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

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## Documentation Section

### 1 Post-Script to Rib

#### *Critique as (part of) production*

Here I return to chapter 4, *Rib, Mirroring productivism* to point to the constellation through which this text was written. The text was commissioned by Rib and it is to be presented on the Rib website, within the specially designated section entitled: *Rib Unresolved Issues*.<sup>256</sup> This Rib segment is a long-term programme in which the programme and format of Rib is reflected upon by different writers. Because each writer responds to the previous writer, and processes that prior assessment of Rib within their own, a chain of responses is set up in which critique and original object of critique blend and fuse. The idea of having readings stacked up upon one another, structurally performs how readings and processing of interpretations are generated and that reflections on worlds and the making of them, are inherently coupled; there is no real distinction possible between a reading of and the object itself. Rib's logic, which takes an artistic approach to production, emphasises and isolates the act of reading and of critique as a constitutive and generative element in artistic production. In the Rib chapter, I explained The Ghost Stories publication (REF Rib) as a form of contestation of the socio-political order by means of documentation and as artistic *work*, and here the same applies with regard to my position as artist *prosaically documenting* the practice of Rib, where the artistic work is the documenting activity, and takes the form of a chapter within my PhD-thesis.

It is important to stress the relevance of the fact of the commission and the factuality of the publication of this text on Rib's website. The function of critique and reflection, performed by an artist specifically invited to reflect on Rib's model and artistic proposition, is thus an entangled position. Normally, in the conventional sequence of production, it is the production of artist and platform that will be reflected upon in a critique and in the convention of critique this is mostly done from a distanced and quasi-objective position. Here though, inversely, it is the platform of production, Rib, commissioning such a critique, and it is an artist, me and others, writing such a reflection.<sup>257</sup> The artist's gesture here in writing a critique

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<sup>256</sup> See: <https://www.ribrib.nl/projects/rib-unresolved-issues?slide=3> (accessed 14-01-2021)

<sup>257</sup> It is important to mention that the remuneration for this commission was limited, due to the sparse resources available for Rib to spend.

on the platform where the critique will be shown, emphasizes the conditional frame of artistic production as such. And in becoming fully integrated within the conditional frame of production and of presentation, it is an act of renunciation of autonomy.

In giving up on the distance and difference between the position of the object and subject, and instead engaging with what is expressed, Rib allows the notion of a dialogue to arise in which receptivity towards the nature of the encounter exceeds and critiques the illusion of a purely critical stance even being possible. The idea of continuing the dialogue via a recursive reflection – as my contribution on the Rib platform could be understood – undercuts the idea of inside and outside in the assembly of production; indeed it cuts right through it. The stance of the artist, which is assumed to bring novel and original insights from a purely subjective position, is renounced and challenged. Taken as yet another position in a chain of dissemination of information, the critic holds a position that is no longer different from that of the artist, curator or institutional platform. Such a model of embedded production, directly addresses the division of labour, the characteristic that shapes capitalist production.

## 2 Benjamin in Palestine conference – supplement

### 2.1 Benjamin in Palestine, On the Task of the Translator in the Age of Platform Production, essay for Open!

Next to chapter 3 of the thesis: *Benjamin in Palestine conference*, I wrote an essay that deals with the same topic titled *Benjamin in Palestine, On the Task of the Translator in the Age of Platform Production*.<sup>258</sup> In this essay that is published at the online journal *Open!*, Platform for Art, Culture and the Public Domain, I compare the conference in Palestine with a roundtable discussion held at the Volksbühne in Berlin in 2015, titled ‘History in the time of hypercirculation’. My critique focusses on how such an event as in Berlin, in which artists, curators, publicists and theorists/scholars come together to discuss before an audience (a format that has become quite common), can retain its politics of aesthetics. The critique builds on a reflection by British philosopher Jacob Bard Rosenberg; and I extend these findings to reflect on the ways in which BiP was organised.

Choosing the platform *Open!* for this essay was deliberate, as *Open!* focusses on the public domain and is itself a public platform for discussion. It was published there with the specific intention of engaging with discourse as the fabric of public space. Reading discourse as such, every text becomes an artistic medium in the field of information exchange and the field of discourse becomes the medium for public exchange. Though the same analytical style is used here as in the rest of the thesis, I propose this text to fit in the supplement section, as it is aimed to directly engage in a public debate. The text engages with the medium of communication as the medium of aesthetics par excellence in information-based societies. To engage as artist in this form of production, is doing so through the art-aesthetics bind directly: discourse is a direct and material form of aesthetics. In an infrastructural sense this means to draw attention to the interconnectedness between the field of art and that of knowledge production.

I have included the text in the form it takes on the *Open!*-website to emphasise the material character of the site of discourse dissemination and the entanglement of content and form.  
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<sup>258</sup> <https://www.onlineopen.org/benjamin-in-palestine> (accessed 03-12-20)

## **Benjamin in Palestine, On the Task of the Translator in the Age of Platform Production**

**Jack Segbars**

The ‘Benjamin in Palestine’ conference and workshop in Palestine from 6–11 December 2015 was organized by an international group of critical theorists, activists, artists and Benjamin scholars.<sup>259</sup> Three days of workshops – interspersed with artistic and academic presentations and interventions – centred on close readings of some of Benjamin’s key texts including: ‘Theses on the Concept of History’ (1940) in which Benjamin advocates for the necessity to stand with the oppressed at any given time vis-à-vis the power of the oppressor over history, thus keeping the space for the oppressed open; and ‘The Task of the Translator’ (1923), an exploration of translation and of language in terms of power relations and preventing instrumentalization in and through text. The last two days consisted of a conference with keynote speeches by Rebecca Comay, Susan Buck-Morss, and Slavoj Žižek, each of whom elaborated on Benjaminian thought in relation to the Palestinian context. Benjamin is a key person to turn to in contemporary Ramallah, as while a Jewish intellectual and icon of Western humanities, he remains an extremely influential cultural theorist due to his critical ideas on representation, state violence, and oppression, all of which still profoundly shape cultural production and the humanities of relevance to the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Case in point: Comay presented a paper on how to address the lack of a revolutionary testament of use in our current conditions by reconsidering Benjamin’s notions on how to relate to our past and the demand that is put forward by our history.

With the animosity between the two sides become practically immensurable, hardly any intrinsic cultural exchange exists between Israelis and Palestinians, be it in journalism, academia, or otherwise, that might counter this stultified toxic relation. Antagonistic rhetoric, illustrated by many declarations made by Israeli officials, takes precedence, branding the ‘other’ as eternal danger and hereditary foe. Take Israel’s recent ban in schools on novels featuring Arab-Jewish romance, under the claim that they ‘threaten Jewish identity.’ To organize such an event as this conference amidst growing acute violence in the West Bank and Jerusalem and the phenomenon of erratic stabbings, tests the potential for critical theory

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<sup>259</sup> The conference’s organizing partners were the International Academy of Art Palestine, Birzeit University, Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center and the Goethe-Institut Palästinaische Gebiete.

in a place where oppression is most felt and visible, and the doors of perception and of communication and exchange are most closed.

What can an academic project offer amid acute political turmoil? How can it, in the spirit of Benjamin's thinking, do justice to its supposed aim, be of effect in the sense of its commitment to the oppressed? What state do the arts and critical theory find themselves in, facing contexts like these? What political agency can be found under the present conditions?

As Benjamin himself noted in considering the literary work in his text the 'Author as Producer': 'Before I ask: how does a literary work stand in relation to the relationships of production of a period, I would like to ask: how does it stand in them? This question aims directly at the function that the work has within the literary relationships of production of a period. In other words, it aims directly at a work's literary technique.' Taking this comment to art and critical theory, how these techniques or practices are executed or applied could be said to depend on the right tendency.<sup>260</sup> What political position is taken up and expressed by them? This question lies at the core of the 'Benjamin in Palestine' project.

The key objective of the organizers was two-fold: first, to address the situation in Palestine critically; and second, to self-critically assess the situation and practice critique and theory in general find themselves. The conference intended not only to insert theory into matters of politics – here, how Benjaminian concepts may form an antidote to factual politics by re-examining its revolutionary potential and its analysis on state violence and oppression – but also to address theory's role in neoliberalism and the way critical theory is instrumentalized under capitalist hegemony (transmitted here to the Palestinian situation via the Israeli occupation). Criticality is absorbed in capitalist production as yet another mode of productivity enhancement without touching capitalism's basic structure. It admittedly performs its critical role but fails to realize political agency and remains within the capitalist order organized under nation-state regimes.

The choice of Palestine was in response to another conference on Benjamin<sup>261</sup> being

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<sup>260</sup> See Walter Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer.' *New Left Review* 1, no. 62 (July–August 1970).

<sup>261</sup> This was the "SPACES, PLACES, CITIES, AND SPATIALITY" conference, organized by International Walter Benjamin Society Conference: Eli Friedländer, Yoav Rinon, Ilit Ferber, Vivian Liska, December 13, 2015 - December 16, 2015, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv University.

organized in Israel, a location the organizers thought would in fact go against Benjamin's core thinking (as it would affirm the oppressor's status). But does Ramallah produce the right form of resistance: that of the fight of the oppressed Palestinians versus Israelis, and the role of resistance performed by critical theory under capitalist subsumption? What is the truly committed position, how can we realize our aesthetic ambitions (what is the right *technique*) in cultural production under our conditions?

In the essay 'All the World's a Platform: Dispatches from Berlin on Post-Internet Art' Benjamin scholar and activist Jacob Bard Rosenberg, one of the organizers of the 'Benjamin in Palestine Conference,' considers how artistic production today interprets our modes of social interaction (the use of social media and platforms) often failing to fully grasp the social and political dimension of these forms.<sup>262</sup> The essay's argumentation is based on a critical review of an event at the Volksbühne in Berlin where a roundtable discussion was organized with artist and essayist Hito Steyerl, art historian and critic Prof. Susanne von Falkenhausen, and two of the editors of DIS Magazine, the curators the (then forthcoming) 2016 Berlin Biennale. The discussion was titled "History in the time of hypercirculation", a term construed for this occasion.<sup>263</sup> His critique is aimed at Hito Steyerl's definition and use of the term 'hyper-circulation,' by which she argues that the economy of circulation has undergone a fundamental change from commodity-form to conceptual to 'imagistic.' Steyerl argues that the modern, algorithmically driven media apparatus based on the consumers economy by images produces a quasi-autonomous mode of exchange. The proposition is that this makes way for a means of resistance since this mode of exchange could allow for an escape of regimes of centralized control (as accelerated exchange modules), offering a sociality manageable by its users (us). Or if not an escape and/or manageability, it can at least be a means of resistance.<sup>264</sup> Rosenberg argues, however, that this analysis fails to understand that it is precisely this circulation that is not under the user's control but under that of corporate and

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<sup>262</sup> See <http://prolapsarian.tumblr.com/post/105025464662/all-the-worlds-a-platform-dispatches-from-berlin>

<sup>263</sup> Quote from 'All the World's a Platform': 'The background to the discussion was an intervention regarding contemporary artistic production made by von Falkenhausen in the latest issue of *Frieze*: "[Too Much Too Fast. The work of art in the age of digital circulation: a lament.](#)" In her essay, Von Falkenhausen takes issue with the current trend for Post-Internet works, claiming that they ultimately fail to address history in the way that artworks ought to: that through their integration into contemporary ideological forms, they renounce the critical power of distance once implied in the notion of artistic autonomy. As such, this discussion offered at least a possibility of critical reflection, for the subject of critique was the relation to history of the works and "projects" of the scene who had arrived to listen.'

<sup>264</sup> This is the central question at hand in the discussion on Accelerationism that is being conducted at the moment: can the capitalist means of production be lodged free from exploitation by accessing its qualities beyond central control.

state scrutiny, establishing and affirming – by a failure of recognition – the oppressors’ rule.

I bring this up not because the topic under discussion is social, virtual platforms as a form of social production, but because of the analogy to another part of Rosenberg’s critique in his ‘All the World’s a Platform’ article, which is the subject of his observations. Specifically, the format that is chosen for this event In this, by now well-known format artists, curators, publicists and theorists/scholars come together to discuss before an audience, a ‘platform’ that is modus operandi in artistic production today. It is a format that has become very successful and that has spread out extensively the last decades in which knowledge (academic) production has become more aligned to the field of artistic production. Here the primary positions of artistic production are presented and brought together: Steyerl as the (theorist-) artist, Von Falkenhausen as art historian and critic, and the curatorial by DIS Magazine. Of the audience, mostly well informed and often also from the field of art-production, a participative role is expected by intervening, asking questions, furthering the discussion at hand and dissemination and production of information and knowledge. This format often assumes the idea that ‘producing’ together produces a (sovereign) form of social production hinting at operating autonomously, similar to what is proposed or suggested by hypercirculation.

This is arguably a contested conclusion, or one that fails to escape the overarching system in which it operates, as Rosenberg rightly observes in the case of Steyerl’s claims. In addition, this example of platformed production as in Berlin illustrates that theory as such is implicated and forms an essential part.<sup>265</sup> Yet the format of the Benjamin in Palestine project has several traits similar to the platform format: the pallet of contributors that gather in a mode of production. Where Rosenberg critically addresses the role of curating and the artist in production, in this conference, it must be said that theory plays a similar role in the production of the cultural object. So does the Benjamin conference manage to offer a method or form to avoid a conundrum so pervasive in critical cultural production?

The critique of theory and likewise of art is nothing new. Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello in

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<sup>265</sup> Quote from ‘All the World’s a Platform’ in which Rosenberg adheres to the criticality of the topic discussed but questions the form in which it is structured: ‘But away from the seriousness, there is also a sense in which theoretical discussion of the arts are staged as a form of entertainment appropriate to the type of intelligentsia of which this scene considers itself to be composed. This gives the discussions themselves a tinge of comedy: as the roundtable started with what felt like an extended job interview of the DIS editors, it seemed this would employ the model made popular by *The Apprentice*: a comedy of hubris drawing on the overconfidence of entrepreneurs, who become the fall guys as they flailingly attempt to undertake everyday work.’



*The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2005) argue that the role of art follows the capitalist regime while at the same time critiquing it. This mode of critical agency as cultural production has been absorbed by capital, even as one of its prime qualities, thus rendering it powerless. The issue of leftist artistic-critical agency, in line with its avant-garde heritage, has become a question rather than a practice. It is arguably the single most important topic in the field of cultural production today.

An essential aspect of Benjaminian thinking is the way it demonstrates the need to conceive history ourselves and even proposes a methodology to produce this, by which agency can be gained as a means to oppose oppression. Benjamin's pointing to the importance of this is both to reveal the potential in counter narratives, but also to demonstrate how obscuring structurally serves authority (documented history always serves the oppressor and neglects or eradicates the oppressed, rendering these non-existent). Documentation and archiving are acts that lead to oppression,<sup>266</sup> the principle of what he calls the 'dialectical image.' Unearthing obscured histories thereby at once reveals the principle of power and the potential of the other – the image that flashes up in a moment of danger.<sup>267</sup>

But how to gain agency through embracing this methodology is maybe the most problematic aspect of Benjaminian thinking – how to render operational a demonstration of the oppressed politically and to prevent this becoming a representation. For each act of representation of course stands the chance to fall in the register of oppression, and becomes the essential problematic to be negotiated. Arguably Benjamin was not able to solve this conundrum, that is, not theoretically, supported by a definite framework. *The Arcades Project*, however, shows a direction in how to circumnavigate this conundrum – a way in which to avoid theory to become a new epistemological and thereby authoritative form.<sup>268</sup> In *The Arcades Project* the detrimental effect of any historicization and epistemology is circumvented by laying out an overview of cultural expressions, disclosing obscured – oppressed – histories that can be navigated without reaching a finalized reading. Or that can be read differently each time the

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<sup>266</sup> 'There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another.' Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History,' *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken, 1969), 256.

<sup>267</sup> 'To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it "the way it really was" (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.' *Ibid.*, 255.

<sup>268</sup> The lack of a strict theoretical framework was critiqued by Adorno, but embraced by the arts, indicating the tension between the accountability of science proper that forms its own authoritative episteme, and the humanities.

text is read, albeit always in the sense of recognisance of the oppressed (the notion of oppression). As Buck-Morss, keynote speaker and expert on Benjamin says in her preface to her study of the *Arcades Project*:

It is a picture book of philosophy, explicating the dialectics of seeing developed by Walter Benjamin, who took seriously the debris of mass culture as the source of philosophical truth. It draws its authority from a book that was never written, the *Passagen-Werk* [Arcades project], the unfinished, major project of Benjamin's mature years. Instead of a 'work,' he left us only a massive collection of notes on nineteenth-century industrial culture as it took form in Paris – and formed that city in turn. These notes consist of citations from a vast array of historical sources, which Benjamin filed with the barest minimum of commentary, and only the most general indications of how the fragments were eventually to have been arranged.<sup>269</sup>

In her keynote presentation Buck-Morss explains how she uses the same circumscribing approach as Benjamin's *Arcades Project* in how she writes about art and envisions her role as critic. Together with Palestinian artist Emily Jacir, she produced a booklet that accompanies Jacir's contribution to dOCUMENTA 13 for which she was invited.<sup>270</sup> It consists of photos by Jacir captioned by Buck-Morss, with further notes, both of essayistic and poetic-literary nature, in an effort to establish the critic's relation to artists as interpreter, a non-authoritative or finite reading of the work and/or artist. This intricate mode of communication works on the intimate level of direct contact, but how does this translate into the institutional level of art production?

