to Rib

#### *Critique as (part of) production*

Here I return to chapter 4, *Rib, Mirroring productivism* to point to the constellation through which this text was written. The text was commissioned by Rib and it is to be presented on the Rib website, within the specially designated section entitled: *Rib Unresolved Issues*.<sup>256</sup> This Rib segment is a long-term programme in which the programme and format of Rib is reflected upon by different writers. Because each writer responds to the previous writer, and processes that prior assessment of Rib within their own, a chain of responses is set up in which critique and original object of critique blend and fuse. The idea of having readings stacked up upon one another, structurally performs how readings and processing of interpretations are generated and that reflections on worlds and the making of them, are inherently coupled; there is no real distinction possible between a reading of and the object itself. Rib's logic, which takes an artistic approach to production, emphasises and isolates the act of reading and of critique as a constitutive and generative element in artistic production. In the Rib chapter, I explained The Ghost Stories publication (REF Rib) as a form of contestation of the socio-political order by means of documentation and as artistic *work*, and here the same applies with regard to my position as artist *prosaically documenting* the practice of Rib, where the artistic work is the documenting activity, and takes the form of a chapter within my PhD-thesis.

It is important to stress the relevance of the fact of the commission and the factuality of the publication of this text on Rib's website. The function of critique and reflection, performed by an artist specifically invited to reflect on Rib's model and artistic proposition, is thus an entangled position. Normally, in the conventional sequence of production, it is the production of artist and platform that will be reflected upon in a critique and in the convention of critique this is mostly done from a distanced and quasi-objective position. Here though, inversely, it is the platform of production, Rib, commissioning such a critique, and it is an artist, me and others, writing such a reflection.<sup>257</sup> The artist's gesture here in writing a critique

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<sup>256</sup> See: <https://www.ribrib.nl/projects/rib-unresolved-issues?slide=3> (accessed 14-01-2021)

<sup>257</sup> It is important to mention that the remuneration for this commission was limited, due to the sparse resources available for Rib to spend.

on the platform where the critique will be shown, emphasizes the conditional frame of artistic production as such. And in becoming fully integrated within the conditional frame of production and of presentation, it is an act of renunciation of autonomy.

In giving up on the distance and difference between the position of the object and subject, and instead engaging with what is expressed, Rib allows the notion of a dialogue to arise in which receptivity towards the nature of the encounter exceeds and critiques the illusion of a purely critical stance even being possible. The idea of continuing the dialogue via a recursive reflection – as my contribution on the Rib platform could be understood – undercuts the idea of inside and outside in the assembly of production; indeed it cuts right through it. The stance of the artist, which is assumed to bring novel and original insights from a purely subjective position, is renounced and challenged. Taken as yet another position in a chain of dissemination of information, the critic holds a position that is no longer different from that of the artist, curator or institutional platform. Such a model of embedded production, directly addresses the division of labour, the characteristic that shapes capitalist production.

## 2 Benjamin in Palestine conference – supplement

### 2.1 Benjamin in Palestine, On the Task of the Translator in the Age of Platform Production, essay for Open!

Next to chapter 3 of the thesis: *Benjamin in Palestine conference*, I wrote an essay that deals with the same topic titled *Benjamin in Palestine, On the Task of the Translator in the Age of Platform Production*.<sup>258</sup> In this essay that is published at the online journal *Open!*, Platform for Art, Culture and the Public Domain, I compare the conference in Palestine with a roundtable discussion held at the Volksbühne in Berlin in 2015, titled ‘History in the time of hypercirculation’. My critique focusses on how such an event as in Berlin, in which artists, curators, publicists and theorists/scholars come together to discuss before an audience (a format that has become quite common), can retain its politics of aesthetics. The critique builds on a reflection by British philosopher Jacob Bard Rosenberg; and I extend these findings to reflect on the ways in which BiP was organised.

Choosing the platform *Open!* for this essay was deliberate, as *Open!* focusses on the public domain and is itself a public platform for discussion. It was published there with the specific intention of engaging with discourse as the fabric of public space. Reading discourse as such, every text becomes an artistic medium in the field of information exchange and the field of discourse becomes the medium for public exchange. Though the same analytical style is used here as in the rest of the thesis, I propose this text to fit in the supplement section, as it is aimed to directly engage in a public debate. The text engages with the medium of communication as the medium of aesthetics par excellence in information-based societies. To engage as artist in this form of production, is doing so through the art-aesthetics bind directly: discourse is a direct and material form of aesthetics. In an infrastructural sense this means to draw attention to the interconnectedness between the field of art and that of knowledge production.

I have included the text in the form it takes on the *Open!*-website to emphasise the material character of the site of discourse dissemination and the entanglement of content and form. Publishing date: 07-09-2016.

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<sup>258</sup> <https://www.onlineopen.org/benjamin-in-palestine> (accessed 03-12-20)

## **Benjamin in Palestine, On the Task of the Translator in the Age of Platform Production**

**Jack Segbars**

The ‘Benjamin in Palestine’ conference and workshop in Palestine from 6–11 December 2015 was organized by an international group of critical theorists, activists, artists and Benjamin scholars.<sup>259</sup> Three days of workshops – interspersed with artistic and academic presentations and interventions – centred on close readings of some of Benjamin’s key texts including: ‘Theses on the Concept of History’ (1940) in which Benjamin advocates for the necessity to stand with the oppressed at any given time vis-à-vis the power of the oppressor over history, thus keeping the space for the oppressed open; and ‘The Task of the Translator’ (1923), an exploration of translation and of language in terms of power relations and preventing instrumentalization in and through text. The last two days consisted of a conference with keynote speeches by Rebecca Comay, Susan Buck-Morss, and Slavoj Žižek, each of whom elaborated on Benjaminian thought in relation to the Palestinian context. Benjamin is a key person to turn to in contemporary Ramallah, as while a Jewish intellectual and icon of Western humanities, he remains an extremely influential cultural theorist due to his critical ideas on representation, state violence, and oppression, all of which still profoundly shape cultural production and the humanities of relevance to the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Case in point: Comay presented a paper on how to address the lack of a revolutionary testament of use in our current conditions by reconsidering Benjamin’s notions on how to relate to our past and the demand that is put forward by our history.

With the animosity between the two sides become practically immensurable, hardly any intrinsic cultural exchange exists between Israelis and Palestinians, be it in journalism, academia, or otherwise, that might counter this stultified toxic relation. Antagonistic rhetoric, illustrated by many declarations made by Israeli officials, takes precedence, branding the ‘other’ as eternal danger and hereditary foe. Take Israel’s recent ban in schools on novels featuring Arab-Jewish romance, under the claim that they ‘threaten Jewish identity.’ To organize such an event as this conference amidst growing acute violence in the West Bank and Jerusalem and the phenomenon of erratic stabbings, tests the potential for critical theory

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<sup>259</sup> The conference’s organizing partners were the International Academy of Art Palestine, Birzeit University, Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center and the Goethe-Institut Palästinensische Gebiete.

in a place where oppression is most felt and visible, and the doors of perception and of communication and exchange are most closed.

What can an academic project offer amid acute political turmoil? How can it, in the spirit of Benjamin's thinking, do justice to its supposed aim, be of effect in the sense of its commitment to the oppressed? What state do the arts and critical theory find themselves in, facing contexts like these? What political agency can be found under the present conditions?

As Benjamin himself noted in considering the literary work in his text the 'Author as Producer': 'Before I ask: how does a literary work stand in relation to the relationships of production of a period, I would like to ask: how does it stand in them? This question aims directly at the function that the work has within the literary relationships of production of a period. In other words, it aims directly at a work's literary technique.' Taking this comment to art and critical theory, how these techniques or practices are executed or applied could be said to depend on the right tendency.<sup>260</sup> What political position is taken up and expressed by them? This question lies at the core of the 'Benjamin in Palestine' project.

The key objective of the organizers was two-fold: first, to address the situation in Palestine critically; and second, to self-critically assess the situation and practice critique and theory in general find themselves. The conference intended not only to insert theory into matters of politics – here, how Benjaminian concepts may form an antidote to factual politics by re-examining its revolutionary potential and its analysis on state violence and oppression – but also to address theory's role in neoliberalism and the way critical theory is instrumentalized under capitalist hegemony (transmitted here to the Palestinian situation via the Israeli occupation). Criticality is absorbed in capitalist production as yet another mode of productivity enhancement without touching capitalism's basic structure. It admittedly performs its critical role but fails to realize political agency and remains within the capitalist order organized under nation-state regimes.

The choice of Palestine was in response to another conference on Benjamin<sup>261</sup> being

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<sup>260</sup> See Walter Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer.' *New Left Review* 1, no. 62 (July–August 1970).

<sup>261</sup> This was the "SPACES, PLACES, CITIES, AND SPATIALITY" conference, organized by International Walter Benjamin Society Conference: Eli Friedländer, Yoav Rinon, Ilit Ferber, Vivian Liska, December 13, 2015 - December 16, 2015, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv University.



organized in Israel, a location the organizers thought would in fact go against Benjamin's core thinking (as it would affirm the oppressor's status). But does Ramallah produce the right form of resistance: that of the fight of the oppressed Palestinians versus Israelis, and the role of resistance performed by critical theory under capitalist subsumption? What is the truly committed position, how can we realize our aesthetic ambitions (what is the right *technique*) in cultural production under our conditions?

In the essay 'All the World's a Platform: Dispatches from Berlin on Post-Internet Art' Benjamin scholar and activist Jacob Bard Rosenberg, one of the organizers of the 'Benjamin in Palestine Conference,' considers how artistic production today interprets our modes of social interaction (the use of social media and platforms) often failing to fully grasp the social and political dimension of these forms.<sup>262</sup> The essay's argumentation is based on a critical review of an event at the Volksbühne in Berlin where a roundtable discussion was organized with artist and essayist Hito Steyerl, art historian and critic Prof. Susanne von Falkenhausen, and two of the editors of DIS Magazine, the curators the (then forthcoming) 2016 Berlin Biennale. The discussion was titled "History in the time of hypercirculation", a term construed for this occasion.<sup>263</sup> His critique is aimed at Hito Steyerl's definition and use of the term 'hyper-circulation,' by which she argues that the economy of circulation has undergone a fundamental change from commodity-form to conceptual to 'imagistic.' Steyerl argues that the modern, algorithmically driven media apparatus based on the consumers economy by images produces a quasi-autonomous mode of exchange. The proposition is that this makes way for a means of resistance since this mode of exchange could allow for an escape of regimes of centralized control (as accelerated exchange modules), offering a sociality manageable by its users (us). Or if not an escape and/or manageability, it can at least be a means of resistance.<sup>264</sup> Rosenberg argues, however, that this analysis fails to understand that it is precisely this circulation that is not under the user's control but under that of corporate and

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<sup>262</sup> See <http://prolapsarian.tumblr.com/post/105025464662/all-the-worlds-a-platform-dispatches-from-berlin>

<sup>263</sup> Quote from 'All the World's a Platform': 'The background to the discussion was an intervention regarding contemporary artistic production made by von Falkenhausen in the latest issue of *Frieze*: "[Too Much Too Fast. The work of art in the age of digital circulation: a lament.](#)" In her essay, Von Falkenhausen takes issue with the current trend for Post-Internet works, claiming that they ultimately fail to address history in the way that artworks ought to: that through their integration into contemporary ideological forms, they renounce the critical power of distance once implied in the notion of artistic autonomy. As such, this discussion offered at least a possibility of critical reflection, for the subject of critique was the relation to history of the works and "projects" of the scene who had arrived to listen.'

<sup>264</sup> This is the central question at hand in the discussion on Accelerationism that is being conducted at the moment: can the capitalist means of production be lodged free from exploitation by accessing its qualities beyond central control.

state scrutiny, establishing and affirming – by a failure of recognition – the oppressors’ rule.

I bring this up not because the topic under discussion is social, virtual platforms as a form of social production, but because of the analogy to another part of Rosenberg’s critique in his ‘All the World’s a Platform’ article, which is the subject of his observations. Specifically, the format that is chosen for this event In this, by now well-known format artists, curators, publicists and theorists/scholars come together to discuss before an audience, a ‘platform’ that is modus operandi in artistic production today. It is a format that has become very successful and that has spread out extensively the last decades in which knowledge (academic) production has become more aligned to the field of artistic production. Here the primary positions of artistic production are presented and brought together: Steyerl as the (theorist-) artist, Von Falkenhausen as art historian and critic, and the curatorial by DIS Magazine. Of the audience, mostly well informed and often also from the field of art-production, a participative role is expected by intervening, asking questions, furthering the discussion at hand and dissemination and production of information and knowledge. This format often assumes the idea that ‘producing’ together produces a (sovereign) form of social production hinting at operating autonomously, similar to what is proposed or suggested by hypercirculation.

This is arguably a contested conclusion, or one that fails to escape the overarching system in which it operates, as Rosenberg rightly observes in the case of Steyerl’s claims. In addition, this example of platformed production as in Berlin illustrates that theory as such is implicated and forms an essential part.<sup>265</sup> Yet the format of the Benjamin in Palestine project has several traits similar to the platform format: the pallet of contributors that gather in a mode of production. Where Rosenberg critically addresses the role of curating and the artist in production, in this conference, it must be said that theory plays a similar role in the production of the cultural object. So does the Benjamin conference manage to offer a method or form to avoid a conundrum so pervasive in critical cultural production?

The critique of theory and likewise of art is nothing new. Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello in

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<sup>265</sup> Quote from ‘All the World’s a Platform’ in which Rosenberg adheres to the criticality of the topic discussed but questions the form in which it is structured: ‘But away from the seriousness, there is also a sense in which theoretical discussion of the arts are staged as a form of entertainment appropriate to the type of intelligentsia of which this scene considers itself to be composed. This gives the discussions themselves a tinge of comedy: as the roundtable started with what felt like an extended job interview of the DIS editors, it seemed this would employ the model made popular by *The Apprentice*: a comedy of hubris drawing on the overconfidence of entrepreneurs, who become the fall guys as they flailingly attempt to undertake everyday work.’

*The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2005) argue that the role of art follows the capitalist regime while at the same time critiquing it. This mode of critical agency as cultural production has been absorbed by capital, even as one of its prime qualities, thus rendering it powerless. The issue of leftist artistic-critical agency, in line with its avant-garde heritage, has become a question rather than a practice. It is arguably the single most important topic in the field of cultural production today.

An essential aspect of Benjaminian thinking is the way it demonstrates the need to conceive history ourselves and even proposes a methodology to produce this, by which agency can be gained as a means to oppose oppression. Benjamin's pointing to the importance of this is both to reveal the potential in counter narratives, but also to demonstrate how obscuring structurally serves authority (documented history always serves the oppressor and neglects or eradicates the oppressed, rendering these non-existent). Documentation and archiving are acts that lead to oppression,<sup>266</sup> the principle of what he calls the 'dialectical image.' Unearthing obscured histories thereby at once reveals the principle of power and the potential of the other – the image that flashes up in a moment of danger.<sup>267</sup>

But how to gain agency through embracing this methodology is maybe the most problematic aspect of Benjaminian thinking – how to render operational a demonstration of the oppressed politically and to prevent this becoming a representation. For each act of representation of course stands the chance to fall in the register of oppression, and becomes the essential problematic to be negotiated. Arguably Benjamin was not able to solve this conundrum, that is, not theoretically, supported by a definite framework. *The Arcades Project*, however, shows a direction in how to circumnavigate this conundrum – a way in which to avoid theory to become a new epistemological and thereby authoritative form.<sup>268</sup> In *The Arcades Project* the detrimental effect of any historicization and epistemology is circumvented by laying out an overview of cultural expressions, disclosing obscured – oppressed – histories that can be navigated without reaching a finalized reading. Or that can be read differently each time the

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<sup>266</sup> 'There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another.' Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History,' *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken, 1969), 256.

<sup>267</sup> 'To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it "the way it really was" (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.' *Ibid.*, 255.

<sup>268</sup> The lack of a strict theoretical framework was critiqued by Adorno, but embraced by the arts, indicating the tension between the accountability of science proper that forms its own authoritative episteme, and the humanities.

text is read, albeit always in the sense of recognisance of the oppressed (the notion of oppression). As Buck-Morss, keynote speaker and expert on Benjamin says in her preface to her study of the *Arcades Project*:

It is a picture book of philosophy, explicating the dialectics of seeing developed by Walter Benjamin, who took seriously the debris of mass culture as the source of philosophical truth. It draws its authority from a book that was never written, the *Passagen-Werk* [Arcades project], the unfinished, major project of Benjamin's mature years. Instead of a 'work,' he left us only a massive collection of notes on nineteenth-century industrial culture as it took form in Paris – and formed that city in turn. These notes consist of citations from a vast array of historical sources, which Benjamin filed with the barest minimum of commentary, and only the most general indications of how the fragments were eventually to have been arranged.<sup>269</sup>

In her keynote presentation Buck-Morss explains how she uses the same circumscribing approach as Benjamin's *Arcades Project* in how she writes about art and envisions her role as critic. Together with Palestinian artist Emily Jacir, she produced a booklet that accompanies Jacir's contribution to dOCUMENTA 13 for which she was invited.<sup>270</sup> It consists of photos by Jacir captioned by Buck-Morss, with further notes, both of essayistic and poetic-literary nature, in an effort to establish the critic's relation to artists as interpreter, a non-authoritative or finite reading of the work and/or artist. This intricate mode of communication works on the intimate level of direct contact, but how does this translate into the institutional level of art production?

Peter Osborne argues that current cultural production – in the form of contemporary art – is post-Conceptual,<sup>271</sup> a system in which all criteria of production, evaluation and quality are based on concept. The term post-Conceptual here does not mean beyond Conceptualism that was established in the 1960s and 1970s, but a mode of interaction and exchange we still inhabit and that is based on the characteristics and premises of information-

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<sup>269</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *The dialectics of seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), ix.

<sup>270</sup> See Emily Jacir and Susan Buck-Morss, *N□004*, in the 100 notes – 100 thoughts series for dOCUMENTA 13 (Berlin: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2011).

<sup>271</sup> 'This is a logic that is itself contradictory: divided between the presentation of the collective exhibition-value of the works and their putative use-values as models within a speculative program of social construction. Such programs are uneasy amalgams of art, economics and politics. But then, what is "culture" but such an amalgam?' Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or not at all* (London: Verso, 2013), 161–162.

exchange as a conceptual form of exchange. Further he denotes cultural production as ‘an uneasy amalgam of art, economics and politics.’ This constellation of production entails an interaction between artists, curators, institutes and theory from which the ‘artistic object’ emerges. Today’s model of cultural production could be described as a constellation of authorships where it becomes virtually impossible to attach to the ‘original’ anymore, or locate its origins.

Within this cycle are constant instances of translation and exchanges of information. Issues of responsibility and accountability arise within the bigger theme of accountability that our technocratic societies are built on: return on investment, audience participation, the primacy of visibility and entrepreneurship. And all these understood as the primal markers of capitalist production. This circulation inevitably leads to a loss of sovereignty. It is hard to overstate the role of language and theory in this cycle of production, acting as the channel of communication. Though one must distinguish theory proper from discursive and applied derivatives with their different frames of accountability (academic, non-academic), theory is unmistakably the Lingua Franca of cultural production, and medium of exchange. It is the medium of technique of contemporary cultural production. And notably the medium par excellence in *platform-ed* cultural production.

