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The emergent artistic object in the postconceptual condition

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Conclusion

Assembly

The two central topics of inquiry addressed in this thesis are, firstly, an examination of the field of artistic production and the assembly of, and relations between positions involved, and secondly the role of the artist within this assembly. In this dissertation, I have demonstrated how both topics need to be understood in the context of, on the one hand, the increasing role of institutional mediation and, on the other hand, the central role of text as medium of information within the infrastructure of contemporary artistic production. My research focused on the condition of production in *cognitive capitalism*, within which according to Paolo Virno a categorical division between aesthetics, labour and politics no longer can be made. As textuality and criticality become a shared medium and modality for all actors and registers involved (from curator, to artist, to institution) this means that the role of critical theory and reflection becomes material in, and part of the economy of institutional production. My proposition is that the subjects involved in these positions function, and should be considered as, actors and as co-authors in the assembly of artistic production. The assumption put forward is that the political economy easily permeates the institutional form, especially now that in the condition of cognitive capitalism the demarcations in roles in artistic production (artist, curating, reflection and organization) have become diffuse, and authorship therefore must be understood in a broadened sense.

The emerging, contemporary constellation of the network of production I identified in the analysis of three contemporary case-studies is captured by the title: *The Emergent Artistic Object in the Postconceptual Condition*. The juxtaposition of *object* and *emergent* in the title is used to define art as a form of activity that takes shape (or that congeals itself in temporary institutional and para-institutional formations) but that also is contingent and in movement. Crucial in this analysis is my use of Rancière's conceptualization of the art and aesthetics relation which is extensively deployed in the case-studies, and runs as a red thread throughout the thesis.

In Rancière's art-theoretical and broader philosophical frame, the conditions and the processes of the exchange between art and its meaning (the poiesis- aisthesis relation) determine the cultural and political community that emerges out of this exchange. This frame is used to analyze the cases for their political and social organization (or institutional form).

The overall claim is that these changing conditions (of the changing constellation of the assembly of production and media of communication under cognitive capitalism) affect the nature of artistic production, and that these changes impact the role of artistic production in a political sense. Questions then are: What does this mean for art production in relation to its societal role and how is art able to critique the conditions of life under the conditions dictated by capitalism?

Following Rancière, I explore how the field of fine art and that of the artist are recent phenomena of the last three centuries, that have developed analogous to that of capitalism. They may even be considered symptom of capitalism's development. This research retraces that development, furthered by the reconsideration of the art aesthetics relation. Capitalist subsumption now is organized through a dissolution of disciplines and positions in production. A response can only come from an acceptance and reconsideration of this dissolution.

Institution

Regarding the question of art's political role, the institutional constellation of artistic production takes on great importance. In particular, this issue relates to how institutional art production is – as English art theorist Dave Beech has formulated²⁵⁵ – the disputed object between the liberal ideologies of the market and politics, within which it is conceived of as a function of the state. The general context in which art is related to both the market within a now 'cognitive' capitalism and a state redefined by its role within a global, cognitive and financialized capitalism, is vital for the understanding of the emerging assemblage of actors that are now constitutive of the artistic object. Importantly, this also involves the site of artistic production in its relation to the economy at large and to the political constellation this entails. This question materializes in the art institution, where the different actors meet against the backdrop of the political economy, of which the institution is an expression.

As said, the institutional constellation is taken as the site of organization connecting the different actors. My argument is that the governmental and administrative regime is shaped as the division of labor, and is active on the work-floor that furthers the neoliberal

²⁵⁵ Dave Beech, *Public Museum, Public Funding, Public Sphere*, GIANT STEP, Vessel Art Projects, Bari, Italy, 2013

order (Lorey). A special focus is put on the role of communication (language and text), and its privileged role in structuring the inner organization of art-production, and how this is related to the wider economic constellation of production (especially observing the characteristics of cognitive capitalism). I argue that although the division between disciplines has become a much more hybrid interplay of positions (as Virno's analysis shows), this division is still structurally upheld in institutional operations. Together with the underacknowledged role of critical/theoretical production as institutional author, a view on the working relations, i.e. who participates and who is subsequent accountable, becomes obfuscated. This leads to an institutional weakness, since the workings of capitalism, and especially that of neoliberal managerialism, might go unhindered. As a consequence, I argue, a more infrastructural approach (Vishmidt) is needed, through which the relations across the field of art and the connection between the site of art with governance and politics are examined. My central argument, which has been examined in the case studies, is that authorship in the artistic field has to be taken up much more profoundly as a case of all parties involved, as the authorship of capitalism traverses it in a novel way, necessitating a reconsideration of the relations between positions.

Cases

In *Chapter 2 The Autonomy Project, Van Abbemuseum*, the tri-angulation between artists, theorists and organizers at the Van Abbemuseum symposium was analyzed. As my analysis of the symposium shows, the structural relation between art and aesthetics, as argued by Rancière, supposes a fundamental and reciprocal equivalence between all actors involved. In this analysis, and extending on Rancière's thinking and combining it with Luhmann's theory of communication, I consider how the epistemological differences present at the symposium were insufficiently recognized. A close reading of the symposium shows how the fields of academia and the arts differ in operation in regards to their contribution to the site of the symposium. I conclude that these differences remained unaddressed. In the exchanges, artists were primarily addressed as practitioners, whereas theory mostly remained considered as a purely interpretative praxis. This hierarchical arrangement disregards the structural reciprocity in the exchange between art and aesthetics. Also, I argue that the role of the organizers of the symposium was kept underexposed as architects of the site of artistic production (the poiesis-aisthesis structure). This means that the division of labor and disciplines between artist, reflection/reception and organization, active at the site of social production (the symposium), remains uncontested.