Peter Osborne argues that current cultural production – in the form of contemporary art – is post-Conceptual,<sup>271</sup> a system in which all criteria of production, evaluation and quality are based on concept. The term post-Conceptual here does not mean beyond Conceptualism that was established in the 1960s and 1970s, but a mode of interaction and exchange we still inhabit and that is based on the characteristics and premises of information-

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<sup>269</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *The dialectics of seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), ix.

<sup>270</sup> See Emily Jacir and Susan Buck-Morss, *N□004*, in the 100 notes – 100 thoughts series for dOCUMENTA 13 (Berlin: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2011).

<sup>271</sup> 'This is a logic that is itself contradictory: divided between the presentation of the collective exhibition-value of the works and their putative use-values as models within a speculative program of social construction. Such programs are uneasy amalgams of art, economics and politics. But then, what is "culture" but such an amalgam?' Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or not at all* (London: Verso, 2013), 161–162.

exchange as a conceptual form of exchange. Further he denotes cultural production as ‘an uneasy amalgam of art, economics and politics.’ This constellation of production entails an interaction between artists, curators, institutes and theory from which the ‘artistic object’ emerges. Today’s model of cultural production could be described as a constellation of authorships where it becomes virtually impossible to attach to the ‘original’ anymore, or locate its origins.

Within this cycle are constant instances of translation and exchanges of information. Issues of responsibility and accountability arise within the bigger theme of accountability that our technocratic societies are built on: return on investment, audience participation, the primacy of visibility and entrepreneurship. And all these understood as the primal markers of capitalist production. This circulation inevitably leads to a loss of sovereignty. It is hard to overstate the role of language and theory in this cycle of production, acting as the channel of communication. Though one must distinguish theory proper from discursive and applied derivatives with their different frames of accountability (academic, non-academic), theory is unmistakably the Lingua Franca of cultural production, and medium of exchange. It is the medium of technique of contemporary cultural production. And notably the medium par excellence in *platform-ed* cultural production.

This sits uneasy with the Benjaminian distinction between information and the original and the necessity of proper translation. Benjamin in ‘On the Task of the Translator’ departed from the notion of the existence of the ‘original,’ an original and self-sufficient event, though already containing the possibility of its translation, but which would require its own ‘form’ to do justice to the translation and without degrading into mere communication.<sup>272</sup> The possibility of an original event now under capitalism and the regime of the post-Conceptual condition, seems emptied out. The task of the translator, whomever that may be, would be to discern and navigate the phantasmagoria between positions, and even propose again an ‘original’ quality within and emerging from this artistic constellation. The performing

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<sup>272</sup> ‘And is this not something that a translator can reproduce only if he is also a poet? Such, actually, is the cause of another characteristic of inferior translation, which consequently we may define as the inaccurate transmission of an inessential content. Whenever a translation undertakes to serve the reader, it demonstrates this. However, if it were intended for the reader, the same would have to apply to the original. If the original does not exist for the reader’s sake, how could the translation be understood on the basis of this premise? Translation is a form. To comprehend it as a form, one must go back to the original, for the laws governing the translation lie within the original, contained in the issue of its translatability.’  
Walter Benjamin, ‘The Task of the Translator’ (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1972), 254.

translator would also need to know how to translate the ‘original’ through the assembled form of its mediation with the right technique.

The ‘Benjamin in Palestine’ conference, as an assembly of these positions, illustrated and showcased our current condition of production, and sought to critically address it. Besides making the obvious and necessary move and political gesture of going to a place where the conversation would be relevant, it also carried out research into the politics of translation. The diversity of geographies, fields and expertise and subsequent diversification of discourses, required dedicated time for thorough exchange, reading and discussion. This was expertly addressed by organizer and Benjamin scholar Sami Khatib, who forced participants into a slow reading of a selection of Benjamin’s texts that served as a reflective agent to exchange. Notably again ‘On the Task of The Translator’ served this purpose. In lengthy discussions bound by the prism of translatability and the commitment to the oppressed, issues of differences and legibility were negotiated, highlighting the way in which issues of power were examined: how to avoid communication as hierarchic transference of information, but instead to keep the channels open to ‘real’ emergent exchange.<sup>273</sup> The conference provided for a different means of resistance. The time that was invested, countered the regular mode of production, and halted the notion of progress as being the critic’s remaining claim to agency.

Communication might have become a quality of discourse, information, the *derivative* of origin, and a sign of the loss of the image as provider of auratic experience. But it can also be used in the framework of the dialectical image. Since it is the material of institutional power relations, it can be treated as the focal point of dialectical scrutiny. Georges Didi-Huberman speaks of the decline of aura,<sup>274</sup> as part of the natural system of the artistic object;

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<sup>273</sup> The performances by Slavoj Žižek, both in the workshop as in the conference, exemplary but also strangely, fit the overall theme. In a provocative style he emphasized and embodied the importance of translation as such. By not being a priori politically correct, one takes the one one addresses seriously. In several instances during the workshop this style of transgression led to debate. It was laudable to what great lengths Žižek went to explain the rationale behind this technique. In his argument it is of no use to anticipate the other, one has to express oneself head on, in order to fully honor the other’s existence. Differences are there, and not to be negated, but solidarity amongst people is all that matters. In his case the role of theory and embodiment are performed in unison.

<sup>274</sup> ‘Let us say, to dialecticize, that the decline of the aura supposes – implies, slips underneath, enfolds in its fashion – the aura as an originary phenomenon of the image. It is, to be faithful to Benjamin in the productive instability of his exploratory vocabulary, an “uncompleted” and “always open” phenomenon. The aura and its decline are thus part of the same system (and have undoubtedly always been so in every age of the aura’s history: we need only read Pliny the Elder, who was already complaining about the decline of the aura in the age of reproducibility of antique busts). But the aura persists, resists its decline precisely as supposition.’ See Georges Didi-Huberman, *The Supposition of the Aura: The Now, the Then, and Modernity, Walter Benjamin and History*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (New York: Continuum, 2005).

that is, loss of aura also proves the aura's existence (as *supposition*, is how he coins this).

Here Liam Gillick paraphrasing Maurizio Lazzarato's definition of immaterial labour springs to mind: 'The discursive is a negotiation and demonstration of Immaterial Labour for other ends,' and 'The discursive makes use of theories of Immaterial Labour in order to escape simplistic understandings of production within a cultural context.'<sup>275</sup> The 'other ends' resonate with Khatib's assessment of Benjamin's conception of means and ends: the different projections of ends and means in the constellation of production, in the exchange between its positions, need to be pulled away from their intentions, their projections of ends, in order to become mutually understood.<sup>276</sup> This requires from the participant in the cycle of communication and of the translator as moderator: investment, dedication and stubbornness. Plus a sense of the auratic appearances and disappearances in the different scales of production, in which different modes of production appear.

'Benjamin in Palestine' as a platform takes a stance of resistance, almost despite its academic content, in being an embodied committed presence as a form of action. It is the performance of poësis, and from this gains its political agency. Like Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, it cannot be closed theoretically, it needs to be done, to be traversed actively. Yet it leaves unanswered the question how it as platform in the bigger scale of production, performed this function. The conference as intervention is something of which one cannot be sure who was touched by it or where its potential is archived. This may be the task at hand: how to develop its archive.

As I walked home through Ramallah's city centre, I heard of other conference attendees who couldn't reach their places due to Israel Defence Forces incursions into Ramallah and subsequent violent confrontations. What until then had been an intense week of critical academic thinking and exchange, was suddenly punctured by something of a different 'real' that imposed itself. This awareness presented itself as a dialectical image.

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<sup>275</sup> Sven Lütticken, '(Stop) Making Sense,' in *Meaning Liam Gillick*, ed. Monika Szewczyk et al. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).

<sup>276</sup> From a Kantian perspective, Benjamin's concept of pure means or means without end might be read as an inversion of the ethical end-in-itself. Ends-in-itself and pure means (means-in-itself, so to speak) are not the same. Shifting the perspective from ends to means and cutting off the reference to a final goal, *Endzweck*, Benjamin emancipates the medial sphere of means from its secondary, supportive role without giving up on the concept of mediation.

## Benjamin in Palestine conference – supplement

### 2.2 Photo documentation

The Benjamin in Palestine conference was also documented by me through visual means. A selection of these photos is inserted between chapters 2 and 3 (p.117-124). During all the programme segments I took photos and tried to capture the atmosphere, the different sites and participants, and the relations taking place in order to give an impression the configuration of the conference. In other words: I tried to capture BiP as a constellation of work. As the conference itself did not organize documentation, my photographs have become practically the only visual afterlife of the conference. As Sami Khatib explains, this lack of effort or arrangement to document the conference was intentional and different from regular modes of institutional academic production. This absence of documentation was decided on in order to maintain a focus on the moment or event itself, and to prevent the conference from becoming an institutional commodifiable object in its afterlife. Institutions normally claim, handle, edit and market the results from this kind of knowledge production, in which visual documentation has an instrumental role. By having only participation and recollections further discussion and information about the events, this contributes to a decentralised, networked form of knowledge dissemination and (re)production, while institutional appropriation is prevented.<sup>277</sup> In the same manner as the *Open!* essay, these photos are an account that tries to preserve the quality of the conference without obeying the logic of conventional production, yet they also seek to act as some sort of archive of the event. Both intentions then also could also be seen as a Groys-ian artistic strategy of *documentation*. The manner in which this is done has to do justice the object of what is documented: the *mode of production* of the conference itself.

The selection of photos here represents the most relevant scenes to my discussions in chapter 3, The Benjamin in Palestine conference, namely the close reading workshop sessions and the conventional academic setting. These photographs provide supplementary information to the exposition of sites described in the text. As explained in that chapter discussing Benjamins notion of the dialectical image, text and visuals can be understood as interchangeable and mutual references. The photos thus become the visual captions of the

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<sup>277</sup> See the interview with Sami Khatib in the interview section where he explains that normally in academic practice a publication would be produced which counts – and importantly claimed – as productive academic output.

scenes described (in text), emphasising the non-hierarchical interrelation between text and image, object and reflection, the artwork and its caption. In an infrastructural sense the photo documentation constitutes a different form of archive, commenting on existing modes of institutional appropriation.







### 3 Saas-Fee Summer Institute for Art

#### *Introduction*

Unlike the other cases that were reflected upon through texts, I reflected on and processed the Saas-Fee Summer Institute for Art (hereafter SFSIA) through an exhibition that took place at A Tale of a Tub, Rotterdam, the Netherlands 2016, titled '*Politics of Estrangement-naught*'. As explained in the introduction of chapter 1, SFSIA is a 2.5week summer school that brings together theorists, curators, artists and students. I participated in the programme and interviewed and video-recorded the lectures. The exhibition at A Tale of a Tub intended to test how a platform like SFSIA could be considered as an object of inquiry by resituating it in the original (modern) habitat of art: the exhibition space. My aim was to consider the exhibition space as space to reflect on the development of the expanded practice of art that we know now, and its evolution from conceptual art of the 1960's and 1970's. Unlike a textual analysis, this consideration mobilized the spatial and experiential modalities of the art space as a means through which to reflect. Within the logic of the Rancière-ian art-aesthetics relation, such visual and sculptural processing of a case (an exhibition as means of assessment and of production) covers the art aspect of the art-aesthetics combination within this dissertation.

The installation was designed over the two floors of the gallery. Included were interviews conducted by me with the initiator and curator of the summer school, Warren Neidich, theorist Franco 'Bifo' Berardi and curator Anselm Franke. There was also a recorded lecture by theorist Gerald Raunig that he gave at SFSIA. As such the installation was a set up in which art, curating, participation and theoretical reflection were presented as intermingled and interdependent. All interviews and recordings were presented on similar sized monitors spread out over the two floors, except for the interview with Anselm Franke, which was projected in a significantly larger size. The interview with Franke gave me the perfect opportunity to explore the relation between curator and artist, as we discussed in detail his working relation with artist Harun Farocki (see interview below). For the show I made a text-work (an animated PowerPoint-presentation) which was also presented larger than most of the other documents. This text-work mixes a literary and analytical style, and is of an impressionistic nature. It was visually designed and animated to guide the flow of reading the text. In the text I reflect on the broader developments of the arts and how these were particularly manifest in SFSIA. The literary tone and quality of the text however confronts

and undercuts a conclusive meta-critical assessment a merely critical approach might produce. Combined with documentation of the installation, I present the transcript of the interview with Franke and the text-work here, as these constituted the main axis of the exhibition.

*Documentation exhibition Tale of a Tub*



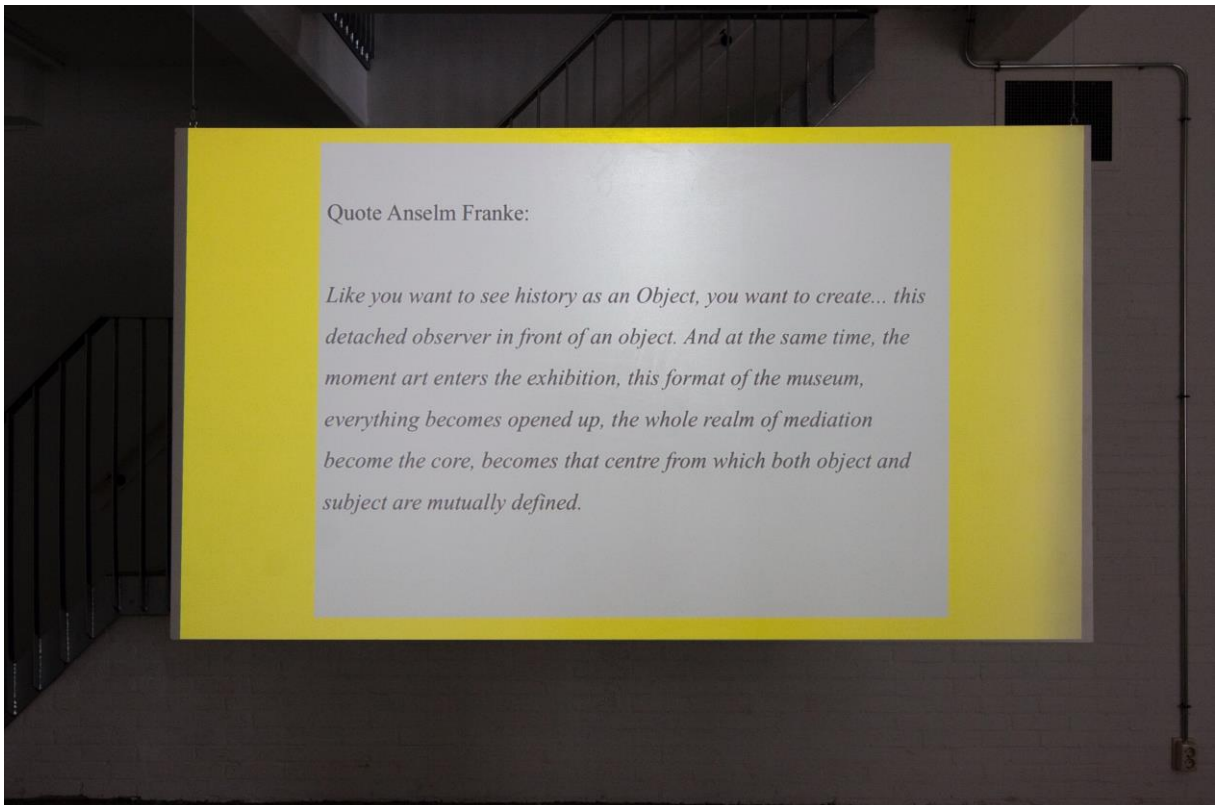
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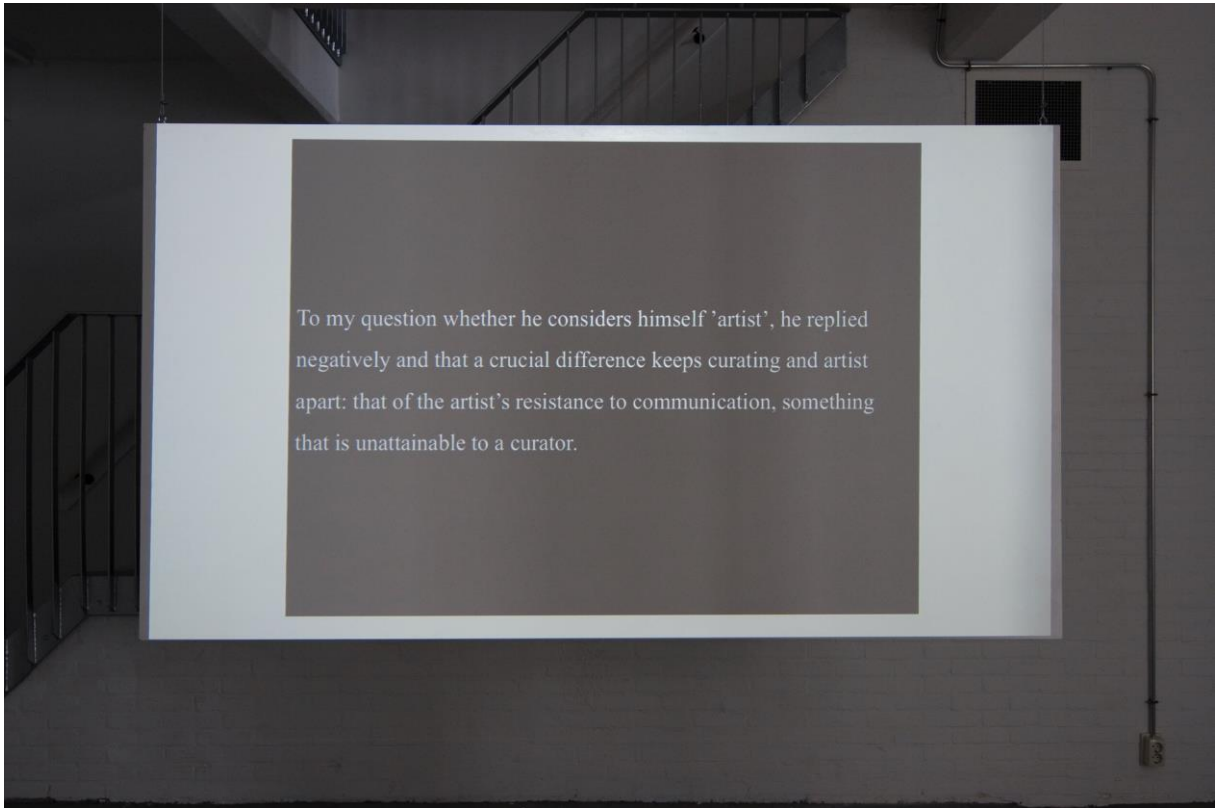
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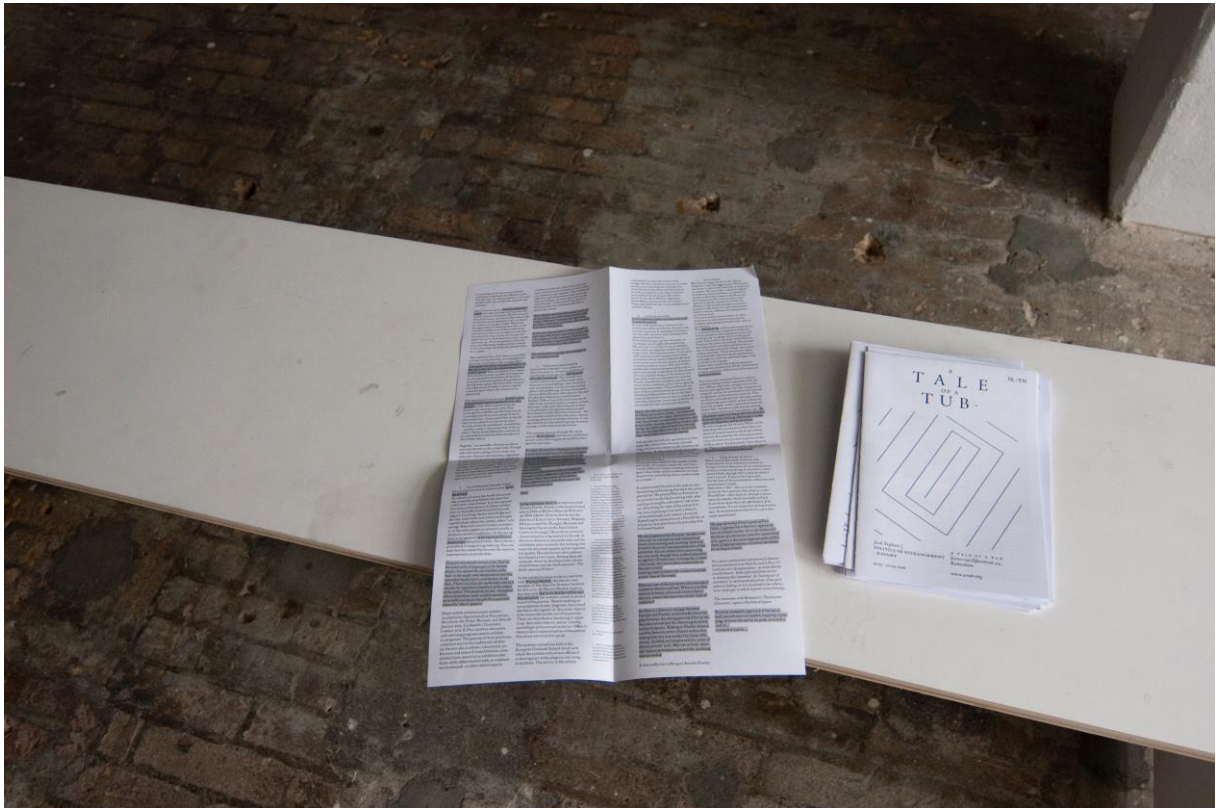