This sits uneasy with the Benjaminian distinction between information and the original and the necessity of proper translation. Benjamin in ‘On the Task of the Translator’ departed from the notion of the existence of the ‘original,’ an original and self-sufficient event, though already containing the possibility of its translation, but which would require its own ‘form’ to do justice to the translation and without degrading into mere communication.<sup>272</sup> The possibility of an original event now under capitalism and the regime of the post-Conceptual condition, seems emptied out. The task of the translator, whomever that may be, would be to discern and navigate the phantasmagoria between positions, and even propose again an ‘original’ quality within and emerging from this artistic constellation. The performing

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<sup>272</sup> ‘And is this not something that a translator can reproduce only if he is also a poet? Such, actually, is the cause of another characteristic of inferior translation, which consequently we may define as the inaccurate transmission of an inessential content. Whenever a translation undertakes to serve the reader, it demonstrates this. However, if it were intended for the reader, the same would have to apply to the original. If the original does not exist for the reader’s sake, how could the translation be understood on the basis of this premise? Translation is a form. To comprehend it as a form, one must go back to the original, for the laws governing the translation lie within the original, contained in the issue of its translatability.’  
Walter Benjamin, ‘The Task of the Translator’ (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1972), 254.

translator would also need to know how to translate the ‘original’ through the assembled form of its mediation with the right technique.

The ‘Benjamin in Palestine’ conference, as an assembly of these positions, illustrated and showcased our current condition of production, and sought to critically address it. Besides making the obvious and necessary move and political gesture of going to a place where the conversation would be relevant, it also carried out research into the politics of translation. The diversity of geographies, fields and expertise and subsequent diversification of discourses, required dedicated time for thorough exchange, reading and discussion. This was expertly addressed by organizer and Benjamin scholar Sami Khatib, who forced participants into a slow reading of a selection of Benjamin’s texts that served as a reflective agent to exchange. Notably again ‘On the Task of The Translator’ served this purpose. In lengthy discussions bound by the prism of translatability and the commitment to the oppressed, issues of differences and legibility were negotiated, highlighting the way in which issues of power were examined: how to avoid communication as hierarchic transference of information, but instead to keep the channels open to ‘real’ emergent exchange.<sup>273</sup> The conference provided for a different means of resistance. The time that was invested, countered the regular mode of production, and halted the notion of progress as being the critic’s remaining claim to agency.

Communication might have become a quality of discourse, information, the *derivative* of origin, and a sign of the loss of the image as provider of auratic experience. But it can also be used in the framework of the dialectical image. Since it is the material of institutional power relations, it can be treated as the focal point of dialectical scrutiny. Georges Didi-Huberman speaks of the decline of aura,<sup>274</sup> as part of the natural system of the artistic object;

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<sup>273</sup> The performances by Slavoj Žižek, both in the workshop as in the conference, exemplary but also strangely, fit the overall theme. In a provocative style he emphasized and embodied the importance of translation as such. By not being a priori politically correct, one takes the one one addresses seriously. In several instances during the workshop this style of transgression led to debate. It was laudable to what great lengths Žižek went to explain the rationale behind this technique. In his argument it is of no use to anticipate the other, one has to express oneself head on, in order to fully honor the other’s existence. Differences are there, and not to be negated, but solidarity amongst people is all that matters. In his case the role of theory and embodiment are performed in unison.

<sup>274</sup> ‘Let us say, to dialecticize, that the decline of the aura supposes – implies, slips underneath, enfolds in its fashion – the aura as an originary phenomenon of the image. It is, to be faithful to Benjamin in the productive instability of his exploratory vocabulary, an “uncompleted” and “always open” phenomenon. The aura and its decline are thus part of the same system (and have undoubtedly always been so in every age of the aura’s history: we need only read Pliny the Elder, who was already complaining about the decline of the aura in the age of reproducibility of antique busts). But the aura persists, resists its decline precisely as supposition.’ See Georges Didi-Huberman, *The Supposition of the Aura: The Now, the Then, and Modernity, Walter Benjamin and History*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (New York: Continuum, 2005).

that is, loss of aura also proves the aura's existence (as *supposition*, is how he coins this).

Here Liam Gillick paraphrasing Maurizio Lazzarato's definition of immaterial labour springs to mind: 'The discursive is a negotiation and demonstration of Immaterial Labour for other ends,' and 'The discursive makes use of theories of Immaterial Labour in order to escape simplistic understandings of production within a cultural context.'<sup>275</sup> The 'other ends' resonate with Khatib's assessment of Benjamin's conception of means and ends: the different projections of ends and means in the constellation of production, in the exchange between its positions, need to be pulled away from their intentions, their projections of ends, in order to become mutually understood.<sup>276</sup> This requires from the participant in the cycle of communication and of the translator as moderator: investment, dedication and stubbornness. Plus a sense of the auratic appearances and disappearances in the different scales of production, in which different modes of production appear.

'Benjamin in Palestine' as a platform takes a stance of resistance, almost despite its academic content, in being an embodied committed presence as a form of action. It is the performance of poësis, and from this gains its political agency. Like Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, it cannot be closed theoretically, it needs to be done, to be traversed actively. Yet it leaves unanswered the question how it as platform in the bigger scale of production, performed this function. The conference as intervention is something of which one cannot be sure who was touched by it or where its potential is archived. This may be the task at hand: how to develop its archive.

As I walked home through Ramallah's city centre, I heard of other conference attendees who couldn't reach their places due to Israel Defence Forces incursions into Ramallah and subsequent violent confrontations. What until then had been an intense week of critical academic thinking and exchange, was suddenly punctured by something of a different 'real' that imposed itself. This awareness presented itself as a dialectical image.

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<sup>275</sup> Sven Lütticken, '(Stop) Making Sense,' in *Meaning Liam Gillick*, ed. Monika Szewczyk et al. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).

<sup>276</sup> From a Kantian perspective, Benjamin's concept of pure means or means without end might be read as an inversion of the ethical end-in-itself. Ends-in-itself and pure means (means-in-itself, so to speak) are not the same. Shifting the perspective from ends to means and cutting off the reference to a final goal, *Endzweck*, Benjamin emancipates the medial sphere of means from its secondary, supportive role without giving up on the concept of mediation.

## Benjamin in Palestine conference – supplement

### 2.2 Photo documentation

The Benjamin in Palestine conference was also documented by me through visual means. A selection of these photos is inserted between chapters 2 and 3 (p.117-124). During all the programme segments I took photos and tried to capture the atmosphere, the different sites and participants, and the relations taking place in order to give an impression the configuration of the conference. In other words: I tried to capture BiP as a constellation of work. As the conference itself did not organize documentation, my photographs have become practically the only visual afterlife of the conference. As Sami Khatib explains, this lack of effort or arrangement to document the conference was intentional and different from regular modes of institutional academic production. This absence of documentation was decided on in order to maintain a focus on the moment or event itself, and to prevent the conference from becoming an institutional commodifiable object in its afterlife. Institutions normally claim, handle, edit and market the results from this kind of knowledge production, in which visual documentation has an instrumental role. By having only participation and recollections further discussion and information about the events, this contributes to a decentralised, networked form of knowledge dissemination and (re)production, while institutional appropriation is prevented.<sup>277</sup> In the same manner as the *Open!* essay, these photos are an account that tries to preserve the quality of the conference without obeying the logic of conventional production, yet they also seek to act as some sort of archive of the event. Both intentions then also could also be seen as a Groys-ian artistic strategy of *documentation*. The manner in which this is done has to do justice the object of what is documented: the *mode of production* of the conference itself.

The selection of photos here represents the most relevant scenes to my discussions in chapter 3, The Benjamin in Palestine conference, namely the close reading workshop sessions and the conventional academic setting. These photographs provide supplementary information to the exposition of sites described in the text. As explained in that chapter discussing Benjamins notion of the dialectical image, text and visuals can be understood as interchangeable and mutual references. The photos thus become the visual captions of the

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<sup>277</sup> See the interview with Sami Khatib in the interview section where he explains that normally in academic practice a publication would be produced which counts – and importantly claimed – as productive academic output.



scenes described (in text), emphasising the non-hierarchical interrelation between text and image, object and reflection, the artwork and its caption. In an infrastructural sense the photo documentation constitutes a different form of archive, commenting on existing modes of institutional appropriation.





### 3 Saas-Fee Summer Institute for Art

#### *Introduction*

Unlike the other cases that were reflected upon through texts, I reflected on and processed the Saas-Fee Summer Institute for Art (hereafter SFSIA) through an exhibition that took place at A Tale of a Tub, Rotterdam, the Netherlands 2016, titled '*Politics of Estrangement-naught*'. As explained in the introduction of chapter 1, SFSIA is a 2.5week summer school that brings together theorists, curators, artists and students. I participated in the programme and interviewed and video-recorded the lectures. The exhibition at A Tale of a Tub intended to test how a platform like SFSIA could be considered as an object of inquiry by resituating it in the original (modern) habitat of art: the exhibition space. My aim was to consider the exhibition space as space to reflect on the development of the expanded practice of art that we know now, and its evolution from conceptual art of the 1960's and 1970's. Unlike a textual analysis, this consideration mobilized the spatial and experiential modalities of the art space as a means through which to reflect. Within the logic of the Rancière-ian art-aesthetics relation, such visual and sculptural processing of a case (an exhibition as means of assessment and of production) covers the art aspect of the art-aesthetics combination within this dissertation.

The installation was designed over the two floors of the gallery. Included were interviews conducted by me with the initiator and curator of the summer school, Warren Neidich, theorist Franco 'Bifo' Berardi and curator Anselm Franke. There was also a recorded lecture by theorist Gerald Raunig that he gave at SFSIA. As such the installation was a set up in which art, curating, participation and theoretical reflection were presented as intermingled and interdependent. All interviews and recordings were presented on similar sized monitors spread out over the two floors, except for the interview with Anselm Franke, which was projected in a significantly larger size. The interview with Franke gave me the perfect opportunity to explore the relation between curator and artist, as we discussed in detail his working relation with artist Harun Farocki (see interview below). For the show I made a text-work (an animated PowerPoint-presentation) which was also presented larger than most of the other documents. This text-work mixes a literary and analytical style, and is of an impressionistic nature. It was visually designed and animated to guide the flow of reading the text. In the text I reflect on the broader developments of the arts and how these were particularly manifest in SFSIA. The literary tone and quality of the text however confronts

and undercuts a conclusive meta-critical assessment a merely critical approach might produce. Combined with documentation of the installation, I present the transcript of the interview with Franke and the text-work here, as these constituted the main axis of the exhibition.

