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

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## Chapter 4 Rib

### Mirroring productivism

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*The scene as a field of production.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Institution, none the less*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Curating institutionally; or not*

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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<sup>231</sup> See: <https://www.ribrib.nl/squirting-wound/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/ICANHELPHYOUREMEMBER-NCARR.pdf?fbclid=IwAR38HQc8FQ0kCiWiHdI9GIP0HG0pYJg99OkZpQ29H3XoMEzr5cMU0QxL5GU> (accessed 05-01-2021)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### *Infrastructure and space*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