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Images 1-5 text-work Duet/triplet/overall, Politics of Estrangement – naught (see below)

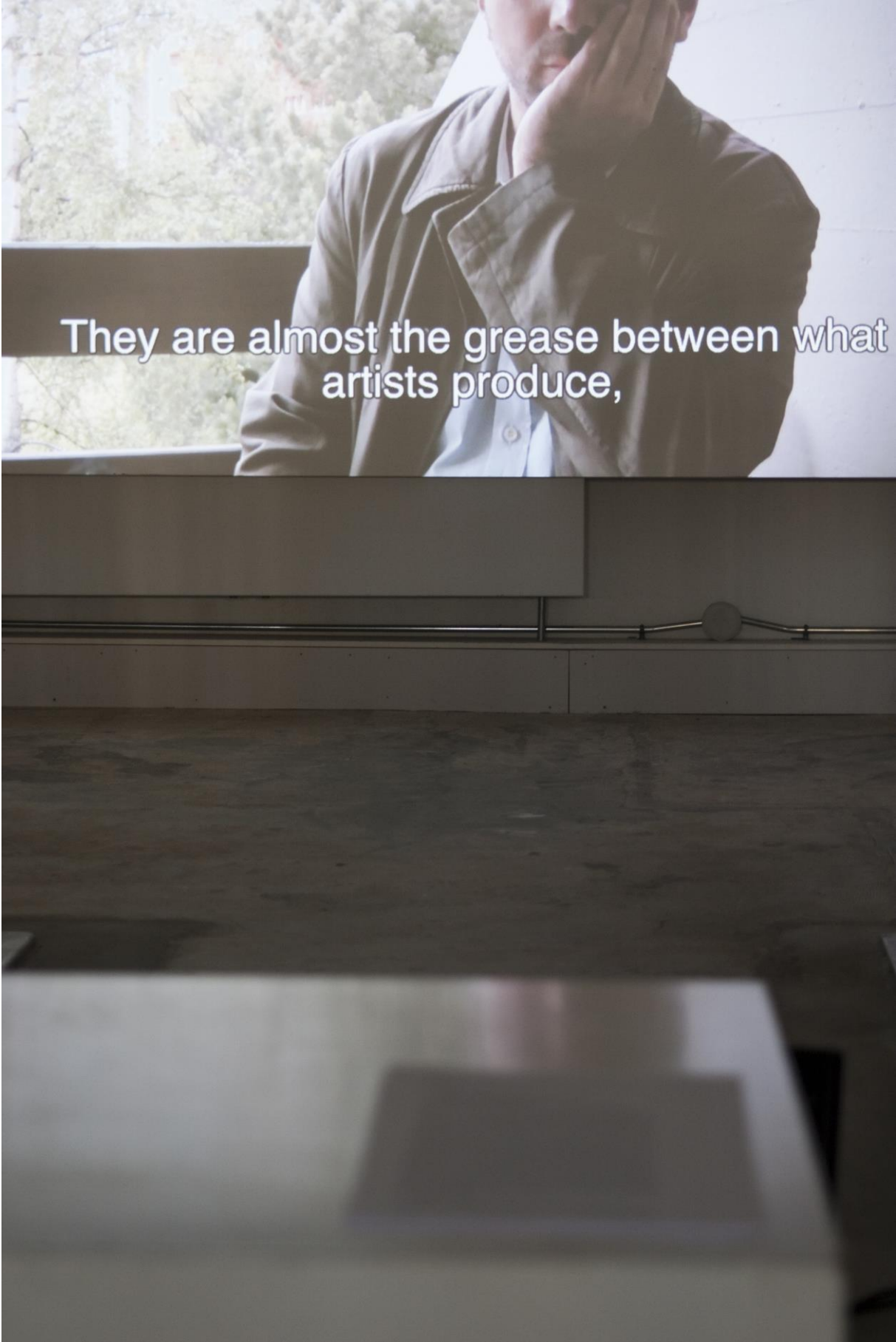
Images 6- 7 interview Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi

Image 8 interview Warren Neidich

Images 9-11 overview

Images 12-16 interview Anselm Franke

Image 17-18 overview



They are almost the grease between what artists produce,

*Transcript text work Duet/triplet/overall* (animated PowerPoint, 28.35 min.)

This was the animated textwork that was presented centrally in the exhibition. The transcription follows the design as in the animation, these are the colored segments.

Duet/triplet/overall  
Politics of Estrangement – naught  
Saas-Fee

**No-one is going to read this**

*In the exhibition there is:*

- a video showing an interview with Anselm Franke, Saas-Fee Summer Institute of Art, EGS, June 2015, Saas-Fee, Switzerland
- a video showing the PowerPoint text-work *Politics of Estrangement - naught* (this)
- a video of an interview with Warren Neidich,
- a video of a lecture by Gerald Raunig
- a video interview with Franco “Bifo” Berardi
- a text of the Saas-Fee Summer Institute of Art curatorial program
- and there is time, and there is space beyond

*(to disclose the elements of the project is a gesture by which the transparency of information is presented; providing for an index of potentialities)*

*Maybe there is no death as we know it. Just documents changing hands.*

—Don DeLillo, *White Noise*<sup>278\*</sup>

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<sup>278</sup> Boris Groys in *Art Power*, p 98, header of the chapter Multiple Authorship

Current day art production is a hybrid endeavor undertaken by different actors. The most obvious and visible of these actors are the artist, the curator, the institute and the art platform.

Peter Osborne asserts that all art production should be considered postconceptual. By this, he emphasizes that the decisions and criteria that inform the production and evaluation of art of this time, are based almost entirely on concepts or ideas rather than materiality or other factors.

Moreover, he argues that in the current structure of contemporaneous art production, the above-mentioned importance of concept means that the author-position shifts between artist, curator and art platform. All these positions, in differing ways and to varying extents, produce artistic content in their function as all these positions involve producing conceptualizations or ideas.

This combination – of the dominance of the concept and the plurality of authorship – has led to a distribution of responsibility around and for the artistic object. *(and maybe also of the relegation of responsibility, this in the end is the tentative proposition to this inquiry)*

This circulation of accountability between artist, curator and museum, has a structural place in the infrastructure of Contemporary Art production.<sup>279</sup> As Osborne argues: the format of the ‘project’ that much of today’s artistic content takes, gives rise to the rotation of its authorship.

The argument I want to make *(and for which I have a special interest and try to take further)* is that, following the rationale, texture and consequences of the postconceptual condition and the structure of Contemporary Art as our current form of art production, *critique* and *theory* should be considered part of the structure of artistic production. Critique and theory significantly contribute to the production of the artistic object. These positions should be recognised as co-authors of the artistic object.

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<sup>279</sup> As Peter Osborne states in *Anywhere or not at all*: “The contemporary, socio-historical forms of the general existential structure of ‘the project’ come to the fore, along with its situational conditions, organized by relations between individual and collective praxis, in which the once curatorial but increasingly directive role of the museum is of growing significance. (This is no longer ‘the artist as producer’, or even ‘the curator as producer’, so much as ‘the museum as producer’.) The existential and social structure of the project itself becomes the carrier of artistic reflection.” p.173



Together with the artist, – as an ensemble – they act as editors and contributors to the artistic field, through reflection and reading (critic), study and reflection (theory) and selection, organization and communication (curator). Their instrumental roles are made possible and accommodated by the conceptual character of the work of art and the structural set-up of Contemporary Art production. The artist is only one of many nodal positions within this chain.

*Art has become a procedural de-authorized result of the network of positions in the space of art as a discursive act.*

## 2 Platformed production

**Box in a box in a box in a box in a box (as in black box).**

In a structural sense, the model of current day art production follows the idea of this transdisciplinary constellation. In it, the separate functions and positions of artistic production are formally related and intrinsically aligned. Curating, theory, knowledge production, institutions and artists are brought together, and it is from this constellation that the ‘artistic object’ emerges. Research as such is taken as material, in the same register as material usually is defined in artistic production. In this set-up there is no apparent **or no expressed hierarchical order**. Nor is there a procedural or sequenced ordering. This model has become the norm in contemporary art production.

*The post-structuralist notion of the Text (and the materiality of language) as the human project, has opened the construction and interpretation of the ‘text’ to the reader, and as such has expanded the field of its contributors, its authors. There is no longer locus for authorship, which can also be regarded as a depletion of the notion of the author. The platform for this – that place where all positions meet – usually maintains an a-authorial stance, yet this is precisely where this ‘object’ appears.*

Major exhibition platforms, both mobile and permanent, produce discursive programs parallel to exhibition programs. One might think of DOCUMENTA, Manifesta, the Venice Biennale and Afterall Journal, BAK, Goldsmith’s Centre for Contemporary Art, ICA and E-Flux. The scope of these platforms comprises both traditional exhibition-formats and also academic, educational, publication and research-based formats. Some of these organizations started off

as exhibition platforms while others started with an emphasis on the research or other related aspects of artistic production. Now, they increasingly move towards a format in which these two elements come together. The traditional reflective and interpretative roles of art history and critique are subsumed in this mode of production. In this system the distance between art production and reflection on it is practically non-existent.

*At the same time the notion of 'the original' is kept intact, the moment of primary 'poiesis' (be it in reading or in the exchange). Still the location (or the mere recognition) of this moment is unabatedly attributed to that of the art object.*

*The result of this exchange, the resulting 'object' is communicated.*

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

The Saas-Fee Summer Institute for Art of 2015 can be considered an exemplary **platform** of current-day art production (and is the focus of this reflection/work).

The school's curriculum was a three-week roster of lectures and workshops that concluded with an exhibition. Lecturers included Gerald Raunig, Armen Avanessian, Franco (Bifo) Berardi, Hito Steyerl, **Anselm Franke**, John Rajchman and Dorothee Richter.

This array of lecturers reflected the mix of authorial positions in Contemporary Art production: lecturers were curators, artists and/or theorists, and many of them had practices that were strongly orientated towards platform-based or hybrid production forms.<sup>280</sup>

It was attended by an international group of mostly younger artists and art professionals. In this way, the summer school integrated the fields and roles of education, theory, curating and art making; all of the roles in Contemporary Art production were present.

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<sup>280</sup>**Dorothee Richter** is director of the Postgraduate Program in Curating at the School of Art and Design Zurich (HGKZ). She also initiated the Curating Degree Zero Archive together with Barnaby Drabble.

**Gerald Raunig** is a philosopher and art theorist. He works at the Zürich University of the Arts, Zürich and the eicpc (European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies), Vienna. He is co-editor of the multilingual publishing platform *Transversal Texts* and the Austrian journal *Kamion*.

**Hito Steyerl** is a filmmaker, visual artist, writer, and innovator of the essay documentary. Steyerl holds a PhD in Philosophy. She is currently a professor of New Media Art at the Berlin University of the Arts.

The question that ran through the whole project (as its theme) was how one could consider Estrangement (*ostranenie*) as an established artistic tool, in our present times.

Shklovsky is known for the concept of *ostranenie* or *defamiliarization* (also translated as "estrangement") in literature. He explained the concept in the important essay "Art as Technique", first published in 1925. It was a major element of Russian Formalism. He argued for this estrangement in order to revitalize something that has become over-familiar, like a cliché in the literary canon:

*The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar', to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged.*

*Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important.*

Victor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique", p.12

*To attend the summer school gave me the chance to be both in and out, to be in as participant but equally to be out as its reader and reviewer, to regard it as a Text.*

*As a whole, the school constitutes an intrinsic and complicated web of relations, fields and positions where institutional, interpretative, authorial, curatorial functions and positions overlap and intersect.*

*I interviewed the lecturers on issues of their respective expertise and their position within the context of the SFSIA. These materials were intended as new material for artistic production.*

This.

**In the exhibition there is** an interview with **Anselm Franke**. Franke is the head of visual arts and film at Berlin's Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW). Prior to that he was the director of Extra City in Antwerp, Belgium. He curated the Shanghai Biennale and Interrupted Survey at the Asia Culture Center in Gwangju in 2008. His curatorial work is characterized by an interest in the role of theory as an element in art production and the exhibition space as a site for exchange between an artwork's discursive and experiential qualities. His exhibitions often

address key themes of our times. Among them are animism, which he developed into a series of exhibitions, and the Anthropocene, as explored in The Anthropocene Project.

**In the exhibition there is** also an interview with **Warren Neidich**, the director and initiator of the Saas-Fee Summer Institute for Art, 2015. As Neidich states in the interview on display: the summer school as a project is part of his practice.

Alongside his neon sculptures, books and diagrams, the summer school is also a ‘discursive object’, that he counts as part of the output of his practice. His practice centres on ‘*producing or organizing*’ discursive objects, and ‘*creating assemblages of theoretical territories*’. Often these projects invited representatives of theoretical discourses to speak.