*Documentation exhibition Tale of a Tub*



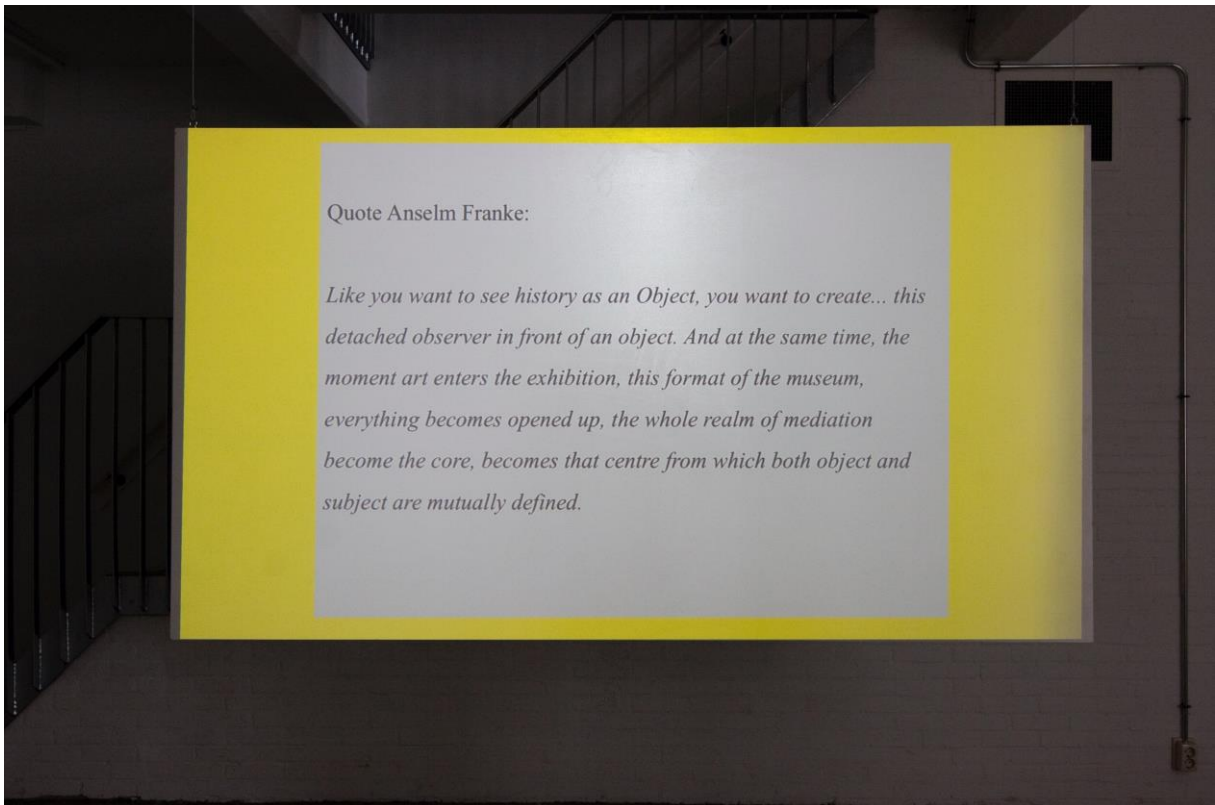
1



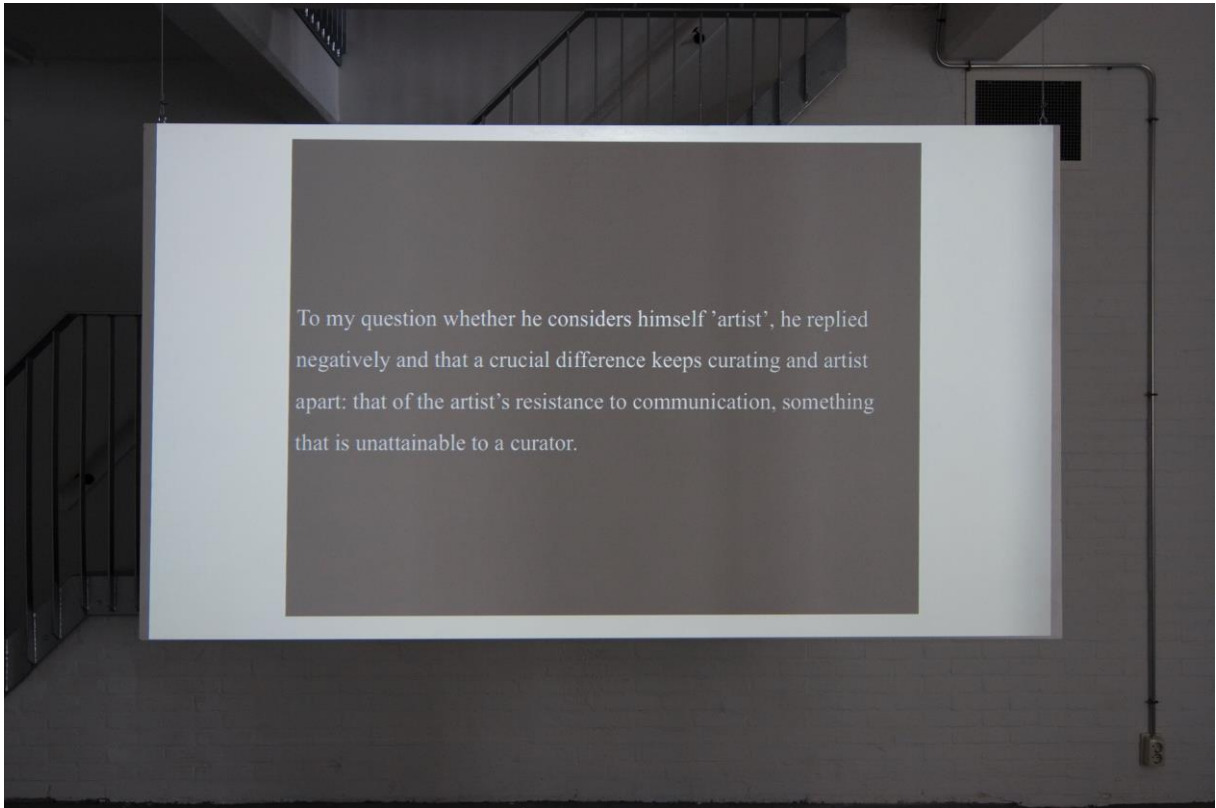
2



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7



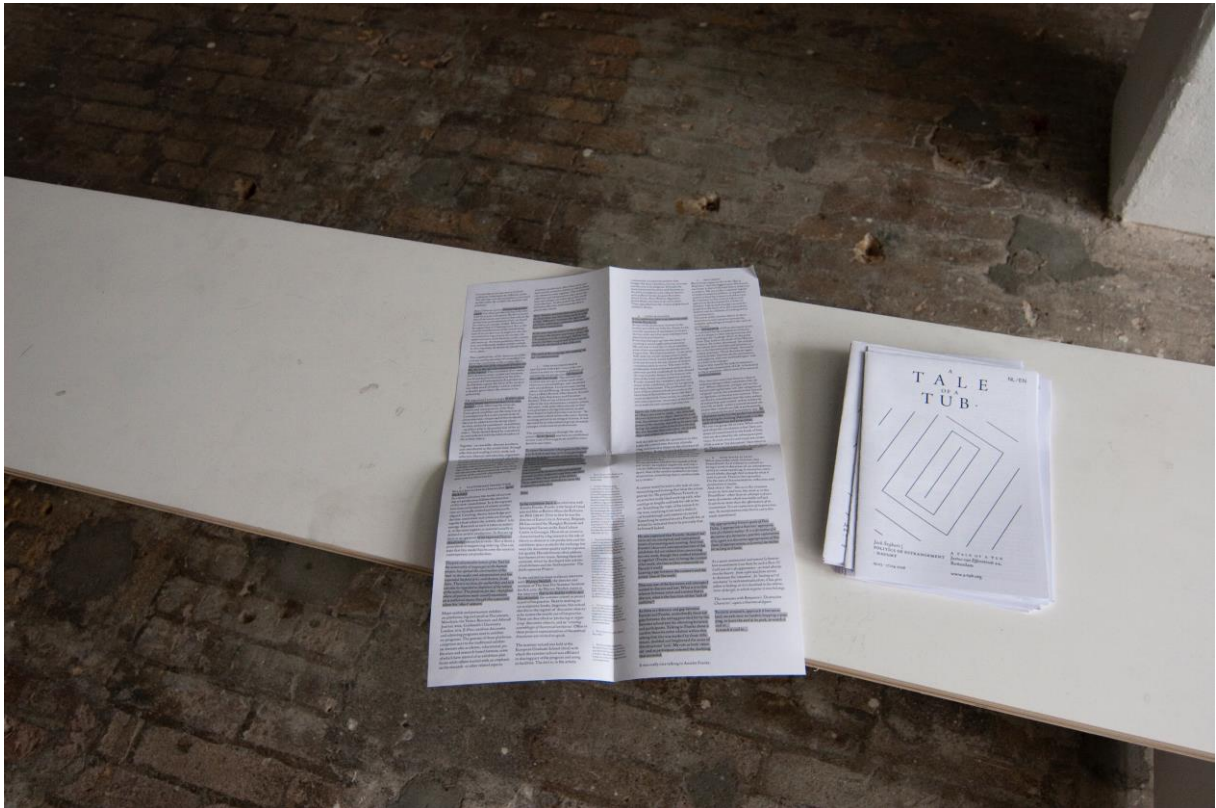
8



9



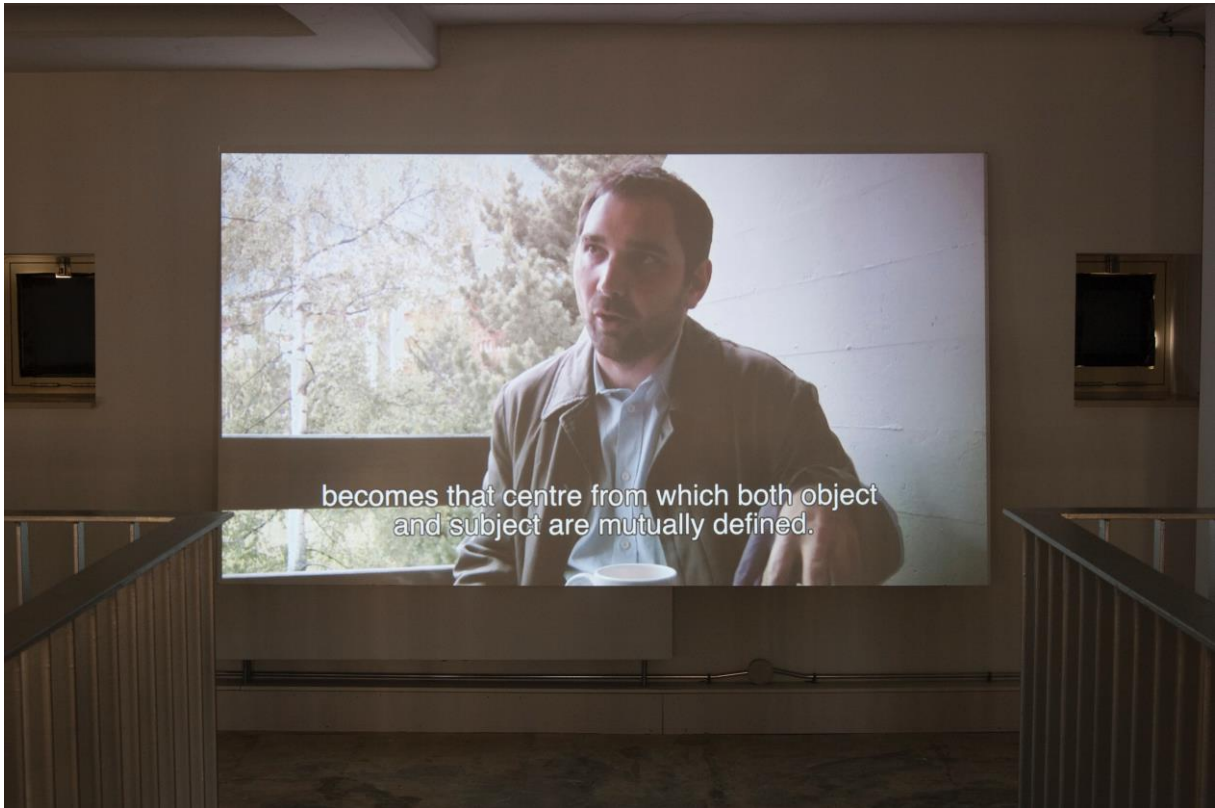
10



11



12



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14



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16



17

Images 1-5 text-work Duet/triplet/overall, Politics of Estrangement – naught (see below)

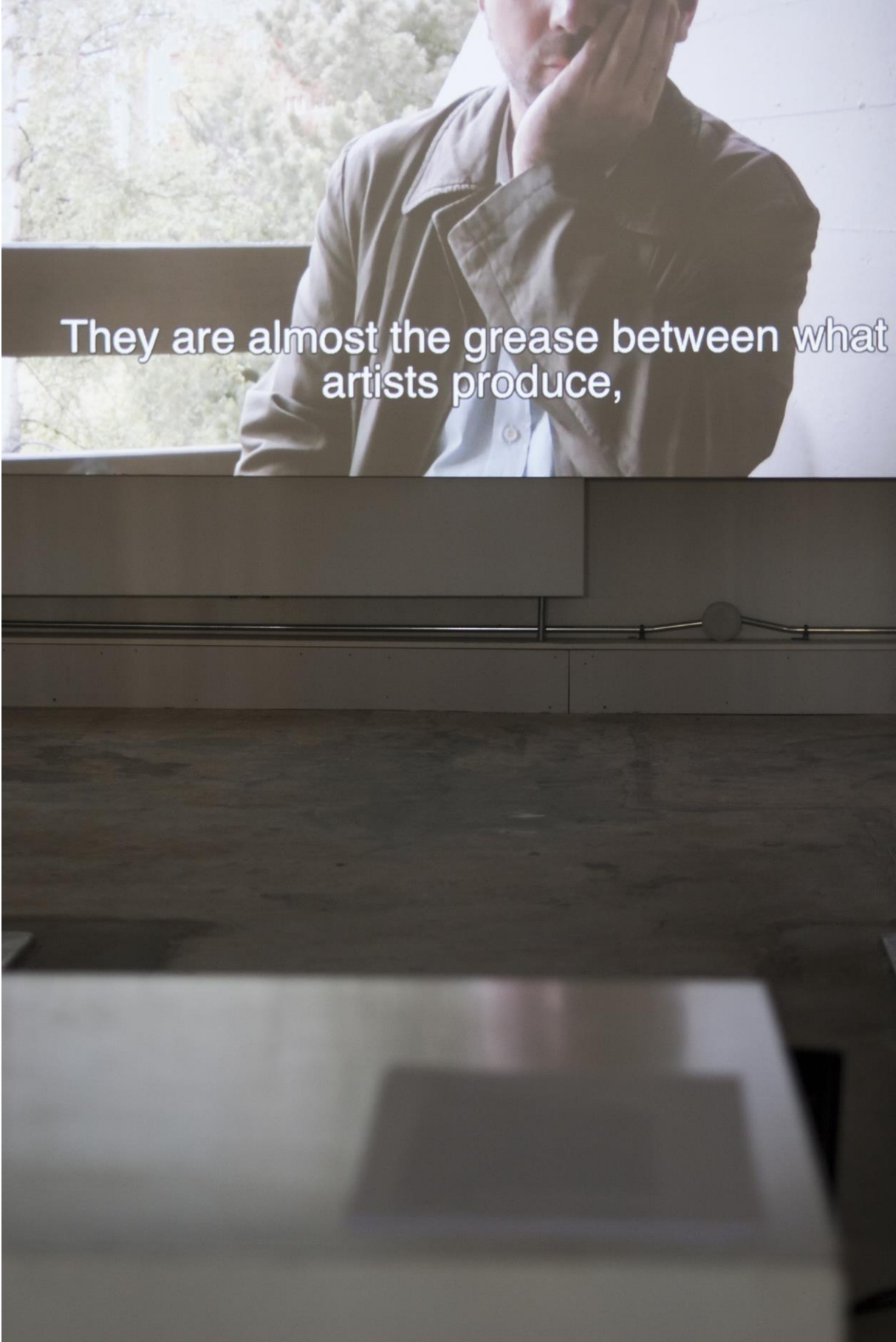
Images 6- 7 interview Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi

Image 8 interview Warren Neidich

Images 9-11 overview

Images 12-16 interview Anselm Franke

Image 17-18 overview



They are almost the grease between what  
artists produce,



*Transcript text work Duet/triplet/overall* (animated PowerPoint, 28.35 min.)

This was the animated textwork that was presented centrally in the exhibition. The transcription follows the design as in the animation, these are the colored segments.

Duet/triplet/overall  
Politics of Estrangement – naught  
Saas-Fee

**No-one is going to read this**

*In the exhibition there is:*

- a video showing an interview with Anselm Franke, Saas-Fee Summer Institute of Art, EGS, June 2015, Saas-Fee, Switzerland
- a video showing the PowerPoint text-work *Politics of Estrangement - naught* (this)
- a video of an interview with Warren Neidich,
- a video of a lecture by Gerald Raunig
- a video interview with Franco “Bifo” Berardi
- a text of the Saas-Fee Summer Institute of Art curatorial program
- and there is time, and there is space beyond

*(to disclose the elements of the project is a gesture by which the transparency of information is presented; providing for an index of potentialities)*

*Maybe there is no death as we know it. Just documents changing hands.*

—Don DeLillo, *White Noise*<sup>278\*</sup>

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<sup>278</sup> Boris Groys in *Art Power*, p 98, header of the chapter Multiple Authorship

Current day art production is a hybrid endeavor undertaken by different actors. The most obvious and visible of these actors are the artist, the curator, the institute and the art platform.

Peter Osborne asserts that all art production should be considered postconceptual. By this, he emphasizes that the decisions and criteria that inform the production and evaluation of art of this time, are based almost entirely on concepts or ideas rather than materiality or other factors.

Moreover, he argues that in the current structure of contemporaneous art production, the above-mentioned importance of concept means that the author-position shifts between artist, curator and art platform. All these positions, in differing ways and to varying extents, produce artistic content in their function as all these positions involve producing conceptualizations or ideas.

This combination – of the dominance of the concept and the plurality of authorship – has led to a distribution of responsibility around and for the artistic object. *(and maybe also of the relegation of responsibility, this in the end is the tentative proposition to this inquiry)*

This circulation of accountability between artist, curator and museum, has a structural place in the infrastructure of Contemporary Art production.<sup>279</sup> As Osborne argues: the format of the ‘project’ that much of today’s artistic content takes, gives rise to the rotation of its authorship.

The argument I want to make *(and for which I have a special interest and try to take further)* is that, following the rationale, texture and consequences of the postconceptual condition and the structure of Contemporary Art as our current form of art production, *critique* and *theory* should be considered part of the structure of artistic production. Critique and theory significantly contribute to the production of the artistic object. These positions should be recognised as co-authors of the artistic object.

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<sup>279</sup> As Peter Osborne states in *Anywhere or not at all*: “The contemporary, socio-historical forms of the general existential structure of ‘the project’ come to the fore, along with its situational conditions, organized by relations between individual and collective praxis, in which the once curatorial but increasingly directive role of the museum is of growing significance. (This is no longer ‘the artist as producer’, or even ‘the curator as producer’, so much as ‘the museum as producer’.) The existential and social structure of the project itself becomes the carrier of artistic reflection.” p.173

Together with the artist, – as an ensemble – they act as editors and contributors to the artistic field, through reflection and reading (critic), study and reflection (theory) and selection, organization and communication (curator). Their instrumental roles are made possible and accommodated by the conceptual character of the work of art and the structural set-up of Contemporary Art production. The artist is only one of many nodal positions within this chain.

*Art has become a procedural de-authorized result of the network of positions in the space of art as a discursive act.*

## **2 Platformed production**

### **Box in a box in a box in a box in a box (as in black box).**

In a structural sense, the model of current day art production follows the idea of this transdisciplinary constellation. In it, the separate functions and positions of artistic production are formally related and intrinsically aligned. Curating, theory, knowledge production, institutions and artists are brought together, and it is from this constellation that the ‘artistic object’ emerges. Research as such is taken as material, in the same register as material usually is defined in artistic production. In this set-up there is no apparent **or no expressed hierarchical order**. Nor is there a procedural or sequenced ordering. This model has become the norm in contemporary art production.

*The post-structuralist notion of the Text (and the materiality of language) as the human project, has opened the construction and interpretation of the ‘text’ to the reader, and as such has expanded the field of its contributors, its authors. There is no longer locus for authorship, which can also be regarded as a depletion of the notion of the author. The platform for this – that place where all positions meet – usually maintains an a-authorial stance, yet this is precisely where this ‘object’ appears.*

Major exhibition platforms, both mobile and permanent, produce discursive programs parallel to exhibition programs. One might think of DOCUMENTA, Manifesta, the Venice Biennale and Afterall Journal, BAK, Goldsmith’s Centre for Contemporary Art, ICA and E-Flux. The scope of these platforms comprises both traditional exhibition-formats and also academic, educational, publication and research-based formats. Some of these organizations started off

as exhibition platforms while others started with an emphasis on the research or other related aspects of artistic production. Now, they increasingly move towards a format in which these two elements come together. The traditional reflective and interpretative roles of art history and critique are subsumed in this mode of production. In this system the distance between art production and reflection on it is practically non-existent.

*At the same time the notion of 'the original' is kept intact, the moment of primary 'poiesis' (be it in reading or in the exchange). Still the location (or the mere recognition) of this moment is unabatedly attributed to that of the art object.*

*The result of this exchange, the resulting 'object' is communicated.*

### **3 The Saas-Fee Summer Institute for Art**

The Saas-Fee Summer Institute for Art of 2015 can be considered an exemplary **platform** of current-day art production (and is the focus of this reflection/work).

The school's curriculum was a three-week roster of lectures and workshops that concluded with an exhibition. Lecturers included Gerald Raunig, Armen Avanessian, Franco (Bifo) Berardi, Hito Steyerl, **Anselm Franke**, John Rajchman and Dorothee Richter.

This array of lecturers reflected the mix of authorial positions in Contemporary Art production: lecturers were curators, artists and/or theorists, and many of them had practices that were strongly orientated towards platform-based or hybrid production forms.<sup>280</sup>

It was attended by an international group of mostly younger artists and art professionals. In this way, the summer school integrated the fields and roles of education, theory, curating and art making; all of the roles in Contemporary Art production were present.

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<sup>280</sup>**Dorothee Richter** is director of the Postgraduate Program in Curating at the School of Art and Design Zurich (HGKZ). She also initiated the Curating Degree Zero Archive together with Barnaby Drabble.

**Gerald Raunig** is a philosopher and art theorist. He works at the Zürich University of the Arts, Zürich and the eicpc (European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies), Vienna. He is co-editor of the multilingual publishing platform *Transversal Texts* and the Austrian journal *Kamion*.

**Hito Steyerl** is a filmmaker, visual artist, writer, and innovator of the essay documentary. Steyerl holds a PhD in Philosophy. She is currently a professor of New Media Art at the Berlin University of the Arts.

The question that ran through the whole project (as its theme) was how one could consider Estrangement (*ostranenie*) as an established artistic tool, in our present times.

Shklovsky is known for the concept of *ostranenie* or *defamiliarization* (also translated as "estrangement") in literature. He explained the concept in the important essay "Art as Technique", first published in 1925. It was a major element of Russian Formalism. He argued for this estrangement in order to revitalize something that has become over-familiar, like a cliché in the literary canon:

*The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar', to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged.*

*Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important.*

Victor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique", p.12

*To attend the summer school gave me the chance to be both in and out, to be in as participant but equally to be out as its reader and reviewer, to regard it as a Text.*

*As a whole, the school constitutes an intrinsic and complicated web of relations, fields and positions where institutional, interpretative, authorial, curatorial functions and positions overlap and intersect.*

*I interviewed the lecturers on issues of their respective expertise and their position within the context of the SFSIA. These materials were intended as new material for artistic production.*

This.

**In the exhibition there is** an interview with **Anselm Franke**. Franke is the head of visual arts and film at Berlin's Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW). Prior to that he was the director of Extra City in Antwerp, Belgium. He curated the Shanghai Biennale and Interrupted Survey at the Asia Culture Center in Gwangju in 2008. His curatorial work is characterized by an interest in the role of theory as an element in art production and the exhibition space as a site for exchange between an artwork's discursive and experiential qualities. His exhibitions often

address key themes of our times. Among them are animism, which he developed into a series of exhibitions, and the Anthropocene, as explored in The Anthropocene Project.

**In the exhibition there is** also an interview with **Warren Neidich**, the director and initiator of the Saas-Fee Summer Institute for Art, 2015. As Neidich states in the interview on display: the summer school as a project is part of his practice.

Alongside his neon sculptures, books and diagrams, the summer school is also a ‘discursive object’, that he counts as part of the output of his practice. His practice centres on ‘*producing or organizing*’ discursive objects, and ‘*creating assemblages of theoretical territories*’. Often these projects invited representatives of theoretical discourses to speak.

**In the exhibition there is** a lecture by **Gerald Raunig**.

Raunig is a philosopher and art theorist. He works at the Zürich University of the Arts, Zürich and the eipcp (European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies), Vienna. He is co-editor of the multilingual publishing platform *Transversal Texts*.

**In the exhibition there is** an interview with **Franco (Bifo) Berardi**. Berardi is a writer, media theorist and media activist. He was involved in *Potere operaio*, the magazine *A/traverso* and the first free pirate radio station in Italy *Radio Alice*. He was also involved in the political movement *Autonomia* during the 1970s. He worked with Felix Guattari in the field of schizoanalysis.

The summer school was held at the **European Graduate School (EGS)** with which the summer school shared part of their resources and facilities. The EGS is viewed by many in the artistic community as a renowned institute that bridges politics, theory, activism and the arts in its program. It includes in its faculty some of the most prominent lecturers and theorists in the field of contemporary aesthetics and cultural theory, including Boris Groys, Jacques Rancière, Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou, Giorgio Agamben and Judith Butler. They arguably form the key corpus of globalized aesthetic theory today.

#### 4 Anselm Franke

**In the exhibition there is an interview with Anselm Franke (2)**

The summer school provided me with the chance to discuss questions of mediation in art

production with one of its most informed and expertized practitioners: Franke is one of the most prominent curators in the world.

It was fascinating to go into the issues of curating in such length and seriousness with him. My aim was to check whether some of my assumptions would continue to stand after talking to him. My biased position as an artist, which is a perspective I find I can never fully shift away from, would undoubtedly have to be addressed in order for any chance of serious communication to occur.

The problematic relation between the artist and curator was quickly established as an issue. This cleared the way for us to probe more deeply into the historic relations between the artist, curator and platform. Franke stressed the exemplary quality and status of the exhibition space as one in which to navigate precisely these issues. The problematic nature of these relations makes the **black box** of the exhibition space the ideal arena to deal with these issues. As a mode of self-critical curatorial practice, the black box enables a reflexive awareness of its location as the material and canvas of production.

*Quote AF: Like you want to see history as an Object, you want to create... this detached observer in front of an object. And at the same time, the moment art enters the exhibition, this format of the museum, everything becomes opened up, the whole realm of mediation become the core, becomes that centre from which both object and subject are mutually defined.*

Still, this left me with the question as to who is in control of this mode of producing, and how this question relates to the structure of production. The curator holds sway over the curatorial expression of the exhibition, and therefore is the author of that object, but how does that inform the relation the curator and platform have with the artists involved? To what extent is the artist informed of this curatorial idea, and what impact does or does that not have on their work?

To my question about whether he considers himself an ‘artist’, he replied negatively and expressed that a crucial difference keeps curators and artists apart: the artist’s resistance to communication. For a curator, this non-communication is professionally impossible.<sup>281</sup>

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<sup>281</sup> This resonates strongly with the Benjaminian notion of the differentiation between the originality and self-sufficiency of the poetic moment and that of a flawed translation, that is described as *communication*.

According to Franke, a curator is held to the task of communicating and framing of that which the artist produces. He praised Harun Farocki as an artist he really liked working with, and who goes to great lengths to look for risk and push his own art.

