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

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## 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 bind 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.