**In the exhibition there is** a lecture by **Gerald Raunig**.

Raunig is a philosopher and art theorist. He works at the Zürich University of the Arts, Zürich and the eipcp (European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies), Vienna. He is co-editor of the multilingual publishing platform *Transversal Texts*.

**In the exhibition there is** an interview with **Franco (Bifo) Berardi**. Berardi is a writer, media theorist and media activist. He was involved in *Potere operaio*, the magazine *A/traverso* and the first free pirate radio station in Italy *Radio Alice*. He was also involved in the political movement *Autonomia* during the 1970s. He worked with Felix Guattari in the field of schizoanalysis.

The summer school was held at the **European Graduate School (EGS)** with which the summer school shared part of their resources and facilities. The EGS is viewed by many in the artistic community as a renowned institute that bridges politics, theory, activism and the arts in its program. It includes in its faculty some of the most prominent lecturers and theorists in the field of contemporary aesthetics and cultural theory, including Boris Groys, Jacques Rancière, Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou, Giorgio Agamben and Judith Butler. They arguably form the key corpus of globalized aesthetic theory today.

#### 4 Anselm Franke

**In the exhibition there is an interview with Anselm Franke (2)**

The summer school provided me with the chance to discuss questions of mediation in art

production with one of its most informed and expertized practitioners: Franke is one of the most prominent curators in the world.

It was fascinating to go into the issues of curating in such length and seriousness with him. My aim was to check whether some of my assumptions would continue to stand after talking to him. My biased position as an artist, which is a perspective I find I can never fully shift away from, would undoubtedly have to be addressed in order for any chance of serious communication to occur.

The problematic relation between the artist and curator was quickly established as an issue. This cleared the way for us to probe more deeply into the historic relations between the artist, curator and platform. Franke stressed the exemplary quality and status of the exhibition space as one in which to navigate precisely these issues. The problematic nature of these relations makes the **black box** of the exhibition space the ideal arena to deal with these issues. As a mode of self-critical curatorial practice, the black box enables a reflexive awareness of its location as the material and canvas of production.

*Quote AF: Like you want to see history as an Object, you want to create... this detached observer in front of an object. And at the same time, the moment art enters the exhibition, this format of the museum, everything becomes opened up, the whole realm of mediation become the core, becomes that centre from which both object and subject are mutually defined.*

Still, this left me with the question as to who is in control of this mode of producing, and how this question relates to the structure of production. The curator holds sway over the curatorial expression of the exhibition, and therefore is the author of that object, but how does that inform the relation the curator and platform have with the artists involved? To what extent is the artist informed of this curatorial idea, and what impact does or does that not have on their work?

To my question about whether he considers himself an ‘artist’, he replied negatively and expressed that a crucial difference keeps curators and artists apart: the artist’s resistance to communication. For a curator, this non-communication is professionally impossible.<sup>281</sup>

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<sup>281</sup> This resonates strongly with the Benjaminian notion of the differentiation between the originality and self-sufficiency of the poetic moment and that of a flawed translation, that is described as *communication*.

According to Franke, a curator is held to the task of communicating and framing of that which the artist produces. He praised Harun Farocki as an artist he really liked working with, and who goes to great lengths to look for risk and push his own art.

Farocki, Franke said, stretches the topic of his research to the maximum, emptying it out until a dialectical breakthrough moment occurs. This seemed to be something he envied Farocki for, indicating that it was this stretching and risk-taking that he himself lacked.

He also explained that Farocki, despite their intensive collaboration, ‘blanked out’ on institutional issues of presenting and curating, and that Franke’s ideas and conceptualisations of the exhibition were of no concern in Farocki’s own work. Franke, as well as being the curator of Farocki’s work, also has written extensively about it.

Leaving a gap between the curator’s and the artist’s idea of ‘the work’.

This was one of the key issues and concepts I wanted to discuss and test. What is it in this relation between artist and curator that is obscure, and what does this ‘lack of visibility’ produce?

Like the distance between Farocki and Franke’s practices, undoubtedly there are gaps between the setting provided by the summer school and the attending lecturers and participants. Talking to Franke about curator/theorist-artist relations within this setting that also was marked by their difference, doubled and heightened the sense of this structural ‘lack’. My role as both ‘observer’ and as participant stressed the doubling that occurred.

It was really nice talking to Anselm Franke.

## 5 Document

Boris Groys argues in *Art in the Age of Biopolitics*<sup>282</sup> that the biggest issue that haunts our times, is that of life itself being subjected to politics. We are under a constant regime of subjugation by politics, that produces a regulatory system that herds the masses in technocracy.

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<sup>282</sup> Boris Groys *Art in the Age of Biopolitics*

As a form of resistance to this control, *Life as such* appears as the focal point for artistic expression. Life as such, however, can only be grasped in the form of its documentation; indirectly and through reading and as re-presentation.

This form of the ‘artistic object’ as documentation is well suited to traverse the multiple authorships at hand in the cycle of production.

The transposition from life to document to art, is continued and furthered by the translations enacted by theory and critique, in their interpretations and analyses and their ‘readings’ of art as Text.

As artists ‘document’ life and also document their activities and practices as art, so too do theorists and critique ‘document’ artistic practices. The institution archives these as ‘artistic objects’. These documents again inform artists’ practices, setting the parameters, subjects, and even the methodologies<sup>283</sup> - and so a full circle emerges, in which archiving and production are equated.

This means that there cannot be a shared understanding of what the ‘objects’ that form the cyclical ‘documents’ are constituted by. When reflection, critique, art historical writing and archiving become ‘art’, the categories of ‘original’ and its documentation blur beyond recognition, or become non-existent.

From this circle emerges the task of resistance – as a general artistic commission, bestowed to all the positions involved in the production of art – to resist (mis-)translation of the documentation of Life.

Since no-one can hold all documents, a suspicion and resentment can arise over the notions of authorship and control (and so indirectly over life as such), which is necessarily located ‘somewhere else’.

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<sup>283</sup> See for example Benjamin’s Arcades Project that has found its way methodologically in many art-schools or the ideas of Rancière as formative to how to bridge horizons of perception etc.

What can be said about the circulation is that there is resentment for the kinds of lives that are described by the subsequent positions. A circle of suspicion arises: if life is not in “my/this document’ then where is it?

There is uncertainty around the shared object that sits as a black hole in the middle of this circle of production.

And life must be somewhere else.

**Now what is this?**

What now is this work, this text, this PowerPoint?

On the axis of documentation, reflection and production, it sits.

*And what is this work other than an attempt to find a meta-document, which inevitably will fail.*

*And of which it can be no more than the affirmation and documentation.*

To circle around it, approach it but never land, we exit once we landed, hopping-and-a-popping, to leave the surf at its peak, to watch it curl in...  
to watch it curl in



This circulation of accountability between artist, curator and museum, has a structural place in the infrastructure of Contemporary Art production.<sup>2</sup>

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2 As Peter Osborne states in *Anywhere or not at all*: "The contemporary, socio-historical forms of the general existential structure of 'the project' come to the fore, along with its situational conditions, organized by relations between individual and collective praxis, in which the once curatorial but increasingly directive role of the museum is of growing significance. (This is no longer 'the artist as producer', or even 'the curator as producer', so much as 'the museum as producer'.) The existential and social structure of the project itself becomes the carrier of artistic reflection." p.173

Together – as an ensemble – they act as editors and contributors to the artistic field, through reflection and reading (critic),

study and reflection (theory)

and selection, organization and communication (curator).

*Art has become a procedural de-authorized result of the network of positions in the space of art as a discursive act.*

This was one of the key issues **and concepts** I wanted to discuss and test. What is it in this relation between artist and curator that is obscure, what is the function of this 'lack of visibility'?

*Transcript interview Anselm Franke*

This text was the subtitle in the video of the interview with Anselm Franke that was presented in the exhibition.

'Politics of Estrangement-naught'

Transcript of an interview with Anselm Franke

Saas Fee Summer School for Art, EGS, June 2015,

**JS** Okay, thanks for having me, for doing this interview.

**AF** Ik spreek een beetje Nederlands... but it's very bad

**JS** O ja? Where did you learn that?

**AF** In Antwerp. It's a different... taal...

**JS** Ja. Well, it's the same but with quite a different pronunciation. I really enjoyed the lecture this morning, and I know your work..., the Anthropocene Project... Observatory... I've seen that installed in Utrecht at BAK. And we already discussed this, the notion that came up this morning, which is about the place of the mediator in Latourian thinking. For him, that is the most important location that governs the contact between that what governs and the subjects that are governed. In that sense: you also work as a curator. So how do you deal with that in your curatorial work?

**AF** You know, I make a simple equation. I say that for all the paradoxes that there is in this realm of the mediator, Latour make sure... that there is a big difference between 'mere intermediaries' and full-blown mediators, whatever that means but I...

Curatorially I work with some of his ideas but, I encountered them actually quite late but then, I was thankful for them... simply because of this: this is not something that he would share, or would go along with, but I think that the exhibition as a medium, as a space, as a historically contingent form, is actually the perfect place to explore that realm of the mediator.

So if his analysis is right -and I think elements of it are extremely precise- that, in other words, in non-Latourian words... the kind of dominant discourse of the Hylomorphic, meaning the kind of post-Aristotelian productionism that I mentioned, is based on a kind of denial of mediation, and his move is opening up that black box, and moving into this black box. I think the exhibition is a really amazing medium for that, because it does both: it opens up this black box and it produces this denial at the same time. Just think of the 'history museum', any museum that is not an art museum; it is exactly... you know, haunted by this

positivism, heroism, facticity. Like you want to see history as an Object, you want to create... this detached observer in front of an object. And at the same time, the moment art enters the exhibition, this format of the museum, everything becomes opened up, the whole realm of mediation become the core, becomes that centre from which both object and subject are mutually defined. Curatorially I just work with, kind of conflating this idea of the 'middle kingdom' and the format of the exhibition... the exhibition is the ideal middle kingdom, because it can also be used to look at, perhaps, the 'flaws' of this idea of the mediation.

**JS** At the same time?

**AF** At the same time.

**JS** So it is also immediately self-questioning its role in the production of [art]...

**AF** Yes.

**JS** It was interesting that you just said that it is quite often denied, this mediating role, this curatorial role, and for me that is very interesting... Is your impetus then one of filling a shortage, or of addressing something that is lacking? Is there a need to focus on this role of the curatorial?

**AF** I look at the curatorial in this respect more as a symptom, and I am part of that symptom. It is not that I love the curatorial - I find it also a pest. It dominates, and I largely see our profession as just one of exploiting positions of power; rather than actually working on the questions that it is supposed to work on. Which is to 'take care' of a complex history, and to make sure that this history is not killed, because that is what I see happens a lot... to speak of it a bit militantly.

**JS** It is also a fight against the recuperation of history, and of power positions?

**AF** You see, I'm trying to get the question of mediation away from the curatorial, and at the same time into a kind of more reflexive and ethical definition of what the curatorial is and can be, but there are all kinds of problems, and I am not unaware of them. I make choices of course that are also contestable, and I understand that and I ... Many of the projects that I do are very authorial.

**JS** O yeah? With strong curatorial guidance, and a thematic approach?

**AF** Yes. That's a price I need to pay for at the same time trying to challenge the parameters. There is a dialectics, there is a paradox in there.

**JS** There is a well-known dialectics also between artists and the curatorial, I'd say. There is a general feeling of being dependent of, and this dependency is always projected in a resentful fashion towards the figure of the curator. For me this is very problematic, this resentment that is being put somewhere else, to say: that's where my dependence lies, to

conform your dependency. Do you think about it in this sense? Or could you also consider yourself as the artist? Does this enter your considerations?

**AF** I definitely don't consider myself the artist.

**JS** Is there an ontological speciality that is governing these different fields?

**AF** I guess yes, and I try to be as sharp about it as I can. In Deleuzian terms, art for me is resistance to communication.

**JS** Ha-ha, I can relate to that...

**AF** You know, that can't be the paradigm for curating.

**JS** No, it can't? Why not? I could imagine strategies that, well...

**AF** The curatorial task would still, in my eyes, be ... more like an architect, it is more like creating a space, and an artist is more the person who inhabits, and remakes and destroys... Art I think needs to be largely anti-institutional, and I like to think institutionally, I like to think against all the evils and problems institutions create. The task of curating is to create institutional spaces that are... as, this sounds maybe, no as –that sounds maybe too... no, that is exactly... as democratic as possible, but not a fake version of democracy, in terms of... voice; but more in the sense of accountability... accountability to power. And providing a space and balancing forces.

So for me it is maybe less about autonomy, and more about sovereignty; that interests me.

They are obviously closely related and when I talk about sovereignty I mean the opposite of state sovereignty. I mean more like the subject's sovereignty, from an almost anarchist perspective. And that I think is the domain of art, and its resistance to communication too. To measure out the spaces of sovereignty, to refuse being named, to refuse the names that are given to things. To change that entire geography of signification, and to re-assert what individual sovereignty is.

That is what is obviously what puts art historically...

**JS** In a specific realm, a specific field... function also maybe

**AF** Maybe function... difficult question of course with the function, because there is this whole stigma of consequentiality<sup>284</sup>

**JS** I had a question about that particular show in Utrecht. As I witnessed it, there was an odd sense of inner address. I saw Latour (in the video at BAK) being followed by his

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<sup>284</sup> So here he speaks of resistance to communication, but at the same time an impossibility for a curator to avoid this. So there's a strange tension going on: is it the artist that as a puppet acts out non-communication that produces art? Or is it the collaboration between them? Either way it is unresolved and the issue of communication vs original remains.

research-group, and being on display. The strange thing was that just before I went there, I also watched his lecture at the venue there that opened the show, so there was an immediate re-appearance of Foucault... ehm of Latour – yeah Foucault was there as well -. But what I meant to say was: theory also plays a very important role in all of this, in the figures that are presented, or produced in theoretical figures... They are almost the grease between what artists produce, what curators produce and what platforms produce, because they produce it as discursive materials again. How did the cooperation with Latour work?

**AF** The Anthropocene Observatory is a complicated project. First I need to really say that... this is a project that comes out of a different genealogy of thinking about the exhibition than other projects of mine. It's very different from, for example, the Animism exhibition...

**JS** Which was more like a real, 'proper' exhibition?

**AF** Yeah, like more addressing the medium and working in an immanent argument to aesthetics, and from within that trying to explode it. This is not really the case with The Anthropocene Observatory. It's a project that comes out of a long engagement that I also have, curatorially, but I don't play such a major role in that. It also draws on a completely different history of exhibition making which comes from architecture, that comes from urbanism. All the problems that we discuss in art, about art and non-art, and discourse and all these things. Obviously with discourse and art, since the nineties it has been increasingly difficult to separate them, but before that you could always separate them, to certain degrees at least. But in architecture exhibitions this was never possible, because architects have always used exhibitions just as a space of modelling, like... you would present research materials, you would...

**JS** A discursive apparatus...

**AF** A discursive apparatus... An analysis of territory, of society...

**JS** But its never about that space itself, where it was presented...

**AF** Never about the space itself.

**JS** And that's what art is mostly about.

**AF** And in that sense, for me, The Anthropocene Observatory is not an art exhibition. Even though there is an artist involved. Armin (Linke) is not, he is not responding in his work to the regime of art. He is somebody who has always moved outside of this, he has always used his photography as a... it's much closer to this analytical, experimental field of expanded spatial research. So that's important (to mention), because there are these kinds of exhibitions that I very much like doing because they are highly inspiring, to think through a lot of things, but they are not primarily responsive to the questions of art.

**JS** In that sense, your lecture also informed me better about the intent of the project; maybe just on your behalf, because I do not know exactly who informs what in that project. You were listed as the curator but sometimes it works out differently. I don't know if you really selected the works or the artists, or the team or the structure or the procedures...

**AF** In this case I'm more of a provider... I was the one who composed the group. I'm not the one who did the fieldwork. I have much less of an authorial voice in this project than in other projects, because I'm more trying to make this possible, and give it a direction, and discuss with them the parameters. I would be very much engaged in [questions such as]: what do we call something? It is in that sense not a curatorial artefact.

**JS** Could you than maybe better describe it as editorial?

**AF** Yes exactly, absolutely right... And editorial, but I also don't try to solve problems there. In many other exhibitions it is really a question of first staging the problem, understanding what something is like as an aesthetic problem, what is immanent to art and outside of art, and than trying to theatricalize this conflict...

The Anthropocene Observatory is dealing more with other kinds of paradoxes, with the paradox of what it means to observe and at the same time to be too close to something, of trying to gain a distance and at the same time fully immerse oneself in a problem, in a set, a practice...

**JS** That was the most fascinating element, I'd say, of that exhibition; to watch the scientist, and not even solely as scientist, because there already was the notion of the interdisciplinary, so there immediately are architects or artists at work, so there's this mix from the bottom-up there. But to then see them from a birds-eye viewpoint at work again, establishing their epistemes again, is very fascinating... but it made me wonder what in the end the lasting position is that is presented there in the exhibition-space...

**AF** Yeah, that is completely unsolved for me. I may be a bit flirtatious with unresolvedness; I'm sometimes utterly uncomfortable with it, and sometimes I think it is exactly right. Yeah, it is not [re]solved...