Farocki, Franke said, stretches the topic of his research to the maximum, emptying it out until a dialectical breakthrough moment occurs. This seemed to be something he envied Farocki for, indicating that it was this stretching and risk-taking that he himself lacked.

He also explained that Farocki, despite their intensive collaboration, ‘blanked out’ on institutional issues of presenting and curating, and that Franke’s ideas and conceptualisations of the exhibition were of no concern in Farocki’s own work. Franke, as well as being the curator of Farocki’s work, also has written extensively about it.

Leaving a gap between the curator’s and the artist’s idea of ‘the work’.

This was one of the key issues and concepts I wanted to discuss and test. What is it in this relation between artist and curator that is obscure, and what does this ‘lack of visibility’ produce?

Like the distance between Farocki and Franke’s practices, undoubtedly there are gaps between the setting provided by the summer school and the attending lecturers and participants. Talking to Franke about curator/theorist-artist relations within this setting that also was marked by their difference, doubled and heightened the sense of this structural ‘lack’. My role as both ‘observer’ and as participant stressed the doubling that occurred.

It was really nice talking to Anselm Franke.

## 5 Document

Boris Groys argues in *Art in the Age of Biopolitics*<sup>282</sup> that the biggest issue that haunts our times, is that of life itself being subjected to politics. We are under a constant regime of subjugation by politics, that produces a regulatory system that herds the masses in technocracy.

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<sup>282</sup> Boris Groys *Art in the Age of Biopolitics*



As a form of resistance to this control, *Life as such* appears as the focal point for artistic expression. Life as such, however, can only be grasped in the form of its documentation; indirectly and through reading and as re-presentation.

This form of the ‘artistic object’ as documentation is well suited to traverse the multiple authorships at hand in the cycle of production.

The transposition from life to document to art, is continued and furthered by the translations enacted by theory and critique, in their interpretations and analyses and their ‘readings’ of art as Text.

As artists ‘document’ life and also document their activities and practices as art, so too do theorists and critique ‘document’ artistic practices. The institution archives these as ‘artistic objects’. These documents again inform artists’ practices, setting the parameters, subjects, and even the methodologies<sup>283</sup> - and so a full circle emerges, in which archiving and production are equated.

This means that there cannot be a shared understanding of what the ‘objects’ that form the cyclical ‘documents’ are constituted by. When reflection, critique, art historical writing and archiving become ‘art’, the categories of ‘original’ and its documentation blur beyond recognition, or become non-existent.

From this circle emerges the task of resistance – as a general artistic commission, bestowed to all the positions involved in the production of art – to resist (mis-)translation of the documentation of Life.

Since no-one can hold all documents, a suspicion and resentment can arise over the notions of authorship and control (and so indirectly over life as such), which is necessarily located ‘somewhere else’.

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<sup>283</sup> See for example Benjamin’s Arcades Project that has found its way methodologically in many art-schools or the ideas of Rancière as formative to how to bridge horizons of perception etc.

What can be said about the circulation is that there is resentment for the kinds of lives that are described by the subsequent positions. A circle of suspicion arises: if life is not in “my/this document’ then where is it?

There is uncertainty around the shared object that sits as a black hole in the middle of this circle of production.

And life must be somewhere else.

**Now what is this?**

What now is this work, this text, this PowerPoint?

On the axis of documentation, reflection and production, it sits.

*And what is this work other than an attempt to find a meta-document, which inevitably will fail.*

*And of which it can be no more than the affirmation and documentation.*

To circle around it, approach it but never land, we exit once we landed, hopping-and-a-popping, to leave the surf at its peak, to watch it curl in...  
to watch it curl in

This circulation of accountability between artist, curator and museum, has a structural place in the infrastructure of Contemporary Art production.<sup>2</sup>

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2 As Peter Osborne states in *Anywhere or not at all*: "The contemporary, socio-historical forms of the general existential structure of 'the project' come to the fore, along with its situational conditions, organized by relations between individual and collective praxis, in which the once curatorial but increasingly directive role of the museum is of growing significance. (This is no longer 'the artist as producer', or even 'the curator as producer', so much as 'the museum as producer'.) The existential and social structure of the project itself becomes the carrier of artistic reflection." p.173

Together – as an ensemble – they act as editors and contributors to the artistic field, through reflection and reading (critic),

study and reflection (theory)

and selection, organization and communication (curator).

*Art has become a procedural de-authorized result of the network of positions in the space of art as a discursive act.*

This was one of the key issues **and concepts** I wanted to discuss and test. What is it in this relation between artist and curator that is obscure, what is the function of this 'lack of visibility'?

*Transcript interview Anselm Franke*

This text was the subtitle in the video of the interview with Anselm Franke that was presented in the exhibition.

'Politics of Estrangement-naught'

Transcript of an interview with Anselm Franke

Saas Fee Summer School for Art, EGS, June 2015,

**JS** Okay, thanks for having me, for doing this interview.

**AF** Ik spreek een beetje Nederlands... but it's very bad

**JS** O ja? Where did you learn that?

**AF** In Antwerp. It's a different... taal...

**JS** Ja. Well, it's the same but with quite a different pronunciation. I really enjoyed the lecture this morning, and I know your work..., the Anthropocene Project... Observatory... I've seen that installed in Utrecht at BAK. And we already discussed this, the notion that came up this morning, which is about the place of the mediator in Latourian thinking. For him, that is the most important location that governs the contact between that what governs and the subjects that are governed. In that sense: you also work as a curator. So how do you deal with that in your curatorial work?

**AF** You know, I make a simple equation. I say that for all the paradoxes that there is in this realm of the mediator, Latour make sure... that there is a big difference between 'mere intermediaries' and full-blown mediators, whatever that means but I...

Curatorially I work with some of his ideas but, I encountered them actually quite late but then, I was thankful for them... simply because of this: this is not something that he would share, or would go along with, but I think that the exhibition as a medium, as a space, as a historically contingent form, is actually the perfect place to explore that realm of the mediator.

So if his analysis is right -and I think elements of it are extremely precise- that, in other words, in non-Latourian words... the kind of dominant discourse of the Hylomorphic, meaning the kind of post-Aristotelian productionism that I mentioned, is based on a kind of denial of mediation, and his move is opening up that black box, and moving into this black box. I think the exhibition is a really amazing medium for that, because it does both: it opens up this black box and it produces this denial at the same time. Just think of the 'history museum', any museum that is not an art museum; it is exactly... you know, haunted by this

positivism, heroism, facticity. Like you want to see history as an Object, you want to create... this detached observer in front of an object. And at the same time, the moment art enters the exhibition, this format of the museum, everything becomes opened up, the whole realm of mediation become the core, becomes that centre from which both object and subject are mutually defined. Curatorially I just work with, kind of conflating this idea of the 'middle kingdom' and the format of the exhibition... the exhibition is the ideal middle kingdom, because it can also be used to look at, perhaps, the 'flaws' of this idea of the mediation.

**JS** At the same time?

**AF** At the same time.

**JS** So it is also immediately self-questioning its role in the production of [art]...

**AF** Yes.

**JS** It was interesting that you just said that it is quite often denied, this mediating role, this curatorial role, and for me that is very interesting... Is your impetus then one of filling a shortage, or of addressing something that is lacking? Is there a need to focus on this role of the curatorial?

**AF** I look at the curatorial in this respect more as a symptom, and I am part of that symptom. It is not that I love the curatorial - I find it also a pest. It dominates, and I largely see our profession as just one of exploiting positions of power; rather than actually working on the questions that it is supposed to work on. Which is to 'take care' of a complex history, and to make sure that this history is not killed, because that is what I see happens a lot... to speak of it a bit militantly.

**JS** It is also a fight against the recuperation of history, and of power positions?

**AF** You see, I'm trying to get the question of mediation away from the curatorial, and at the same time into a kind of more reflexive and ethical definition of what the curatorial is and can be, but there are all kinds of problems, and I am not unaware of them. I make choices of course that are also contestable, and I understand that and I ... Many of the projects that I do are very authorial.

**JS** O yeah? With strong curatorial guidance, and a thematic approach?

**AF** Yes. That's a price I need to pay for at the same time trying to challenge the parameters. There is a dialectics, there is a paradox in there.

**JS** There is a well-known dialectics also between artists and the curatorial, I'd say. There is a general feeling of being dependent of, and this dependency is always projected in a resentful fashion towards the figure of the curator. For me this is very problematic, this resentment that is being put somewhere else, to say: that's where my dependence lies, to

conform your dependency. Do you think about it in this sense? Or could you also consider yourself as the artist? Does this enter your considerations?

**AF** I definitely don't consider myself the artist.

**JS** Is there an ontological speciality that is governing these different fields?

**AF** I guess yes, and I try to be as sharp about it as I can. In Deleuzian terms, art for me is resistance to communication.

**JS** Ha-ha, I can relate to that...

**AF** You know, that can't be the paradigm for curating.

**JS** No, it can't? Why not? I could imagine strategies that, well...

**AF** The curatorial task would still, in my eyes, be ... more like an architect, it is more like creating a space, and an artist is more the person who inhabits, and remakes and destroys... Art I think needs to be largely anti-institutional, and I like to think institutionally, I like to think against all the evils and problems institutions create. The task of curating is to create institutional spaces that are... as, this sounds maybe, no as –that sounds maybe too... no, that is exactly... as democratic as possible, but not a fake version of democracy, in terms of... voice; but more in the sense of accountability... accountability to power. And providing a space and balancing forces.

So for me it is maybe less about autonomy, and more about sovereignty; that interests me.

They are obviously closely related and when I talk about sovereignty I mean the opposite of state sovereignty. I mean more like the subject's sovereignty, from an almost anarchist perspective. And that I think is the domain of art, and its resistance to communication too. To measure out the spaces of sovereignty, to refuse being named, to refuse the names that are given to things. To change that entire geography of signification, and to re-assert what individual sovereignty is.

That is what is obviously what puts art historically...

**JS** In a specific realm, a specific field... function also maybe

**AF** Maybe function... difficult question of course with the function, because there is this whole stigma of consequentiality<sup>284</sup>

**JS** I had a question about that particular show in Utrecht. As I witnessed it, there was an odd sense of inner address. I saw Latour (in the video at BAK) being followed by his

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<sup>284</sup> So here he speaks of resistance to communication, but at the same time an impossibility for a curator to avoid this. So there's a strange tension going on: is it the artist that as a puppet acts out non-communication that produces art? Or is it the collaboration between them? Either way it is unresolved and the issue of communication vs original remains.

research-group, and being on display. The strange thing was that just before I went there, I also watched his lecture at the venue there that opened the show, so there was an immediate re-appearance of Foucault... ehm of Latour – yeah Foucault was there as well -. But what I meant to say was: theory also plays a very important role in all of this, in the figures that are presented, or produced in theoretical figures... They are almost the grease between what artists produce, what curators produce and what platforms produce, because they produce it as discursive materials again. How did the cooperation with Latour work?

**AF** The Anthropocene Observatory is a complicated project. First I need to really say that... this is a project that comes out of a different genealogy of thinking about the exhibition than other projects of mine. It's very different from, for example, the Animism exhibition...

**JS** Which was more like a real, 'proper' exhibition?

**AF** Yeah, like more addressing the medium and working in an immanent argument to aesthetics, and from within that trying to explode it. This is not really the case with The Anthropocene Observatory. It's a project that comes out of a long engagement that I also have, curatorially, but I don't play such a major role in that. It also draws on a completely different history of exhibition making which comes from architecture, that comes from urbanism. All the problems that we discuss in art, about art and non-art, and discourse and all these things. Obviously with discourse and art, since the nineties it has been increasingly difficult to separate them, but before that you could always separate them, to certain degrees at least. But in architecture exhibitions this was never possible, because architects have always used exhibitions just as a space of modelling, like... you would present research materials, you would...

**JS** A discursive apparatus...

**AF** A discursive apparatus... An analysis of territory, of society...

**JS** But its never about that space itself, where it was presented...

**AF** Never about the space itself.

**JS** And that's what art is mostly about.

**AF** And in that sense, for me, The Anthropocene Observatory is not an art exhibition. Even though there is an artist involved. Armin (Linke) is not, he is not responding in his work to the regime of art. He is somebody who has always moved outside of this, he has always used his photography as a... it's much closer to this analytical, experimental field of expanded spatial research. So that's important (to mention), because there are these kinds of exhibitions that I very much like doing because they are highly inspiring, to think through a lot of things, but they are not primarily responsive to the questions of art.



**JS** In that sense, your lecture also informed me better about the intent of the project; maybe just on your behalf, because I do not know exactly who informs what in that project. You were listed as the curator but sometimes it works out differently. I don't know if you really selected the works or the artists, or the team or the structure or the procedures...

**AF** In this case I'm more of a provider... I was the one who composed the group. I'm not the one who did the fieldwork. I have much less of an authorial voice in this project than in other projects, because I'm more trying to make this possible, and give it a direction, and discuss with them the parameters. I would be very much engaged in [questions such as]: what do we call something? It is in that sense not a curatorial artefact.

**JS** Could you than maybe better describe it as editorial?

**AF** Yes exactly, absolutely right... And editorial, but I also don't try to solve problems there. In many other exhibitions it is really a question of first staging the problem, understanding what something is like as an aesthetic problem, what is immanent to art and outside of art, and than trying to theatricalize this conflict...

The Anthropocene Observatory is dealing more with other kinds of paradoxes, with the paradox of what it means to observe and at the same time to be too close to something, of trying to gain a distance and at the same time fully immerse oneself in a problem, in a set, a practice...

**JS** That was the most fascinating element, I'd say, of that exhibition; to watch the scientist, and not even solely as scientist, because there already was the notion of the interdisciplinary, so there immediately are architects or artists at work, so there's this mix from the bottom-up there. But to then see them from a birds-eye viewpoint at work again, establishing their epistemes again, is very fascinating... but it made me wonder what in the end the lasting position is that is presented there in the exhibition-space...

**AF** Yeah, that is completely unsolved for me. I may be a bit flirtatious with unresolvedness; I'm sometimes utterly uncomfortable with it, and sometimes I think it is exactly right. Yeah, it is not [re]solved...

**JS** It's a difficult strategy to go for this notion of unresolvedness as a position from which you narrate? It will ultimately reflect back to it...

**AF** But it at least... it helps... it produces what we are familiar with in art on a different level, on a level that is completely non-art, that is far too real on a political, worldly level... and that's what I mean by flirtatious... Because I don't know better, and I don't know many people who know better; or I'm very suspicious of most people who seem to know better..., I think it's okay to go there. This tension between proximity and distance ...

Back to the question you asked earlier: I have collaborated with Latour, but personally... the kind of stuff I do is, there's always a point where... It was completely fascinating to guide Latour through the Whole Earth exhibition, simply to find out... he's been to California many years ago... and he never credits any of this yet it was totally formative for him. As with other things, but he would never credit any of the *cyberneticians* or the people that were highly formative to him. There is always a moment where my insistence on a dialectical optics completely shuts Latour off.

**JS** Then he's gone...

**AF** He's out of the game. And the person who sustains the collaboration with Latour, in the case of the Anthropocene Observatory, is really Armin Linke, and also John and Anne-Sophie but mostly Armin Linke. He has worked for many years in collaboration. What Latour sees in his photographic and filmic practice, this observation of scientists at work, of the entanglement... He finds himself in these images, and I like the passion of this collaboration, and also the many misunderstandings.

**JS** There are also misunderstandings there, I'm sure?

**AF** Many, many...

**JS** These are fascinating relations between curator, artist and theorist.

**AF** Totally. The whole question of image-making and the relation to theory, is obviously something that I am totally passionate about... Many other exhibitions I do, to connect to things like the Whole Earth exhibition, are almost like the antithesis of what many people say... an exhibition shouldn't be like books... but I love when they're like books, because I cannot imagine something better than being able to walk through a book, and test an idea accordingly... test an idea on thinking in images...

**JS** That's the old maxim of art's agency through the material and not through the discursive...

**AF** Exactly...

**JS** ...which is named than the 'discursive', but I really doubt whether this should be called discursive? The way you arrange it, or...

**AF** I also have problems with... sometimes I say 'narrative' rather than discursive, but is also of course not narrative, because narrative is more how ad-people would: *you can't sell that salve if you don't have a story*... So that is certainly not the kind of definition of narrative that I would follow, it's more like... that narrative when discursively mobilized, or something like that, becomes a means to tell a story in a certain way, becomes a means of rendering you sensible... and making you see differently, no? It's more like a means, like a tool to get to a

certain sensibility, and then the image becomes the way to completely reconstruct the discourse. So I really use exhibitions as a means of reworking meta-theories, because there is always this point where meta-theories start to believe in their own language; and that is exactly where they break down.

**JS** Still, this sounds very much like an artist, and also what you just described as the first task for the artist: to break down or to stop communicating. It is again reconstituting something, but it is through...

**AF** Yeah, but then I work with artists, so I try to create [something from that]... Whole Earth is an exception, but for most exhibitions I start with an artist's practice and I try to construct a set of references around this work that would challenge everything that this work does, in the here and now, in a kind of larger historical resonance... and yeah, there may be something artistic in the way of constructing it... the key then is still that there needs to be... It's more that the curatorial needs to live up to the art. In the Animism exhibition this was very important to me. There are like five artistic practices for which I did this exhibition, in order to...

**JS** So it is immediately positioned or related to what the artists...

**AF** That kind of allows the whole problem, and the power and the complications, in the way in a particular practice, let's say Jimmy Durham's or Angela Melitopoulos' or so. Like the moments of ecstatic sovereignty and utter powerlessness, ... omnipotence and impotence they obviously live... often in the best works they are very close to each other, and can you do justice to that in a curatorial narration? That would be one of the starting questions...

**JS** I very much liked your analysis of the Harun Farocki works... the one work you showed, these two juxtaposed images...

**AF** The clouds...<sup>285</sup>

**JS** Yes... Did you talk to him about your writing, did you discuss this with him?

**AF** Yes, I did. About a decade, 12, 13 years ago, he was someone from whom I learned a lot. So I had an ongoing conversation with him, and what I was saying there (at the lecture), what got me thinking about this work was really what he said about it.

**JS** And how did he use your writing? Was that of use to him? Was that recursively activating for him? Maybe hard to answer...

**AF** I don't think so. I think he had an understanding... Because, his insistence on a dialectical optics is very, very different from mine; and Harun always entered and lived with

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<sup>285</sup> This is the work *Parallel I*, see; <http://www.vdb.org/titles/parallel-i>

the art world, and kept his own sanity by blanking on a whole set of questions... that pertain to the exhibition, so there almost was this kind of deal... His dialectics was really one that was completely formed in cinematographic thinking, and he refused to think about all of those problems of the post-conceptual space of art.

**JS** That is fascinating to hear... but of course when you talk to him you immediately transpose this to these other issues?

**AF** Yes, I'm always... One of the things I also learned from him was to... somehow it applied very differently... I certainly learned from him a lot in terms of... I liked to talk to him most in his home because that's where he was surrounded by his books. And he was somebody who was reading a lot, he is extremely... well-read, in literature particularly... fascinatingly well-read. And this process of pulling out a book, and laying a path onto... making a thought reform itself by being transformed through a reference that was completely unlikely at first...

**AF** The practice of what he did with that was very, very different than the curatorial. That's what I already mentioned, he would do that entirely on the level of coming so close to an image that you already thought that this could not, that the dialectics could never... he would go so close to the positivism of an image until it releases a dialectical space again... That's his artistic power... and that's obviously very different from... It's a difference between a very meditative piece of music and an immersive kind of orchestral one...

