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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.¹

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

¹ 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 objecthood² (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'³ 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.⁴

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

³ See references to the work of Yann Moulier-Boutang in this chapter.

⁴ 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.⁵ This idea of art’s function remains dominant in contemporary discourse.⁶ 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.

⁵ Theodor Adorno. *Aesthetic Theory*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013 [1970].

⁶ 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.⁷ Joseph Beuys famously developed his idea of the ‘social sculpture’ where artistic work is conceived as a

⁷ 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.⁸ 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.⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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*,

⁸ 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.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ 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.¹¹

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

¹¹ 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.¹² 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.¹³

¹² 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

¹³ 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?¹⁴

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.¹⁵

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*.¹⁶ 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

¹⁴ 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

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

¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ 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.

¹⁷ 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,¹⁸ French economist Yann Moulier Boutang¹⁹ and others.²⁰ 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.²¹ 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

¹⁸ 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

¹⁹ 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

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

²¹ 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*.²² 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*²³ 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.²⁴

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

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

²³ 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

²⁴ 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 Virno²⁵ 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*²⁶ – 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.²⁷ 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

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

²⁶ 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.)

²⁷ 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*,²⁸ 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.²⁹

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

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

²⁹ 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?³⁰ 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

³⁰ 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.³¹

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 11-12-2015.³² 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,

³¹ 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 (accessed 08-02-21)

³²For 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.³³

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

³³ 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 (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!*³⁴ 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

³⁴ 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.³⁵ 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*.

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