**JS** It's a difficult strategy to go for this notion of unresolvedness as a position from which you narrate? It will ultimately reflect back to it...

**AF** But it at least... it helps... it produces what we are familiar with in art on a different level, on a level that is completely non-art, that is far too real on a political, worldly level... and that's what I mean by flirtatious... Because I don't know better, and I don't know many people who know better; or I'm very suspicious of most people who seem to know better..., I think it's okay to go there. This tension between proximity and distance ...

Back to the question you asked earlier: I have collaborated with Latour, but personally... the kind of stuff I do is, there's always a point where... It was completely fascinating to guide Latour through the Whole Earth exhibition, simply to find out... he's been to California many years ago... and he never credits any of this yet it was totally formative for him. As with other things, but he would never credit any of the *cyberneticians* or the people that were highly formative to him. There is always a moment where my insistence on a dialectical optics completely shuts Latour off.

**JS** Then he's gone...

**AF** He's out of the game. And the person who sustains the collaboration with Latour, in the case of the Anthropocene Observatory, is really Armin Linke, and also John and Anne-Sophie but mostly Armin Linke. He has worked for many years in collaboration. What Latour sees in his photographic and filmic practice, this observation of scientists at work, of the entanglement... He finds himself in these images, and I like the passion of this collaboration, and also the many misunderstandings.

**JS** There are also misunderstandings there, I'm sure?

**AF** Many, many...

**JS** These are fascinating relations between curator, artist and theorist.

**AF** Totally. The whole question of image-making and the relation to theory, is obviously something that I am totally passionate about... Many other exhibitions I do, to connect to things like the Whole Earth exhibition, are almost like the antithesis of what many people say... an exhibition shouldn't be like books... but I love when they're like books, because I cannot imagine something better than being able to walk through a book, and test an idea accordingly... test an idea on thinking in images...

**JS** That's the old maxim of art's agency through the material and not through the discursive...

**AF** Exactly...

**JS** ...which is named than the 'discursive', but I really doubt whether this should be called discursive? The way you arrange it, or...

**AF** I also have problems with... sometimes I say 'narrative' rather than discursive, but is also of course not narrative, because narrative is more how ad-people would: *you can't sell that salve if you don't have a story*... So that is certainly not the kind of definition of narrative that I would follow, it's more like... that narrative when discursively mobilized, or something like that, becomes a means to tell a story in a certain way, becomes a means of rendering you sensible... and making you see differently, no? It's more like a means, like a tool to get to a



certain sensibility, and then the image becomes the way to completely reconstruct the discourse. So I really use exhibitions as a means of reworking meta-theories, because there is always this point where meta-theories start to believe in their own language; and that is exactly where they break down.

**JS** Still, this sounds very much like an artist, and also what you just described as the first task for the artist: to break down or to stop communicating. It is again reconstituting something, but it is through...

**AF** Yeah, but then I work with artists, so I try to create [something from that]... Whole Earth is an exception, but for most exhibitions I start with an artist's practice and I try to construct a set of references around this work that would challenge everything that this work does, in the here and now, in a kind of larger historical resonance... and yeah, there may be something artistic in the way of constructing it... the key then is still that there needs to be... It's more that the curatorial needs to live up to the art. In the Animism exhibition this was very important to me. There are like five artistic practices for which I did this exhibition, in order to...

**JS** So it is immediately positioned or related to what the artists...

**AF** That kind of allows the whole problem, and the power and the complications, in the way in a particular practice, let's say Jimmy Durham's or Angela Melitopoulos' or so. Like the moments of ecstatic sovereignty and utter powerlessness, ... omnipotence and impotence they obviously live... often in the best works they are very close to each other, and can you do justice to that in a curatorial narration? That would be one of the starting questions...

**JS** I very much liked your analysis of the Harun Farocki works... the one work you showed, these two juxtaposed images...

**AF** The clouds...<sup>285</sup>

**JS** Yes... Did you talk to him about your writing, did you discuss this with him?

**AF** Yes, I did. About a decade, 12, 13 years ago, he was someone from whom I learned a lot. So I had an ongoing conversation with him, and what I was saying there (at the lecture), what got me thinking about this work was really what he said about it.

**JS** And how did he use your writing? Was that of use to him? Was that recursively activating for him? Maybe hard to answer...

**AF** I don't think so. I think he had an understanding... Because, his insistence on a dialectical optics is very, very different from mine; and Harun always entered and lived with

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<sup>285</sup> This is the work *Parallel I*, see; <http://www.vdb.org/titles/parallel-i>

the art world, and kept his own sanity by blanking on a whole set of questions... that pertain to the exhibition, so there almost was this kind of deal... His dialectics was really one that was completely formed in cinematographic thinking, and he refused to think about all of those problems of the post-conceptual space of art.

**JS** That is fascinating to hear... but of course when you talk to him you immediately transpose this to these other issues?

**AF** Yes, I'm always... One of the things I also learned from him was to... somehow it applied very differently... I certainly learned from him a lot in terms of... I liked to talk to him most in his home because that's where he was surrounded by his books. And he was somebody who was reading a lot, he is extremely... well-read, in literature particularly... fascinatingly well-read. And this process of pulling out a book, and laying a path onto... making a thought reform itself by being transformed through a reference that was completely unlikely at first...

**AF** The practice of what he did with that was very, very different than the curatorial. That's what I already mentioned, he would do that entirely on the level of coming so close to an image that you already thought that this could not, that the dialectics could never... he would go so close to the positivism of an image until it releases a dialectical space again... That's his artistic power... and that's obviously very different from... It's a difference between a very meditative piece of music and an immersive kind of orchestral one...

Mit Farocki denken HKW <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XFxulfza3SI>



#### **4 The Author, Platform and Spectator, the Author-Function in Artistic Production Now, West, The Hague**

##### *Explanation video-interview project*

*The Author, Platform and Spectator, the Author-Function in Artistic Production Now* is a video interview project initiated by me, consisting of seven interviews with artists, curators, theoreticians, and organizers of educational and artistic platforms. The framework of the project and the selection of interviewees aimed to provide an overview of today's authorial complex in artistic production and the various institutional alignments involved in this. For this investigation I invited participants who occupy exemplary hybrid positions that bridge the different fields of artistic production, and who are active both in the realm of art production, presentation and its discourse. The participants were: Sami Khatib, Charles Esche, Lietje Bauwens, Armen Avanesian, Rachel O'Reilly, Maziar Afrassiabi and Mohammad Salemy. The interviews were presented as an installation at art space West, The Hague, the Netherlands, 14-08 through 01-11-2020. The interviews and transcripts are now available on West's website.<sup>286</sup>

Conceived to investigate the fluent border between art and its context, the aim of this installation was foremost to frame the conditions of an artwork's making: the theoretical context, the distributive context, the infrastructural context. The interviewees were selected for their relationship to the infrastructure of artistic production, an infrastructure that encompasses museums, independent art spaces, knowledge production/critiques and presentation platforms. Following in the footsteps of various theorists, from Friedrich von Schlegel to Walter Benjamin (who argue that the role of the 'observer' is to complete the artwork), art is the continuous productive interplay between making and perception/reception. An artwork can be understood to be the aggregation of an artistic proposition, which begets its meaning both through the way in which it is presented (a conflation of choices made by the artist, curator, institution and more) and through its reading (the critical reception and encounter by audience, critique and more). This processual idea of art is therefore fully dependent on the way it is distributed and attributed with meaning. The wider chain of production, which functions as the assembled observer, can therefore be seen as a co-author. This reorients how we might read the distinctions between the various roles: the curator, the

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<sup>286</sup> [https://www.westdenhaag.nl/exhibitions/20\\_08\\_Jack\\_Segbars/more2](https://www.westdenhaag.nl/exhibitions/20_08_Jack_Segbars/more2) (accessed 13-12-2020)

critical interpretation and the institutional mediation all participate in the networked and assembled mode of production. This assemblage characterizes the current day model of art production and constitutes its *apparatus*. This artistic project aimed to elucidate the nature of this apparatus and the complex issue of joint authorship.

The talks focused on the pivotal role that knowledge production has in contemporary art production. In how far can we consider it as a curatorial form in respect to the author-function. Within the condition of cognitive capitalism, it becomes important to identify and (re)trace how production – which gives form to the co-authorship of a processual object and which defines its political authorship – is organized.<sup>287</sup> The scope of interviewees, and the range of institutional, semi-institutional and independent forms they represented, is meant to provide an overview of the different angles, frames and positions involved in the field. Their roles ranged from museum director, to independent curator, to theorist and organizer of a para-academic platform. The interviewees were invited to consider their roles and positions in dialogue with the relation between aesthetics, curating, platform and art, and prompted to reflect on their situatedness in the contemporary form of artistic production. How do they perceive their position, from the perspective of their practice and as an author within this complex of production, and where do they see pitfalls, obstructions, accountability and responsibility?

By reversing the artist-theorist relation here in this project (conventionally it is the theorist reflecting on artistic production as the privileged observer), the institutional relation between artist and context is overturned, opening up the conventions of relations of institutional artistic production. This critique on the level of form is explored further content wise in the interviews with the participants. Curator, organizer and artist, expounding on these questions, are presented as equal in regards to the artistic object that is produced.

The videos were presented in a set-up of 7 monitors, which sculptural layout was adapted to the characteristics of the presentation space, to give spatial coherence to the installation. The choice for the site of the presentation was deliberate. West represents the

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<sup>287</sup> As in this assembled mode of producing the division between aesthetics, labour and politics dissolves, authorship in art production becomes general. Paolo Virno. *A Grammar of the Multitude, For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*. Cambridge, MA: Semiotext(e)/Foreign Agents, The MIT Press. 2004.

conditions of artistic contemporary production; site where artists and theory meet in the public discursive space of contemporary art-production.

### *Participants*

Here I will summarize the interviews with the participants, and elaborate on the topics and the frame that were discussed.

**Charles Esche** is the director of the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven (hereafter VAM) and of publishing platform *Afterall*,<sup>288</sup> as well as being involved in several educational/curatorial programs: De Appel, Amsterdam and Jan van Eyck Academy, Maastricht. Esche's practice therefore combines many aspects of artistic production and its institutional forms. The interview centred around Esche's ideas of the changing role of the museum, which gradually evolved from a more modernist notion towards a more directly politically oriented form of art over the period 2005-2020. In his opinion the classical autonomous artwork was losing its political significance. In 2015, the project *Arte Útil* by Cuban artist Tania Bruguera<sup>289</sup> served as the starting point for a transformation of the artistic direction at VAM. By inviting Bruguera, not only did VAM engage with an explicitly political artist, but this project also demanded a change in the role of the museum in terms of how it presented and collected art, how it would have to function as a platform. Esche speaks about how to make the museum more utilitarian for the audience and the process of turning it into a social powerplant. Esche also explains how the idea of utility, that started with Bruguera, was adopted as a model by VAM and further developed and researched by VAM's theorist (Stephen Wright) and curator (Gemma Medina). It led amongst other things to think of a more activating role of exhibition design, self-produced publications and the mobilization of the museum's archive (online and as integral part of exhibitions) through which the museum itself was able to become an explicit activating agent. Here the overflow and generative exchange between artist, curator and theory under the platform idea of the museum as institution is apparent.

Also discussed were the discursive and online platforms *Afterall* and *L'Internationale*,<sup>290</sup> which provide for different means for contextualizing and archiving institutional production and which act as extra outlets and stages for the museum. Esche describes these as means to

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<sup>288</sup> <https://www.afterall.org/home> (accessed 16-12-2020)

<sup>289</sup> <https://vanabbemuseum.nl/en/programme/programme/museum-of-arte-util/> (accessed 16-12-2020)

<sup>290</sup>

provide for a necessary historical framework that is increasingly lacking and eroding in an ever more solely entrepreneurial frame of artistic production. The final topic we discussed was the long-term exhibition, *The Making of Modern Art* (2018-2021) at the VAM, an exhibition that tries to offer both a reevaluation of the history of modern art and proposes a reconfiguration of this history by offering new art historical interpretations. By positing an alternative, and toying with the idea of the speculative nature of history, the exhibition tries to propose a new way for dealing with canons as such. Here the VAM deliberately repurposes its collection to emphasize the ideological grounds that underlie how collections are created, and the political significance of the cultural canons that continue to structure collections and thereby museums too. Esche hereby, as part of the curatorial team of the exhibition, embraces the role of author in the cultural field.

**Armen Avnessian** is an Austrian philosopher engaged in numerous projects in which curating, philosophy and art merge. Together with Anke Hennig he has produced several publications that deal with the productive interaction between literary and visual arts as a ground for a political model of action. His political and philosophical ideas concerning cultural production are lensed through the notion of time, which according to Avnessian is how capitalism holds power and is able to control our world. Capitalism's pre-empted determination of future time makes it impossible to perceive and use time differently. His output is not limited to the world of academia, as he not only writes about these issues but also experiments with different forms of productive artistic platforms and workshops in which art and theory connect to the broader field of culture, technology and the economy of production. The role philosophy may play as a mediator in artistic production was explored in *Discreet*, a curated production platform connected to the Berlin Biennale 9 conceptualized by Avnessian. In the interview his philosophical ideas were discussed in combination with how he operationalizes these in the field of the arts.

**Sami Khatib** is a scholar of media studies and political theory. He specializes in Walter Benjamin. In his practice, informed by Benjamin, he is concerned with notions of how different disciplines, such as art, politics and academia, can be brought together as a form of political organisation. An example of such a transdisciplinary project is the 2015 *Benjamin in Palestine Conference*, held in Ramallah Palestine, of which Khatib was one of the initiators. The interview delved into how the structure of this week-long conference served to facilitate communication between the different participants (artists, theorists and activists) by

employing theory – most notably that of Benjamin – as a form of community building and as a form of politics. Alongside the choice of location which voiced a political message and was in response to another Benjamin conference held elsewhere, the conference was intended to re-appraise Benjamin’s critical thinking, through discussing the way in which transdisciplinary interaction could be organized. How can text and reading serve as means to bridge epistemological differences and backgrounds, and how might such ambition be curated? Explained his thinking with and through Benjamin, rather than viewing his thought as object of study, is one means of curating to this end. He also discussed how new forms of practice and of organization can counter the political economy of productivism that is shaped through the division of labour in institutional forms.

**Maziar Afrassiabi** is director of independent art space Rib in Rotterdam, whose programme specifically mobilizes aspects of labour in artistic production, both in the projects shown and in the topics addressed. This is evidenced in how Rib structures the work and relation between artists and its platform. As director-artist-curator Afrassiabi represents, in his person, the hybrid nature of the curating-art-platform. In the interview, Rib’s projects were unpacked to examine how they introduce a form of politics in the institutional infrastructure of art. As a relatively small space, its very compactness enables Rib to hold and represent a critical attitude towards the larger institutional artistic platforms and how these have become embedded in the governmental frameworks of production.

**Mohammad Salemy** is the organizer and initiator of *The New Centre for Research and Practice*, a para-institutional research and education platform. In The New Centre’s curriculum art, philosophy, media theory and aesthetics merge. As opposed to the more conventional formations in academia and art schools, it operates in the institutional field of knowledge production as a mobile and adaptable institute: its seminars and workshops are conducted fully online. Salemy translates the relationship between art, philosophy, technology and education into a site of direct aesthetical, academic and political activism, that he defines as *epistopolitics*. He has managed to build up a reputation through his online and public performances, where his media persona serves to mediate and amplify his political views. In the interview, the New Centre’s history was discussed; the conditions from which it emerged and how this relates to the tradition of conceptual art. Salemy’s hybrid role as curator (organizer), artist (poet) and architect (of an epistopolitical platform) was discussed.



**Rachel O'Reilly** is an artist, curator, poet, writer, lecturer and researcher. In her long-term project *The Gas Imaginary* (2013 - ongoing) many of these forms of artistic work are combined. *The Gas Imaginary* is a research project exploring the legal and aesthetic logics of 'unconventional' extractivism, specifically fossil gas fracking, and its continuity of and differentiation from modernist mining regimes, as it has rolled out to the indebted settler colonial states of the West. The industry is exemplary of how capitalist expansion works to the detriment of planetary habitation. The colonization of Australia by the world's most significant fossil Empire, was a capitalist occupation of the land and resources shaped by settler ideology. Today, the damaging effects of this are returning to haunt the descendants of these colonizers, who now experience land dispossession in the same areas of Indigenous resistance to frontier wars. O'Reilly is an invested researcher, as she grew up in this affected area and has been part of its history. In her work, she focusses on the pressure the industry enforces onto the population through language and aesthetics. O'Reilly examines this complex history through site research, which she presents through communal and curated projects, films, writing and poetry, under the umbrella of her self-initiated and managed project, *The Gas Imaginary*. The interview centers on this project, notably two films *Infractions* and *Drawing Rights*, which deal with the history of fracking in Australia. *Infractions* (2019), commissioned by Kunstwerke Berlin, addresses the issue through a more documentary approach, through talks with First Nations most affected by current shale gas plans. *Drawing Rights* (2018), on the other hand, commissioned by Van Abbemuseum and Frontier Imageries, and uses a much more abstract language, including animations and data rendering. The difference between these two aesthetic approaches and artistic strategy was discussed with regard to their artistic and political relevance (in regard to capitalism itself being a mode of value abstraction through which it extracts). In this project and through her approach the categorizations of research and art, factual finding and speculation and interpretation overlap and dissolve.