Mit Farocki denken HKW <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XFxulfza3SI>



#### **4 The Author, Platform and Spectator, the Author-Function in Artistic Production Now, West, The Hague**

##### *Explanation video-interview project*

*The Author, Platform and Spectator, the Author-Function in Artistic Production Now* is a video interview project initiated by me, consisting of seven interviews with artists, curators, theoreticians, and organizers of educational and artistic platforms. The framework of the project and the selection of interviewees aimed to provide an overview of today's authorial complex in artistic production and the various institutional alignments involved in this. For this investigation I invited participants who occupy exemplary hybrid positions that bridge the different fields of artistic production, and who are active both in the realm of art production, presentation and its discourse. The participants were: Sami Khatib, Charles Esche, Lietje Bauwens, Armen Avanesian, Rachel O'Reilly, Maziar Afrassiabi and Mohammad Salemy. The interviews were presented as an installation at art space West, The Hague, the Netherlands, 14-08 through 01-11-2020. The interviews and transcripts are now available on West's website.<sup>286</sup>

Conceived to investigate the fluent border between art and its context, the aim of this installation was foremost to frame the conditions of an artwork's making: the theoretical context, the distributive context, the infrastructural context. The interviewees were selected for their relationship to the infrastructure of artistic production, an infrastructure that encompasses museums, independent art spaces, knowledge production/critiques and presentation platforms. Following in the footsteps of various theorists, from Friedrich von Schlegel to Walter Benjamin (who argue that the role of the 'observer' is to complete the artwork), art is the continuous productive interplay between making and perception/reception. An artwork can be understood to be the aggregation of an artistic proposition, which begets its meaning both through the way in which it is presented (a conflation of choices made by the artist, curator, institution and more) and through its reading (the critical reception and encounter by audience, critique and more). This processual idea of art is therefore fully dependent on the way it is distributed and attributed with meaning. The wider chain of production, which functions as the assembled observer, can therefore be seen as a co-author. This reorients how we might read the distinctions between the various roles: the curator, the

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<sup>286</sup> [https://www.westdenhaag.nl/exhibitions/20\\_08\\_Jack\\_Segbars/more2](https://www.westdenhaag.nl/exhibitions/20_08_Jack_Segbars/more2) (accessed 13-12-2020)

critical interpretation and the institutional mediation all participate in the networked and assembled mode of production. This assemblage characterizes the current day model of art production and constitutes its *apparatus*. This artistic project aimed to elucidate the nature of this apparatus and the complex issue of joint authorship.

The talks focused on the pivotal role that knowledge production has in contemporary art production. In how far can we consider it as a curatorial form in respect to the author-function. Within the condition of cognitive capitalism, it becomes important to identify and (re)trace how production – which gives form to the co-authorship of a processual object and which defines its political authorship – is organized.<sup>287</sup> The scope of interviewees, and the range of institutional, semi-institutional and independent forms they represented, is meant to provide an overview of the different angles, frames and positions involved in the field. Their roles ranged from museum director, to independent curator, to theorist and organizer of a para-academic platform. The interviewees were invited to consider their roles and positions in dialogue with the relation between aesthetics, curating, platform and art, and prompted to reflect on their situatedness in the contemporary form of artistic production. How do they perceive their position, from the perspective of their practice and as an author within this complex of production, and where do they see pitfalls, obstructions, accountability and responsibility?

By reversing the artist-theorist relation here in this project (conventionally it is the theorist reflecting on artistic production as the privileged observer), the institutional relation between artist and context is overturned, opening up the conventions of relations of institutional artistic production. This critique on the level of form is explored further content wise in the interviews with the participants. Curator, organizer and artist, expounding on these questions, are presented as equal in regards to the artistic object that is produced.

The videos were presented in a set-up of 7 monitors, which sculptural layout was adapted to the characteristics of the presentation space, to give spatial coherence to the installation. The choice for the site of the presentation was deliberate. West represents the

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<sup>287</sup> As in this assembled mode of producing the division between aesthetics, labour and politics dissolves, authorship in art production becomes general. Paolo Virno. *A Grammar of the Multitude, For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*. Cambridge, MA: Semiotext(e)/Foreign Agents, The MIT Press. 2004.

conditions of artistic contemporary production; site where artists and theory meet in the public discursive space of contemporary art-production.

### *Participants*

Here I will summarize the interviews with the participants, and elaborate on the topics and the frame that were discussed.

**Charles Esche** is the director of the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven (hereafter VAM) and of publishing platform *Afterall*,<sup>288</sup> as well as being involved in several educational/curatorial programs: De Appel, Amsterdam and Jan van Eyck Academy, Maastricht. Esche's practice therefore combines many aspects of artistic production and its institutional forms. The interview centred around Esche's ideas of the changing role of the museum, which gradually evolved from a more modernist notion towards a more directly politically oriented form of art over the period 2005-2020. In his opinion the classical autonomous artwork was losing its political significance. In 2015, the project *Arte Útil* by Cuban artist Tania Bruguera<sup>289</sup> served as the starting point for a transformation of the artistic direction at VAM. By inviting Bruguera, not only did VAM engage with an explicitly political artist, but this project also demanded a change in the role of the museum in terms of how it presented and collected art, how it would have to function as a platform. Esche speaks about how to make the museum more utilitarian for the audience and the process of turning it into a social powerplant. Esche also explains how the idea of utility, that started with Bruguera, was adopted as a model by VAM and further developed and researched by VAM's theorist (Stephen Wright) and curator (Gemma Medina). It led amongst other things to think of a more activating role of exhibition design, self-produced publications and the mobilization of the museum's archive (online and as integral part of exhibitions) through which the museum itself was able to become an explicit activating agent. Here the overflow and generative exchange between artist, curator and theory under the platform idea of the museum as institution is apparent.

Also discussed were the discursive and online platforms *Afterall* and *L'Internationale*,<sup>290</sup> which provide for different means for contextualizing and archiving institutional production and which act as extra outlets and stages for the museum. Esche describes these as means to

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<sup>288</sup> <https://www.afterall.org/home> (accessed 16-12-2020)

<sup>289</sup> <https://vanabbemuseum.nl/en/programme/programme/museum-of-arte-util/> (accessed 16-12-2020)

<sup>290</sup>



provide for a necessary historical framework that is increasingly lacking and eroding in an ever more solely entrepreneurial frame of artistic production. The final topic we discussed was the long-term exhibition, *The Making of Modern Art* (2018-2021) at the VAM, an exhibition that tries to offer both a reevaluation of the history of modern art and proposes a reconfiguration of this history by offering new art historical interpretations. By positing an alternative, and toying with the idea of the speculative nature of history, the exhibition tries to propose a new way for dealing with canons as such. Here the VAM deliberately repurposes its collection to emphasize the ideological grounds that underlie how collections are created, and the political significance of the cultural canons that continue to structure collections and thereby museums too. Esche hereby, as part of the curatorial team of the exhibition, embraces the role of author in the cultural field.

**Armen Avnessian** is an Austrian philosopher engaged in numerous projects in which curating, philosophy and art merge. Together with Anke Hennig he has produced several publications that deal with the productive interaction between literary and visual arts as a ground for a political model of action. His political and philosophical ideas concerning cultural production are lensed through the notion of time, which according to Avnessian is how capitalism holds power and is able to control our world. Capitalism's pre-empted determination of future time makes it impossible to perceive and use time differently. His output is not limited to the world of academia, as he not only writes about these issues but also experiments with different forms of productive artistic platforms and workshops in which art and theory connect to the broader field of culture, technology and the economy of production. The role philosophy may play as a mediator in artistic production was explored in *Discreet*, a curated production platform connected to the Berlin Biennale 9 conceptualized by Avnessian. In the interview his philosophical ideas were discussed in combination with how he operationalizes these in the field of the arts.

**Sami Khatib** is a scholar of media studies and political theory. He specializes in Walter Benjamin. In his practice, informed by Benjamin, he is concerned with notions of how different disciplines, such as art, politics and academia, can be brought together as a form of political organisation. An example of such a transdisciplinary project is the 2015 *Benjamin in Palestine Conference*, held in Ramallah Palestine, of which Khatib was one of the initiators. The interview delved into how the structure of this week-long conference served to facilitate communication between the different participants (artists, theorists and activists) by

employing theory – most notably that of Benjamin – as a form of community building and as a form of politics. Alongside the choice of location which voiced a political message and was in response to another Benjamin conference held elsewhere, the conference was intended to re-appraise Benjamin’s critical thinking, through discussing the way in which transdisciplinary interaction could be organized. How can text and reading serve as means to bridge epistemological differences and backgrounds, and how might such ambition be curated? Explained his thinking with and through Benjamin, rather than viewing his thought as object of study, is one means of curating to this end. He also discussed how new forms of practice and of organization can counter the political economy of productivism that is shaped through the division of labour in institutional forms.

**Maziar Afrassiabi** is director of independent art space Rib in Rotterdam, whose programme specifically mobilizes aspects of labour in artistic production, both in the projects shown and in the topics addressed. This is evidenced in how Rib structures the work and relation between artists and its platform. As director-artist-curator Afrassiabi represents, in his person, the hybrid nature of the curating-art-platform. In the interview, Rib’s projects were unpacked to examine how they introduce a form of politics in the institutional infrastructure of art. As a relatively small space, its very compactness enables Rib to hold and represent a critical attitude towards the larger institutional artistic platforms and how these have become embedded in the governmental frameworks of production.

**Mohammad Salemy** is the organizer and initiator of *The New Centre for Research and Practice*, a para-institutional research and education platform. In The New Centre’s curriculum art, philosophy, media theory and aesthetics merge. As opposed to the more conventional formations in academia and art schools, it operates in the institutional field of knowledge production as a mobile and adaptable institute: its seminars and workshops are conducted fully online. Salemy translates the relationship between art, philosophy, technology and education into a site of direct aesthetical, academic and political activism, that he defines as *epistopolitics*. He has managed to build up a reputation through his online and public performances, where his media persona serves to mediate and amplify his political views. In the interview, the New Centre’s history was discussed; the conditions from which it emerged and how this relates to the tradition of conceptual art. Salemy’s hybrid role as curator (organizer), artist (poet) and architect (of an epistopolitical platform) was discussed.

**Rachel O'Reilly** is an artist, curator, poet, writer, lecturer and researcher. In her long-term project *The Gas Imaginary* (2013 - ongoing) many of these forms of artistic work are combined. *The Gas Imaginary* is a research project exploring the legal and aesthetic logics of 'unconventional' extractivism, specifically fossil gas fracking, and its continuity of and differentiation from modernist mining regimes, as it has rolled out to the indebted settler colonial states of the West. The industry is exemplary of how capitalist expansion works to the detriment of planetary habitation. The colonization of Australia by the world's most significant fossil Empire, was a capitalist occupation of the land and resources shaped by settler ideology. Today, the damaging effects of this are returning to haunt the descendants of these colonizers, who now experience land dispossession in the same areas of Indigenous resistance to frontier wars. O'Reilly is an invested researcher, as she grew up in this affected area and has been part of its history. In her work, she focusses on the pressure the industry enforces onto the population through language and aesthetics. O'Reilly examines this complex history through site research, which she presents through communal and curated projects, films, writing and poetry, under the umbrella of her self-initiated and managed project, *The Gas Imaginary*. The interview centers on this project, notably two films *Infractions* and *Drawing Rights*, which deal with the history of fracking in Australia. *Infractions* (2019), commissioned by Kunstwerke Berlin, addresses the issue through a more documentary approach, through talks with First Nations most affected by current shale gas plans. *Drawing Rights* (2018), on the other hand, commissioned by Van Abbemuseum and Frontier Imageries, and uses a much more abstract language, including animations and data rendering. The difference between these two aesthetic approaches and artistic strategy was discussed with regard to their artistic and political relevance (in regard to capitalism itself being a mode of value abstraction through which it extracts). In this project and through her approach the categorizations of research and art, factual finding and speculation and interpretation overlap and dissolve.

In the interview O'Reilly self-critically maps how the position of cultural work is imbricated within neoliberalism, which is mostly funded by the same politics that also shapes the conditions and is responsible for the environmental damage that is caused. In this complex of production, it becomes practically impossible to speak of artistic autonomy. She also mentions the tension between the globalized sphere of cultural practitioners (of which she is also part) and the local conditions on the ground which stands the risk of being *othered* by the globalized. O'Reilly explains how this has informed how she positions herself in the

institutional field (which she aims to engage with as independently as possible) and her choice to work with indigenous communities. Finally, the roles of poetry and of academic writing were discussed, and how these fit within the overall transdisciplinary character and politics of O'Reilly's practice. For O'Reilly the act of academic writing contains an emancipatory and feminist quality which in the face of the neoliberal attack on institutional public space, serves as a means of empowerment.

**Lietje Bauwens** was educated as a philosopher. Through her involvement with artists she gradually settled in the field of critical writing. She writes for *Mister Motley* and is editor for *nY*, a magazine for literature and critique. Next to her writerly activities she participates, together with Wouter De Raeve, in the project-based art initiative *431* in Brussels,<sup>291</sup> which serves as a multidisciplinary container for their research. Her working profile therefore is defined by its multidisciplinary character. The research-based platform *431* initiates projects that often address societal issues informed by the conditions of work and life they find themselves in. The film *WTC A Love Story*, one of the central topics of the interview, is one such project. Here De Raeve and Bauwens, as *431*, intervene in Brussels' city centre redevelopment project *Little Manhattan*, a major urban redevelopment plan involving many stakeholders: citizens, politics, governance, refugees, retail and other businesses, as well as the housing corporations themselves who have their own commercial interest. Bauwens and De Raeve studied the early stages of this redevelopment project and questioned the level of participation and possibilities of input that was suggested. They critically assessed the suggestion and pretense of participation as an empty bureaucratic shell in which key stakeholder groups were missing. Amongst those are notably refugees who live nearby in an encampment and have become a structural part of the city, although they do not have access to legal representation. In the film they let actors play the roles of the key players in this redevelopment project, who are informed about their roles by these key players themselves. These processes of getting instructed are filmed as well, thereby staging a complex set up of fictionalizations, albeit with concrete political implications and informed by a real setting. With their artistic intervention in these processes and the use of fictionalization through their film-project *WTC A Love Story*, they successfully managed to open the public discussion around this redevelopment as political and public issue. As well as this film, another

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<sup>291</sup> <http://www.fourthirty-one.org> (accessed 22-12-20)

431project was discussed: *The New Local*, which took place in Brussels in 2018 as part of the project Precarious Pavilions, curated by Michiel Vandeveldde.

Here 431 acted as curator, conceptualizing the architecture of meetings in which audience, artist and reflection meet. Unlike *WTC A Love Story*, with its clear ambition to be far-reaching and to affect politics directly, here the ambition was inversed. The project was set up to problematize the consumption and visibility of art by limiting communication and documentation of the project and to focus rather on the quality of the moment of meeting of the involved participants. In the interview, though clearly engaged with aesthetics and the public domain, Bauwens explains that she does not identify as an artist. In the interview, the relation between curating, reflection and art, as a means to probe aesthetics as a public issue, was discussed and their subsequent demarcations within Bauwens' practice.

*Documentation (photos installation and stills from the interviews)*





## 5 Artistic Production in the Context of Neoliberalism, Autonomy and Heteronomy Revisited by Means of Infrastructural Critique, essay PARSE

### *Explanation*

The last project within this section I want to discuss is the essay ‘Artistic Production in the Context of Neoliberalism, Autonomy and Heteronomy Revisited by Means of Infrastructural Critique’.<sup>292</sup> It is an essay which was published at the Platform for Artistic Research Sweden (hereafter PARSE), issue 9, spring 2019 within the Work theme. PARSE is initiated by the University of Gothenburg Sweden and publishes twice per year a journal with a different theme. These publications and journals are accompanied by presentations and exhibitions in a comprehensive program. The aim of the Work-issue (editors Benjamin Fallon, Dave Beech, Kirsten Macdonald and Marina Vishmidt) was to further the debate concerning artistic labour, the place of the artist in it and how a ground for political engagement with art could be shaped. In my essay I deploy most of the framework I use and developed in my PhD research: the condition of cognitive capitalism which causes a unification and traversal of work between positions (Virno), how this condition relates to the politics of art and aesthetics (Rancière) and how this could be understood in the infrastructure of production (Vishmidt). This theoretical framework is illustrated through the art’s advocacy group W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy)<sup>293</sup> whose practice of political work, I argue, must be understood as artistic work, and the situation that arose between not-for-profit artist initiatives and the organization of Art Rotterdam in 2018. Describing this situation, I lay out the relation and political interconnectedness between the not-for-profit art sector, the commercial market and the politics of art funding and gentrification. I argue that this constellation requires an infrastructural answer and political positioning (as does W.A.G.E.).

With this essay being published at PARSE, I use the field of discourse as the fitting site and medium for artistic labour and the site for political exchange. In this text, though utilizing the same medium as with the Open! essay, I push the envelope a bit further by deliberately pointing to issues of infrastructural organisation and the political aspects it contains. This way the programmatic framework of my research (in which I point to the

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<sup>292</sup> See: <https://parsejournal.com/article/artistic-production-in-the-context-of-neoliberalism-autonomy-and-heteronomy-revisited-by-means-of-infrastructural-critique/> (accessed 22-12-20)

<sup>293</sup> See: <https://wageforwork.com/home#top> (accessed 22-12-20)



importance of communication as the fabric of our time) is related to the concreteness of the political situation. This way theory, art and politics is connected and is agency in the field of public communication, of which PARSE is part. As an artist and through, I argue, artistic labour, I become a co-author of the *scene* as formulated by Rancière. PARSE states on its website:

PARSE is a research publishing platform committed to the movement back and forth between analysis and creation, between meaning-making and the analytics of meaning, between construction and re-construction.<sup>294</sup>

This programme as phrased by PARSE very much fits with how I envision my own position as an artist within such a reciprocally constitutive relation between art and aesthetics.

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<sup>294</sup> See: <https://parsejournal.com> (accessed 22-12-20)

## Artistic Production in the Context of Neoliberalism

### Autonomy and Heteronomy Revisited by Means of Infrastructural Critique

Jack Segbars

How are we to consider artistic practices to have agency under neo-liberal domination? This question is pertinent and needs to be addressed, since neo-liberalism, as the remaining hegemonic ideology, has co-opted art within its logic. Taking the Netherlands as an example of this development, in which the shift away from a welfare-state ideology of production was completed in 2012, artistic production has been seen to adapt as a response to these changes in conditions. That year marked effectively—by means of drastic budget cuts in the arts— the ideological turn away from state support for art production to a market-oriented model. The responses to these developments show a tendency to explore self-organisational and institutional formats that cater to the need for self-sufficiency. A prominent characteristic of these responses is the integral incorporation of a wider range of functions of production within the institutional production models, such as reflective platforms, knowledge exchange and the production of publications, all of which are incorporated in institutions' programmes. By taking more control over all aspects of production in a comprehensive way, an effort is made to create greater autonomy for production. Will this response—understood as a general organisational reconfiguration throughout the field of artistic production—be enough to safeguard and deploy artistic agency and to confront neo-liberal conditions?