In *Chapter 3 Benjamin in Palestine conference*, the negotiation between fields and positions (art, theory) was operationalised during the event. The conference was mostly analysed through a close reading of the relationships between artists and academics and the way it was organized. I argue that the set-up of the generative interchange between these fields demonstrated a politics of aesthetics. I described how artistic and theoretical presentations intermingled in collective and cross-categorical readings. Walter Benjamin's notions of the role of language and of the organization of work were used to focus on and detail the multi-positional exchanges that took place. Rancière's model of the art and aesthetics relation was used to frame the social proceedings of the participants in the conference

Chapter 4 Rib is a close examination of the mode and organisation of artistic work of art space Rib. Rib's small-scale operation is compared to the bigger art institution Witte de With, which provides a chance to examine how institutional scale effect modes of operation. I argue that the politics of governance and neoliberalism is furthered through a multi-registered use of language that traverses artistic production and I demonstrate how this particularly affects bigger institutions. Here especially the role of text was examined, and how it is part and medium of the wider institutional infrastructure of artistic production, where it touches the realms of politics. I argue that the art institution needs to discern, negotiate and disclose where and how the political economy effects its operation. The not-for-profit character of Rib was related to the theoretical critique of Vishmidt and Stakemeier, who have contextualized artistic labor as a critique of work in general. The close-knit operation of Rib enables a tighter integration between the positions of artist, curator and of communal processes of meaning, which enables a mode of constantly translating the artistic as a matter of work. My argument is that Rib thus has found a way to formulate and enact a model of work that critically addresses the condition of capitalism.

Institutional field

These three cases are exponents of the segment of contemporary art that aims for non-commodified forms of artistic production. Together they present a cross-section of (semi-) institutional forms of contemporary artistic production that offer a critique on the conventional economy (by no means this is presumed to be a complete account). The Van Abbe's Autonomy Project is situated within an acknowledged institutional format of the museum, the Benjamin in Palestine conference was an independent initiative, initiated

primarily by the academic and knowledge segment of the art-aesthetics combination at the centre of this examination. Rib is part of the institutional artistic field and represents the independent not-for-profit art institutions. Witte de With is part of the bigger institutions in the not-for-profit artistic field. Together these present the different forms in which artistic production proposes an alternative mode of production and the manifold ways in which these are embedded and relate to the economy at large.

In this overview and diversity of institutional formations I set out to map and investigate the constellations of roles in production: of the artist (also considered an institution), of curating, of theory and institutional form. It is my claim that these roles should be reconsidered in their close entwinement. As the functions of aesthetics, labour and politics no longer can be clearly differentiated, an infrastructural mode of survey is needed to identify how the art-aesthetics exchange (Rancière) is structured, how it is related to the forces that determine the conditions for it, to begin to understand what constitutes the art-object.

Artist position, authorship and accountability

I have used my own position as visual artist to denote the equivalence between these positions. By stepping away from a position of adding to the situation – I limit myself to the function of documenting, of analysis and of mapping – the conventional disciplinary artist position is undercut. This artistic position demonstrates the entangled constellation and calls for an interdisciplinary approach. The appropriation of the role of critic by the artist (me) serves to highlight the role of critical reception as generative author. Both movements are to be understood as a *critique of creativity* in the current economy of precarity that sets the conditions for art and labor. My thesis throughout is marked by the notion of accountability, which is linked to the notion of authorship. In the case studies the different positions – next to that of the artist – are identified in terms of their authorship (the organizer, the curator, the critic, the platform). The combined notion of accountability and authorship, is aimed at identifying the structure of the operation: as *cognitive mapping*, as an act of orientation in order to understand one's place and the conditions in which one finds one's self. Next to this notion of orientation, I think I have offered the beginnings of an alternative way of thinking that moves beyond critique only and beyond a confrontation with the conditions as they presently are. A fundamental recalibration of positions – and of subsequent authorships – is needed in order to think of an unrestrained poiesis - aisthesis flow as stipulated by Rancière. In this dissertation I argue that Benjamin's language theory, in which translation between

positions is key, offers a way to enter into the contemporary art-aesthetics relation on its most fundamental level. Thought together, the notion of the live art-aesthetics exchange (adapted from Rancière's position) and the notion of an epistemological recursivity (contained in Luhmann) may provide a tool to counter the shift as ordered by cognitive capitalism, that was observed by Virno as a shift in labor positions. This may provide the building blocks for a model of artistic work. This then entails a re-orientation of the position of the artist as well as institutional organization which needs to be thought of as a mode of constant negotiation and orientation. To engage with this question as a permanent ground zero, is a critical approach I believe to be pertinently necessary.