In the interview O'Reilly self-critically maps how the position of cultural work is imbricated within neoliberalism, which is mostly funded by the same politics that also shapes the conditions and is responsible for the environmental damage that is caused. In this complex of production, it becomes practically impossible to speak of artistic autonomy. She also mentions the tension between the globalized sphere of cultural practitioners (of which she is also part) and the local conditions on the ground which stands the risk of being *othered* by the globalized. O'Reilly explains how this has informed how she positions herself in the

institutional field (which she aims to engage with as independently as possible) and her choice to work with indigenous communities. Finally, the roles of poetry and of academic writing were discussed, and how these fit within the overall transdisciplinary character and politics of O'Reilly's practice. For O'Reilly the act of academic writing contains an emancipatory and feminist quality which in the face of the neoliberal attack on institutional public space, serves as a means of empowerment.

**Lietje Bauwens** was educated as a philosopher. Through her involvement with artists she gradually settled in the field of critical writing. She writes for *Mister Motley* and is editor for *nY*, a magazine for literature and critique. Next to her writerly activities she participates, together with Wouter De Raeve, in the project-based art initiative *431* in Brussels,<sup>291</sup> which serves as a multidisciplinary container for their research. Her working profile therefore is defined by its multidisciplinary character. The research-based platform *431* initiates projects that often address societal issues informed by the conditions of work and life they find themselves in. The film *WTC A Love Story*, one of the central topics of the interview, is one such project. Here De Raeve and Bauwens, as *431*, intervene in Brussels' city centre redevelopment project *Little Manhattan*, a major urban redevelopment plan involving many stakeholders: citizens, politics, governance, refugees, retail and other businesses, as well as the housing corporations themselves who have their own commercial interest. Bauwens and De Raeve studied the early stages of this redevelopment project and questioned the level of participation and possibilities of input that was suggested. They critically assessed the suggestion and pretense of participation as an empty bureaucratic shell in which key stakeholder groups were missing. Amongst those are notably refugees who live nearby in an encampment and have become a structural part of the city, although they do not have access to legal representation. In the film they let actors play the roles of the key players in this redevelopment project, who are informed about their roles by these key players themselves. These processes of getting instructed are filmed as well, thereby staging a complex set up of fictionalizations, albeit with concrete political implications and informed by a real setting. With their artistic intervention in these processes and the use of fictionalization through their film-project *WTC A Love Story*, they successfully managed to open the public discussion around this redevelopment as political and public issue. As well as this film, another

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<sup>291</sup> <http://www.fourthirty-one.org> (accessed 22-12-20)

431project was discussed: *The New Local*, which took place in Brussels in 2018 as part of the project Precarious Pavilions, curated by Michiel Vandeveldde.

Here 431 acted as curator, conceptualizing the architecture of meetings in which audience, artist and reflection meet. Unlike *WTC A Love Story*, with its clear ambition to be far-reaching and to affect politics directly, here the ambition was inversed. The project was set up to problematize the consumption and visibility of art by limiting communication and documentation of the project and to focus rather on the quality of the moment of meeting of the involved participants. In the interview, though clearly engaged with aesthetics and the public domain, Bauwens explains that she does not identify as an artist. In the interview, the relation between curating, reflection and art, as a means to probe aesthetics as a public issue, was discussed and their subsequent demarcations within Bauwens' practice.

*Documentation (photos installation and stills from the interviews)*





## 5 Artistic Production in the Context of Neoliberalism, Autonomy and Heteronomy Revisited by Means of Infrastructural Critique, essay PARSE

### *Explanation*

The last project within this section I want to discuss is the essay ‘Artistic Production in the Context of Neoliberalism, Autonomy and Heteronomy Revisited by Means of Infrastructural Critique’.<sup>292</sup> It is an essay which was published at the Platform for Artistic Research Sweden (hereafter PARSE), issue 9, spring 2019 within the Work theme. PARSE is initiated by the University of Gothenburg Sweden and publishes twice per year a journal with a different theme. These publications and journals are accompanied by presentations and exhibitions in a comprehensive program. The aim of the Work-issue (editors Benjamin Fallon, Dave Beech, Kirsten Macdonald and Marina Vishmidt) was to further the debate concerning artistic labour, the place of the artist in it and how a ground for political engagement with art could be shaped. In my essay I deploy most of the framework I use and developed in my PhD research: the condition of cognitive capitalism which causes a unification and traversal of work between positions (Virno), how this condition relates to the politics of art and aesthetics (Rancière) and how this could be understood in the infrastructure of production (Vishmidt). This theoretical framework is illustrated through the art’s advocacy group W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy)<sup>293</sup> whose practice of political work, I argue, must be understood as artistic work, and the situation that arose between not-for-profit artist initiatives and the organization of Art Rotterdam in 2018. Describing this situation, I lay out the relation and political interconnectedness between the not-for-profit art sector, the commercial market and the politics of art funding and gentrification. I argue that this constellation requires an infrastructural answer and political positioning (as does W.A.G.E.).

With this essay being published at PARSE, I use the field of discourse as the fitting site and medium for artistic labour and the site for political exchange. In this text, though utilizing the same medium as with the Open! essay, I push the envelope a bit further by deliberately pointing to issues of infrastructural organisation and the political aspects it contains. This way the programmatic framework of my research (in which I point to the

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<sup>292</sup> See: <https://parsejournal.com/article/artistic-production-in-the-context-of-neoliberalism-autonomy-and-heteronomy-revisited-by-means-of-infrastructural-critique/> (accessed 22-12-20)

<sup>293</sup> See: <https://wageforwork.com/home#top> (accessed 22-12-20)

importance of communication as the fabric of our time) is related to the concreteness of the political situation. This way theory, art and politics is connected and is agency in the field of public communication, of which PARSE is part. As an artist and through, I argue, artistic labour, I become a co-author of the *scene* as formulated by Rancière. PARSE states on its website:

PARSE is a research publishing platform committed to the movement back and forth between analysis and creation, between meaning-making and the analytics of meaning, between construction and re-construction.<sup>294</sup>

This programme as phrased by PARSE very much fits with how I envision my own position as an artist within such a reciprocally constitutive relation between art and aesthetics.

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<sup>294</sup> See: <https://parsejournal.com> (accessed 22-12-20)

## Artistic Production in the Context of Neoliberalism

### Autonomy and Heteronomy Revisited by Means of Infrastructural Critique

Jack Segbars

How are we to consider artistic practices to have agency under neo-liberal domination? This question is pertinent and needs to be addressed, since neo-liberalism, as the remaining hegemonic ideology, has co-opted art within its logic. Taking the Netherlands as an example of this development, in which the shift away from a welfare-state ideology of production was completed in 2012, artistic production has been seen to adapt as a response to these changes in conditions. That year marked effectively—by means of drastic budget cuts in the arts— the ideological turn away from state support for art production to a market-oriented model. The responses to these developments show a tendency to explore self-organisational and institutional formats that cater to the need for self-sufficiency. A prominent characteristic of these responses is the integral incorporation of a wider range of functions of production within the institutional production models, such as reflective platforms, knowledge exchange and the production of publications, all of which are incorporated in institutions' programmes. By taking more control over all aspects of production in a comprehensive way, an effort is made to create greater autonomy for production. Will this response—understood as a general organisational reconfiguration throughout the field of artistic production—be enough to safeguard and deploy artistic agency and to confront neo-liberal conditions?

The effects of neo-liberalism imply a continued move towards the logic of market-oriented production and less state support, less public funding, deteriorating social and working conditions in the context of the so-called gig economy: an economy that runs on temporary jobs for most. In short, for artists and for artistic professionals (as for all workers) this means a structural move towards more precarity, as Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams have laid out in *Inventing the Future* (2016).<sup>295</sup> This forces artists, and those working in education, the humanities and cultural workers alike, to become—and understand themselves as—entrepreneurs in a workplace that has become more market-oriented and that loses its social function, since it is only measured in economised terms. In concrete terms, this means more work for less money, permanent job insecurity, increased competition, and the resulting

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<sup>295</sup> Srnicek, Nick and Williams, Alex. *Inventing the Future, Postcapitalism and a World Without Work*. London: Verso. 2016.



effects of exhaustion of those working in the field. On a political level this also means that the public infrastructure for art and cultural production is under severe pressure. In the Netherlands this was most noticeable through the budget cuts for the arts that were initiated in 2011 and completed in 2012, from which it is still recovering.<sup>296</sup> These are structural effects, given the political tendency towards further precarisation, without substantial opposition to counter these developments in the foreseeable future. The term neo-liberalism is sometimes used too readily, yet it is the last remaining hegemonic political idea that continues to shape the world. As Wendy Brown has shown, neo-liberalism means the ongoing transformation of life and work into human capital, affecting artistic production and its organisation. According to neo-liberal ideology, production in the end has to comply with the laws and rationale of the liberal economic logic, although this has evidently shown to be a logic that benefits only a few and dismantles social cohesion.<sup>297</sup>

Philosopher Peter Osborne also identifies the solidification of neo-liberalism and its effects on art production, rather than a moving towards a post-capitalist situation. The misconception that we would be heading towards, or had an outlook on a post-capitalist situation was evoked by the term “late-capitalism” as used by Fredric Jameson in his famous essay on postmodernism, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1989).<sup>298</sup> But rather than being in a stage of transition towards a situation beyond its end, capitalism has on the contrary found an enduring foothold. An acknowledgement of this misconception is required to begin to think about how to address the persistence of neo-liberalism’s stranglehold. Such recognition is needed especially given the all-encompassing force of neo-liberalism that determines the conditional framework of production, effecting all production processes and social relations these represent, undercutting the democratic principle of empowerment of its subjects. As Brown argues, in the end it endangers democracy and a sense of the commons, as a shared space of political identity, expression and exchange. “What happens when the practices and principles of speech, deliberation, law, popular sovereignty,

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<sup>296</sup> The budget cuts by the right-wing coalition of VVD and CDA were enabled by the support of the populist party PVV of Geert Wilders in 2011.

Oudenampsen, Merijn, *Dutch Culture Wars: on the Politics of Gutting the Arts*. See <https://merijnoudenampsen.org/2013/02/21/dutch-culture-wars-on-the-politics-of-gutting-the-arts/> (accessed 2019-05-08.)

<sup>297</sup> Brown, Wendy. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution*. New York, NY: Zone Books. 2015

<sup>298</sup> Osborne, Peter. *The Postconceptual Condition. Critical Essays*. London: Verso London. 2018

participation, education, public goods, and shared power entailed in rule by the people are submitted to economization?”<sup>299</sup>

Is it still possible, under these circumstances, for art as form of critique, to be considered as a meaningful force, once its structure of production ultimately follow capitalism’s logic? How can art, in its production of aesthetics, in shaping the way we perceive the world and our place in it, contest the undermining of the democratic principle by neo-liberalism. As Brown has argued, it is through neo-liberalism that all ideas on the cultural and societal organisation of our lives in the end are controlled by the principle of economisation, and organised by neo-liberalism. Here the way in which art production has transformed, along with the development of global neo-liberalism, into contemporary art—understood as the global network of institutions and its discourses—becomes of importance. According to Osborne, art production as we know it now has evolved out of the legacy of conceptual art—broadly understood as focusing on material and value in production and utilising art’s singularity—effectively constituting a critical address of the organisation of production in our technological, capitalist societies. The authorship of the artistic object, in Osborne’s view, as he identifies it in the post-conceptual condition, is spread across the institutional players concerned, as a co-authorial production assembly comprising artists, curators and institutions.<sup>300</sup> This assembled mode of producing is closely related to the post-Fordist economy in which there is no longer a categorical division in work to be made between aesthetics, labour and politics as analysed by Italian philosopher Paolo Virno.<sup>301</sup> This also means that the divisions between positions become relative: all participate in the networked and assembled mode of production. Virno also asserts that the autonomy within work is granted by capitalism, in so far as the worker has to remain productive according to the criteria set by capitalism. The question, then, of art’s critical leverage, its possible agency in relation to capitalist subsumption (its artistic legacy and promise), and the way in which it is organised, are deeply entwined in terms of form and content, and become a matter of its infrastructural organisation.

To understand the implications of the dominance neo-liberalism exerts now, and how labour is organised in post-Fordist production, we need to take a closer look at the basic

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<sup>299</sup> Brown, Wendy. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution*. New York, NY: Zone Books. 2015. p. 10.

<sup>300</sup> Osborne, Peter. *Anywhere or Not at All*. London: Verso. 2013.

<sup>301</sup> Virno, Paolo. *A Grammar of the Multitude, For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*. Cambridge, MA: Semiotext(e)/Foreign Agents, The MIT Press. 2004.

infrastructure of artistic production, which designates the means and ends in the relations of production. How do issues of authorship and respective accountability shift and how are these to be considered under these developments? My approach in answering these questions resonates with a form of critical inquiry that has recently been conceptualised by art theorist and writer Marina Vishmidt as *Infrastructural Critique*.<sup>302</sup> Here the infrastructure of art production as integrated assemblage of production, or infrastructural set-up, is considered as a coherent system. Such an infrastructural notion, according to Vishmidt, is to be approached through the specificity of relations in production, rather than by way of theories supposedly underlying them, since these social relations are the material embodiment of the infrastructural set-up of production. According to Vishmidt, “A move to infrastructural critique represents an attempt to mediate some of the closures of this position both discursively and pragmatically, with infrastructure focusing the link between the material and ideological conditions of the institution of art in a way that de-centres rather than affirms it.”<sup>303</sup> The closures Vishmidt here refers to relate to Institutional Critique’s critical approach, which finds its limits within the institution of art at which it addresses its efforts. The notion of infrastructure can be understood as the assemblage of positions and functions that in its totality enable production. This totality contains the conflicting ideas and communications on the relation between form and conditions of work and purpose. In my view, this principle has to extend to territories outside of the art institution that affect its production processes: the realms of governance and politics. These are to be considered co-authors (or co-authorial positions) of the “artistic object”. Since, in post-Fordism, these equally shape the ideologically defined conditions and parameters affecting the operation and outcome of artistic production, they are part of its infrastructure of production.

In the remainder of the text I will discuss how the binary sets of terms of autonomy vs heteronomy and profit vs not-for-profit have changed under neo-liberalism and post-Fordism, and how this forces a re-orientation of artistic practice and how that is related to its socio-political task. And finally I will consider how an infrastructural approach may help to redefine the notion of autonomy in art production.

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<sup>302</sup> Vishmidt, Marina. “Beneath the Atelier, the Desert: Critique, Institutional and Infrastructural”. In *Marion von Osten: Once We Were Artists (A BAK Critical Reader in Artists’ Practice)*. Tom Holert, Maria Hlavajova (eds.) Cambridge, MA, and Utrecht: The MIT Press, and BAK. 2017.

<sup>303</sup> *Ibid.*, np.

### **The Unification of the ‘Market’ as Hybridity under Neo-liberalism**

Up until quite recently, art’s agency was supported and guaranteed by the idea of its autonomy. Although working within, or even depending on the art market and public institutions, this artistic autonomy had been considered a given since the early nineteenth century, underpinned by its own strand of philosophy separate from art, that of aesthetics.<sup>304</sup> The idea was that from a position of autonomy, art held a culturally exceptional position and had something unique to offer, despite it being subsidiary to and dependent on a heteronomous field for its material existence. Through its economically exceptional status, that is, by being exempt from regular conditions of production—since its value did not follow regular economic rules of valuation, such as the accustomed remuneration for labour—it was able to perform its critique on society and the effects of commodification within capitalism.<sup>305</sup> This relatively protected position of art in European social democracies, underpinned by public support for museums, presentation spaces, in education and non-commercial art production, defined its infrastructure and structured art’s role within society. This agreement was in place while at the same time the idea of autonomy in production was maintained. The not-for-profit artistic sector, as part of this wider spectrum, was able to perform—as a critique on the general economic and political organisation of societies, seemingly independent from the market. However, with the hegemony of the capitalist order that carries no responsibility for such a (quasi-)autonomous and critical function, the conditions supporting this model of production are undermined. This model is increasingly threatened by the practically unchallenged capitalist order that occupies and determines cultural space through the sheer power of private capital, and through the ideologically deployed principle of economisation that permeates all layers of its structure. Art’s supposed autonomy therefore becomes not only exposed as determined by the heteronomy of forces that define the conditions of production; in addition, and more importantly—and for now lacking a response—it ideologically follows suit in how the space for production is organised by (neo-liberal) politics, voiding the potential of any avant-garde ambition having co-authorial ideological societal agency.

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<sup>304</sup> Starting with Kant and Hegel and subsequent philosophies of art, art—as object and as practice—has been investigated as the relation between art and aesthetics. Notably Theodor Adorno situates this relation at its core.

<sup>305</sup> The different aspects of production of the artwork vis-à-vis commodification as the general characteristic in capitalism, is extensively laid out in *Aesthetic Theory* by Theodor Adorno. See for the relation between the economic and ‘formal’ aspect of artistic production Josephine Wikström’s article “Art’s Economic Exceptionalism”, available online at <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/art’s-economic-exceptionalism> (accessed 2018-11-01.)