The effects of neo-liberalism imply a continued move towards the logic of market-oriented production and less state support, less public funding, deteriorating social and working conditions in the context of the so-called gig economy: an economy that runs on temporary jobs for most. In short, for artists and for artistic professionals (as for all workers) this means a structural move towards more precarity, as Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams have laid out in *Inventing the Future* (2016).<sup>295</sup> This forces artists, and those working in education, the humanities and cultural workers alike, to become—and understand themselves as—entrepreneurs in a workplace that has become more market-oriented and that loses its social function, since it is only measured in economised terms. In concrete terms, this means more work for less money, permanent job insecurity, increased competition, and the resulting

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<sup>295</sup> Srnicek, Nick and Williams, Alex. *Inventing the Future, Postcapitalism and a World Without Work*. London: Verso. 2016.

effects of exhaustion of those working in the field. On a political level this also means that the public infrastructure for art and cultural production is under severe pressure. In the Netherlands this was most noticeable through the budget cuts for the arts that were initiated in 2011 and completed in 2012, from which it is still recovering.<sup>296</sup> These are structural effects, given the political tendency towards further precarisation, without substantial opposition to counter these developments in the foreseeable future. The term neo-liberalism is sometimes used too readily, yet it is the last remaining hegemonic political idea that continues to shape the world. As Wendy Brown has shown, neo-liberalism means the ongoing transformation of life and work into human capital, affecting artistic production and its organisation. According to neo-liberal ideology, production in the end has to comply with the laws and rationale of the liberal economic logic, although this has evidently shown to be a logic that benefits only a few and dismantles social cohesion.<sup>297</sup>

Philosopher Peter Osborne also identifies the solidification of neo-liberalism and its effects on art production, rather than a moving towards a post-capitalist situation. The misconception that we would be heading towards, or had an outlook on a post-capitalist situation was evoked by the term “late-capitalism” as used by Fredric Jameson in his famous essay on postmodernism, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1989).<sup>298</sup> But rather than being in a stage of transition towards a situation beyond its end, capitalism has on the contrary found an enduring foothold. An acknowledgement of this misconception is required to begin to think about how to address the persistence of neo-liberalism’s stranglehold. Such recognition is needed especially given the all-encompassing force of neo-liberalism that determines the conditional framework of production, effecting all production processes and social relations these represent, undercutting the democratic principle of empowerment of its subjects. As Brown argues, in the end it endangers democracy and a sense of the commons, as a shared space of political identity, expression and exchange. “What happens when the practices and principles of speech, deliberation, law, popular sovereignty,

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<sup>296</sup> The budget cuts by the right-wing coalition of VVD and CDA were enabled by the support of the populist party PVV of Geert Wilders in 2011.

Oudenampsen, Merijn, *Dutch Culture Wars: on the Politics of Gutting the Arts*. See <https://merijnoudenampsen.org/2013/02/21/dutch-culture-wars-on-the-politics-of-gutting-the-arts/> (accessed 2019-05-08.)

<sup>297</sup> Brown, Wendy. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution*. New York, NY: Zone Books. 2015

<sup>298</sup> Osborne, Peter. *The Postconceptual Condition. Critical Essays*. London: Verso London. 2018

participation, education, public goods, and shared power entailed in rule by the people are submitted to economization?”<sup>299</sup>

Is it still possible, under these circumstances, for art as form of critique, to be considered as a meaningful force, once its structure of production ultimately follow capitalism’s logic? How can art, in its production of aesthetics, in shaping the way we perceive the world and our place in it, contest the undermining of the democratic principle by neo-liberalism. As Brown has argued, it is through neo-liberalism that all ideas on the cultural and societal organisation of our lives in the end are controlled by the principle of economisation, and organised by neo-liberalism. Here the way in which art production has transformed, along with the development of global neo-liberalism, into contemporary art—understood as the global network of institutions and its discourses—becomes of importance. According to Osborne, art production as we know it now has evolved out of the legacy of conceptual art—broadly understood as focusing on material and value in production and utilising art’s singularity—effectively constituting a critical address of the organisation of production in our technological, capitalist societies. The authorship of the artistic object, in Osborne’s view, as he identifies it in the post-conceptual condition, is spread across the institutional players concerned, as a co-authorial production assembly comprising artists, curators and institutions.<sup>300</sup> This assembled mode of producing is closely related to the post-Fordist economy in which there is no longer a categorical division in work to be made between aesthetics, labour and politics as analysed by Italian philosopher Paolo Virno.<sup>301</sup> This also means that the divisions between positions become relative: all participate in the networked and assembled mode of production. Virno also asserts that the autonomy within work is granted by capitalism, in so far as the worker has to remain productive according to the criteria set by capitalism. The question, then, of art’s critical leverage, its possible agency in relation to capitalist subsumption (its artistic legacy and promise), and the way in which it is organised, are deeply entwined in terms of form and content, and become a matter of its infrastructural organisation.

To understand the implications of the dominance neo-liberalism exerts now, and how labour is organised in post-Fordist production, we need to take a closer look at the basic

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<sup>299</sup> Brown, Wendy. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution*. New York, NY: Zone Books. 2015. p. 10.

<sup>300</sup> Osborne, Peter. *Anywhere or Not at All*. London: Verso. 2013.

<sup>301</sup> Virno, Paolo. *A Grammar of the Multitude, For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*. Cambridge, MA: Semiotext(e)/Foreign Agents, The MIT Press. 2004.

infrastructure of artistic production, which designates the means and ends in the relations of production. How do issues of authorship and respective accountability shift and how are these to be considered under these developments? My approach in answering these questions resonates with a form of critical inquiry that has recently been conceptualised by art theorist and writer Marina Vishmidt as *Infrastructural Critique*.<sup>302</sup> Here the infrastructure of art production as integrated assemblage of production, or infrastructural set-up, is considered as a coherent system. Such an infrastructural notion, according to Vishmidt, is to be approached through the specificity of relations in production, rather than by way of theories supposedly underlying them, since these social relations are the material embodiment of the infrastructural set-up of production. According to Vishmidt, “A move to infrastructural critique represents an attempt to mediate some of the closures of this position both discursively and pragmatically, with infrastructure focusing the link between the material and ideological conditions of the institution of art in a way that de-centres rather than affirms it.”<sup>303</sup> The closures Vishmidt here refers to relate to Institutional Critique’s critical approach, which finds its limits within the institution of art at which it addresses its efforts. The notion of infrastructure can be understood as the assemblage of positions and functions that in its totality enable production. This totality contains the conflicting ideas and communications on the relation between form and conditions of work and purpose. In my view, this principle has to extend to territories outside of the art institution that affect its production processes: the realms of governance and politics. These are to be considered co-authors (or co-authorial positions) of the “artistic object”. Since, in post-Fordism, these equally shape the ideologically defined conditions and parameters affecting the operation and outcome of artistic production, they are part of its infrastructure of production.

In the remainder of the text I will discuss how the binary sets of terms of autonomy vs heteronomy and profit vs not-for-profit have changed under neo-liberalism and post-Fordism, and how this forces a re-orientation of artistic practice and how that is related to its socio-political task. And finally I will consider how an infrastructural approach may help to redefine the notion of autonomy in art production.

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<sup>302</sup> Vishmidt, Marina. “Beneath the Atelier, the Desert: Critique, Institutional and Infrastructural”. In *Marion von Osten: Once We Were Artists (A BAK Critical Reader in Artists’ Practice)*. Tom Holert, Maria Hlavajova (eds.) Cambridge, MA, and Utrecht: The MIT Press, and BAK. 2017.

<sup>303</sup> *Ibid.*, np.

### **The Unification of the ‘Market’ as Hybridity under Neo-liberalism**

Up until quite recently, art’s agency was supported and guaranteed by the idea of its autonomy. Although working within, or even depending on the art market and public institutions, this artistic autonomy had been considered a given since the early nineteenth century, underpinned by its own strand of philosophy separate from art, that of aesthetics.<sup>304</sup> The idea was that from a position of autonomy, art held a culturally exceptional position and had something unique to offer, despite it being subsidiary to and dependent on a heteronomous field for its material existence. Through its economically exceptional status, that is, by being exempt from regular conditions of production—since its value did not follow regular economic rules of valuation, such as the accustomed remuneration for labour—it was able to perform its critique on society and the effects of commodification within capitalism.<sup>305</sup> This relatively protected position of art in European social democracies, underpinned by public support for museums, presentation spaces, in education and non-commercial art production, defined its infrastructure and structured art’s role within society. This agreement was in place while at the same time the idea of autonomy in production was maintained. The not-for-profit artistic sector, as part of this wider spectrum, was able to perform—as a critique on the general economic and political organisation of societies, seemingly independent from the market. However, with the hegemony of the capitalist order that carries no responsibility for such a (quasi-)autonomous and critical function, the conditions supporting this model of production are undermined. This model is increasingly threatened by the practically unchallenged capitalist order that occupies and determines cultural space through the sheer power of private capital, and through the ideologically deployed principle of economisation that permeates all layers of its structure. Art’s supposed autonomy therefore becomes not only exposed as determined by the heteronomy of forces that define the conditions of production; in addition, and more importantly—and for now lacking a response—it ideologically follows suit in how the space for production is organised by (neo-liberal) politics, voiding the potential of any avant-garde ambition having co-authorial ideological societal agency.

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<sup>304</sup> Starting with Kant and Hegel and subsequent philosophies of art, art—as object and as practice—has been investigated as the relation between art and aesthetics. Notably Theodor Adorno situates this relation at its core.

<sup>305</sup> The different aspects of production of the artwork vis-à-vis commodification as the general characteristic in capitalism, is extensively laid out in *Aesthetic Theory* by Theodor Adorno. See for the relation between the economic and ‘formal’ aspect of artistic production Josephine Wikström’s article “Art’s Economic Exceptionalism”, available online at <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/art’s-economic-exceptionalism> (accessed 2018-11-01.)

A telling characteristic and illustration of this development is the fading distinction between not-for-profit artistic practices and their infrastructures on the one hand, and artistic practices that operate within the commercial art market on the other. These now have to a great extent to be considered as unified into one general realm of artistic production. As Lise Soskolne of W.A.G.E. convincingly argues, the economic relationships between the independent not-for-profit field of artistic production and that of the market are closely connected.<sup>306</sup> The commercial value of artists is channelled through, and increased by their performance and validation in the so-called independent circuit that acknowledges and establishes it for its critical value. This critique manifests itself often as critique on the conditions of art production itself, on art's and people's position and imbrication in the capitalist commodity economy. The financial and economic structures upholding the not-for-profit sector—in the US on a charitable basis—are structurally geared towards commercial success as well as being financially rewarding for the patronage supporting such rationale.<sup>307</sup> The ideological framework and end goal that is operational here is that of the market, to which end art's criticality then serves, supposedly benefiting the greater good that art as public function represents. At the same time, this is not the rationale of those engaged in the not-for-profit sector: they engage with and work in the arts precisely because for them it intrinsically represents alternative ideas on working relations and production. The working conditions and invested labour—in the not-for-profit context—are for them the factual ends, the ends that are non-marketised or commodifiable, and not the means towards marketised value. They work to foster the “general intellect”, as Paulo Virno calls it, in terms of putting the qualities of cognitive labour and creativity to a common benefit.<sup>308</sup> Those working and investing in its model aim to counteract the capitalist model of production, and the relationship between work and its validation.

Although Soskolne clearly speaks from an American perspective, which is marked by an evident neo-liberal structure in which any form of state financing, direct or indirect, fits the

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<sup>306</sup> W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy) started in 2008, informally researching precarity of working conditions in artistic production. Since then it has developed in an internationally active platform producing knowledge and making this public. It is also engaged in issuing certificates (W.A.G.E. Certification) to institutions that conform to fair pay for their workers. See <https://wageforwork.com/home> (accessed 2018-11-01.)

<sup>307</sup> The injection of capital for “charitable causes” as contributions for not-for-profit forms of production are in the US considered tax-deductible, which mostly benefits bigger companies supporting such programmes. These benefactors arguably represent the affluent few in an increasingly unequal division of wealth.

<sup>308</sup> Virno, Paolo. *General intellect*. In *Lessico Postfordista*. Zanini and Fadini (eds), Translation by Arianna Bove. Milan: Feltrinelli. 2001.

frame of investment, revenue and economisation, the rationale that underpins this structure is —albeit more opaquely—equally discernible in the European context. Here the general idea of market-driven production as end goal shapes the structure of artistic production too. Administrative criteria as formulated by most grant providers or other funding bodies comply with this rationale. Supportive arrangements and subsidies are framed as “temporary stimuli”, providing a bridge towards a future of self-supporting independence. They hardly ever mention the activity of producing independently as an end or as a quality in itself. At the same time, this end goal of market success is translated into societal objectives, or of audiences to be addressed, embracing the supposed emancipatory and social criticality of art, in turn confirming the market as an end goal. See for instance how the Mondriaanfonds—the Netherlands’ most important grant-giving body in the arts— presents itself as a funder of production, thereby intervening in the market, albeit reluctantly since fundamentally it is supposed to be acritical of market mechanisms (or it cannot voice its criticism because of it being held to governmental neutrality). The function of art here is formulated as if it were a free haven for imagination as a common good, but with the subtext that ideally it should not need such support.<sup>309</sup> This creates a distinct and hybridised economy of artistic production and its accompanying language of funding, catering to both sets of criteria. The idea of art as a function of the commons, aligned with the social objective of emancipation or of diversity, for example, is channelled through capitalism’s notion of the market. The respective discourses of both societal function and goals, and of capitalism as market are intertwined in an ongoing schizophrenia. Through the politically motivated regime of these funding structures—based on keeping the applicant, in terms of support for cost of living, on the threshold of the bare minimum—and the enforced stress on entrepreneurial capitalisation, the ambition to establish art as a thriving milieu of critique, as a working practice is unacknowledged, and the rationale of capitalist production remains uncontested. The understanding of public funding as such, as a structural governmental tool in markets, stimulating or shielding processes deemed underdeveloped or precarious, is not expressed as a fundamental element of the “market”. As Pascal Gielen observes, a society that desires a

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<sup>309</sup> All contributions reinforce the production or presentation of art and heritage from the Netherlands, both at home and abroad, where the market doesn’t do this (yet): precisely there, art and heritage prove themselves as valuable havens of the imagination. The fund stimulates the public commitment and the development of these havens. See <https://www.mondriaanfonds.nl/en/about/> (accessed 2018-11-01.)



viable art production, guarantees its autonomy by supporting its existence for which it itself cannot fully provide. Such decision then is a question of political contestation.<sup>310</sup>

### **W.A.G.E., Aesthetic Performance and Politics in the Workplace, Working Conditions as Object of Contestation**

Since precarious government support, the rationale of austerity and more market-oriented production compliant with the rationale of economisation characterise the direction we are moving in, we can consider it the starting point through which the frame of artistic production is politically determined. It is the hinge point of political contention. In response to the question on how small-scale art organisations create value, in her lecture at the Public Assets Conference in London in 2015, Soskolne laid out the rationale to W.A.G.E.'s programme, and the position of not-for-profit art production in the economy at large.<sup>311</sup> For W.A.G.E. the logical artistic consequence is to engage in the battle for fair remuneration for artists working in institutional settings, and for artistic labourers to be recognised as co-workers in the same workplace as other paid workers, such as directors, curators, communication employees etc.<sup>312</sup> Rather than continuing to work underpaid, or not being paid at all—on a voluntary basis, and therefore operating at the mercy of support structures that are ideologically in opposition to the economic exceptionalism of art with its subsequent poor working conditions—the artist should be considered an equal in the production process. This strategy does not directly solve the problem of capitalism, but it politicises the workplace—and the institutional responsibility thereof—by re-introducing a counter ideology of artistic work with its alternative ideas on validation, within the frame of its working conditions. This re-connects the place of artistic work to the public good it professes to serve and binds its workers as equals within the assembled setting. It also exposes existing workplace rationales and protocols underpinned by neo-liberal capitalism that lead to structural under-valuation and the position of artistic work in it. The performative work of W.A.G.E. thus exposes and interrupts capitalism's logic, and particularly the principle of economisation by which it is structured in the workplace.

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<sup>310</sup> Gielen, Pascal. "Autonomy via Heteronomy". *Open! Platform for Art, Culture and the Public Domain*, 2013, <http://www.onlineopen.org/autonomy-via-heteronomy> (accessed 2018-11-01.)

<sup>311</sup> See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2aou\\_VmDYNs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2aou_VmDYNs) (accessed 2018-11-01.)

<sup>312</sup> W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy) started in 2008, informally researching the precarity of working conditions in artistic production. Since then it has developed into an internationally active platform producing knowledge around this topic and making this publicly accessible. It is also engaged in issuing certificates (W.A.G.E. Certification) to institutions that comply with fair pay for their workers. See <https://wageforwork.com/home> (accessed 2018-11-05.)

Such an activist artistic approach would, however, as a critique on W.A.G.E. has been voiced, conform to the existing regime of workplace criteria and thus follow existing state political rationales and protocols that underpin neo-liberalism's rationale of economisation. For the artist this would therefore mean losing out on freedom and autonomy as prerequisites and tools of artistic labour and eventual political agency. It is a critique that fits the wider debate on the art and activism schism and the question of how far art can engage with politics.<sup>313</sup>

This notion of artistic freedom and autonomy is non-existent to begin with, in the sense that it is inert, analysed correctly in my opinion by W.A.G.E. Such assessment then first needs to be recognised and secondly politicised by affectively and cognitively activating it. As Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello have indeed shown in *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2005), their extensive sociological field study of production processes, it are precisely the qualities of collaboration and creativity, and the idea of independence that are appropriated in capitalist production.<sup>314</sup>

As an artistic and activist form of organisation, W.A.G.E. engages aesthetically with the conditions that shape its space for life and work. The self-administered suspension by W.A.G.E. of what is commonly recognised as the artists' "creative work" and to substitute this for (more tedious) administrative, bureaucratic and activist work, here becomes art's task. The performative abandonment of creative labour, to negate the presumed artists' role in the market of the arts, is an artistic act, since the conditions set out by the market negate the space for creative work to become manifest in the first place. Addressing working conditions, then, is W.A.G.E.'s artistic strategy and prime artistic target. This fundamental address acknowledges that working conditions shape the outcome of the political artistic space, and that any space for control over or recognition and affirmation of its relevance must be sought among the conditions that are to be engaged with. This then means that work—as the organisation of labour—itself is that *object* of artistic production that is contested within the current frame and condition of production under post-Fordist, neo-liberal capitalism.

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<sup>313</sup> See for example how Chantal Mouffe calls for the recognition of art practices as counterhegemonic form vs politics. This requires an institutional engagement; it is through institutional mediation after all that "common sense" is developed, and where the subsequent political arena—as area of contestation—is established.

<sup>314</sup> Boltanski, Luc and Chiapello, Ève. *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. London: Verso. 2005.

Concurring with the argument made by Vishmidt and theorist Kerstin Stakemeier: it is the basic organisation of work itself that produces the notion of autonomy to begin with.<sup>315</sup> As all work takes place under the guise of, and is engineered by neo-liberal capitalism as labour, work becomes the object of expression that shows the relation between the potential of autonomy and heteronomy under the regime of capitalist production. In this sense the political organisation of artistic work becomes synonymous with the political struggle and organisation of any work and all workers as such.

### **Aesthetic Practice, Work and the Space of Democracy, the Art-Aesthetics Bind**

The “contention over work”—as that what is ordered by politics and what may organise any form of autonomy—is therefore also the quintessential form of artistic inquiry. And it becomes art’s political task, if we follow through on French philosopher Jacques Rancière’s ideas on the relation between art and politics. In the *distribution of the sensible*, his well-known conceptualisation of aesthetics as political form, the space of politics is to be understood as the contestation over the arrangement of registers and forms of expression, visibility and agency.<sup>316</sup> According to Rancière, the artistic becomes expressed in the exposition and relation between art and politics as political-aesthetical antinomies. Through art’s operation, in postulating its sovereign singularity, the forces of political policing and rule, that what occupies and dominates as well as that which organises an idea of a common ground, become visible. This requires the free play between *aisthesis* and *poiesis*, between that what is made and the meaning attributed to it. The artistic act of the free play between *aisthesis* and *poiesis*, then, must be taken as the fundamental democratic principle to the formation of a sovereignly organised life. Under neo-liberal subsumption, where social relations are deeply determined by the conditions set out by it, the antagonism between neo-liberalism’s rule and the possibility to a sovereign life becomes obvious.

Art here directly contests and interacts with politics, since the production of aesthetics is automatically a matter of political action, as it enters and contributes to the arena of the

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<sup>315</sup> In reading Mario Tronti, Marina Vishmidt and Kerstin Stakemeier argue that autonomy in capitalism can only be identified from within the determination of labour conditions: “Where Adorno locates autonomy in the realm of the aesthetic to construct a maximal distance from the reproductive brutalities of capital, Tronti argues that autonomy cannot be won at any distance from the production process but can be anticipated only as an autonomisation from within divided labour.” Vishmidt, Marina and Stakemeier, Kerstin. *Reproducing Autonomy: Work, Money, Crisis and Contemporary Art*. London and Berlin: Mute Publishing. 2016. p. 28.

<sup>316</sup> Rancière, Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. Gabriel Rockhill trans. and intr. London and New York, NY: Continuum. 2004.

political, where it competes with politics and establishes itself through aesthetics.<sup>317</sup> In this sense, this model of art directly proposes a counter model to politics (as in the structures of representative democracies) as we have it, in that it proposes an alternative model to community building, worlding and meaning. According to Rancière, in honouring the principle of radical equality, there are also no boundaries or limitations to who contributes to the formation of the common space via the combination of art and aesthetics.<sup>318</sup> When we apply this premise to the assembled chain in artistic production, this ranges from theoretical critique and discourse, to critics, curators and artists, publics, workers and institutions, who all participate in the field of artistic production. The art-aesthetics bind and the notion of radical equality, and thus total accessibility of the political, follows, according to Rancière, from the history of emancipation in which humans formulate and organise themselves as sovereign subjects, not dominated by the authority of politics that would occupy the production, meaning and relevance of cultural knowledge. This is where the ideal of democracy and of art meet, and indeed overlap: in short, a space of the commons. However, as Rancière emphasises, this can never lead to a stable or fixed form, since it is an ongoing process of exchange. The commons can never be stable, but must each time be organised, re-adapted and re-affirmed. Its structural incompleteness must be honoured.<sup>319</sup> The question on how to accommodate these processes, therefore, to designate a place for it, becomes a matter of political action and of ideology.

The organisation of the free play between *aisthesis* and *poiesis*, and the structural connection of art and aesthetics become important if we look at how contemporary forms of artistic production are shaped, in terms of the paradigmatic transformation of the field of art production as mentioned in the beginning of this text. The expansion of the field of art production resonates strongly with the notion of the idea of assembled production—of the

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<sup>317</sup> There are of course questions to be raised concerning the equivalence between power that is distributed through politics and through art and aesthetics. It is true that matters of ideology and politics, and the way in which these are established are closely linked by the ways these are perceived and culturally shaped. In that sense the assertion of equivalence between politics and art can be made, and does a politics of aesthetics have political agency.

<sup>318</sup> In Anna Wójcik's interview with Jacques Rancière - conducted in October 2014 during Conrad Festival in Cracow, Poland - he describes art not as medium-specific and an autonomous realm but as a form of heteronomous aesthetics-formation: as art-aesthetics bind.

*The Politics of Art: An interview with Jacques Rancière*, in: "Verso.com", 09 November 2015.

See: <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2320-the-politics-of-art-an-interview-with-jacques-ranciere> (accessed 2019-05-08.)

<sup>319</sup> Rancière defines the space of politics through the notion of *Dissensus*, a continual exchange between the formation of dominance and subsequent political and ideological coherence and that what opposes this formation.

*scene*—as formulated by Jacques Rancière.<sup>320</sup> Recent decades have shown an acceleration in the development of forms of artistic practices that deploy artistic research and interdisciplinary forms of organisation, promoting participation and social exchange, and that are leaning towards activism and resistance. Artists are exploring forms of practice in which the production of art is put forward as the production of politicised aesthetics, as Sven Lütticken observes in *Cultural Revolution. Aesthetic Practice After Autonomy* (2017).<sup>321</sup> This movement is characteristic in artistic practices such as those of Bik Van der Pol, Jeanne van Heeswijk, Renzo Martens and Jonas Staal, to list some more outspoken examples among many other less visible ones. As Lütticken's title suggests, the question of the flight from art's autonomy (or of the apparent depletion of such notion), and the acknowledgement of and engagement with the implication of the conditions through which it is shaped, prompt these new artistic practices. The issue then becomes one of a strategic positioning and of direct aesthetic interference—as outward aesthetics—aiming to overcome the institutional confines of the institute of art.

This tendency is not only limited to artists' practices, but similarly takes place in presentation spaces and the realms of education and academia, where presentation, research and operation are thought through in tandem. Examples in the Netherlands are Casco and BAK in Utrecht, DAI in Arnhem and Veem House for Performance in Amsterdam. Their programmes and output are the (self-)critical outcomes of research into artistic production processes. The question here is how these processes and structures organise the social relations between the actors involved, and how these are situated in and related to the world, and how these may engender effect. Here the artistic is connected to theoretical and discursive aspects, and to educational and curatorial practices—as modes of distribution—and most of the time it is therefore concerned and intertwined with institutional mediation. These forms of artistic production—which include modes of reception, communication and meaning—pursue or mimic “the institutional” as a form of independent and autonomous production. The artistic research conducted in these contexts translates intrinsically, and sometimes explicitly, into political demands or propositions.<sup>322</sup> These formations of artistic production thus manifest themselves as aesthetic agencies in a Rancièrian sense: as total and complete

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<sup>320</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>321</sup> Lütticken, Sven. *Cultural Revolution. Aesthetic Practice After Autonomy*. Berlin: Sternberg Press. 2017.

<sup>322</sup> See for instance Dutch Art Institute's REALTY study group in which the research into the relation between art production, gentrification and theoretical discourse leads to concrete political proposals.

entities—connecting art and aesthetics into a coherent form—that counteract and contest the institutions or bodies that are expressions of the political distribution of power.

### **Accountability in Assemblage of Production, Authorship**

The problems that arise as a result of this development have been identified by British theorists and educators Suhail Malik and Andrea Phillips in their critique on the workings of contemporary art. Extrapolating on the ideas of Rancière, they argue that art has to go beyond the problem of the mere demonstration of power as its negative, as the opposite of a politics that does enforce its aesthetics, and to grasp for political agency itself: in other words, to not solely identify the political frame that sets the conditions but to engage in its formation.<sup>323</sup> Art, as an organised form that is engaged in the politics of aesthetics, must consider itself as an institutional player versus the institutions of politics, and perceive itself as an institutional actor. In addition, a consequence that arises out of these art and aesthetics configurations is their diffused and assembled mode of production that fosters a sense of indetermination. If the field of art wants to exert its political ambition and be the champion of artistic value versus that of politics through the means and deployment of aesthetics, it not only needs to give up on its internal open-endedness or self-referentially to accept such a concrete challenge. I would argue that the field of art also has to consider its relation towards politics from the viewpoint and through the assertion of its expanded form, and address the problems of accountability inherent in this assertion.

The diffused and assembled mode of production—considered as interaction between institution, curator, discourse and artist, and its connection to the broader political framework that sets the parameters of production, such as financing and grant-giving bodies—arguably presents such a challenge. The authorship of the artistic object, in the institutional structure of current artistic production, shows itself as intimately entangled within the broader economic setting and in production as totality. Its structural set-up accommodates an obfuscation of accountability.<sup>324</sup> It is internally divided between the direct actors at play: artist, curator and institutional platform. However, how this configuration is related to conditions outside of these platforms, to governmental or political frames—how it sits in, and is connected to, the

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<sup>323</sup> Malik, Suhail and Phillips, Andrea. "The Wrong of Contemporary Art: Aesthetics and Political Indeterminacy". In *Reading Rancière*. Paul Bowman and Richard Stamp (eds.) pp. 111-128.

<sup>324</sup> In the format of contemporary art production as formulated by Peter Osborne in *Anywhere or not at all* (London: Verso, 2013), it is the amalgamation of the different functions in its totality: curating, distribution, the institutional platform, discursivity and theory, that acts as author-producer.

bigger infrastructure of production and how this can be considered an institutional co-author—is often under-exposed. The importance of the infrastructure and how infrastructure determines artistic productions, like all production, therefore becomes ever more relevant. The infrastructure is the frame that houses and upholds the function of political exchange—of dissensus—as democratic societal interest.

In the post-Fordist condition the forms of the institution and that of its situatedness in the infrastructure affecting its conditions to production cannot be separated. Institution, infrastructure and its actors merge as co-authorial instances to the artistic object that is produced. As Vishmidt has noted, the issue of authorship in artistic production can be instrumental in mapping the accountabilities and functions performed throughout the production processes in the wider field of art.<sup>325</sup> How these accountabilities and functions traverse the fields of art production and the heteronomous outside to which it is connected and that partially structures and defines it, can then be made visible. This becomes especially pertinent under neo-liberal subsumption, in which all operations in the cycle are determined by it. These insights can be used to question the actions performed by these transversal authors and/or how relations are organised. How is one to consider oneself institutionally or positionally within this conflicted infrastructure? As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have stipulated, while critiquing the existing constellation and the role that institutions perform, an institutional format is still required to start to think about operationalising alternative values in production. In their push to propagate a non-hierarchical, non-representational and egalitarian form of production that does not exert a power relation, the format of the institution is still needed to gain agency, to foster collaboration, organisation and continuity.<sup>326</sup> The questions then become, I argue, how these new quasi-institutional forms operate within the assembly of production; how they relate to the economical frames set by these conditions and the ideologies these represent; how they address the fundamental questions as set out by W.A.G.E. And, finally, how new infrastructural configurations can be imagined and how these relate to the issue of absorption and what aesthetic strategies these insights prompt.

### **Art Rotterdam, an Example**

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<sup>325</sup> Vishmidt, Marina. “Beneath the Atelier, the Desert: Critique, Institutional and Infrastructural”. In *Marion von Osten: Once We Were Artists (A BAK Critical Reader in Artists' Practice)*. Tom Holert, Maria Hlavajova (eds.) Cambridge, MA, and Utrecht: The MIT Press, and BAK. 2017.

<sup>326</sup> Hardt, Michael and Negri, Antonio. *Assembly*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2017.

A case in point, where different responses to a complex constellation of positions in art production obfuscated accountability in relation to the common endeavour in the current conditions, is the problem that arose between the Art Rotterdam 2018 edition and the Art Initiatives (AIs) that were invited to participate in the art fair. In prior editions, the not-for-profit initiatives were presented in the fair's Intersections programme. The AIs had in previous editions been able to participate only because the costs were kept relatively low. This was enabled by an, as it turned out, incidental reduction of rent for the location in which Intersections was housed, and because of a one-off subsidy. The participation of the AIs gave Art Rotterdam the aura of a young and critically innovative fair—precisely by incorporating the non-commercial section as a token recognition of the interconnection of the profit and non-profit sectors—and boosted its artistic credibility and its subsequent value. In the competition with the more established and older Art Amsterdam, which had gone in decline in recent years, it was the aura of risk and experiment these AIs brought to the fair, considered prime artistic qualities, that contributed to the success of Art Rotterdam. For the AIs it meant a chance to tap into new audiences while keeping the costs manageable. Once the financial injections evaporated in 2018, the AIs were confronted with normal market rates, which practically none of them were able to cover. Ironically, the chosen theme for the Intersections segment that year was the precarity of current conditions of production, which it critically aimed to address.

Many AIs declined immediately, while a few others made the effort to negotiate—not only about the financial terms, but also to contest the thematic framing. The conditional and aesthetical framework of production were considered to demonstrate precisely the condition of precarity the AIs have to work in, through the way in which Art Rotterdam had set up the cooperation. Since Art Rotterdam had benefited from the surplus-value of this cooperation in previous years, and had shown to acknowledge the economic entanglement, it would have been fair to expect some lenience in fees or a jointly agreed solution—for example a contribution by the other commercial galleries that had also benefited from AIs' presence and input in previous iterations of the fair in which both sectors participated. Such ideas, which engaged with notions of common production, however, proved fruitless and remained unexplored. The iron logic of the market rent was firmly kept in place. The AIs were supposed to invest their scarce resources without any prospect of a financial return, other than a potential—but speculative and precarious—remuneration through prospective and future applications, by means of which their participation in Art Rotterdam—as production through



visibility—could or would be validated. As Soskolne rightly argues, art’s critical value is transformed into market capital through precarious work.<sup>327</sup>

There were some attempts to formulate a joint public response. Ideas for a protest or strike were raised, but soon the united front of the AIs evaporated.<sup>328</sup> The notion of a “strike” was rejected and considered too negative and reactive. Thoughts of bringing a complete alternative fair into existence, parallel to the regular fair, were soon abandoned because of a lack of time, funding and organisational resources. The challenge of taking this on in addition to the already difficult conditions of producing their own programmes, proved insurmountable. Some of them decided to present an alternative programme during the Art Rotterdam week, announcements for which were included in Art Rotterdam’s communications. This programme was framed as “the independent scene” showcasing their platforms and activities dubbed as the *Not for Profit Art Party*.<sup>329</sup> However, this response kept the existing logic of unilateral extraction and dependency in production intact. It had cost Art Rotterdam nothing in the previous years, on the contrary, it had only added extra value, and it could continue to communicate the ongoing cooperation with the AIs, and thereby continue adding to its own value. The AIs in the meantime—despite being seen as structural co-author in the infrastructure of production—were fractured and fragmented, and left with nothing.

By wanting to continue to make use of the publicity provided in the Art Rotterdam week, maintaining a front of “independent” production, the AIs that did participate undoubtedly continued the cycle of dependency, and subsequent deterioration of future conditions. The reasons for AIs to continue to participate in this situation are obvious: the publicity and audience reach provided for here count as positive production results that are hard to neglect. These register as the “revenue”, as goals matching the criteria set by government grant providers to which the AIs are accountable. These positive results then become speculative “production value” for future applications. These are the “assets” in the competition for funding that is becoming scarcer, given the ideology of austerity, which needless to say generates competition among AIs themselves. Since the AIs had demonstrated they were able to function under precarious conditions and to meet set criteria, any incentive to increase

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<sup>327</sup> See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2aou\\_VmDYNs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2aou_VmDYNs) (accessed 2018-11-01.)

<sup>328</sup> After an initial meeting between a representation of the AIs and the director of AR, Fons Hof, the discussion was continued in some follow-up meetings. An extensive e-mail exchange developed simultaneously, in which many AIs participated and which focused on how to respond. It resulted in divisions.

<sup>329</sup> See <https://worm.org/production/not-for-profit-art-party/> (accessed 2018-11-05.)

support for them evaporated, maintaining and even justifying (or aggravating) the rationale for austerity for the not-for-profit sector, aiding thus the logic that underpins existing funding. So, to continue working within the context of Art Rotterdam did nothing to confront the idea of the market as art production's end goal, in fact it only confirmed it.

This example demonstrates the cycle of dependency, precisely in contrast to the idea of autonomy as evoked by the *Not for Profit Art Party*, as a deeply internalised condition of art initiatives and art practices. It is important to understand these mechanisms, and the self-imposed ideas of exceptionality, autonomy and willingness to invest without reward in production that keeps this cycle going.<sup>330</sup> The not-for-profit artists, organisers and curators offer themselves willingly as dedicated and even productive workers in this system. This guarantees a continuation of the exploitation and the upholding of the market-driven idea of production, consolidating the neo-liberal scheme of production supported by public means and the supposed function of art.

The same logic of instrumentalisation of art production can be detected in governmental policies, where the input of artists is put to work in the context of urban gentrification, as part of the creative industries in general. At temporarily reduced costs artists are allowed to rent, live and produce in urban areas that then become profitable because of increasing property value and the influx of more affluent inhabitants, who follow the lead once the creative sector has done the groundwork. Once the objective of property value increase has been accomplished, artists and the original residents are forced to move someplace else as rents are raised.<sup>331</sup> The creative sector as gentrifying avant-garde, with those whose output cannot become profitable becoming martyrs along the way.<sup>332</sup> The artist's autonomy here serves not the symbolic value of its independence in respect to its condition in heteronomy, its autonomy rather serves the amelioration of the conditions of heteronomy to its own detriment.

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<sup>330</sup> What was telling in the discussions between the AIs on how to respond, was the perception of the negativity of a strike or protest. Deemed as a reactionary tool, the discussion veered to a "positivist" response: to produce or to perform rather than to halt production.

<sup>331</sup> See for instance the critique BAVO has laid out in *Too Active to Act*. Amsterdam: Valiz, 2010; or David Harvey in "The Art of Rent: Globalization, Monopoly and the Commodification of Culture", *Socialist Register*. Vol. 38. 2002. pp. 93-110.

<sup>332</sup> The trend of a retreating government and the influx of private capital that is left to structure public space can be witnessed now in Rotterdam. Big plans to create new large art spaces in the less developed Rotterdam-Zuid area are in development. These plans, turning post-industrial buildings into creative hubs, will be funded by the native Rotterdam family van der Vorm, which also donates to charitable causes as foodbanks and language courses for immigrants (which are mandatory in order to be able to apply for citizenship), restoring the pre-welfare-state notion of public funding for social causes as a responsibility for patronage and charity.