A telling characteristic and illustration of this development is the fading distinction between not-for-profit artistic practices and their infrastructures on the one hand, and artistic practices that operate within the commercial art market on the other. These now have to a great extent to be considered as unified into one general realm of artistic production. As Lise Soskolne of W.A.G.E. convincingly argues, the economic relationships between the independent not-for-profit field of artistic production and that of the market are closely connected.<sup>306</sup> The commercial value of artists is channelled through, and increased by their performance and validation in the so-called independent circuit that acknowledges and establishes it for its critical value. This critique manifests itself often as critique on the conditions of art production itself, on art's and people's position and imbrication in the capitalist commodity economy. The financial and economic structures upholding the not-for-profit sector—in the US on a charitable basis—are structurally geared towards commercial success as well as being financially rewarding for the patronage supporting such rationale.<sup>307</sup> The ideological framework and end goal that is operational here is that of the market, to which end art's criticality then serves, supposedly benefiting the greater good that art as public function represents. At the same time, this is not the rationale of those engaged in the not-for-profit sector: they engage with and work in the arts precisely because for them it intrinsically represents alternative ideas on working relations and production. The working conditions and invested labour—in the not-for-profit context—are for them the factual ends, the ends that are non-marketised or commodifiable, and not the means towards marketised value. They work to foster the “general intellect”, as Paulo Virno calls it, in terms of putting the qualities of cognitive labour and creativity to a common benefit.<sup>308</sup> Those working and investing in its model aim to counteract the capitalist model of production, and the relationship between work and its validation.

Although Soskolne clearly speaks from an American perspective, which is marked by an evident neo-liberal structure in which any form of state financing, direct or indirect, fits the

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<sup>306</sup> W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy) started in 2008, informally researching precarity of working conditions in artistic production. Since then it has developed in an internationally active platform producing knowledge and making this public. It is also engaged in issuing certificates (W.A.G.E. Certification) to institutions that conform to fair pay for their workers. See <https://wageforwork.com/home> (accessed 2018-11-01.)

<sup>307</sup> The injection of capital for “charitable causes” as contributions for not-for-profit forms of production are in the US considered tax-deductible, which mostly benefits bigger companies supporting such programmes. These benefactors arguably represent the affluent few in an increasingly unequal division of wealth.

<sup>308</sup> Virno, Paolo. *General intellect*. In *Lessico Postfordista*. Zanini and Fadini (eds), Translation by Arianna Bove. Milan: Feltrinelli. 2001.

frame of investment, revenue and economisation, the rationale that underpins this structure is —albeit more opaquely—equally discernible in the European context. Here the general idea of market-driven production as end goal shapes the structure of artistic production too. Administrative criteria as formulated by most grant providers or other funding bodies comply with this rationale. Supportive arrangements and subsidies are framed as “temporary stimuli”, providing a bridge towards a future of self-supporting independence. They hardly ever mention the activity of producing independently as an end or as a quality in itself. At the same time, this end goal of market success is translated into societal objectives, or of audiences to be addressed, embracing the supposed emancipatory and social criticality of art, in turn confirming the market as an end goal. See for instance how the Mondriaanfonds—the Netherlands’ most important grant-giving body in the arts— presents itself as a funder of production, thereby intervening in the market, albeit reluctantly since fundamentally it is supposed to be acritical of market mechanisms (or it cannot voice its criticism because of it being held to governmental neutrality). The function of art here is formulated as if it were a free haven for imagination as a common good, but with the subtext that ideally it should not need such support.<sup>309</sup> This creates a distinct and hybridised economy of artistic production and its accompanying language of funding, catering to both sets of criteria. The idea of art as a function of the commons, aligned with the social objective of emancipation or of diversity, for example, is channelled through capitalism’s notion of the market. The respective discourses of both societal function and goals, and of capitalism as market are intertwined in an ongoing schizophrenia. Through the politically motivated regime of these funding structures—based on keeping the applicant, in terms of support for cost of living, on the threshold of the bare minimum—and the enforced stress on entrepreneurial capitalisation, the ambition to establish art as a thriving milieu of critique, as a working practice is unacknowledged, and the rationale of capitalist production remains uncontested. The understanding of public funding as such, as a structural governmental tool in markets, stimulating or shielding processes deemed underdeveloped or precarious, is not expressed as a fundamental element of the “market”. As Pascal Gielen observes, a society that desires a

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<sup>309</sup> All contributions reinforce the production or presentation of art and heritage from the Netherlands, both at home and abroad, where the market doesn’t do this (yet): precisely there, art and heritage prove themselves as valuable havens of the imagination. The fund stimulates the public commitment and the development of these havens. See <https://www.mondriaanfonds.nl/en/about/> (accessed 2018-11-01.)

viable art production, guarantees its autonomy by supporting its existence for which it itself cannot fully provide. Such decision then is a question of political contestation.<sup>310</sup>

### **W.A.G.E., Aesthetic Performance and Politics in the Workplace, Working Conditions as Object of Contestation**

Since precarious government support, the rationale of austerity and more market-oriented production compliant with the rationale of economisation characterise the direction we are moving in, we can consider it the starting point through which the frame of artistic production is politically determined. It is the hinge point of political contention. In response to the question on how small-scale art organisations create value, in her lecture at the Public Assets Conference in London in 2015, Soskolne laid out the rationale to W.A.G.E.'s programme, and the position of not-for-profit art production in the economy at large.<sup>311</sup> For W.A.G.E. the logical artistic consequence is to engage in the battle for fair remuneration for artists working in institutional settings, and for artistic labourers to be recognised as co-workers in the same workplace as other paid workers, such as directors, curators, communication employees etc.<sup>312</sup> Rather than continuing to work underpaid, or not being paid at all—on a voluntary basis, and therefore operating at the mercy of support structures that are ideologically in opposition to the economic exceptionalism of art with its subsequent poor working conditions—the artist should be considered an equal in the production process. This strategy does not directly solve the problem of capitalism, but it politicises the workplace—and the institutional responsibility thereof—by re-introducing a counter ideology of artistic work with its alternative ideas on validation, within the frame of its working conditions. This re-connects the place of artistic work to the public good it professes to serve and binds its workers as equals within the assembled setting. It also exposes existing workplace rationales and protocols underpinned by neo-liberal capitalism that lead to structural under-valuation and the position of artistic work in it. The performative work of W.A.G.E. thus exposes and interrupts capitalism's logic, and particularly the principle of economisation by which it is structured in the workplace.

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<sup>310</sup> Gielen, Pascal. "Autonomy via Heteronomy". *Open! Platform for Art, Culture and the Public Domain*, 2013, <http://www.onlineopen.org/autonomy-via-heteronomy> (accessed 2018-11-01.)

<sup>311</sup> See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2aou\\_VmDYNs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2aou_VmDYNs) (accessed 2018-11-01.)

<sup>312</sup> W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy) started in 2008, informally researching the precarity of working conditions in artistic production. Since then it has developed into an internationally active platform producing knowledge around this topic and making this publicly accessible. It is also engaged in issuing certificates (W.A.G.E. Certification) to institutions that comply with fair pay for their workers. See <https://wageforwork.com/home> (accessed 2018-11-05.)

Such an activist artistic approach would, however, as a critique on W.A.G.E. has been voiced, conform to the existing regime of workplace criteria and thus follow existing state political rationales and protocols that underpin neo-liberalism's rationale of economisation. For the artist this would therefore mean losing out on freedom and autonomy as prerequisites and tools of artistic labour and eventual political agency. It is a critique that fits the wider debate on the art and activism schism and the question of how far art can engage with politics.<sup>313</sup>

This notion of artistic freedom and autonomy is non-existent to begin with, in the sense that it is inert, analysed correctly in my opinion by W.A.G.E. Such assessment then first needs to be recognised and secondly politicised by affectively and cognitively activating it. As Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello have indeed shown in *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2005), their extensive sociological field study of production processes, it are precisely the qualities of collaboration and creativity, and the idea of independence that are appropriated in capitalist production.<sup>314</sup>

As an artistic and activist form of organisation, W.A.G.E. engages aesthetically with the conditions that shape its space for life and work. The self-administered suspension by W.A.G.E. of what is commonly recognised as the artists' "creative work" and to substitute this for (more tedious) administrative, bureaucratic and activist work, here becomes art's task. The performative abandonment of creative labour, to negate the presumed artists' role in the market of the arts, is an artistic act, since the conditions set out by the market negate the space for creative work to become manifest in the first place. Addressing working conditions, then, is W.A.G.E.'s artistic strategy and prime artistic target. This fundamental address acknowledges that working conditions shape the outcome of the political artistic space, and that any space for control over or recognition and affirmation of its relevance must be sought among the conditions that are to be engaged with. This then means that work—as the organisation of labour—itself is that *object* of artistic production that is contested within the current frame and condition of production under post-Fordist, neo-liberal capitalism.

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<sup>313</sup> See for example how Chantal Mouffe calls for the recognition of art practices as counterhegemonic form vs politics. This requires an institutional engagement; it is through institutional mediation after all that "common sense" is developed, and where the subsequent political arena—as area of contestation—is established.

<sup>314</sup> Boltanski, Luc and Chiapello, Ève. *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. London: Verso. 2005.



Concurring with the argument made by Vishmidt and theorist Kerstin Stakemeier: it is the basic organisation of work itself that produces the notion of autonomy to begin with.<sup>315</sup> As all work takes place under the guise of, and is engineered by neo-liberal capitalism as labour, work becomes the object of expression that shows the relation between the potential of autonomy and heteronomy under the regime of capitalist production. In this sense the political organisation of artistic work becomes synonymous with the political struggle and organisation of any work and all workers as such.

### **Aesthetic Practice, Work and the Space of Democracy, the Art-Aesthetics Bind**

The “contention over work”—as that what is ordered by politics and what may organise any form of autonomy—is therefore also the quintessential form of artistic inquiry. And it becomes art’s political task, if we follow through on French philosopher Jacques Rancière’s ideas on the relation between art and politics. In the *distribution of the sensible*, his well-known conceptualisation of aesthetics as political form, the space of politics is to be understood as the contestation over the arrangement of registers and forms of expression, visibility and agency.<sup>316</sup> According to Rancière, the artistic becomes expressed in the exposition and relation between art and politics as political-aesthetical antinomies. Through art’s operation, in postulating its sovereign singularity, the forces of political policing and rule, that what occupies and dominates as well as that which organises an idea of a common ground, become visible. This requires the free play between *aisthesis* and *poiesis*, between that what is made and the meaning attributed to it. The artistic act of the free play between *aisthesis* and *poiesis*, then, must be taken as the fundamental democratic principle to the formation of a sovereignly organised life. Under neo-liberal subsumption, where social relations are deeply determined by the conditions set out by it, the antagonism between neo-liberalism’s rule and the possibility to a sovereign life becomes obvious.

Art here directly contests and interacts with politics, since the production of aesthetics is automatically a matter of political action, as it enters and contributes to the arena of the

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<sup>315</sup> In reading Mario Tronti, Marina Vishmidt and Kerstin Stakemeier argue that autonomy in capitalism can only be identified from within the determination of labour conditions: “Where Adorno locates autonomy in the realm of the aesthetic to construct a maximal distance from the reproductive brutalities of capital, Tronti argues that autonomy cannot be won at any distance from the production process but can be anticipated only as an autonomisation from within divided labour.” Vishmidt, Marina and Stakemeier, Kerstin. *Reproducing Autonomy: Work, Money, Crisis and Contemporary Art*. London and Berlin: Mute Publishing. 2016. p. 28.

<sup>316</sup> Rancière, Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. Gabriel Rockhill trans. and intr. London and New York, NY: Continuum. 2004.

political, where it competes with politics and establishes itself through aesthetics.<sup>317</sup> In this sense, this model of art directly proposes a counter model to politics (as in the structures of representative democracies) as we have it, in that it proposes an alternative model to community building, worlding and meaning. According to Rancière, in honouring the principle of radical equality, there are also no boundaries or limitations to who contributes to the formation of the common space via the combination of art and aesthetics.<sup>318</sup> When we apply this premise to the assembled chain in artistic production, this ranges from theoretical critique and discourse, to critics, curators and artists, publics, workers and institutions, who all participate in the field of artistic production. The art-aesthetics bind and the notion of radical equality, and thus total accessibility of the political, follows, according to Rancière, from the history of emancipation in which humans formulate and organise themselves as sovereign subjects, not dominated by the authority of politics that would occupy the production, meaning and relevance of cultural knowledge. This is where the ideal of democracy and of art meet, and indeed overlap: in short, a space of the commons. However, as Rancière emphasises, this can never lead to a stable or fixed form, since it is an ongoing process of exchange. The commons can never be stable, but must each time be organised, re-adapted and re-affirmed. Its structural incompleteness must be honoured.<sup>319</sup> The question on how to accommodate these processes, therefore, to designate a place for it, becomes a matter of political action and of ideology.

The organisation of the free play between *aisthesis* and *poiesis*, and the structural connection of art and aesthetics become important if we look at how contemporary forms of artistic production are shaped, in terms of the paradigmatic transformation of the field of art production as mentioned in the beginning of this text. The expansion of the field of art production resonates strongly with the notion of the idea of assembled production—of the

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<sup>317</sup> There are of course questions to be raised concerning the equivalence between power that is distributed through politics and through art and aesthetics. It is true that matters of ideology and politics, and the way in which these are established are closely linked by the ways these are perceived and culturally shaped. In that sense the assertion of equivalence between politics and art can be made, and does a politics of aesthetics have political agency.

<sup>318</sup> In Anna Wójcik's interview with Jacques Rancière - conducted in October 2014 during Conrad Festival in Cracow, Poland - he describes art not as medium-specific and an autonomous realm but as a form of heteronomous aesthetics-formation: as art-aesthetics bind.

*The Politics of Art: An interview with Jacques Rancière*, in: "Verso.com", 09 November 2015. See: <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2320-the-politics-of-art-an-interview-with-jacques-ranciere> (accessed 2019-05-08.)

<sup>319</sup> Rancière defines the space of politics through the notion of *Dissensus*, a continual exchange between the formation of dominance and subsequent political and ideological coherence and that what opposes this formation.

*scene*—as formulated by Jacques Rancière.<sup>320</sup> Recent decades have shown an acceleration in the development of forms of artistic practices that deploy artistic research and interdisciplinary forms of organisation, promoting participation and social exchange, and that are leaning towards activism and resistance. Artists are exploring forms of practice in which the production of art is put forward as the production of politicised aesthetics, as Sven Lütticken observes in *Cultural Revolution. Aesthetic Practice After Autonomy* (2017).<sup>321</sup> This movement is characteristic in artistic practices such as those of Bik Van der Pol, Jeanne van Heeswijk, Renzo Martens and Jonas Staal, to list some more outspoken examples among many other less visible ones. As Lütticken’s title suggests, the question of the flight from art’s autonomy (or of the apparent depletion of such notion), and the acknowledgement of and engagement with the implication of the conditions through which it is shaped, prompt these new artistic practices. The issue then becomes one of a strategic positioning and of direct aesthetic interference—as outward aesthetics—aiming to overcome the institutional confines of the institute of art.

This tendency is not only limited to artists’ practices, but similarly takes place in presentation spaces and the realms of education and academia, where presentation, research and operation are thought through in tandem. Examples in the Netherlands are Casco and BAK in Utrecht, DAI in Arnhem and Veem House for Performance in Amsterdam. Their programmes and output are the (self-)critical outcomes of research into artistic production processes. The question here is how these processes and structures organise the social relations between the actors involved, and how these are situated in and related to the world, and how these may engender effect. Here the artistic is connected to theoretical and discursive aspects, and to educational and curatorial practices—as modes of distribution—and most of the time it is therefore concerned and intertwined with institutional mediation. These forms of artistic production—which include modes of reception, communication and meaning—pursue or mimic “the institutional” as a form of independent and autonomous production. The artistic research conducted in these contexts translates intrinsically, and sometimes explicitly, into political demands or propositions.<sup>322</sup> These formations of artistic production thus manifest themselves as aesthetic agencies in a Rancièrian sense: as total and complete

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<sup>320</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>321</sup> Lütticken, Sven. *Cultural Revolution. Aesthetic Practice After Autonomy*. Berlin: Sternberg Press. 2017.

<sup>322</sup> See for instance Dutch Art Institute’s REALTY study group in which the research into the relation between art production, gentrification and theoretical discourse leads to concrete political proposals.

entities—connecting art and aesthetics into a coherent form—that counteract and contest the institutions or bodies that are expressions of the political distribution of power.

### **Accountability in Assemblage of Production, Authorship**

The problems that arise as a result of this development have been identified by British theorists and educators Suhail Malik and Andrea Phillips in their critique on the workings of contemporary art. Extrapolating on the ideas of Rancière, they argue that art has to go beyond the problem of the mere demonstration of power as its negative, as the opposite of a politics that does enforce its aesthetics, and to grasp for political agency itself: in other words, to not solely identify the political frame that sets the conditions but to engage in its formation.<sup>323</sup> Art, as an organised form that is engaged in the politics of aesthetics, must consider itself as an institutional player versus the institutions of politics, and perceive itself as an institutional actor. In addition, a consequence that arises out of these art and aesthetics configurations is their diffused and assembled mode of production that fosters a sense of indetermination. If the field of art wants to exert its political ambition and be the champion of artistic value versus that of politics through the means and deployment of aesthetics, it not only needs to give up on its internal open-endedness or self-referentially to accept such a concrete challenge. I would argue that the field of art also has to consider its relation towards politics from the viewpoint and through the assertion of its expanded form, and address the problems of accountability inherent in this assertion.

The diffused and assembled mode of production—considered as interaction between institution, curator, discourse and artist, and its connection to the broader political framework that sets the parameters of production, such as financing and grant-giving bodies—arguably presents such a challenge. The authorship of the artistic object, in the institutional structure of current artistic production, shows itself as intimately entangled within the broader economic setting and in production as totality. Its structural set-up accommodates an obfuscation of accountability.<sup>324</sup> It is internally divided between the direct actors at play: artist, curator and institutional platform. However, how this configuration is related to conditions outside of these platforms, to governmental or political frames—how it sits in, and is connected to, the

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<sup>323</sup> Malik, Suhail and Phillips, Andrea. "The Wrong of Contemporary Art: Aesthetics and Political Indeterminacy". In *Reading Rancière*. Paul Bowman and Richard Stamp (eds.) pp. 111-128.

<sup>324</sup> In the format of contemporary art production as formulated by Peter Osborne in *Anywhere or not at all* (London: Verso, 2013), it is the amalgamation of the different functions in its totality: curating, distribution, the institutional platform, discursivity and theory, that acts as author-producer.

bigger infrastructure of production and how this can be considered an institutional co-author—is often under-exposed. The importance of the infrastructure and how infrastructure determines artistic productions, like all production, therefore becomes ever more relevant. The infrastructure is the frame that houses and upholds the function of political exchange—of dissensus—as democratic societal interest.

In the post-Fordist condition the forms of the institution and that of its situatedness in the infrastructure affecting its conditions to production cannot be separated. Institution, infrastructure and its actors merge as co-authorial instances to the artistic object that is produced. As Vishmidt has noted, the issue of authorship in artistic production can be instrumental in mapping the accountabilities and functions performed throughout the production processes in the wider field of art.<sup>325</sup> How these accountabilities and functions traverse the fields of art production and the heteronomous outside to which it is connected and that partially structures and defines it, can then be made visible. This becomes especially pertinent under neo-liberal subsumption, in which all operations in the cycle are determined by it. These insights can be used to question the actions performed by these transversal authors and/or how relations are organised. How is one to consider oneself institutionally or positionally within this conflicted infrastructure? As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have stipulated, while critiquing the existing constellation and the role that institutions perform, an institutional format is still required to start to think about operationalising alternative values in production. In their push to propagate a non-hierarchical, non-representational and egalitarian form of production that does not exert a power relation, the format of the institution is still needed to gain agency, to foster collaboration, organisation and continuity.<sup>326</sup> The questions then become, I argue, how these new quasi-institutional forms operate within the assembly of production; how they relate to the economical frames set by these conditions and the ideologies these represent; how they address the fundamental questions as set out by W.A.G.E. And, finally, how new infrastructural configurations can be imagined and how these relate to the issue of absorption and what aesthetic strategies these insights prompt.

### **Art Rotterdam, an Example**

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<sup>325</sup> Vishmidt, Marina. “Beneath the Atelier, the Desert: Critique, Institutional and Infrastructural”. In *Marion von Osten: Once We Were Artists (A BAK Critical Reader in Artists' Practice)*. Tom Holert, Maria Hlavajova (eds.) Cambridge, MA, and Utrecht: The MIT Press, and BAK. 2017.

<sup>326</sup> Hardt, Michael and Negri, Antonio. *Assembly*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2017.

A case in point, where different responses to a complex constellation of positions in art production obfuscated accountability in relation to the common endeavour in the current conditions, is the problem that arose between the Art Rotterdam 2018 edition and the Art Initiatives (AIs) that were invited to participate in the art fair. In prior editions, the not-for-profit initiatives were presented in the fair's Intersections programme. The AIs had in previous editions been able to participate only because the costs were kept relatively low. This was enabled by an, as it turned out, incidental reduction of rent for the location in which Intersections was housed, and because of a one-off subsidy. The participation of the AIs gave Art Rotterdam the aura of a young and critically innovative fair—precisely by incorporating the non-commercial section as a token recognition of the interconnection of the profit and non-profit sectors—and boosted its artistic credibility and its subsequent value. In the competition with the more established and older Art Amsterdam, which had gone in decline in recent years, it was the aura of risk and experiment these AIs brought to the fair, considered prime artistic qualities, that contributed to the success of Art Rotterdam. For the AIs it meant a chance to tap into new audiences while keeping the costs manageable. Once the financial injections evaporated in 2018, the AIs were confronted with normal market rates, which practically none of them were able to cover. Ironically, the chosen theme for the Intersections segment that year was the precarity of current conditions of production, which it critically aimed to address.

Many AIs declined immediately, while a few others made the effort to negotiate—not only about the financial terms, but also to contest the thematic framing. The conditional and aesthetical framework of production were considered to demonstrate precisely the condition of precarity the AIs have to work in, through the way in which Art Rotterdam had set up the cooperation. Since Art Rotterdam had benefited from the surplus-value of this cooperation in previous years, and had shown to acknowledge the economic entanglement, it would have been fair to expect some lenience in fees or a jointly agreed solution—for example a contribution by the other commercial galleries that had also benefited from AIs' presence and input in previous iterations of the fair in which both sectors participated. Such ideas, which engaged with notions of common production, however, proved fruitless and remained unexplored. The iron logic of the market rent was firmly kept in place. The AIs were supposed to invest their scarce resources without any prospect of a financial return, other than a potential—but speculative and precarious—remuneration through prospective and future applications, by means of which their participation in Art Rotterdam—as production through

visibility—could or would be validated. As Soskolne rightly argues, art’s critical value is transformed into market capital through precarious work.<sup>327</sup>

There were some attempts to formulate a joint public response. Ideas for a protest or strike were raised, but soon the united front of the AIs evaporated.<sup>328</sup> The notion of a “strike” was rejected and considered too negative and reactive. Thoughts of bringing a complete alternative fair into existence, parallel to the regular fair, were soon abandoned because of a lack of time, funding and organisational resources. The challenge of taking this on in addition to the already difficult conditions of producing their own programmes, proved insurmountable. Some of them decided to present an alternative programme during the Art Rotterdam week, announcements for which were included in Art Rotterdam’s communications. This programme was framed as “the independent scene” showcasing their platforms and activities dubbed as the *Not for Profit Art Party*.<sup>329</sup> However, this response kept the existing logic of unilateral extraction and dependency in production intact. It had cost Art Rotterdam nothing in the previous years, on the contrary, it had only added extra value, and it could continue to communicate the ongoing cooperation with the AIs, and thereby continue adding to its own value. The AIs in the meantime—despite being seen as structural co-author in the infrastructure of production—were fractured and fragmented, and left with nothing.

By wanting to continue to make use of the publicity provided in the Art Rotterdam week, maintaining a front of “independent” production, the AIs that did participate undoubtedly continued the cycle of dependency, and subsequent deterioration of future conditions. The reasons for AIs to continue to participate in this situation are obvious: the publicity and audience reach provided for here count as positive production results that are hard to neglect. These register as the “revenue”, as goals matching the criteria set by government grant providers to which the AIs are accountable. These positive results then become speculative “production value” for future applications. These are the “assets” in the competition for funding that is becoming scarcer, given the ideology of austerity, which needless to say generates competition among AIs themselves. Since the AIs had demonstrated they were able to function under precarious conditions and to meet set criteria, any incentive to increase

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<sup>327</sup> See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2aou\\_VmDYNs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2aou_VmDYNs) (accessed 2018-11-01.)

<sup>328</sup> After an initial meeting between a representation of the AIs and the director of AR, Fons Hof, the discussion was continued in some follow-up meetings. An extensive e-mail exchange developed simultaneously, in which many AIs participated and which focused on how to respond. It resulted in divisions.

<sup>329</sup> See <https://worm.org/production/not-for-profit-art-party/> (accessed 2018-11-05.)

support for them evaporated, maintaining and even justifying (or aggravating) the rationale for austerity for the not-for-profit sector, aiding thus the logic that underpins existing funding. So, to continue working within the context of Art Rotterdam did nothing to confront the idea of the market as art production's end goal, in fact it only confirmed it.

This example demonstrates the cycle of dependency, precisely in contrast to the idea of autonomy as evoked by the *Not for Profit Art Party*, as a deeply internalised condition of art initiatives and art practices. It is important to understand these mechanisms, and the self-imposed ideas of exceptionality, autonomy and willingness to invest without reward in production that keeps this cycle going.<sup>330</sup> The not-for-profit artists, organisers and curators offer themselves willingly as dedicated and even productive workers in this system. This guarantees a continuation of the exploitation and the upholding of the market-driven idea of production, consolidating the neo-liberal scheme of production supported by public means and the supposed function of art.

The same logic of instrumentalisation of art production can be detected in governmental policies, where the input of artists is put to work in the context of urban gentrification, as part of the creative industries in general. At temporarily reduced costs artists are allowed to rent, live and produce in urban areas that then become profitable because of increasing property value and the influx of more affluent inhabitants, who follow the lead once the creative sector has done the groundwork. Once the objective of property value increase has been accomplished, artists and the original residents are forced to move someplace else as rents are raised.<sup>331</sup> The creative sector as gentrifying avant-garde, with those whose output cannot become profitable becoming martyrs along the way.<sup>332</sup> The artist's autonomy here serves not the symbolic value of its independence in respect to its condition in heteronomy, its autonomy rather serves the amelioration of the conditions of heteronomy to its own detriment.

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<sup>330</sup> What was telling in the discussions between the AIs on how to respond, was the perception of the negativity of a strike or protest. Deemed as a reactionary tool, the discussion veered to a "positivist" response: to produce or to perform rather than to halt production.

<sup>331</sup> See for instance the critique BAVO has laid out in *Too Active to Act*. Amsterdam: Valiz, 2010; or David Harvey in "The Art of Rent: Globalization, Monopoly and the Commodification of Culture", *Socialist Register*. Vol. 38. 2002. pp. 93-110.

<sup>332</sup> The trend of a retreating government and the influx of private capital that is left to structure public space can be witnessed now in Rotterdam. Big plans to create new large art spaces in the less developed Rotterdam-Zuid area are in development. These plans, turning post-industrial buildings into creative hubs, will be funded by the native Rotterdam family van der Vorm, which also donates to charitable causes as foodbanks and language courses for immigrants (which are mandatory in order to be able to apply for citizenship), restoring the pre-welfare-state notion of public funding for social causes as a responsibility for patronage and charity.



It is not a question of finding a singular response to this problem, nor is it my aim to frame this dynamic as a binary opposition between commercial and non-profit. The for-profit sector is also affected by the dominance of neo-liberal capitalism that reduces the space of production. Numerous galleries are forced to close under pressure of rising rents that cannot be covered by sales. Galleries either have to scale up or foreclose, which leads to fewer, and therefore less diverse production spaces, more stringent monetised conditions and subsequent monopolies in production conforming to this scheme of production. In addition, the AIs are not easily captured under one header in how they operate and participate. They have distinct profiles and modes of operation addressing these issues that are not to be unified under one (artistic) format. My argument is not that I insist on the necessity of AIs remaining connected to institutional formats like Art Rotterdam, or to the realm of commercial production in general. What I do propose and consider necessary is for artists acting in the infrastructural set-up of artistic production—and therefore as institutional actors/authors—to consider the relations and dependencies and how they function in the wider field. It is here where the AIs in Art Rotterdam failed to respond to their institutional role in the whole chain of production. It is also where they—as stakeholders, to adopt a fitting term—missed the chance to politicise their position by addressing the general working conditions for production. The notion of the institution here, as proposed by Hardt and Negri, must be understood precisely as the problematic notion concerning its autonomy, since, as they argue, the occupation of power vs its milieu becomes materialised as the competition between islands of autonomy. An institution can only become relevant if it considers itself as imbricated in the heteronomy of its conditions.<sup>333</sup>

### **Art's Exceptionalism in Infrastructure**

In an interview in *Politics of Study* in 2015, Suhail Malik criticises the general and generic mode of criticality in art production.<sup>334</sup> In his reading, rather than contesting existing situations, critique only serves as the token quality by which the professional institutional apparatus is measured and validated, and in which register it most of the time presents itself. To counter this, Malik argues that a direct enactment of critical ideas and theories *in*

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<sup>333</sup> Hardt and Negri, *op.cit.*

<sup>334</sup> Interview with Suhail Malik *Politics of Study*, Sidsel Meineche Hansen & Tom Vandeputte (Eds.), Open Editions/Funen Art Academy, 2015

production makes the difference. The deployment of critical models in artistic production *as* production directly translates and connects idea and praxis. The recognition by Malik and Phillips of art's correspondence to politics, plus the recognition of the art-aesthetics bind, situates and isolates the chain of artistic production as focal point for potential artistic agency. If the artistic projects can be said to be produced by the chain as a whole or by its coherent unity, then its political aesthetic production resides there. The cycle of production itself becomes the focus of address as that which is heteronomous, in the scheme of art's stipulation of its self-rule as its political medium. Extrapolated to the bigger scale of artistic production, and expanding on Malik and Philips, this would entail the direct connection to politics, to funding and the structure of artistic production as artistic enquiry. Such focus on the totality of production creates new entry points and strategies, not only for artists but for all parties involved, considering issues of address and of form. The resulting premise would be that any artistic endeavour is based on an idea of general co-authorship and on the condition of heteronomy, thus comprising a bigger set of participants, and an understanding of itself as worker/working in a communal project. If one takes the considerations and, this is important, the form of the art-aesthetics bind seriously, as the effectuation of institutional political ambition, then the differences marking production towards an aesthetic expression—the mistranslations, mistransferences and misappropriations that occur in it—are the nodal points in production for what emerges as the artistic object. And the project of art—rather than the institution— is then the place to work through these differences.

In an interview, Virno describes how art can be instrumental in mapping and expressing these differences that he calls the *dismeasure* between the conditional frame laid out by post-Fordist economy and those experiencing this rule. From such an investigation an index of alternatives could be proposed to negotiate these differences.<sup>335</sup> As the distinct division between aesthetics, politics and labour collapses in post-Fordism, the issue of a possible resistance against capitalism's rule becomes a matter of political-aesthetic work, as the act of indexing, by all involved in its infrastructure.

### **To Conclude**

The issue of art's exceptionalism—formulated as the space to performatively negate and contest the conditions set out for it—cannot be thought outside the conditions of subsumption

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<sup>335</sup> Lavaert, Sonja and Gielen, Pascal. "The Dismeasure of Art, An interview with Paolo Virno". November 2009. Available online at <http://www.onlineopen.org/the-dismeasure-of-art> (accessed 2018-11-05.)

we find ourselves in. The appropriation of criticality as artistic objects by capitalism now, forces us to look at the structure of cultural production as such. Given this preoccupation, art's prime tool of championing the singular does not suffice anymore. The division of labour and the increased stress for survival as structured by neo-liberalism organises the atomisation of resistance against it. As Isabell Lorey has argued, with the identification of one's sovereignty with work, biopolitical control also becomes a mode of self-administration, the disentanglement of which requires an introspective recognition of how one functions within the larger structure.<sup>336</sup> Therefore, the designation of function and the notion of work within the assemblage of production need reconsideration. Its idea of itself and its heteronomous relation must be rethought.

If all who take part are to be considered as contributing to the infrastructural set-up, and the points of transference in position and function—the social relations—become the nodal points of interest, then the whole assemblage of production and the work within, is the artistic object. The question of how an artist, a curator or an educator acts, how platforms are organised, and how these functions operate in the mesh of interdependencies in capitalism—and how these are subsumed—becomes the material to work with, since this structure is made up of the social relations affected by the logic of neo-liberal capitalism. The latter system determines our time and space, and the way we operate and are in it. This means that a far greater investigation by all who participate in the existing mode of production is required as a mode of co-authorship to this “artistic object” and how we are *to be* in it. Its *total measure* is a matter of artists, theorists, curators, institutions and of governance and politics alike. As all these functions channel information and contribute to the form of infrastructure that produces the common object, the different labelling of these actions or positions within this assemblage becomes redundant. Art can be understood as aesthetic work to the commons, to the political as space of interaction. It is rather the focus on operations, on *what* is performed by *whom* to *what end* that becomes the institution's responsibility, that is needed, where institution here is to be understood as a malleable form of organisation.<sup>337</sup>

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<sup>336</sup> Lorey, Isabell. “Governmentality and Self Precarization”. EIPCP, 2006. Available online at <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1106/lorey/en> (accessed 2018-11-02.)

<sup>337</sup> W.A.G.E. can again be listed here as an initiative that has undergone a transformation from an organisation of advocacy and of artistic mediation into a semi-institutional platform that maintains and utilises artistic considerations in its operation.

The re-configuration of the artistic field of production in taking up aesthetics as an integral artistic means, as discussed in this text, therefore is a necessary adaptation to the conditions set out for it: as a means to a counter-aesthetical proposal. The re-politicisation of the work-floor as a space of aesthetics, of politics and of life undermined by precarisation, in this respect needs special attention. So if the formal exceptionality of artistic production is to be taken serious and of consequence again, if most engaged in it perceive “work” as lifework, this notion needs to be politicised in solidarity. It cannot be kept outside the economy as it is; it has to permeate the economic constellation as a political act. A skewed and de-centred look onto the infrastructural set-up of the whole of production, which Vishmidt speaks of, is therefore needed to dislodge the solidified perspectives.