It is not a question of finding a singular response to this problem, nor is it my aim to frame this dynamic as a binary opposition between commercial and non-profit. The for-profit sector is also affected by the dominance of neo-liberal capitalism that reduces the space of production. Numerous galleries are forced to close under pressure of rising rents that cannot be covered by sales. Galleries either have to scale up or foreclose, which leads to fewer, and therefore less diverse production spaces, more stringent monetised conditions and subsequent monopolies in production conforming to this scheme of production. In addition, the AIs are not easily captured under one header in how they operate and participate. They have distinct profiles and modes of operation addressing these issues that are not to be unified under one (artistic) format. My argument is not that I insist on the necessity of AIs remaining connected to institutional formats like Art Rotterdam, or to the realm of commercial production in general. What I do propose and consider necessary is for artists acting in the infrastructural set-up of artistic production—and therefore as institutional actors/authors—to consider the relations and dependencies and how they function in the wider field. It is here where the AIs in Art Rotterdam failed to respond to their institutional role in the whole chain of production. It is also where they—as stakeholders, to adopt a fitting term—missed the chance to politicise their position by addressing the general working conditions for production. The notion of the institution here, as proposed by Hardt and Negri, must be understood precisely as the problematic notion concerning its autonomy, since, as they argue, the occupation of power vs its milieu becomes materialised as the competition between islands of autonomy. An institution can only become relevant if it considers itself as imbricated in the heteronomy of its conditions.<sup>333</sup>

### **Art's Exceptionalism in Infrastructure**

In an interview in *Politics of Study* in 2015, Suhail Malik criticises the general and generic mode of criticality in art production.<sup>334</sup> In his reading, rather than contesting existing situations, critique only serves as the token quality by which the professional institutional apparatus is measured and validated, and in which register it most of the time presents itself. To counter this, Malik argues that a direct enactment of critical ideas and theories *in*

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<sup>333</sup> Hardt and Negri, *op.cit.*

<sup>334</sup> Interview with Suhail Malik *Politics of Study*, Sidsel Meineche Hansen & Tom Vandeputte (Eds.), Open Editions/Funen Art Academy, 2015

production makes the difference. The deployment of critical models in artistic production *as* production directly translates and connects idea and praxis. The recognition by Malik and Phillips of art's correspondence to politics, plus the recognition of the art-aesthetics bind, situates and isolates the chain of artistic production as focal point for potential artistic agency. If the artistic projects can be said to be produced by the chain as a whole or by its coherent unity, then its political aesthetic production resides there. The cycle of production itself becomes the focus of address as that which is heteronomous, in the scheme of art's stipulation of its self-rule as its political medium. Extrapolated to the bigger scale of artistic production, and expanding on Malik and Philips, this would entail the direct connection to politics, to funding and the structure of artistic production as artistic enquiry. Such focus on the totality of production creates new entry points and strategies, not only for artists but for all parties involved, considering issues of address and of form. The resulting premise would be that any artistic endeavour is based on an idea of general co-authorship and on the condition of heteronomy, thus comprising a bigger set of participants, and an understanding of itself as worker/working in a communal project. If one takes the considerations and, this is important, the form of the art-aesthetics bind seriously, as the effectuation of institutional political ambition, then the differences marking production towards an aesthetic expression—the mistranslations, mistransferences and misappropriations that occur in it—are the nodal points in production for what emerges as the artistic object. And the project of art—rather than the institution— is then the place to work through these differences.

In an interview, Virno describes how art can be instrumental in mapping and expressing these differences that he calls the *dismeasure* between the conditional frame laid out by post-Fordist economy and those experiencing this rule. From such an investigation an index of alternatives could be proposed to negotiate these differences.<sup>335</sup> As the distinct division between aesthetics, politics and labour collapses in post-Fordism, the issue of a possible resistance against capitalism's rule becomes a matter of political-aesthetic work, as the act of indexing, by all involved in its infrastructure.

### **To Conclude**

The issue of art's exceptionalism—formulated as the space to performatively negate and contest the conditions set out for it—cannot be thought outside the conditions of subsumption

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<sup>335</sup> Lavaert, Sonja and Gielen, Pascal. "The Dismeasure of Art, An interview with Paolo Virno". November 2009. Available online at <http://www.onlineopen.org/the-dismeasure-of-art> (accessed 2018-11-05.)

we find ourselves in. The appropriation of criticality as artistic objects by capitalism now, forces us to look at the structure of cultural production as such. Given this preoccupation, art's prime tool of championing the singular does not suffice anymore. The division of labour and the increased stress for survival as structured by neo-liberalism organises the atomisation of resistance against it. As Isabell Lorey has argued, with the identification of one's sovereignty with work, biopolitical control also becomes a mode of self-administration, the disentanglement of which requires an introspective recognition of how one functions within the larger structure.<sup>336</sup> Therefore, the designation of function and the notion of work within the assemblage of production need reconsideration. Its idea of itself and its heteronomous relation must be rethought.

If all who take part are to be considered as contributing to the infrastructural set-up, and the points of transference in position and function—the social relations—become the nodal points of interest, then the whole assemblage of production and the work within, is the artistic object. The question of how an artist, a curator or an educator acts, how platforms are organised, and how these functions operate in the mesh of interdependencies in capitalism—and how these are subsumed—becomes the material to work with, since this structure is made up of the social relations affected by the logic of neo-liberal capitalism. The latter system determines our time and space, and the way we operate and are in it. This means that a far greater investigation by all who participate in the existing mode of production is required as a mode of co-authorship to this “artistic object” and how we are *to be* in it. Its *total measure* is a matter of artists, theorists, curators, institutions and of governance and politics alike. As all these functions channel information and contribute to the form of infrastructure that produces the common object, the different labelling of these actions or positions within this assemblage becomes redundant. Art can be understood as aesthetic work to the commons, to the political as space of interaction. It is rather the focus on operations, on *what* is performed by *whom* to *what end* that becomes the institution's responsibility, that is needed, where institution here is to be understood as a malleable form of organisation.<sup>337</sup>

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<sup>336</sup> Lorey, Isabell. “Governmentality and Self Precarization”. EIPCP, 2006. Available online at <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1106/lorey/en> (accessed 2018-11-02.)

<sup>337</sup> W.A.G.E. can again be listed here as an initiative that has undergone a transformation from an organisation of advocacy and of artistic mediation into a semi-institutional platform that maintains and utilises artistic considerations in its operation.

The re-configuration of the artistic field of production in taking up aesthetics as an integral artistic means, as discussed in this text, therefore is a necessary adaptation to the conditions set out for it: as a means to a counter-aesthetical proposal. The re-politicisation of the work-floor as a space of aesthetics, of politics and of life undermined by precarisation, in this respect needs special attention. So if the formal exceptionality of artistic production is to be taken serious and of consequence again, if most engaged in it perceive “work” as lifework, this notion needs to be politicised in solidarity. It cannot be kept outside the economy as it is; it has to permeate the economic constellation as a political act. A skewed and de-centred look onto the infrastructural set-up of the whole of production, which Vishmidt speaks of, is therefore needed to dislodge the solidified perspectives.

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## Summary

### The Emergent Artistic Object in the Postconceptual Condition

This dissertation investigates the fabric and the infrastructure of contemporary artistic production. The focal question is how the contemporary field of institutional artistic production is organised and how the relations between its actors and functions: artists, curators, institution, governance and theory are structured, and how the artistic object that results from their interaction is produced. The first general backdrop of this investigation, is the condition of *cognitive capitalism*. This condition, that defines production and working-relations in late capitalism as analysed by Paolo Virno, is characterized by the primacy of communications. It presumes that no longer there is a clear demarcation between aesthetics, labour and politics in the general make-up of production and economy. This situation also affects artistic production and the relationships between the main actors: artist, curator and theoretical reflection in regards to who holds the authorship over the artistic object.

The second backdrop is *the postconceptual condition*, as formulated by British philosopher Peter Osborne. In his analysis of the current landscape of artistic production, Osborne describes how the authorship of the art-object has shifted to the institutional platform (museum, Kunsthalle, presentation-space) and how *the project* has become the general mode and form of production, rather than individual artworks or the oeuvre of the artist. Both these movements have led, in my opinion, to significant changes in how to consider the status of authorship in artistic production. Together they shape the theoretical basis for the research.

A special focus is put on the role that theoretical reflection currently holds in the constellation of artistic production. The polemical proposition is made that theory and the diverse practices of knowledge-production, that have become integral part of the institutional apparatus of production, should be added to the line-up of authorial actors of the artistic object (following the Romantic notion of reading as conclusion of the artwork). This proposition is closely tied to the issue of institutional authorship in the model of Contemporary Art and the political implications this holds: it are the institutions and the political-economic constitutive frameworks supporting those, that have become the platformed instances for artistic production.



The second issue that is researched is the meaning of this shifting framework of artistic production for the position of the artist (and subsequent other positions) within already established notions of interdisciplinary production. The perspective chosen for the research is that of artist. My artistic practice, in which I bring the traditional artist-position together with curating, theoretical research and critique, is mobilized to enter into the now considered, authorially assembled field of art.

The methodology that was used is that of participative case studies. The notion of *infrastructural critique* (formulated by Marina Vishmidt) was deployed - and expanded upon - to analyse and delineate the relationships between the actors and instances involved. And to trace how the field of art connects to, and is in part shaped by, the realms of governance and politics.

The selection of cases was based on the criteria that, firstly, they represent the general features of contemporary artistic production, in that they combine art, artists, theoretical reflection, aspects of curating through which forms of interaction between art and aesthetics are organized. Secondly, the choice was informed by how these features together represent – though by no means fully – the scope of institutional artistic production. This way, the respective institutional scales that effect positioning and strategies could be reflected upon and be related to one another. These are: *The Autonomy Project Conference* at the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven (the museum), *The Benjamin in Palestine Conference*, Ramallah Palestine (independently organized initiative), Rib Art space, Rotterdam (small size not-for-profit presentation-space), and Witte de With (since 2020 renamed as Melly), Rotterdam, (mid-scale presentation-space).

Jacques Rancière's ideas on the relationship between art and aesthetics (*the Aesthetic Regime of Art*) and how this binds relates to politics of *commoning* were used to critique and situate the Autonomy Project at the Van Abbemuseum. Through Suhail Malik and Susanne Philips' reading of Rancière, together with the particulars of cognitive capitalism, I argue that theoretical reflection should be considered as part of the institutional form. I argue that this holds consequences for the politics of institutions and that the strategy of authorial indeterminacy (the politics of *indeterminacy*) no longer suffices. In the reading of the Benjamin in Palestine Conference, and throughout the thesis, Walter Benjamin's theories on language and authorship in production is used to rethink the relation between art and

academia, and to perceive these as reciprocally active in a politics of communal aesthetics. In the comparison between Rib and Witte de With, the notion and importance of language that connects the operation of the art institution to governance is explored. I demonstrate how language as shared means of communication, functions differently in both fields and how this affects artistic agency. In general, in reading these cases I show how epistemological differences, both within the artistic field and in relation to its heteronomy, weakens artistic coherence. This leaves it negatively susceptible to the division of labour – ordered by the economic regime we find ourselves in and voiced through the bureaucratic apparatus of governance, as formulated by Isabell Lorey – and vulnerable to the logic of capitalism. Any countering therefore comes to depend on all actors and on institutional restructuring.

A final point that is addressed, is how the attribution of creativity to the figure of the artist and mythical status of the arts, serve to uphold the economically exceptional mode of production in the arts, and how this is characteristic of capitalist subsumption. Kerstin Stakemeier and Marina Vishmidt, in this respect, rightly point to the arrangement of *work* and of working conditions (in capitalist subsumption) as the ground-level conditional frame to be considered. Their insights are woven into many of the readings.

The artistic gesture made by me therefore is: to renounce the act of creation and rather to appropriate the role of critic and of theorist *as* artist (a proposal for a different artist position), mapping this ground level of conditions, serves to demonstrate the subsumption we find ourselves in *and* it is a proposition to think authorship as more accessible and proximate. This artistic positioning is unpacked in and demonstrated through the dissertation.

## Summary in Dutch

### The Emergent Artistic Object in the Postconceptual Condition

Deze dissertatie is een onderzoeksproject naar de textuur en infrastructuur van de hedendaagse artistieke productie. De focus van het onderzoek ligt op hoe het hedendaagse veld van institutionele artistieke productie is georganiseerd en hoe de verhoudingen tussen de verschillende actoren en functies: kunstenaars, curatoren, institutie, overheid en theorie gestructureerd zijn; en hoe het artistieke object dat voortvloeit uit de interactie hiertussen geproduceerd wordt. De eerste algemene achtergrond voor het onderzoek wordt gevormd door wat bekend staat als *cognitief kapitalisme*. Met deze term worden de condities voor productie en arbeidsrelaties in het laat kapitalisme gedefinieerd, zoals geanalyseerd door Paolo Virno, en die gekarakteriseerd worden door de dominantie van communicatie. Het veronderstelt dat er geen duidelijk onderscheid meer bestaat tussen esthetiek, arbeid en politiek in de algemene constellatie van productie en economie. Dit is daarmee ook van invloed op artistieke productie en de relaties tussen de belangrijkste actoren: kunstenaar, curator en theoretische reflectie wat betreft het auteurschap.

De tweede achtergrond is wat door de Britse filosoof Peter Osborne de *postconceptuele conditie* wordt genoemd. In deze analyse van het huidige artistieke landschap beschrijft Osborne hoe het auteurschap van het kunstobject verschoven is naar het institutionele platform (museum, presentatie-instelling en platform) en hoe *het project* de algemene modus en vorm van productie is geworden, in tegenstelling tot het individuele kunstwerk of oeuvre van de kunstenaar. Deze bewegingen leiden, naar mijn mening, tot significante veranderingen in hoe het auteurschap in artistieke productie beschouwd moet worden. Deze beide vormen in combinatie, de theoretische ondergrond voor het onderzoek.

Een special focus wordt gelegd op de rol die theoretische reflectie momenteel vervult in de constellatie van productie. De polemische stelling die wordt neergelegd is dat theorie en de diverse praktijken van kennisproductie die als actoren onderdeel zijn geworden van het institutionele apparaat, toegevoegd moeten worden als auteur van het artistieke object. Deze stelling hangt nauw samen met de vraag naar institutioneel auteurschap in het model van de hedendaagse kunst en de politieke implicaties die eruit volgen. Het zijn namelijk de instituties en de politiek-economische raamwerken die deze ondersteunen en vormgeven, die de platform-instanties geworden zijn van artistieke productie.

De tweede vraag die onderzocht wordt, is wat dit veranderende raamwerk van artistieke productie betekent voor de positie van de kunstenaar (en daarmee andere posities) binnen reeds bestaande ideeën over interdisciplinaire productie. Het perspectief waarmee het onderzoek wordt benaderd is daarom dat van de kunstenaar. Mijn artistieke praktijk waarin ik de traditionele kunstenaarsrol combineer met het curatorschap, theoretisch onderzoek en kritiek, wordt ingezet om wat nu als samengesteld veld van kunst gezien wordt, te benaderen.

De methodologische aanpak die gebruikt wordt, is die van die van participerende casestudies. De notie van *infrastructurele kritiek* (geformuleerd door Marina Vishmidt) werd ingezet – en uitgebreid – om de relaties tussen de betrokken actoren en instanties te analyseren en te beschrijven. En om na te gaan hoe het veld van de kunsten relateert aan, en in hoeverre wordt vormgegeven door, de sferen van bestuur en politiek.

De selectie van de casussen was ten eerste gebaseerd op de kenmerken van de algemene opzet van hedendaagse artistieke productie: kunst, kunstenaars, theoretische reflectie en curatorische aspecten worden gecombineerd waarmee vormen van interactie tussen kunst en esthetiek georganiseerd worden. De keuze was ten tweede gebaseerd op het gegeven dat ze samen de breedte van de institutionele artistieke verschijningsvormen vertegenwoordigen (dit is uiteraard geen volledige representatie). Op deze manier kunnen de respectievelijke institutionele niveaus en hun strategieën geanalyseerd en onderling vergeleken worden. Dit zijn: *The Autonomy Project Conference* in het Van Abbe Museum, Eindhoven (het museum), de *Benjamin in Palestine Conference*, Ramallah Palestina (onafhankelijk initiatief), *Rib Art space*, Rotterdam (kleinschalige not-for-profit presentatie-instelling), en Witte de With (vanaf 2020 Melly), Rotterdam, (middelgrote presentatie-instelling).

Jacques Rancière's raamwerk van ideeën over de relatie tussen kunst en esthetica (het esthetisch regime van de kunst) en hoe dit verbonden is aan de politiek van *commoning* werd gebruikt om de *The Autonomy Project Conference* te duiden en te kritiseren. Ik argumenteer aan de hand van Suhail Malik en Andrea Phillips's lezing van Rancière, dat binnen de condities van cognitief kapitalisme, theoretische reflectie beschouwd moet worden als onderdeel van de institutionele vorm. Ik argumenteer dat dit consequenties heeft voor de politiek van instituties (van politieke vrijblijvendheid) en dat de strategie van authoriële onbepaaldheid – van *indeterminacy* – niet meer voldoet.

In de lezing van de Benjamin in Palestine Conference, en doorheen de hele dissertatie, worden Walter Benjamin's theorieën over taal en auteurschap ingezet om de relatie tussen kunst en academia kritisch te bezien en om deze als wederkerige onderdelen binnen een politiek geheel van gezamenlijke esthetica, te beschouwen. In de vergelijking tussen Rib en Witte de With werd het gegeven en het belang van taal, als schakel tussen het kunstinstituut en de bestuurlijke vorm van politiek, verkend. Ik toon aan hoe taal als gedeeld medium van communicatie verschillend functioneert in beide velden, en hoe dit de artistieke slagkracht beïnvloedt. In het algemeen, in de lezingen van de casussen, toon ik aan hoe epistemologische verschillen, zowel in het artistieke veld als in de relatie met de heteronomie van externe velden, de artistieke coherentie verzwakt. Hiermee wordt het op negatieve wijze vatbaar voor de deling van arbeid (*division of labour*) – zoals het opgezet is door het economische regime waar we ons in bevinden, en verwoord wordt door het bureaucratisch bestuurlijke apparaat zoals omschreven door Isabell Lorey – en wordt het kwetsbaar voor de kapitalistische logica. De mogelijkheid tot weerstand hiertegen wordt dus een zaak van alle actoren.

Een laatste punt dat besproken wordt, is hoe de toekenning van creativiteit aan de figuur van kunstenaar alsook de mythische status van kunst dienen om de exceptionele economische productiewijze in de kunst, kenmerkend voor kapitalistische dominantie, in stand te houden. Kerstin Stakemeier en Marina Vishmidt wijzen wat dit aangaat terecht naar het belang van de organisatie van *werk* en de condities van arbeid (in kapitalistische subsumptie), en dat deze beschouwd moeten worden als het conditionele basisniveau van artistieke arbeid. Deze inzichten zijn verweven in veel van de lezingen.

De artistieke geste die ik maak, namelijk afstand doen van de creatieve expressie, en de rol van criticus en van theoreticus die ik aanneem *als* kunstenaar (als voorstel voor een andere kunstenaarspositie) om het conditionele basisniveau te kunnen mappen, dient om de situatie waarin we ons bevinden aan te tonen én als voorstel om de notie auteurschap toegankelijker te maken. Deze artistieke positionering ontvouwt zich in en door middel van de dissertatie.

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## C.V.

Jack Segbars works as an artist and writer. In his work and through his practice, he is primarily engaged with the questions concerning the conditions and parameters that frame art's emergence: the infrastructural set-up and the apparatus of art. He was born in Eindhoven in 1963, he works and lives in Rotterdam, the Netherlands.

Segbars investigates the different positions and fields that shape art: autonomous art, the role of language / art discourse, the role of the curator and the heteronomy set by governance and politics. The interconnections and overflows between the different positions: critic, curator, writer and visual artist are explored as artistic investigation.

In 2009 he produced the publication *Random-All around the periphery* (Onomatopee) that deals with the overlap of positions and domains in the field of art. This publication was produced in conjunction with an exhibition addressing the relationship between the visual art image and its textual compendiums and derivatives.

In 2012 this was followed by *Inertia* (Onomatopee) a travelogue of visits to Palestine, partly set within the context of artistic production.

Between 2010 and 2012 he was curator of the presentation-space BRAK at Duende, Rotterdam.

Segbars is one of the founders of Platform Beeldende Kunst (Platform Visual Arts), an arts advocacy platform researching the role of art in times of political change and austerity.

Next to his practise as visual artist, Segbars regularly writes reviews and articles on art and art-related subjects including *Fucking Good Art*, *Metropolis M.*, *PARSE* and *Open!*